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A Love Untaught by Law

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Cover Page Footnote

Kaufman, Moisés. The Laramie Project and the Laramie Project: Ten Years Later. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

A Love Untaught by Law: A Study of Othering Language

If you look up the word “tolerate” in the English Oxford Dictionary, you will find these following definitions: “allow the existence, occurrence, or practice of . . . without interference,” “accept or endure (someone or something unpleasant or disliked) with forbearance,” and “be capable of continued subjection to (a drug, toxin, or environmental condition) without adverse reaction” (“Tolerate”). This word, “tolerate,” despite the negative denotations given here, is frequently used to describe the way individuals treat and should treat others different from themselves—we *tolerate* them. While “tolerance” remains the goal of most organizations, some have begun to acknowledge the flaws in this use of the word. The magazine *Teaching Tolerance* admits, “‘Tolerance’ is surely an imperfect term,” but argues that “the English language offers no single word that embraces the broad range of skills we need to live together peacefully” (“About Us”). In organizations like these, the inkling has begun that the term “tolerance” and its practice cannot be a goal for which we strive: instead, tolerance should act as a stepping stone on our way to expressing greater love and acceptance of others as *Diverse Education* argues. In his article, John Achrazoglou (2010) states that “Tolerance is a first step. It is much better than conflict.” He further notes however, if a comparison to conflict is the most positive thing we can say about tolerance, it is obvious that this practice is no longer an acceptable manner of interacting with those we consider “Other.”

In order to take a step beyond tolerance, we must recognize the damage we can inflict with the current use of othering language and actively pursue the betterment or rejection of this language. One such text through which to do this is *The Laramie Project*, a work of theater compiled by the Tectonic Theater Company. This piece of literature tackles the heavy topic of the murder of Matthew Shepard due to his sexual orientation. Containing testimony from

Matthew's friends and fellow Laramie citizens that expose the shocking mindset and reaction of the town, the play is an incredible study of the power of language and its failings. Through examining the diction of the people of Laramie, my essay strives to unveil the damage that can result from a certain pattern of word choice and how such manners of speaking can impact the way one thinks of and responds to others different from oneself. By finding the flaws in this institution, I push for the dismissal of language that divides us in order to greater promote the embrace of the diverse, for "tolerance" is no longer the highest goal for which we should strive.

"Laramie sparkles, doesn't it?"

The words of Matthew Shepard echo the shared love of the Wyoming townspeople, a love that stops at the edge of the land. For all the romanticism that finds its way into their language, this adoration of life does not extend to their fellow human beings. In an attempt to research the murder of Matthew Shepard and draw attention to the injustice of Laramie's reaction to his death, the Tectonic Theater Project from New York ventured into the town to interact with its inhabitants. To contrast the loving words used by inhabitants of Laramie to describe their landscape, the Tectonic Theater Project recorded the use of phrases—by those same people—such as "She likes girls...she's disgusting" (Kaufman, 2001, p.20) and "this is what gay people do. This is what (*scoffs*) animals do" (p. 56), to describe their fellow man. A self-proclaimed "live and let live" society, Laramie is revealed to be everything but, through interviews with Laramie residents in the aftermath of Matthew Shepard's murder. By drawing attention to disturbingly inherent elements of Laramie's culture including verbal distancing, an elitist sentiment, and the belief that apathy is acceptable through their play *The Laramie Project*, the Tectonic Theater Project exposes the hostile climate that has made this Wyoming city nearly unlivable for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) community.

Through the recognition of the inadequacy of language, the reader can see that tolerance, as we currently define it, does not work in communities.

“I don’t want you to call me Matthew, or Mr. Shepard. I don’t want you to call me anything. My name is Matt” (Kaufman, 2001, p.16-7), a 21-year-old boy informed Doc O’Connor, a limousine driver in 1998. Within months he had become the impersonal “Matthew Shepard” that went down in history as a victim and a catalyst for change, the Matthew Shepard of the 2009 Hate Crimes Prevention Act. It took the Tectonic Theater Project several days in Laramie before they found individuals that mentioned the boy by his preferred name “Matt” (p.16). This act of using his first and last name, by people who knew him personally, communicates intentional distancing, even among members of his own small, close-knit town, in order to alleviate guilt and association with the gruesome incident. In her interview, his good friend Romaine Patterson goes so far as to say, “Matthew Shepard is this iconic hate crime that has happened in our history . . . it’s about a community’s reaction . . . it’s not about Matt” (p.187). Here she distinguishes her “Matt” from the Matthew Shepard of history, referring to the impersonal “Matthew” as an “it” rather than a person. Some even go as far as to use no name at all. Detective Sergeant Hing, who introduces the theater company to Laramie, calls Matt “that boy,” noting his murder as an “incident” (p.6). In these examples, the theater company recognized a very subtle form of dehumanizing language brought about by the townsfolk’s desire to distance themselves from the boy; rather than seeing him as a human, they soften their guilt by training themselves to think of him as an event, an incident. One’s willingness to believe a human rights violation in his hometown does not concern or affect him is merely one symptom of civic unhealth created by othering language. Such emotional distance prevents citizens from taking action to stop the repetition of such violations.

In the aforementioned scene with the Sergeant, another disturbing characteristic of the Laramie society comes into play. When Hing describes taking reporters, the largest number of visitors the town had experienced in years, up at the spot where Matthew was tied and beaten, the audience sees him taking in the scenery, while the reporters delve into the story of Matthew's death. Rather than showing any interest or concern for the hostile murder of a young man, Hing admits he "felt that they were stupid. They're missing the point—they're just missing the whole point" (Kaufman, 2001, p.6-7). This spoken commentary from a figure of authority choosing to ignore the taking of a life and the social impact of the incident exposing town corruption shows his continued intentional emotional distancing from Matthew Shepard and highlights the strength of Wyoming inhabitants love for their state, to the extent that it blots out simple human compassion. Here Hing is utterly oblivious to the inconsideration he exhibits through his language, but not all are as unaware of this subtly violent—in that it disregards human welfare—mindset of their society. Catherine Connolly, the first "out" lesbian faculty member at the University of Wyoming, recalls a phone call she received when she first came to Laramie. A fellow lesbian explained to her that while she herself was ecstatic to meet her, "there were other lesbians that she knew who wouldn't be seen with [Connolly]. That [she] would irreparably taint them" (p. 20). The use of the word "taint" shows that even members of the lesbian and gay community have adopted the mindset of their heterosexual counterparts: they have begun to see members of their own community as a disease or an infection, a blot on the iconic landscape. This language creates a climate near unbearable for those who associate with or support the LGBTQ community in Laramie. Through this interaction, we see the way in which the small size of the targeted community affects the mindset of its members. Like a disease, mob mentality spreads via the allegedly tolerant language, largely preventing differing viewpoints.

Jonas Slonaker, a farmer and one of Laramie's few "out" homosexual men, supports this sentiment of Laramie as being unlivable for those of his sexual orientation when he mentions meeting homosexuals at gay bars in Colorado, stating, "So many gay men [...] grew up [in Laramie], and they're like: This is not a place where I can live, how can you live there, I had to get out" (Kaufman, 2001, p.20). Marge, the mother of Officer Reggie Fluty who found Matthew Shepard tied to the fence near death, acknowledges how hostile the environment is when she asks what the company will do with her testimony before she answers an inquiry. After Tectonic Theater member Greg Pierotti explains they plan to bring their collected work back to Laramie, Marge responds, saying "Okay, then, there are parts I won't tell you" (p.15). This self-censorship, likely for the sake of safety, reinforces the evident undercurrent of violence that exists within the Wyoming town. This instance also hints that she too conforms to the town's desire to distance itself from the situation, and by refusing to share the information, Marge abets Laramie's unhealthy ignorance, a consequence of tolerance that furthers injustice.

The use of aforementioned dehumanizing diction and the inhabitants' love for their land contributes to the town dwellers' elitist attitude and enhances the degree of separation between individuals as well as a sense of subordination of the gay community to the straight community. Upon crossing the Wyoming border, Greg Pierotti recalls a sign that says "Wyoming—Like No Place on Earth" (Kaufman, 2001, p.11). Greg comments he found it curious that it did not say "Like No Place *Else* on Earth" (p.11). With this difference, Wyoming assumes a heaven-like identity—if not like any place on Earth, where else would it be like? Rather than giving their state a unique quality, the question is raised if Wyoming inhabitants consider themselves a cut above the rest, exposing the breakdown of the American institution Thomas Jefferson established with the birth of our nation: "All men are created equal." This sentiment is reiterated when the

audience hears each of the townsfolk describe Laramie at the beginning of the work. Rebecca Hilliker comments that the sun “shines a lot here” (p.4). Again the constant presence of sunshine offers a celestial quality to the state and the town. The phrase “the sun is shining on you” is often used to refer to someone who is experiencing a period of good fortune and is interchangeable with the saying “God is smiling on you;” by commenting on the sunshine, Laramie, in a way, becomes “God’s town.” This elitism crops up in less symbolic ways as well. Resident Jeffrey Lockwood outright admits to it, saying, “My secret hope was that [Aaron and Russell] were from somewhere else that then of course you can create that distance: We don’t grow children like that here. Well, it’s pretty clear that we do grow children like that here” (p.44). By saying they do not have that type of people, Laramie demonstrates the belief that they are exempt from the pitfalls of other societies.

This division goes even deeper within the town, dividing the gay inhabitants from the straight and othering those homosexuals. In Marge’s statement: “Laramie is live and let live” (Kaufman, 2001, p.15), the word “let” indicates the existence of a hierarchy: the straight members of the community live and *let* the gay community live, with some important exceptions as demonstrated by the Matthew Shepard case. The same is evident when Murdock Cooper, a Laramie resident speaks in the epilogue of the work, saying, “If you [homosexuals] step out of line, you’re asking for it” (p.56). The sentiment shows the corruption of justice and the development of a system that only punishes those with lifestyles different from the majority. This system makes conservative, straight men the unworthy figures of authority, placing them above the undeserving homosexual victims, even when a speaker urges the citizens to “show the world that Laramie is not this kind of town” (p.57). The fact that such discrimination is so deeply imbedded within Laramie culture argues with the University Inn sign the Theater members

encounter which attempts to reason that “Hate is Not a Laramie Value” (p.12). One begins to see the violence in Laramie as a disease whose symptoms, dangerous language and elitism, went untreated.

Through the easy way in which the residents of Laramie spew what Laramie priest Father Roger Schmit refers to as the “seed of violence” (Kaufman, 2001, p.63), the members of the Tectonic Theater Project are very quickly able to distinguish the inherently hostile and unhealthy social climate that the conservatives have created. Though the community attitude is possibly undetectable during times of peace, homosexuals inside and outside of the community have for the most part determined it unbearable and have learned to distance themselves or keep their heads down. The murder of Matthew Shepard by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson truly ignited these sentiments, bringing them to the surface for the United States to analyze and judge and act upon.

Passing the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, while helpful, is merely a small bandage to a large wound. In the aftermath of this hate crime, many of the inhabitants have realized in hindsight how self-destructive “apathy” can be, an apathy they confused with acceptance. By opening their eyes to the dangers of such indifference, many more bystanders have begun to understand “the magnitude with which some people hate” (Kaufman, 2001, p.68-9). This hatred, that clouds minds, alters thoughts, and motivates dangerous actions, is a practice some still believe to be an acceptable end goal to coexisting with those who remain “Others.”

By bringing the damage inflicted by language associated with tolerance to the attention of its audience, the Tectonic Theater Project exposes the kind of division that hinders civic growth and action. Though national action such as the Hate Crimes Act often strives to right such human

rights violations, it is clear that change and the eventual claim to civic health must start with our recognition of the power we wield with language and the subsequent evil we inflict with negatively connoted words in reference to others, specifically blanketed groups of people distinguished by the institutions of race, origin, ability, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Only after recognition can we work together as an army of recovering cells to vaccinate our nation against the hate that has taken root and begin to rebuild our institutions in a structure better equipped for a future of absolute equality.

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