

“WE WON’T DIE SECRET DEATHS ANYMORE”:  
EDUCATION, MEMORY, AND SCREEN MEDIA IN PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE AMERICAN AIDS CRISIS, 1981-2000

by

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## ABSTRACT

K.M. CHADWICK-SCHULTZ. “We won’t die secret deaths anymore”: Education, Memory, and Screen Media in Public Understanding of the American AIDS Crisis, 1981-2000. (Under the direction of DR. PETER THORSHEIM)

Despite the obvious devastation of the American AIDS crisis—the period of time from 1981 to 2000 when the United States experienced social, cultural, and political repercussions directly related to the presence of AIDS—educated collective memory of this historic event appears to be lacking. Rather than continuing to explore the rise of AIDS-related gay activism and the Reagan administration’s role in so many unacknowledged deaths, historians need to start asking new questions to uncover why the general public lacks this knowledge. First, how have Americans who consciously lived through the AIDS crisis remembered this historical event? This is not a question of what they have remembered but of how the memories have survived. Second, how have Americans who did not consciously live through the AIDS crisis learn about this historical event? Those born during or after the specified timeframe do not possess detailed memories of this event, but their knowledge of it still informs the nation’s collective memory. So, from where is this knowledge coming? Thanks to a politically motivated distribution of popular textbooks and widespread anti-LGBTQ curriculum laws throughout the country, the American public education system fails to adequately address this historic event in classrooms. Instead, the public turns to its most fruitful memory-making vehicle to learn about the American AIDS crisis: the screen. Popular film and television media has taught the history of this event to the American public over the past 30+ years.

## DEDICATION

To those who lost their lives to AIDS. You are remembered.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No part of this academic endeavor would have been possible without the unconditional support of my wife, Brittany Chadwick-Schultz. I am endlessly grateful for her encouragement, her engagement with my research, and her belief in my ability to succeed. She endured countless hours of my reading, writing, recording, and editing, but she never once faltered. I simply could not have achieved any of this without her.

I am equally grateful for the consistent support of my academic advisor and thesis chair, Dr. Peter Thorsheim. Under his guidance, I felt empowered to explore new avenues of research that occasionally crossed boundaries into other fields. Anytime I second-guessed myself, he was there to reassure me that my work was valid. Additionally, the resources he provided were integral to the completion of this thesis—particularly his introducing me to Mike Chopra-Gant’s *Cinema and History* (2008). I also received exceptional guidance on source material from the other members of my committee, Dr. Kristina Shull and Dr. Mark Wilson. Both provided insightful feedback throughout the process and consistently challenged me to think from new perspectives. I would also like to extend thanks to Dr. Ritika Prasad and Dr. David Johnson for helping me evolve my research topic and improve my writing.

I owe additional gratitude for my accompanying public history project to Dr. Kristina Shull, who encouraged my creation of *Historytelling* from the moment I first presented her with the concept. She helped me work through the trial-and-error process of starting a podcast and was always there to listen to new ideas for how I could make it better. The podcast itself would not exist without the generous gift of audio recording equipment from Jessica Schultz, Bi Nguyen, and Mackenzie Chadwick. Furthermore, I

could not have produced three quality episodes without Dr. Andrea Milne, Dr. Anne E. Parsons, and Christina Wright—all of whom joined *Historytelling* as special guests and offered invaluable insight on how popular media portrays the American AIDS crisis.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents—starting with my mother, Sue Schultz, who unknowingly inspired this endeavor over two years ago. I am forever amazed by her willingness to learn and to grow as an individual. Her compassion and dedication to her children is unmatched; none of my present achievements would be possible without her past sacrifices. My father, Ted Schultz, taught me to never settle, to dream big, and to put in the work to make it happen. He has supported me through every career change, and his belief in me has never once wavered. To say that I am eternally grateful for them would not do them justice, so I will simply say... Thank you.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sometime during the end of March 2020, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, a casual conversation with my mother about the spread of the new virus somehow turned to the AIDS crisis. I remember the earnest look in her eyes and the innocuous tone of her voice when she said, “This is worse than AIDS was.” I wish I could have responded adequately in the moment, but her assertion left me asking too many questions to be able to formulate any coherent answers. What I should have said was, it is too early to compare the social, cultural, and political effects of COVID-19 and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). At the time of this conversation, COVID-19 death rates in the United States had yet to even reach 5,000.<sup>1</sup> I should have pointed out this particular statistic as well as other obvious differences between the two illnesses: COVID-19 is a virus that is transmitted through the air whereas AIDS is a syndrome caused by a virus (HIV) that is transmitted through bodily fluids; COVID-19 has spread rampantly through all populations across the globe whereas AIDS overwhelmingly affected the homosexual male community in its early days; medical professionals quickly discovered and diagnosed COVID-19 whereas medical authorities incorrectly identified AIDS as a “gay cancer” and later named it “gay-related immune deficiency (GRID)” before properly diagnosing it.<sup>2</sup> These are just a few of the major differences I should have discussed with my mother in the spring of 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> “National Data: Deaths,” *The COVID Tracking Project*, March 7, 2021, [covidtracking.com/data/national/deaths](https://covidtracking.com/data/national/deaths).

<sup>2</sup> Trevor Hoppe, *Punishing Disease: HIV and the Criminalization of Sickness* (University of California Press, 2018).

Since then, naturally, more similarities have appeared between COVID-19 and AIDS—most notably increased prejudice against marginalized populations associated with the illness, including a recent wave of hate crimes committed against people of Asian descent and the 4Hs of AIDS: homosexuals, heroin addicts, hemophiliacs, and Haitians.<sup>3</sup> When comparing pandemics, it is only a matter of time before common themes emerge. Just ask any of the historians who have dedicated countless pages to the similarities and differences between the bubonic plague, cholera, smallpox, the Spanish flu, and AIDS. Surely, COVID-19 will find its place among those texts within the next handful of decades. While these historiographies are fascinating and worthy of extensive study, it is not where my mind turned in the wake of this influential—albeit short—conversation with my mother. I did not wonder what a comparison between COVID-19 and AIDS would look like; I wondered why my fifty-nine-year-old, white, heterosexual, cis-gender mother knew so little about the American AIDS crisis. Although she is admittedly not a student of history, my mother was twenty when the first article about AIDS ran in the *New York Times*.<sup>4</sup> She consciously lived through this historical event, yet she does not seem to remember how terrifying and devastating it was. **I want to know *why*.** Is the answer as simple as looking to her listed identifiers and dismissing her lack of knowledge as a lack of connection with a particular community? Or is there something deeper—beyond individual identity to the core of America’s collective memory about the American AIDS crisis?

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<sup>3</sup> The Associated Press, “More Than 9,000 Anti-Asian Incidents Have Been Reported Since The Pandemic Began,” *NPR*, August 12, 2021, [npr.org/2021/08/12/1027236499/anti-asian-hate-crimes-assaults-pandemic-incidents-aapi](https://www.npr.org/2021/08/12/1027236499/anti-asian-hate-crimes-assaults-pandemic-incidents-aapi); Sander L. Gilman, “AIDS and Syphilis: The Iconography of Disease,” *October*, AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism, 43 (1987): 87–107.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence K. Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 1981.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 448,060 people in the United States died from AIDS between June 1981 and December 2000.<sup>5</sup> Since then, mortality rates among those living with HIV/AIDS have decreased significantly—marking the end of what I consider to be the American AIDS crisis (1981-2000).<sup>6</sup> My definition of the American AIDS crisis should not be confused with the AIDS epidemic at large. HIV/AIDS still affects a significant portion of the American population, even with the invention and distribution of medicines dedicated to managing it. The American AIDS *crisis*, however, is the historical event during which the United States experienced social, cultural, and political repercussions directly related to the presence of AIDS. More specifically, the American AIDS crisis occurred before AIDS became a manageable condition for those with access to newly discovered treatments.

Several historians have studied the impact of AIDS during this time period, including Jennifer Brier in her exploration of President Reagan and the U.S. political response to the AIDS crisis entitled *Infectious Ideas* (2009).<sup>7</sup> This comprehensive, thoroughly researched work leans on primary sources from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library that detail HIV/AIDS policy development over the course of his administration. She credits a rise in AIDS-based activism—from political organizations, like the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and other “AIDS workers”—as influencing policy at both the local and federal level. Brier also notes deep divisions within the Reagan administration regarding how to approach the crisis. Overall,

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<sup>5</sup> Center for Disease Control, “HIV and AIDS - United States, 1981-2000,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, June 1, 2001, [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm#fig2](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm#fig2).

<sup>6</sup> HIV Epidemiology and Field Services Program, “HIV Surveillance Annual Report, 2013” (New York, NY: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, December 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

*Infectious Ideas* adds nuance and clarity to the widely held belief among scholars that the U.S. government was slow to respond to the AIDS epidemic.

Others have dedicated their studies to the criminalization of AIDS and subsequent criminalization of the LGBTQ community. Trevor Hoppe's *Punishing Disease* (2018) highlights conservative America's narrative that AIDS was "punishment" for the "homosexual lifestyle," while Eric Cervini's *The Deviant's War* (2020) includes information on Reagan's refusal to fund further AIDS research in 1986 after twelve thousand Americans had already died.<sup>8</sup> The consensus among historians is that so-called ordinary American citizens saw early victims of AIDS as inferior, due to the pervasive notion that the illness only affected marginalized communities. These communities tend to be the focus of most historical AIDS narratives, including a lesbian perspective of the American AIDS crisis in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (1991) by Lillian Faderman, an examination of the African American struggle against HIV/AIDS in *To Make the Wounded Whole* (2020) by Dan Royles, and a look into how the AIDS crisis shaped U.S. immigration policy in *The Borders of AIDS: Race, Quarantine & Resistance* by Karma R. Chavez.<sup>9</sup> Each one of these are invaluable texts for understanding the full scope of this historical event; however, none of them speak directly to my concerns about America's collective memory of the AIDS crisis.

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<sup>8</sup> Hoppe, *Punishing Disease: HIV and the Criminalization of Sickness*. 1; Eric Cervini, *The Deviant's War: The Homosexual vs. the United States of America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2020). 376-77.

<sup>9</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Dan Royle, *To Make the Wounded Whole: The African American Struggle against HIV/AIDS, Justice, Power, and Politics* 46 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Karma R. Chavez, *The Borders of AIDS: Race, Quarantine & Resistance* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021).

To discover more about why people like my mother do not sufficiently remember this dark period of America's history, historians need to ask new questions. First, how have Americans who consciously lived through the AIDS crisis remembered this historical event? This is not a question of what they have remembered but of how the memories have survived. Second, how have Americans who did not consciously live through the AIDS crisis learn about this historical event? Those born during or after the specified timeframe do not possess detailed memories of this event, but their knowledge of it still informs the nation's collective memory. So, from where is this knowledge coming? Is the AIDS crisis taught in American public schools or learned about elsewhere?

After reviewing a thorough *New York Times* analysis of popular American textbooks, examining a variety of state-mandated curricula, and reading through the last twenty years' worth of AP U.S. History exam questions, it is clear that the majority of public knowledge regarding the American AIDS crisis comes from outside of the classroom. I detail these findings and my methods in the following chapter's first section, entitled "Education." Additionally, having engaged with a variety of theoretical texts on the establishment of public memory, the subsequent section, "Memory," demonstrates the role screen media plays in informing America's collective memory of the AIDS crisis.

Then, I employ Mike Chopra-Gant's theory of historical reception studies from *Cinema and History* (2008) for three case studies of screen media—two films and one television mini-series.<sup>10</sup> I detail my media selection process and dive deep into each of their reception histories in Chapter 2. The case studies include *Philadelphia* (1993),

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<sup>10</sup> Mike Chopra-Gant, *Cinema and History: The Telling of Stories*, Short Cuts: Introductions to Film Studies (London, England: Wallflower Press, 2008).

*Angels in America* (2003), and *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), all of which highlight the fact that popular screen media is the primary way in which the American public learns about and remembers the American AIDS crisis.

Finally, I detail a public-facing podcast I have created to continue research and analysis on this topic, as well as the subject of collective memory and screen media at large. The primary goal is to engage the public in conversations about fiction versus reality, the popularity of popular culture, and ultimately their own historical memories. The project begins with a continuation of the American AIDS crisis but will later include other major events throughout history as demonstrated on screen.

## CHAPTER 1: AIDS CRISIS IN EDUCATION & MEMORY

### Education

In the final months of 2019, *New York Times* education reporter Dana Goldstein embarked on a mission to read forty-three grade-school-level American history textbooks in order to “figure out what American teenagers are learning about our nation’s history in this deeply divided time, and how those lessons differ across the country.”<sup>11</sup> Originally, I had intended to do the same—to flip through page after page of textbook after textbook in search of any real education on the American AIDS crisis. Such an endeavor proved to be outside the scope of this project; however, Goldstein’s research still proves useful for understanding the current state of American public education. She shared the details of her enterprise in “I Read 4,800 Pages of American History Textbooks” and subsequently published an analysis of textbooks in Texas versus textbooks in California in “Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories.”<sup>12</sup> Both articles reveal a truth of American history education in the United States: what you learn depends on where you are.

Goldstein notes that the textbooks she examined in Texas and California—two of the nation’s largest markets—have the same publishers and credit the same authors, yet “their contents sometimes diverge in ways that reflect the nation’s deepest partisan divides.”<sup>13</sup> She argues that the reason for these differences is entirely political, citing state

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<sup>11</sup> Dana Goldstein, “I Read 4,800 Pages of American History Textbooks,” *New York Times*, January 13, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/01/13/reader-center/american-history-textbooks-journalism.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/13/reader-center/american-history-textbooks-journalism.html).

<sup>12</sup> Goldstein, “I Read 4,800 Pages of American History Textbooks”; Dana Goldstein, “Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories.,” *New York Times*, January 13, 2020, sec. A.

<sup>13</sup> Goldstein, “Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories.”

social studies standards, state laws, and most notably, feedback from textbook review panels made up of local policymakers. This explains why history textbooks across the country vary when it comes to teaching “the extent of discrimination against LGBTQ Americans.”<sup>14</sup> In Republican-dominated Texas, the commitment to social conservatism restricts coverage of LGBTQ issues within textbooks. What is important to note here is that Texas, like many other states on either side of the political coin, includes the American AIDS crisis under this umbrella category of LGBTQ issues—despite the reality that the AIDS crisis also affected a significant number of individuals who did not identify as homosexual. However, the curriculum of left-leaning California “requires [public] schools to teach the contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and disabled Americans.”<sup>15</sup>

Specific LGBTQ curriculum mandates such as California’s also exist elsewhere in the United States, including in New Jersey, Colorado, Oregon, and Illinois.<sup>16</sup> While this does mark notable progress in the potential for educating young Americans about the AIDS crisis, each of these laws passed between 2019 and 2021, apart from California (2011). In other words, entire generations of public-school students have come and gone from the time the American AIDS crisis took place to the time these mandates took effect. Furthermore, while these pro-LGBTQ mandates exist in a few Democrat-dominated states, an anti-LGBTQ curriculum remains the law of the land in a handful of “red” states.<sup>17</sup> Most of these curriculum laws focus on sex education, but those opposed

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<sup>14</sup> Goldstein, “Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Harron Walker, “Here’s Every State That Requires Schools to Teach LGBTQ+ History,” *Out Magazine*, August 16, 2019, [out.com/news/2019/8/16/heres-every-state-requires-schools-teach-lgbtq-history](https://out.com/news/2019/8/16/heres-every-state-requires-schools-teach-lgbtq-history).

<sup>17</sup> During the time it took to write and edit this scholarly essay, Florida passed a new “Don’t Say Gay” bill that limits discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity within public classrooms. This legislation is

to teaching LGBTQ history in schools can easily interpret their language as a means to restrict all LGBTQ education.

For example, Section 85.007 of the Texas Health and Safety Code, enacted in 1991, says that “the materials in education programs intended for persons younger than 18 years of age must: ... state that homosexual conduct is not an acceptable lifestyle and is a criminal offense under Section 21.06, Penal Code.”<sup>18</sup> Although 2003’s landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas* has since removed criminal penalties on the act of homosexual conduct (sodomy) itself, the remaining language in Section 85.007 is still current Texas law—a law stating that minors residing in Texas must learn that homosexual conduct is unacceptable.<sup>19</sup> It does not say they can or they should; it says they must. The state requires it. Additionally, the law does not specify where or how they must learn that homosexuality is unacceptable. Therefore, it is possible for this requirement to extend to history teachers as well as health teachers and sex education professionals.

Article 11 of Oklahoma’s School Code is another example of anti-LGBTQ curricula, although this example deals more specifically with AIDS education. The Oklahoma legislation states that AIDS prevention education must teach students that “engaging in homosexual activity” is one of the things primarily responsible for

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too new to warrant inclusion in this analysis. However, it is important to note that states are still enacting anti-LGBTQ curriculum laws for public schools in 2022.

<sup>18</sup> “ACQUIRED IMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME AND HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS INFECTION,” Health and Safety Code § 36 (1991), [statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/HS/htm/HS.85.htm](http://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/HS/htm/HS.85.htm).

<sup>19</sup> Justice Anthony Kennedy, John Geddes Lawrence and Tyron Garner v. Texas, 539 U.S. 558 (Supreme Court of the United States 2003).

contracting the AIDS virus.<sup>20</sup> However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) do not consider homosexuality or homosexual activity to be a method of transmitting HIV.<sup>21</sup> Not only is this legislation incorrect and outdated, but it perpetuates a harmful connection between AIDS and the LGBTQ community. One way to counter this false connection is to better understand the history of the American AIDS crisis and why the connection between AIDS and homosexuality exists in the first place, but Oklahoma does not require the teaching of LGBTQ issues or histories like California does. Therefore, the only mandated AIDS education in Oklahoma public schools is Article 11. Other states, like Arizona and Alabama, repealed their anti-LGBTQ curriculum laws as recently as 2021, but for every student residing in those states who received their public education prior to this year, the repeals did not come soon enough to make a difference in their understanding of the American AIDS crisis.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond statewide mandates for curriculum and politically modified history textbooks, there are a few constants at the federal level. For instance, there is the annual Advanced Placement (AP) exam in United States History. Every year, each American student who enrolls in AP U.S. History concludes the year with the same exam. It does not matter what state they live in or what textbook they read; the exam is the exam. Because of this, one might assume that at some point in the past twenty years a question has come up about the American AIDS crisis. However, after reviewing every AP U.S.

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<sup>20</sup> “AIDS Prevention Education,” HB 1476 School Code of 1971 § 11-103.3 (1987), [oscn.net/applications/oscn/DeliverDocument.asp?CiteID=90134](https://oscn.net/applications/oscn/DeliverDocument.asp?CiteID=90134).

<sup>21</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “HIV Transmission,” CDC, [cdc.gov/hiv/basics/transmission.html](https://cdc.gov/hiv/basics/transmission.html).

<sup>22</sup> “Instruction on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome - Department Assistance,” 15–716 Arizona Revised Statutes § (2019), [law.justia.com/codes/arizona/2019/title-15/section-15-716/](https://law.justia.com/codes/arizona/2019/title-15/section-15-716/); “Minimum Contents to Be Included in Sex Education Program or Curriculum,” 92–590 Code of Alabama § 16-40A-2 (2019), [law.justia.com/codes/alabama/2019/title-16/chapter-40a/section-16-40a-2/](https://law.justia.com/codes/alabama/2019/title-16/chapter-40a/section-16-40a-2/).

History exam from 2000 to 2014 (the most recently archived test), I found no mention of AIDS or of anything remotely related to LGBTQ history.<sup>23</sup> The closest the test came to providing students an opportunity to even acknowledge the AIDS crisis in their free-response essays was a 2007 short-answer question about political effectiveness not being ensured by landslide election victories, with Ronald Reagan as one of the options for analysis.<sup>24</sup> Given the students' reliance on politicized textbooks and widespread anti-LGBTQ curriculum mandates, I do not feel confident that anyone took advantage of that opportunity to write about AIDS while taking the 2007 exam.

The research I have conducted in this section only scratches the surface of how the American education system deals with teaching the history of the AIDS crisis. New research on LGBTQ education continues to evolve, and most of it has been expertly detailed in *LGBTQ Issues in Education: Advancing a Research Agenda* (2015); however, this American Educational Research Association publication examines a plethora of LGBTQ-related research from K-12 bullying to the impact of school on LGBTQ families.<sup>25</sup> While it is a useful text for considering how the American education system views the LGBTQ community within the confines of the classroom, it does not specifically address my question regarding how students learn about this one historical moment. Additionally, it is worth noting that I have limited my research within this section to formal public education—as it remains the most pervasive method of education

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<sup>23</sup> The College Board, “AP U.S. History Past Exam Questions,” AP Central, [apcentral.collegeboard.org/courses/ap-united-states-history/exam/the-exam-prior-to-2014-15](http://apcentral.collegeboard.org/courses/ap-united-states-history/exam/the-exam-prior-to-2014-15).

<sup>24</sup> “AP United States History 2007 Free-Response Questions” (The College Board, 2007), AP U.S. History Past Exam Questions, [secure-media.collegeboard.org/apc/ap07\\_us\\_hist\\_frq.pdf](http://secure-media.collegeboard.org/apc/ap07_us_hist_frq.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> George L. Wimberly, ed., *LGBTQ Issues in Education: Advancing a Research Agenda* (Washington, D.C: American Educational Research Association, 2015).

within the United States.<sup>26</sup> This means that I have not included an analysis of niche education outlets, such as Learning for Justice or The Zinn Education Project.

So, with all that I have revealed about public education and the teaching of the American AIDS crisis, how have Americans who did not consciously live through this historical event learned about it? Unless they were public-school students in Democrat-dominated states from about 2019 onward, they did not learn about it in school. There is no evidence to suggest that traditional K-12 public education has taught the American people anything valuable about the AIDS crisis.

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## **Memory**

While education focuses on what the American public has learned, an important question remains as to what the public remembers about the American AIDS crisis. Throughout his book, *The Art of AIDS*, Rob Baker asks a seemingly simple question: What is AIDS?<sup>27</sup> He does not ask this literally, hoping for a response of science and statistics; rather, he asks what AIDS means to us as a society. What is AIDS about? What is its cultural resonance? What is there to AIDS beyond death and disease? While openly acknowledging that there may never be a coherent answer, Baker argues that our best attempt at understanding the scope of the American AIDS crisis is through art. He goes on to suggest that art serves as a means for remembering and coping with the past, whether through individual or collective efforts. This calls to mind Edward S. Casey's theory that "public memory is both attached to a past (typically an originating event of

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<sup>26</sup> Maya Riser-Kositsky, "Education Statistics: Facts About American Schools," EducationWeek, January 7, 2022, [edweek.org/leadership/education-statistics-facts-about-american-schools/2019/01](https://edweek.org/leadership/education-statistics-facts-about-american-schools/2019/01).

<sup>27</sup> Rob Baker, *The Art of AIDS* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994).

some sort) *and* acts to ensure a future of further remembering of that same event.”<sup>28</sup> Art allows the existence of public memory by both being attached to the past and creating a future in which the public remembers the past.

Public memory, or collective memory, “entails the acts and processes through which memories move beyond the remembering individual and become shared, passed on, and in this way, form a broader network through which people gather a sense of collectivity.”<sup>29</sup> When analyzing public memory, it is important to note that there is never one definitive version—just as no individual memory is definitive or absolute. The act of sharing a common memory helps form communities, but the memory itself may differ greatly across a multitude of said communities. This is due in part to the fact that these communities tend to form along cultural lines. For instance, the American LGBTQ community likely shares a collective memory of the AIDS crisis that differs significantly from that of conservative heterosexual Americans who vehemently supported Ronald Reagan during his administration. However, the American LGBTQ community’s memory of the AIDS crisis likely aligns more closely with that of Haitian Americans, who also suffered many casualties during the height of the epidemic and faced rampant discrimination because of it. I call attention to these discrepancies in public memory as a means of acknowledging their existence, but my overall focus is not on what these various groups remember; I am concerned with *how* they remember it.

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<sup>28</sup> Edward S. Casey, “Public Memory in Place and Time,” in *Framing Public Memory* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 17–44. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Houdek and Kendall R. Phillips, “Public Memory,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, January 25, 2017), doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.181.

Several theories exist regarding how the public establishes a collective memory. Historian Sarah Maza directly associates collective memory—or “collective amnesia” rather—with nationalism in a chapter of *Thinking about History* (2017).<sup>30</sup> She argues that the nation plays a primary role in establishing both a collective memory and a collective lack of memory about a certain event or time period. The same argument appears in Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed’s *If Memory Serves* (2012), as they directly implicate the United States government in what they consider to be a lack of conscious queer memory.<sup>31</sup> This book plays an important role in understanding how the LGBTQ community remembers its past—or, as Castiglia and Reed would argue, fails to remember its past. The authors detail targeted “unremembering” efforts by powerful cultural institutions—including both religious fundamentalist groups and GLAAD (originally the Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation)—and argue that these efforts began with the AIDS crisis.

Castiglia and Reed point specifically to a “divide in gay culture” between the pre-AIDS decade and the post-AIDS decade, marking a turn in queer-centric media from whimsical and highly stylized to an “anxious commitment to normalcy at the expense of memory.”<sup>32</sup> Here, the authors suggest that efforts to normalize the LGBTQ community in the eyes of the general American public following the AIDS crisis outweighed any efforts to remember or even memorialize the tragedy of the crisis itself. While cultural historians may be quick to disagree, citing the great works of fine artists and playwrights in the

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<sup>30</sup> Sarah Maza, “The History of Where?,” in *Thinking about History* (The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), [jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttwqg](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttwqg).

<sup>32</sup> Castiglia and Reed, *If Memory Serves*. 211.

wake of AIDS, what the authors are really referring to here is popular culture. In other words, they argue that memory is directly tied to mainstream cultural representation, and they place significant responsibility for that representation on popular screen media.

In *Framing Public Memory*, Barbie Zelizer notes that “memory works through various vehicles that give collectives a sense of their past.”<sup>33</sup> The most important of these vehicles, she argues, is the visual. For Zelizer, images possess their own unique voices that help tell stories of the past; so, imagine all the stories that moving images could tell. Screen media is the height of memory vehicles because it combines the visual with the written, the audible, and the reenacted. Every tool necessary for establishing collective memory exists within screen media, but what really makes this medium stand out against other memory vehicles is its ability to garner mass distribution and widespread popularity.

Take the award-winning play *Angels in America* for example. No theater on Broadway seats more than 2,000 audience members.<sup>34</sup> Even if the play ran night after night, it would take many decades of live performances to reach the 4.2 million viewers who watched the premiere of the HBO miniseries adaptation on a single Sunday night.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, a general lack of access to theater productions exists for ordinary citizens—often due to financial, social, and sometimes even cultural circumstances. For instance, rampant protests nearly prevented a 1996 production of *Angels in America* in Charlotte, North Carolina. Despite the play’s winning of a Pulitzer Prize and two Tony awards,

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<sup>33</sup> Barbie Zelizer, “The Voice of the Visual in Memory,” in *Framing Public Memory* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 157–86. 157.

<sup>34</sup> Theatre Development Fund, “Theatre 101,” *TDF Backstage* (blog), October 18, 2007, [web.archive.org/web/20071018100822/http://www.tdf.org/tdf\\_servicepage.aspx?id=103&%20do=v](http://www.tdf.org/tdf_servicepage.aspx?id=103&%20do=v).

<sup>35</sup> David Bauder, “HBO’s ‘Angels in America’ Seen by 4.2M,” *AP News*, December 9, 2003.

conservative locals found its displays of nudity and overt homosexual themes too offensive to grace the stage.<sup>36</sup> Tensions escalated to the point that Superior Court Judge Marvin K. Gray needed to issue a temporary restraining order against the conservative board of the North Carolina Performing Arts Center and local law enforcement agencies “just three hours before curtain.”<sup>37</sup> Even with a court-ordered injunction to let the play continue its run, protestors picketed performances. If not for the last-minute efforts of Judge Gray and numerous counter-demonstrators who supported the production’s presence in Charlotte, an entire city of potential theatergoers would have missed their opportunity to see *Angels in America* on stage. Even those who could afford the elevated ticket prices had to brave the controversy just to attend. This example highlights one of many ways that outstanding circumstances may limit theater attendance, whereas seven years later those same Charlotte locals could simply tune in to the HBO miniseries and experience the play adaptation sans controversy.

When it comes to establishing public memory, the more people who experience the memory vehicle, the stronger the collective memory (or various collective memories) becomes. If a couple thousand people saw *Angels in America* in Charlotte, then their collective memory of the American AIDS crisis based on the play is only a couple thousand people strong. Conversely, when 4.2 million viewers tuned in to the premiere of the miniseries, the newly formed collective memory is 4.2 million people strong. The stronger memory carries more weight and does more to inform public perception of the

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<sup>36</sup> Kevin Sack, “Play Displays a Growing City’s Cultural Tensions,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1996, Late Edition. A12; Charlotte, NC was not the only city to oppose the production of *Angels in America*. However, the tension between conservative protestors and liberal counter-protestors thrust the controversy into the national spotlight.

<sup>37</sup> Steven Drukman, “‘Angels’ Provokes a Legal and Cultural Confrontation,” *American Theatre*, May 1, 1996, [americantheatre.org/1996/05/01/angels-provokes-a-legal-and-cultural-confrontation/](http://americantheatre.org/1996/05/01/angels-provokes-a-legal-and-cultural-confrontation/).

event in question: the American AIDS crisis. Therefore, screen media's ability to reach a wider audience and garner vast popularity makes it the best vehicle for establishing public memory and the leading way that Americans remember the AIDS crisis.

## CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL RECEPTION STUDIES

When selecting screen media for my historical reception case studies, I began with the basic criteria of content and release date. I decided to choose one source from each decade following the onset of the American AIDS crisis: 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. This allowed me to compare and contrast changing narratives over time. Additionally, I chose to include only media that dealt specifically with the AIDS crisis as defined by its time period (1981-2000); therefore, I did not include any sources set after 2000 that dealt with or discussed the presence of AIDS. These initial criteria significantly narrowed my list of potential media and allowed me to employ a new standard of criteria for final selection. From there, I examined the film or television series' overall popularity through box office results and Nielsen ratings, critical appeal through awards and reviews, and longevity through current engagement with modern audiences. The latter considered how accessible the media is to modern audiences and if conversation about the text still occurs today. Though some decisions were more difficult than others—namely whether or not to include the film adaptation of *Rent* (2005)—the final decision to choose *Philadelphia* (1993), *Angels in America* (2003), and *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) was ultimately a clear and definitive one.

Regardless of one's opinion on the academic merit of these primary sources, the public's dependence on them for historical knowledge calls into question how other sources—educational institutions, governments, news outlets—disseminate history. These films and television series are the means through which the American public

experiences, relives, and remembers this historical event, so they warrant legitimate historical consideration all the same.

Each of the following three case studies engages in historical reception—a “specialized area of historical film study that focuses on how films were understood by audiences at particular times,” according to Mike Chopra-Gant.<sup>38</sup> In his continued explanation of historical reception, Chopra-Gant states, “At the heart of this enterprise is a desire to comprehend the meanings attached to films in the particular contexts within which they were watched and enjoyed by real viewers.”<sup>39</sup> While I did examine behind-the-scenes production details for each of the following case studies, the majority of my emphasis remained with the “real viewers,” as he calls them. Therefore, I paid particular attention to critical reviews and audience responses at the time of each one’s release.

A key factor in analyzing audience responses is understanding that every audience is different, because each viewer brings a unique experience to the text. These films and television series do not exist in a vacuum, so any analysis of them needs to take into consideration the state of the world in which their creators made them. The true goal of historical reception studies, according to Chopra-Gant, is to:

Examine how viewers might have been able to interpret films in the historical moment of exhibition, taking into account the subject matter and its treatment in the film itself, and the wider social context, debates and discourses of the time with which those viewers would have been familiar and which would have provided frames of reference within which to make meanings from the material provided by the film.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Chopra-Gant, *Cinema and History: The Telling of Stories*. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Chopra-Gant. 11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

This emphasis on wider social context is what makes my selection of a film from each decade so relevant. For example, if I were to analyze only screen media from the 1990s—a time during which the AIDS crisis was still part of daily American life—my reception studies would be limited to audiences that bring their own perspectives and observations about the AIDS crisis with them to the theater. Whether they first heard about AIDS on the news, learned about it from a friend, or had personal experience with the epidemic itself, their prior knowledge of the portrayed event would color their opinion of the event’s portrayal. While the unique perspectives of these audiences are important, a deeper understanding of how the public interacts with this media requires the consideration of other audiences as well—particularly those with historical hindsight.

By the end of this chapter and my analysis of these audiences, it will be clear that screen media plays a primary role in educating the public and shaping their collective memory of the American AIDS crisis. Each selected case study offers unique individual elements with similar overall results, proving the power of AIDS media at-large rather than simply emphasizing the power of each individual text.

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### ***Philadelphia* (1993)**

TriStar Pictures released *Philadelphia* on December 24, 1993, to a \$143,433 domestic opening.<sup>41</sup> The film starring Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington went on to gross over \$206 million worldwide. Directed by Jonathan Demme and written by Ron Nyswaner, *Philadelphia* won two Oscars, including best Actor in a Leading Role for

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<sup>41</sup> “Philadelphia (1993),” Box Office Mojo, [boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0107818/?ref=bo\\_se\\_r\\_1](http://boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0107818/?ref=bo_se_r_1).

Tom Hanks.<sup>42</sup> Today, the film is “certified fresh” on Rotten Tomatoes with a critical score of 81% and an audience score of 89%.<sup>43</sup> Modern viewers can stream it online.

*Philadelphia* tells the story of skilled lawyer Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks), who abruptly loses his job at a prestigious Philadelphia law firm following a well-deserved promotion.<sup>44</sup> His firing occurs shortly after a colleague notices a Kaposi’s sarcoma lesion on his forehead—a tell-tale sign of AIDS. From there, Beckett seeks counsel in a lawsuit against the firm for wrongful termination, successfully arguing that the firm fired him because he has AIDS and not because of his job performance. He ends up in the office of Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), a homophobic personal injury lawyer more known for his television commercials than his case record. At first, Miller declines due to his dislike of homosexuals. It is not until later in the film, when he witnesses the discrimination Beckett faces firsthand, that he agrees to take the case.

Several scenes stand out over the course of the film, but one is especially poignant. It takes place in a law library, where Beckett researches legal precedence and prepares to defend himself in his lawsuit. He keeps to himself and bothers no one, yet a librarian appears at his table and asks him if he would prefer a private study room. Beckett declines, but the visibly uncomfortable librarian persists. Looking around the room, Beckett observes a bevy of similarly uncomfortable faces with the sole exception of Miller. To them, he is nothing more than the picture of AIDS. As the director shifts the film’s perspective over to Miller, both Washington’s character and the audience watch as Beckett becomes increasingly frustrated by the idea that he should isolate himself just to

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<sup>42</sup> “The Official Academy Awards Database,” Database, Oscars, [awardsdatabase.oscars.org](https://awardsdatabase.oscars.org).

<sup>43</sup> “Philadelphia,” Rotten Tomatoes, [rottentomatoes.com/m/philadelphia](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/philadelphia).

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Demme, *Philadelphia*, Drama (TriStar Pictures, 1993).

make everyone else more comfortable. His illness makes him no less of a lawyer, and he should be treated as no less of a man. Miller eventually comes to Beckett's defense by joining him at his table and ultimately agreeing to take the case. This marks the start of Miller's journey to understanding Beckett and reevaluating his prejudices about the LGBTQ community.

The remainder of the film showcases the legal battle between Beckett and his former firm, with stellar performances from the entire cast and memorable moments in film history—including Joe Miller's famous line, "With all due respect, your honor, we don't live in this courtroom."<sup>45</sup> The trial concludes triumphantly, setting precedent for future fictional cases of AIDS-related workplace discrimination, but Beckett barely has time to enjoy the victory. His health deteriorates over the course of the movie, resulting in his death shortly after the verdict.

By highlighting Beckett's health struggles alongside his court battle and his personal relationships with friends, family, and his longtime partner Miguel (Antonio Banderas), audiences witness a well-rounded look into life with AIDS in the early 1990s. Hanks' performance expertly captures the fear, frustration, and constant feeling of embarrassment that comes with his diagnosis. From trying to hide his lesions with poorly applied makeup to struggling to provide his own testimony on the stand, audiences do not simply watch the progression of AIDS; they experience it. When Beckett faces discrimination in the workplace, so does the audience. When Beckett is made to feel uncomfortable, so is the audience. Although masterfully executed by Hanks and director

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<sup>45</sup> Demme, *Philadelphia*.

Jonathan Demme, one critic observed that Beckett is not as much of a surrogate for the audience as another character is:

Miller's character is the movie's admission ticket for heterosexual and anti-gay America. Those hostile to homosexuals and AIDS sufferers who contract the virus through homosexual activity can presumably identify with Miller. This, of course, is the baited hook. Miller is destined to take a more reasoned look at Beckett's situation, and so is the audience.<sup>46</sup>

By setting the film up with these two main characters on different trajectories, every viewer has the opportunity to identify with someone and to learn a valuable lesson about this moment in history, regardless of a person's preconceived notions about the AIDS crisis.

Celebrated film critic Roger Ebert agreed. In his 1994 review of *Philadelphia*, he stated that "for moviegoers with an antipathy to AIDS but an enthusiasm for stars like Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, it may help to broaden understanding of the disease."<sup>47</sup> While Ebert praised the film for being "a ground-breaker" and marking "the first time Hollywood has risked a big-budget film on the subject," he also lamented the fact that it does not do more. It relies on safe formulas and familiar settings to tell a story about AIDS without ever getting too dark or too difficult to watch. Ebert was correct; *Philadelphia* is not the harrowing look at homosexual life in American during the AIDS crisis that some may have wanted it to be. Not only does it center around a privileged white male with a successful career and supportive family, but it also fails to adequately represent gay male sexuality:

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<sup>46</sup> Gary Thompson, "Our Review of 'Philadelphia,'" *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1994, sec. Entertainment, [inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/movies/jonathan-demme-philadelphia-review-tom-hanks-denzel-washington.html](http://inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/movies/jonathan-demme-philadelphia-review-tom-hanks-denzel-washington.html).

<sup>47</sup> Roger Ebert, "Reviews: Philadelphia," *RogerEbert.com*, January 14, 1994, [rogerebert.com/reviews/philadelphia-1994](http://rogerebert.com/reviews/philadelphia-1994).

Little within the movie's content reveals that these gay men are actually sexually involved lovers rather than simply very close roommates or best friends. Even when they are alone in Andrew's hospital room and Andrew reveals that he is ready to die, Miguel's greatest display of intimacy during his final moments with the character superficially encoded to be the great love of his life involves his kissing a couple of Andrew's fingers and then holding Andrew's hands.<sup>48</sup>

These critiques about what *Philadelphia* is lacking are all valid, but they are not as vitally important for a mainstream audience in 1993.

Today, we expect to receive more accurate representation in our media. Back in the early 1990s—when people were still dying from AIDS in significant numbers but widespread news coverage felt scarce in comparison—this was exactly the type of film necessary to bring AIDS to the forefront of the national conversation. It was because it did not push boundaries and did not appear threatening to the average viewer that it was able to reach so many people and become such an integral part of the AIDS media narrative. As Mark Zelinsky of *The Gay & Lesbian Review* puts it, “In the end, most of the gay community forgave the film for its Disney-like depiction of gay life” because it “was disseminating information to mainstream viewers.”<sup>49</sup> That is not to say that the entire LGBTQ+ community at large was in agreement about the film's political usefulness when it first came out. Some responses from queer publications support Zelinsky's analysis, like a review of *Philadelphia* in Virginia's *Our Own Community Press* which stated, “We see the movie, and most of the time, we can say, ‘Yeah I can relate to that.’ And we think, ‘Thank God there are straight people watching this.’”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, *The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television* (Binghamton: The Haworth Press, 2000). 54-5.

<sup>49</sup> Mark Zelinsky, “The Philadelphia Phenomenon,” *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, 2015, [glreview.org/article/the-philadelphia-phenomenon/](http://glreview.org/article/the-philadelphia-phenomenon/).

<sup>50</sup> Patrick Evans, “QueeReview: Philadelphia,” *Our Own Community Press*, February 1994. 12.

Others claimed “bullshit” and asked why gay men should not “demand the full truth.”<sup>51</sup> There was clear divisiveness among those the film claimed to portray, but divisions over *Philadelphia* did not end with the queer community.

Just as a textbook’s geographic origin influences its content, initial opinions of the film varied based on location. Bob Lapham of the *Abilene Reporter-News* in Texas all but begged audiences not to see the film, using words like “bland,” “contrived,” and “unbalanced” to describe it.<sup>52</sup> While one could easily dismiss this review as a personal—albeit unpopular—creative opinion, other statements within Lapham’s article allude to a more political agenda. At one point, he describes *Philadelphia* as “a mix of overdrawn situations and characters which tries, almost embarrassingly at times, to portray homosexuality and AIDS as if it were a training film for gay rights activists.”<sup>53</sup> If conservative Texans had any inclination to see the film prior to reading Lapham’s review, his thinly veiled cries of propaganda could have been all they needed to stay away for good. Meanwhile, reviews in liberal-leaning states suggested that *Philadelphia* is a must-see movie for the ages whereas those in “purple” states—the ones lingering in the middle of America’s harsh political divide—provided potential audiences with a mix of criticism and praise.<sup>54</sup> For example, Bill Morrison of Raleigh’s *The News and Observer* described *Philadelphia* as “timid, but still important.”<sup>55</sup> These opinions on the film, while presented by individuals, likely reflect the majority opinion of the communities from which they

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<sup>51</sup> Cliff Bostock, “Quips and Quotes,” *Q-Notes*, March 1, 1994, 1st edition. 18.

<sup>52</sup> Bob Lapham, “Acting Tops Unbalanced ‘Philadelphia,’” *Abilene Reporter-News*, January 15, 1994. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Lapham, “Acting Tops Unbalanced ‘Philadelphia.’” 15.

<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey Schmalz, “Hollywood’s First Big-Budget AIDS Movie,” *The San Francisco Examiner*, March 14, 1993. 29; Dolores Barclay, “First Major Studio Film Facing AIDS Head-On,” *The Napa Valley Register*, December 30, 1993. 1C.

<sup>55</sup> Bill Morrison, “The Easy Out,” *The News and Observer*, January 20, 1994. 1E.

came—given that those writing the reviews provide an authoritative cultural voice to said communities. However, it is incorrect to assume that everyone shares the majority opinion.

Less than two months after the film’s release, the *Democrat and Chronicle* of Rochester, New York published reader responses to the question: “Are the movies an appropriate place to teach about AIDS?”<sup>56</sup> Most of the published responses reflected the majority opinion of a liberal-leaning city and supported the inclusion of AIDS education in an “excellent,” “powerful,” and “socially responsible” movie. Others opposed the portrayal of something they considered “too controversial a topic for Hollywood to take on.” One unique response considered the bigger picture, as Gerald F. Anderson stated that “AIDS should not be shown in the movies for money profit—unless all proceeds are donated to research.” Since *Philadelphia* debuted in the midst of the American AIDS crisis, these responses offer great insight into the film’s historical reception. To understand its impact on public memory, however, historians can gather more information through reflections on the movie’s legacy.

Gary Bell, a longtime HIV advocate and director of a Philadelphia-based health service agency called Bebashi, spoke to his local PBS station on the twentieth anniversary of the film in 2013.<sup>57</sup> During the interview, he recalled there being a lot of buzz about it throughout the city and reflected what he valued most about the film: “I think the good news was that it got people talking about HIV in a way that they really weren’t, because HIV was always that thing we really didn’t want to talk about.” Marla

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<sup>56</sup> “Town Topic: Are the Movies an Appropriate Place to Teach about AIDS?,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, February 2, 1994. sec. Town Talk. 2E.

<sup>57</sup> Elena Gordon, “Two Decades Ago, Tom Hanks and ‘Philadelphia’ Prompted Changing Attitudes Toward HIV-AIDS,” WHYY, December 20, 2013, [whyy.org/segments/20th-anniversary-of-philadelphia/](http://whyy.org/segments/20th-anniversary-of-philadelphia/).

Gold, Dean of Health Management and Policy at Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health, agreed. She noted, "We have a major star, playing a significant role with a visual for HIV, acted out beautifully [in] a movie that's award winning. So, this is a lot different than a pamphlet that arrives in the mail and warns you of something. This is real."<sup>58</sup>

Between these recollections and the film's obvious staying power as "Hollywood's most successful gay-themed movie to date in terms of box office receipts" (as of 2015), it is clear that—divisiveness aside—the filmmakers accomplished what they set out to do.<sup>59</sup> They made a movie about AIDS for mainstream audiences that was educational, enlightening, and entertaining all in one. As director and co-producer Jonathan Demme said, "We didn't want to make a film that would appeal to an audience of people like us, who already had a predisposition for caring about people with AIDS. We wanted to reach people who couldn't care less about people with AIDS. That was our target audience."<sup>60</sup> Given screen media's ability to reach such a wide range of viewers and the big-studio film's commitment to engaging a variety of audiences, from the mainstream to the marginalized, *Philadelphia's* role in shaping public memory of the American AIDS crisis is concrete. For those watching back in 1993 or 1994, it shed a new perspective on AIDS that they maybe had not previously considered. For those watching now, nearly three decades later, it informs audiences of what the AIDS crisis was like in the early 1990s—the discrimination, the sickness, etc. Therefore, if you consciously lived through the American AIDS crisis, this film likely shaped your

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<sup>58</sup> Gordon, "Two Decades Ago, Tom Hanks and 'Philadelphia' Prompted Changing Attitudes Toward HIV-AIDS."

<sup>59</sup> Zelinsky, "The Philadelphia Phenomenon."

<sup>60</sup> Gordon.

memory of it; if you did not consciously live through the American AIDS crisis, this film likely educated you about it.

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### ***Angels in America* (2003)**

HBO premiered *Angels in America* on December 8, 2003, to 4.2 million total viewers.<sup>61</sup> The miniseries—starring Al Pacino, Meryl Streep, Emma Thompson, and a continuously impressive cast of other actors—went on to win eleven Emmy awards, including Outstanding Miniseries.<sup>62</sup> Directed by Mike Nichols and written by Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* is “certified fresh” on Rotten Tomatoes with a critical score of 90% and an audience score of 96%.<sup>63</sup> Modern viewers can stream the miniseries on HBO Max, on Hulu, or watch it on DVD.

Kushner’s self-proclaimed “gay fantasia” weaves together multiple AIDS narratives as a variety of characters come face-to-face with the realities of the epidemic.<sup>64</sup> It begins with Prior Walter (Justin Kirk) attending the funeral of his boyfriend Louis’s grandmother.<sup>65</sup> Shortly after the funeral, as Louis (Ben Shenkman) drowns in guilt over never visiting his grandmother before her passing, Prior reveals a lesion on his chest. More than that, he reveals he has already been to the doctor and that they have confirmed the worst: AIDS. The timing, unfortunate as it is, sends Louis from one spiral to another as he must continue his journey onward to the cemetery, where he will muse on the seemingly inevitable death of his partner while laying his grandmother to rest. All the

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<sup>61</sup> Bauder, “HBO’s ‘Angels in America’ Seen by 4.2M.”

<sup>62</sup> “Emmy Awards Search,” Database, Emmys, [emmys.com/awards/nominations/award-search](http://emmys.com/awards/nominations/award-search).

<sup>63</sup> “Angels in America,” Rotten Tomatoes, [rottentomatoes.com/tv/angels\\_in\\_america](http://rottentomatoes.com/tv/angels_in_america).

<sup>64</sup> Nancy Franklin, “America, Lost and Found,” *The New Yorker*, November 30, 2003, [newyorker.com/magazine/2003/12/08/america-lost-and-found](http://newyorker.com/magazine/2003/12/08/america-lost-and-found).

<sup>65</sup> Mike Nichols, *Angels in America* (HBO, December 2003).

while, director Mike Nichols makes eloquent use of the medium by sharply cutting back and forth to new scenes with new characters—rather than having them all fill a single stage during their introductions, as they would in the original staged production.

Audiences meet the fictional version of real-life conservative icon and lawyer Roy Cohn (Al Pacino) as he subtly asserts his power over Joe Pitt (Patrick Wilson), “a promising young clerk in the federal appellate court and a Mormon.”<sup>66</sup> Not long after meeting Joe, viewers meet his wife Harper (Mary-Louise Parker) in all of her eccentric, hallucination-filled, pill-popping glory.

From there, the cast fills out methodically over time, introducing one stellar performance after another. Roy Cohn reluctantly comes to terms with his AIDS diagnosis, faces disbarment, and finds himself haunted by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg (Meryl Streep) while Joe leaves his wife to begin a homosexual relationship with Louis, who has since left Prior. In the midst of all this turmoil, an Angel (Emma Thompson) visits Prior and claims that God has abandoned mankind due to its constant movement—a metaphor for man’s innate desire for progress. The Angel presents Prior with the option to go back to the way things were nearly a century ago, to stop moving forward with modern life, and to win back God’s love. Ultimately, Prior refuses the Angel, as he continues moving his life forward and outlives his diagnosis.

The image of Prior alive at the end of the miniseries is one that, up until its debut in December 2003, was severely lacking in AIDS screen media. It was a more familiar sight on stage, but on screen it was uncanny. Audiences expected a death, because even in 2003 they understood AIDS as a death sentence. Instead, *Angels in America* left them

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<sup>66</sup> Franklin, “America, Lost and Found.”

with a feeling of hope for the future of all those diagnosed and living with HIV/AIDS. In fairness to its predecessors, however, this hopeful future only realistically appeared when effective treatments for HIV did around 1997.<sup>67</sup> It was not until 2002, a year before the miniseries premiered, that “the FDA approved the first rapid HIV diagnostic test kit” allowing for early detection of the virus with 99.6% accuracy.<sup>68</sup> Before then, hope felt hard to come by, and media centered around AIDS reflected that hopelessness. Death had either been the central theme in films like *Longtime Companion* (1989), *Jeffrey* (1995), and *It’s My Party* (1996) or the inevitable outcome for characters diagnosed with AIDS in *And the Band Played On* (1993), *Philadelphia* (1993), *Boys on the Side* (1995), and more. For audiences familiar with these titles, *Angels in America* felt refreshing and “progressive” in its portrayal—though one would be mistaken in suggesting that the miniseries is an easy watch.<sup>69</sup>

On the contrary, each episode demands a significant amount of care and attention from its viewers in order for them to feel rewarded by its sweeping themes.<sup>70</sup> Beyond its many elements of interpretive art is the series’ dedication to not pulling any punches. Much of the criticism *Philadelphia* received came from its decision to play things safe. No one could accuse *Angels in America*, in any of its forms, of being safe. Whereas *Philadelphia* took risks by bringing an AIDS narrative to a mainstream audience in 1993, *Angels in America* is far riskier with its content—particularly in the eyes of the miniseries’ predominantly white target audience. For example, the same nude scene that

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<sup>67</sup> Rachel Nall, “The History of HIV and AIDS in the United States,” Healthline, October 12, 2021, [healthline.com/health/hiv-aids/history](https://www.healthline.com/health/hiv-aids/history).

<sup>68</sup> Nall, “The History of HIV and AIDS in the United States.”

<sup>69</sup> Vince Horiuchi, “Angels in America,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, December 5, 2003. D1.

<sup>70</sup> Barry Garron, “‘Angels in America’: Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 5, 2003, [hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/angels-america-review-2003-hbo-tv-adaptation-1153657/](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/angels-america-review-2003-hbo-tv-adaptation-1153657/).

caused such outrage when the play came to Charlotte in 1996 barely registers as anything more than another carefully curated scene in a complex work of art during the miniseries version. This could be due, in part, to its existence on HBO—a network that had already established its capacity to create popular, high-brow television with the debuts of *Oz* (1997), *The Sopranos* (1999), *Six Feet Under* (2001), and *The Wire* (2002). Being that HBO was exclusively a premiere cable channel back then, nudity was not all that shocking. Perhaps people are more comfortable with a full-frontal view of a man’s penis on their screens than in person, or perhaps any outrage that the televised scene may have caused fell upon deaf ears since the success of the series is not reliant on ticket sales. Either way, the riskier content paid off. Not only did the creators remain true to the original work, but it also earned the series 21 Emmy nominations.<sup>71</sup>

Although many creators insist that awards do not matter and that a work should be able to stand alone on its merits, for our purposes of understanding how the work shapes public memory, awards matter quite significantly. Prizes elevate films and television series into public consciousness by generating rampant discussion around their quality. In fact, it is easier to find local newspaper articles praising the miniseries for its record-breaking Emmy nominations and wins than it is to locate local reviews. Suddenly, a casual TV viewer who has never read a review or plot synopsis and does not subscribe to HBO wants to check out *Angels in America* to see if it is really worth its 21 nominations. That viewer will purchase a subscription (even if only temporarily), seek out the series when it is available on DVD, or even stream the episodes nearly two decades later all because of its clout. The public does not just remember *Angels in America* as an AIDS

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<sup>71</sup> “Emmy Awards Search.”

narrative but as an award-winning AIDS narrative with a superstar cast of popular—albeit almost entirely white—actors. It becomes important, essential viewing without even needing to know its plot beyond the word AIDS. This reputation carries a lot of weight in the establishment of public memory. It helps to construct a memory of the series being high quality and necessary to watch while also attracting more viewers in to further develop a collective memory of the content itself.

The majority of the show’s content depicts the American AIDS crisis through social relationships in what is “undeniably a period piece.”<sup>72</sup> Given that Kushner wrote the original script for the play “during the Reagan era” in 1987-88, its premiere on HBO puts over a decade of distance between when the story is set and when the series aired.<sup>73</sup> In describing its position as a historical narrative in his 2003 review of the miniseries, *Variety* television critic Todd McCarthy explains:

On the work’s most specific level of concern, AIDS and gay issues are not front-burner issues in the public consciousness quite the way they were a decade back, even if no cure has been found and the front lines are shifting from the West to the East and Africa. Secondly, if Kushner thought liberal-left activists had their hands full with Ronald Reagan, what would they then have made of the political landscape today, President Bush’s African AIDS initiative notwithstanding? But by far the biggest difference in experiencing *Angels in America* then and now is the fact that we have passed through the millennium, and the millennium was 9/11. [...] Now, with domestic political knives extra sharpened and a monumental, religiously freighted global conflict at an uncertain but more than likely early stage, the [miniseries] ironically makes one look back on the period in question with longing for its peculiarly enraged form of innocence.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Todd McCarthy, “Angels in America,” *Variety*, November 30, 2003, [variety.com/2003/tv/reviews/angels-in-america-7-1200537704/](http://variety.com/2003/tv/reviews/angels-in-america-7-1200537704/).

<sup>73</sup> Tony Kushner, “Angels in America Changed Tony Kushner’s Life,” HBO, [hbo.com/angels-in-america/season-1/interview-with-tony-kushner](http://hbo.com/angels-in-america/season-1/interview-with-tony-kushner).

<sup>74</sup> McCarthy, “Angels in America.”

Social and political issues of the time influence so much of our individual perspective that this description goes a long way to helping us understand the perspectives that so many Americans brought to their viewing of *Angels in America* in 2003. Fifteen years later, Alex Abad-Santos made similar observations in a *Vox* article comparing the story's contents to American life under the Trump administration: "The Angel's message, coupled with the play's sharp criticism of former president Ronald Reagan's policies and politics, make it very easy to graft however you feel about Donald Trump's campaign promise to 'make America great again' onto Kushner's work."<sup>75</sup> It is clear from both articles that the content of Kushner's masterpiece has the uncanny ability to stay relevant in every age and to teach audiences about the present while also showcasing events of the past.

That is not to assume that *Angels in America* teaches more about the present than it does the past. Contrarily, on the surface it only teaches the past—in traumatic, sickening detail. Viewers watch Prior struggle to make it to the bathroom before screaming out in a mixture of agony and embarrassment as he defecates blood.<sup>76</sup> The reality of AIDS is not a beautiful work of art; it is harsh and cruel, and it leaves its witnesses feeling unsettled and afraid. The miniseries accomplishes the same feat through its honest, vulgar depiction of the illness. In this way, *Angels in America* does more to educate viewers about the terrifying parts of the American AIDS crisis than *Philadelphia* does. This may still be a big-budget Hollywood production, but it certainly is not the Disney-like version of AIDS that members of the LGBTQ community claimed its

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<sup>75</sup> Alex Abad-Santos, "What It's Like to Watch *Angels in America* in an Age of Making America Great Again," *Vox*, March 30, 2018, [vox.com/culture/2018/3/30/17168846/angels-in-america-broadway-review](https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/3/30/17168846/angels-in-america-broadway-review).

<sup>76</sup> Nichols, *Angels in America*.

predecessor to be. *Angels in America* offers an air of authenticity that either helps those who consciously lived through the AIDS crisis remember it or educates those who did not consciously live through the AIDS crisis about what it was like.

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### ***Dallas Buyers Club* (2013)**

Focus Features released *Dallas Buyers Club* on November 1, 2013, to a \$260,865 domestic opening.<sup>77</sup> The film starring Matthew McConaughey, Jennifer Garner, and Jared Leto went on to gross nearly \$56 million worldwide. Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée and written by Craig Borten and Melisa Wallack, *Dallas Buyers Club* won three Oscars, including Actor in a Leading Role for McConaughey and Actor in a Supporting Role for Leto.<sup>78</sup> Today, the film is “certified fresh” on Rotten Tomatoes with a critical score of 92% and an audience score of 91%.<sup>79</sup> It is the only case study with an audience score lower than its critical score, though 1% is not a significant difference. Modern viewers can stream *Dallas Buyers Club* on Peacock or rent it online.

The film begins in 1985 as the outwardly racist, homophobic Ron Woodroof (Matthew McConaughey) receives an AIDS diagnosis during a trip to the hospital.<sup>80</sup> Realizing that his past encounters with sex workers and intravenous drug users may have been unprotected, he reluctantly—albeit angrily—accepts his diagnosis and begins routine hospital visits with Dr. Eve Saks (Jennifer Garner). It is during these visits that Woodroof learns about zidovudine (AZT), which is still in its clinical trial stage. He

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<sup>77</sup> “Dallas Buyers Club (2013),” Box Office Mojo, [boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0790636/?ref\\_=bo\\_se\\_r\\_1](http://boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0790636/?ref_=bo_se_r_1).

<sup>78</sup> “The Official Academy Awards Database.”

<sup>79</sup> “Dallas Buyers Club,” Rotten Tomatoes, [rottentomatoes.com/m/dallas\\_buyers\\_club](http://rottentomatoes.com/m/dallas_buyers_club).

<sup>80</sup> Jean-Marc Vallée, *Dallas Buyers Club*, Drama (Focus Features, 2013).

proceeds to bribe someone at the hospital for a few doses of AZT in a desperate attempt to outlive his 30-day life sentence. Despite the AZT, Woodroof's health rapidly deteriorates. America's lack of proactive solutions to the AIDS crisis leads him to Mexico in search of more AZT, but he instead meets a former American doctor (Griffin Dunne) who refers to the drug as a poison. The doctor prescribes him his own concoction of drugs that the FDA has yet to approve, and before long, Woodroof's health greatly improves.

The rest of the film details the formation, successes, and failures of the titular Dallas Buyers Club—a members-only club that provides unapproved, illegal drugs to those diagnosed with AIDS for a considerable monthly fee. Woodroof works closely with members of the LGBTQ community, including an HIV-positive, drug-addicted trans woman named Rayon (Jared Leto). His time with the community helps change his perception of them, and eventually the club becomes less of a money-making endeavor and more of a noble cause to distribute life-saving medicine. By the movie's end, Ron Woodroof dies of AIDS in 1992—seven years after his initial diagnosis gave him only 30 days to live.

Several elements of *Dallas Buyers Club* help it stand out among the now vast catalog of AIDS media. Most notably, the basis of the film's plot is the real-life story of Ron Woodroof. Screenwriter Craig Borten heard about Woodroof's story from a friend back in 1992 and immediately set off for Texas to interview the man behind the Dallas Buyers Club.<sup>81</sup> Borten was able to speak with Woodroof just one month before he died in

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<sup>81</sup> Aisha Harris, "How Accurate Is *Dallas Buyers Club*?" *Slate*, November 1, 2013, [slate.com/culture/2013/11/dallas-buyers-club-true-story-fact-and-fiction-in-the-matthew-mcconaughey-movie-about-ron-woodroof.html](http://slate.com/culture/2013/11/dallas-buyers-club-true-story-fact-and-fiction-in-the-matthew-mcconaughey-movie-about-ron-woodroof.html).

September 1992, and those twenty hours of recorded conversations (along with access to Woodroof's personal journals) laid the foundation for the screenplay. When asked about the accuracy of the film, Borten described the script as "a 'pretty accurate portrayal' of Woodroof's life but acknowledged that he and [Melisa] Wallack employed a good deal of poetic license in rendering Woodroof's story on screen."<sup>82</sup> For example, the writers created the fictional characters of Dr. Saks and Rayon as a means for moving the story forward—both literally and thematically. Rayon's involvement not only gave a voice to the members of the Dallas Buyers Club, but it also helped highlight the emotional transformation Woodroof experiences by working directly with members of the LGBTQ community. When critics call a film's historic accuracy into question, they often equate these artistic additions with falsehoods.<sup>83</sup> It is my opinion, however, that the opposite tends to be true in the case of many acclaimed movies, such as *Dallas Buyers Club*. These creative additions can add truth and clarity to narrative that may otherwise be difficult to follow. Such fixation on pure accuracy ignores the careful efforts of filmmakers to tell authentic stories in a succinct, entertaining fashion.

Beyond the film being based on a true story is its expansion of AIDS crisis victims to include more than just homosexual men. The lead character is a heterosexual man who likely contracted HIV from a heterosexual, intravenous drug-using woman. In fact, *Dallas Buyers Club* tackles the issue of who can have AIDS head on, as Woodroof's family and friends turn away from him upon learning of his diagnosis and assuming he is a closeted homosexual. By presenting and immediately countering the harmful

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<sup>82</sup> Harris, "How Accurate Is *Dallas Buyers Club*?"

<sup>83</sup> Alex von Tunzelmann, "Rewriting the Past: Do Historical Movies Have to Be Accurate?" *The Guardian*, February 1, 2019, sec. Film, [theguardian.com/film/2019/feb/01/rewriting-the-past-do-historical-movies-have-to-be-accurate](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/feb/01/rewriting-the-past-do-historical-movies-have-to-be-accurate).

assumption that only gay men can have AIDS, the film teaches a valuable lesson about the American AIDS crisis that previous films and television series have often overlooked. This is not just an LGBTQ issue, despite what any public-school curriculum may suggest. While it may seem like a small addition—especially considering that by 2013 we already possessed the knowledge that AIDS does not only affect gay men—the real benefit of expanding the AIDS narrative to include more than just members of the LGBTQ community is its ability to attract a wider mainstream audience.

Despite the great commercial success of both *Philadelphia* and *Angels in America*, both works still possess the moniker of “gay media.” The central characters are gay, so their issues feel like gay issues and their interests feel like gay interests. Even if the audience can identify with a more relatable straight character, like Joe Miller in *Philadelphia*, the challenge lies with getting them to see the film in the first place. Noah Gittell of *The Atlantic* referred to *Dallas Buyers Club* as “an AIDS drama the Tea Party can enjoy” upon its 2013 release.<sup>84</sup> While most of the article is sharply critical of the film—citing how a story about one man’s fight against government corruption never once mentions the “Reagan-era political context” that made it corrupt in the first place—there is something noteworthy about the idea that a film about AIDS can appeal to conservative Americans and thus expand public memory of this historic event.<sup>85</sup> For example, the same Texas-based newspaper that accused *Philadelphia* of being gay rights propaganda in 1994 praised *Dallas Buyers Club* twenty years later for being “an uplifting,

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<sup>84</sup> Noah Gittell, “*Dallas Buyers Club*: An AIDS Drama the Tea Party Can Enjoy,” *The Atlantic*, November 18, 2013, [theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/-em-dallas-buyers-club-em-an-aids-drama-the-tea-party-can-enjoy/281421/](http://theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/-em-dallas-buyers-club-em-an-aids-drama-the-tea-party-can-enjoy/281421/).

<sup>85</sup> Gittell.

entertaining look at AIDS history.”<sup>86</sup> The article makes the differences between the two films clear in its description of the latter’s main character: “a sweaty, scrawny sex machine—profane, homophobic, coke-snorting, whiskey-drinking, and gaunt.” He is a salt-of-the-earth Texas man, and he is “what’s been missing from all the movies about AIDS and the history of the AIDS crisis.” In other words, Ron Woodroof is not Andrew Beckett. He is more masculine, more heterosexual, and more Texan. Therefore, the conservative moviegoers of Abilene, Texas, embrace him as one of their own and welcome this unique AIDS narrative into their consciousness.

This is not to say that criticisms from Noah Gittell and others are misplaced; in fact, I personally agree with most of them. I am rather pointing to the fact that the film’s approach to telling the story of the AIDS crisis allowed for an entire community of viewers to encounter an AIDS narrative that they may not have engaged with otherwise. Filmgoer Trin Moody said it best in her amateur review of the movie on *Incluvie*:

Vallée’s film illustrates the desperation of a dying bigot in his search for relief from his grueling symptoms of HIV. In doing so, *Dallas Buyers Club* gives McConaughey’s character the room to grow out of his hard shell of homophobic hostility. The theme of the unity of death and universal struggle rings true in almost every scene. [While] the message may not be pivotal to the queer community as properly representing queer struggles, *Dallas Buyers Club* has a different target audience. Maybe the people that need to watch this film are the ones that relate more to Woodroof than Rayon.<sup>87</sup>

That target audience is conservative America at large—a group that likely knows less about the AIDS crisis than liberal America based on our understanding of how politicized public education curricula is. In particular, given what we know about Texas’s aversion

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<sup>86</sup> Roger Moore, “‘Dallas Buyers Club’ an Uplifting, Entertaining Look at AIDS History,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, January 23, 2014. 5B.

<sup>87</sup> Trin Moody, “A Handshake for ‘Dallas Buyers Club,’” *Incluvie* (blog), August 15, 2020, [medium.com/incluvie/a-handshake-for-dallas-buyers-club-f4db6ab700b2](https://medium.com/incluvie/a-handshake-for-dallas-buyers-club-f4db6ab700b2).

to teaching any queer-centric history in schools, this Texas-based film may be the only exposure to the American AIDS crisis that some Texans have. So, if that is the case, what does *Dallas Buyers Club* teach viewers about the American AIDS crisis?

While the film does showcase the deteriorating health conditions of those suffering with AIDS, it spends more time highlighting “the injustices of the FDA’s regulation on medicinal remedies of the disease [and] the growing panic of the masses.”<sup>88</sup> This story introduces audiences to the exhausting, often harrowing experience of trying to find life-saving treatment when none yet exists on the market. In detailing this specific part of the AIDS crisis, viewers learn a significant amount of factual medical and political history as it relates to how the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) constructs and alters its regulations.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, audiences experience the discrimination that AIDS patients faced from healthcare professionals, as “many doctors and nurses openly proclaimed they would not be going anywhere near a patient with AIDS because of the personal risk and because of their obligations to protect their own family.”<sup>90</sup> In this regard, *Dallas Buyers Club* offers useful education on the American AIDS crisis for those who did not consciously live through it as well as those who lived through it but may not have known the full extent of it.

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### **What AIDS Media Lacks**

In examining public education and collective memory, I have argued that the American public primarily relies on screen media for its knowledge of the AIDS crisis.

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<sup>88</sup> Moody, “A Handshake for ‘Dallas Buyers Club.’”

<sup>89</sup> Sean Philpott, “How the Dallas Buyers Club Changed HIV Treatment in the US,” *The Conversation*, February 2014, [theconversation.com/how-the-dallas-buyers-club-changed-hiv-treatment-in-the-us-22664](http://theconversation.com/how-the-dallas-buyers-club-changed-hiv-treatment-in-the-us-22664).

<sup>90</sup> Philpott, “How the Dallas Buyers Club Changed HIV Treatment in the US.”

Furthermore, in analyzing three popular AIDS media texts, I have demonstrated what most Americans likely know about the AIDS crisis. What remains is a single question: is this enough?

Understanding the complexities of the American AIDS crisis is a mission to which many historians dedicate their lives. It is unlikely that any citizen would grasp the full extent of this historic event through screen media alone. It requires in-depth, nuanced research at the highest level. However, if the goal is to educate the American public about this moment in history at a base level of understanding, I do believe that popular screen media has the capability to accomplish this—but it has not yet.

As of 2021, the catalog of AIDS media we currently have does not adequately represent the full history of the American AIDS crisis. The present dilemma that this catalog faces is its lack of diversity. For example, there are alarmingly few films focused on how the AIDS crisis adversely affected the African American community. Of those few, most are documentaries—such as *Paris Is Burning* and *Tongues Untied*—that have obtained small cult followings rather than mainstream commercial success.

Despite the existence of extensive historic scholarship on the African American struggle against AIDS, including Dan Royles' aforementioned monograph *To Make the Wounded Whole*, the primary concern of Hollywood executives is not to distribute scholarship; it is to make profit. Whether or not more diverse AIDS media narratives would generate a significant profit remains untested. Films and television series depicting the African American LGBTQ experience have garnered more success at the box office and at award shows in recent years. For example, Barry Jenkins' semi-autobiographical *Moonlight* won Best Picture at the 89th Academy Awards despite being unapologetically

Black and queer.<sup>91</sup> The present-day success of this diverse media suggests a shift in its popularity—and therefore, its profitability.

Most people, historians included, do not know about the 4Hs of AIDS. Perhaps that is because popular representations of the AIDS crisis only focus on one of the four Hs. The time has come for filmmakers to start pushing the boundaries of what successful mainstream AIDS media can be. Otherwise, the public may remain forever in the dark about certain important aspects of the American AIDS crisis.

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<sup>91</sup> “The Official Academy Awards Database.”

### CHAPTER 3: PUBLIC HISTORY PROJECT

In a 1997 article for *The Public Historian* entitled “Public History and Public Memory,” Diane F. Britton explains that “Americans are in love with their pasts.”<sup>92</sup> She goes on to cite the popularity of public-facing history as proof of this claim. She calls special attention to popular “historical novels by individuals such as Howard Fast and John Jakes, the History Channel’s ability to attract 30 million weekly viewers, [and] increasing sales of computer software games like *The Oregon Trail*.” For Britton, these examples showcase how the American public engages with history “on a daily basis.”<sup>93</sup> This is the draw of public history—the ability to regularly engage an audience outside of a traditional classroom setting.

Since Britton’s observations, public history has evolved to meet the needs of modern society by becoming increasingly digital. When digital media and digital networks first appeared as a potential avenue for historians, many were skeptical. This led Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig to consider the “promises and perils of digital history” in their 2005 guidebook.<sup>94</sup> Here, the authors recognize “seven qualities of digital media and networks that potentially allow [historians] to do things better: capacity, accessibility, flexibility, diversity, manipulability, interactivity, and hypertextuality (or nonlinearity).” With these identified advantages, public historians can utilize the digital sphere to share a bevy of information with diverse learners across the globe. It begs the

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<sup>92</sup> Diane F. Britton, “Public History and Public Memory,” *The Public Historian* 19, no. 3 (1997): 11–23. 11.

<sup>93</sup> Britton. 13.

<sup>94</sup> Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, “Promises and Perils of Digital History,” *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*, 2005, [chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/index.php.html](http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/index.php.html).

question: why settle for a local audience at a brick-and-mortar museum when the Internet allows online museums to garner a worldwide audience?

However, capturing the attention of such a large audience can be difficult. Global attention spans are rapidly narrowing—according to a 2019 study from the Technical University of Denmark—and public historians are having to compete in a sea of information overload in order to establish an audience.<sup>95</sup> Simply sharing lectures online or creating research-heavy websites is not enough to capture the interest of the public. Instead, public historians must create new ways to inform while also entertaining. Therein lies the appeal of podcasting.

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### **Why a Podcast?**

The research presented in this scholarly essay opens a door for broader conversations about how screen media impacts public memory of historical events. Though I have solely focused on the American AIDS crisis during this analysis, historians can apply this same methodology to other topics, time periods, and major historical moments—which is exactly what I intend to do with an accompanying public history podcast entitled *Historytelling: A Fact & Fiction Podcast*.

The popularity of podcasts has increased exponentially in the past few years, with the percentage of monthly podcast listeners among 12-to-34 years old [growing] from 27% in 2017 to 49% in 2020.<sup>96</sup> This upward trend is a positive sign for the future of the medium

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<sup>95</sup> Dream McClinton, “Global Attention Span Is Narrowing and Trends Don’t Last as Long, Study Reveals,” *The Guardian*, April 17, 2019, sec. Society, [theguardian.com/society/2019/apr/16/got-a-minute-global-attention-span-is-narrowing-study-reveals](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/apr/16/got-a-minute-global-attention-span-is-narrowing-study-reveals).

<sup>96</sup> Brad Adgate, “As Podcasts Continue To Grow In Popularity, Ad Dollars Follow,” *Forbes*, February 11, 2021, [forbes.com/sites/bradadgate/2021/02/11/podcasting-has-become-a-big-business/?sh=4c809cbd2cfb](https://www.forbes.com/sites/bradadgate/2021/02/11/podcasting-has-become-a-big-business/?sh=4c809cbd2cfb).

and for content creators, like public historians, who are searching for new ways to share information. In addition to being popular, podcasts are remarkably accessible. While most people listen to podcasts on subscription streaming services like Spotify, listeners can access most series online without having to pay. For example, *Historytelling* is available for free online through a distribution service called Anchor. As long as someone has access to the Internet, they can access the wealth of historical knowledge my new podcast provides.

Another feature of podcasts that makes them more accessible than other public-facing mediums is the fact that they are audio only. Rather than requiring audiences to sit in front of a screen and devote 100% of their attention to the content, podcasts offer flexible ways to engage. One can listen to a podcast while driving to work, cooking dinner, taking a shower, playing a video game, etc. This versatility allows people to engage throughout the day, providing more opportunities to access important information. Though some may argue that this ultimately limits engagement—since listeners may be distracted by other activities—I believe that it is unrealistic to expect modern audiences to provide their undivided attention in an age where competitors are constantly creating and distributing new content. Personally, I would rather people listen to episodes of my podcast sporadically over the course of their daily routines than not listen at all. This is something that separates public history from traditional academic history—as public historians must “use their training to meet the needs of the community,” including allowing the community to engage on their own schedule.<sup>97</sup> In other words, public historians need to find ways to

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<sup>97</sup> Department of History, Geography, & Philosophy, “What Is Public History?,” *University of Louisiana at LaFayette*, [history.louisiana.edu](http://history.louisiana.edu).

provide information without the same expectations of a classroom setting. Podcasts help make that possible.

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### ***Historytelling***

My podcast, entitled *Historytelling: A Fact & Fiction Podcast*, exists at the intersection of history and storytelling—just as its name suggests. Throughout each episode, my goal is to examine the space where historical fact and historical fiction blur to form a uniquely curated portrayal of past events. The goal is not to discover whether viewers encountered accurate history on screen but rather to understand what historical narrative they have learned through their viewing experience and how that narrative contributes to the broader public memory of that history. To do this, I will employ a methodology similar to the one used in this scholarly essay.

Over the course of the podcast, I will examine a variety of popular screen media that claim to portray real events in history. Each episode will offer a case study of a particular film or television program and will feature extensive research, in-depth analysis, relevant anecdotes, and interviews with expert historians. A collection of three to four episodes on the same historical topic will make up a series. This series format allows the podcast to look more broadly at the historical event as it is portrayed through multiple sources rather than just a single film or television show. I intend to publicly launch *Historytelling* in May 2022 with a debut series on the American AIDS crisis to accompany the research presented in this scholarly essay.

By focusing the content of the podcast on both popular culture and history, I am confident that *Historytelling* will be able to attract a diverse listenership. One benefit of

podcasts that I did not previously mention is the ability to connect with niche audiences. A podcast exists for every specific interest and fandom imaginable. For example, one podcast from which I drew influence when creating *Historytelling* is *The Evolution of Horror*, a movie discussion podcast that “explores the history of the horror genre by delving into particular sub-genres across several weeks.”<sup>98</sup> Other inspirations for *Historytelling* include: *Revisionist History*, *How Did This Get Made*, *Dead Meat*, and *Lovett or Leave It*.

Prior to the May 2022 public launch of *Historytelling*, I have made available a fully recorded and edited episode for review. This episode, entitled “Philadelphia with Dr. Andrea Milne,” is the first in the series on the American AIDS crisis and features a deep dive into the film *Philadelphia*, a real account of AIDS-related workplace discrimination, and an interview with AIDS historian Dr. Andrea Milne. In addition to this completed episode, scripts and interviews for future episodes are also available for review. While these episodes are not yet ready for listenership, they will be completed and published online in May. The release schedule for *Historytelling*’s launch is currently as follows: “Philadelphia with Dr. Andrea Milne” on May 9, “Rent with Dr. Anne E. Parsons” on May 16, and “The Normal Heart with Tina Wright” on May 23. In the meantime, a podcast trailer is already available on Spotify, Google Podcasts, RadioPublic, and Anchor at [anchor.fm/historytellingpod](https://anchor.fm/historytellingpod). Additionally, I have established a social media presence on Instagram and Facebook, complete with unique branding and informative posts.

I intend to continue creating new content for *Historytelling* as I move forward with my career as a public historian and continue to explore the effects of screen media on public memory.

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<sup>98</sup> Mike Muncer, “The Evolution of Horror: A Podcast for Horror Lovers, By Horror Lovers,” *The Evolution of Horror*, [evolutionofhorror.com/about](https://evolutionofhorror.com/about).

## CONCLUSION

An article in *The Nation* entitled “What Does It Mean to Remember AIDS?” considers memory discourses surrounding tragic historic events such as the AIDS crisis.<sup>99</sup> Author Alisa Solomon explores the titular question by analyzing the effectiveness of memorials, monuments, and other retrospective projects, including “a spate of new memoirs, dance and theater performances, social-media site, museum exhibits, art shows, podcasts, participatory events, films, TV movies, a mini-series, narrative nonfiction, biographies, essays, and novels.”<sup>100</sup> She argues that the outpouring of these “memory practices” makes sense, as they offer a way to cope with the painful memories of the AIDS crisis and “to assure, while they still can, that their struggles and their dead will not be forgotten.” While such musings on the importance of memory practices are insightful, the real highlight of Solomon’s article is her observation of the unique circumstances surrounding the AIDS crisis. She states:

But even as AIDS memorials echo the tropes of other commemorations, the unique qualities of AIDS also put unprecedented pressure on the overlapping questions that animate all grand public-memory projects: what and whom, specifically, to remember; where and when to remember them; whom to address; and how; and why. Such projects are always contested, but these disputes typically take for granted one essential fact that AIDS memorialization cannot: that by engaging in commemoration, a society is acknowledging (even if incompletely or in a deliberately distorting way) that the historical trauma occurred. There has been no such national reckoning with AIDS in America, no official recognition that in the face of a public-health emergency, the homophobic and racist indifference of the Reagan administration (not to mention of state and city governments, religious institutions, media, and too many families) exacerbated the suffering and hastened the death of thousands.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Alisa Solomon, “What Does It Mean to Remember AIDS?,” *The Nation*, November 30, 2017, [thenation.com/article/archive/what-does-it-mean-to-remember-aids/](http://thenation.com/article/archive/what-does-it-mean-to-remember-aids/).

<sup>100</sup> Solomon, “What Does It Mean to Remember AIDS?”

<sup>101</sup> Solomon.

This is the heart of my investigation into how the American public learns about and remembers the AIDS crisis. Every new creation of AIDS media is a retrospective attempt to make sense of a tragedy that remains widely unacknowledged by a country it ravaged. So many victims of the AIDS crisis died alone, in secret seclusion with nothing more than the stigma of their sickness. AIDS media creators push back against the shame and the secrecy. They echo the promise of Prior Walter: “We won’t die secret deaths anymore.”<sup>102</sup>

It is an unfortunate reality that the American public relies so heavily on these creators and their content to learn about this unique, tragic moment in the nation’s history. My chapter on “AIDS Crisis in Education & Memory” proves the this claim to be true. Through my analysis of textbooks, statewide curricula, and Advanced Placement exams, I demonstrate a clear lack of attention paid to the history of the AIDS crisis in public education. This leaves public memory of the event to memory’s greatest vehicle—the visual. The most prolific visual for creating collective memory is popular screen media, as I argue in my discussion of the 1996 protests over *Angels in America* in Charlotte.

Understanding the truth of AIDS history education led me to a closer examination of AIDS media through historical reception case studies. While these case studies alone do not cover the full scope of content presented within the AIDS media catalog, they do provide valuable insight into what the public knows about the American AIDS crisis through a few of its most popular entries. *Philadelphia*, the first mainstream motion

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<sup>102</sup> Nichols, *Angels in America*.

picture to centrally depict AIDS and homosexuality, educated the public on workplace discrimination, stigma, and how the syndrome is and is not contracted. *Angels in America*, the award-winning HBO miniseries, showed audiences that life with HIV/AIDS may be horrifying and painful, but it is not an inevitable death sentence. *Dallas Buyers Club*, a modern yet conservative look at the early days of the AIDS, taught Americans that the crisis did not only affect gay men and that national politics played a major role in the deaths of nearly half a million people by 2000.

Again, I would like to emphasize that these three case studies are only the beginning of my attempt to understand what the public knows about the American AIDS crisis through screen media. The creation of my public history podcast, entitled *Historytelling*, will allow me to continue this research and analysis in a more creative and easily accessible format. My goal for *Historytelling* is to create an ongoing conversation about what the public gains from viewing history through the lens of screen media.

As for my hope for the future of AIDS media—and therefore the future of the public's understanding of the American AIDS crisis—I wish to see the creation and distribution of more diversity. This historic event affected the entire population of American citizens, not just gay white men. So, should we not demand an AIDS media catalog that reflects this reality? Until more screen media like *Pose* (2018-2021) garners widespread public attention, the catalog we do have is informative, entertaining, emotionally gripping, and most importantly, enables us to learn about and to remember the tragedy of the American AIDS crisis.

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