

The Laramie Project Analysis

The violence committed against Matthew Shepard is considered by many to be a hate crime, and I agree with this. The evidence and testimonies from the case all suggest that Matt was attacked because of his sexuality. However, perpetrators Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson did not know Matt before the night of the incident, so how could they know that he was gay? What it boils down to is that Matt's gender performance was revealing of his sexuality, and was therefore unacceptable to these boys. They reacted to his performance in a way that was consistent with their own learned gender performances. The murder of Matthew Shepard was a crime fueled by hate, but facilitated by gender performance.

Gender performance is the way that we express our own personal gender identities. We each craft our own gender identity or story by integrating our own life experiences with the stories we learn from others. We select components that are relevant to us and draft them into a coherent gender identity (Foss, Domenico, and Foss 141). Once we have crafted our gender identities, we can perform them. This performance is how we share our gender stories with the outside world, and it allows others to perceive us the way we perceive ourselves.

The Laramie project explains that Matthew's gender performance strongly indicated that he was homosexual. Doc O'Connor, the taxi driver, recalls that Matt was forthcoming about his sexuality, and stated "I want you to know, I am gay and we are going to a gay bar" (Kaufman 19). His use of language is part of his gender performance, and it indicates that he wanted others to perceive him as gay. He was not ashamed of his sexuality, and he wanted to make sure people understood that. In fact, Matthew's friend Romaine Patterson told the theater project that Matthew joined the gay and lesbian club on campus a week before his murder (Kaufman 20).

Clearly Matt was very proud to be gay. He was always open and honest about it, so it makes sense that he would be openly gay to McKinney and Henderson.

Matt also performed his gender in the way we think a stereotypical gay man should. The bartender Matt Galloway recalls him as “dressed nice, clean cut” and Romaine Patterson said that he came from money, had nice things, and cared more about his shoes than his wallet (Kaufman 29-30). This indicates that Matt appeared fancy, which is how modern society imagines the gay man. The gay man is sharply dressed, sometimes flamboyantly so, but without question is always fancier in our minds than his heterosexual counterpart, whom we picture covered in grease and beer stains. Because of this gender performance, it would have been easy for Matt’s murderers to conclude he was gay.

Doc also recalls him as being a slight boy- about 5’2” and 97 pounds “soakin wet” (Kaufman 18). Now, if Matt had been a 6’3” gay body builder, this tragedy may not have occurred. However, Matt never performed as a hyper-masculine male, and he had no interest in fighting. He was a very sweet guy who got along well with most people. Because he was so slight and meek, he was seen as an easy target. His attackers clearly hated gays, but they were also enticed by the ease of the crime. In *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* we learn that McKinney had been looking to commit a robbery that night (Kaufman et al 53). He saw Matt as a rewarding target because of his expensive attire and sexuality, and an easy target because of his slight build and gentle manner.

It is important to realize that the gender performances of McKinney and Henderson also contributed to the crime. Based on the statements of McKinney’s father, who urged that his son was being treated unfairly for his actions, you can tell that Aaron wasn’t raised to respect homosexuals (Kaufman 49). Being from a small town, where homosexuality is barely accepted

Gender Speak

and is certainly not the norm, it is easy to see how McKinney would develop homophobic attitudes. In later interviews, Henderson described McKinney as being very assertive, always the leader (Kaufman et al. 41). McKinney's gender performance is very masculine. He appears strong, confident, and powerful, and must control every situation. This thirst for power is one reason why the attack was not prevented.

Beyond the gender expressions of the individual is performance interaction. One of the essential components of gender performance is audience (Foss, Domenico, and Foss 172). The audience views your gender performance, and reviews it by either supporting, tolerating, or rejecting your performance (Foss, Domenico, and Foss 207). Russell Henderson served as the audience for McKinney, and actually rejected his violent gender expression at first. Russell tried to modify McKinney's performance through persuasion, but eventually failed. He then chose to tolerate McKinney's performance, even though he didn't agree with it (Kaufman et al. 41-42). Ten years later, Henderson expresses remorse at his own gender performance. If he had been a stronger man, and not such a pushover, he could have stopped McKinney. Henderson recalls trying to talk sense into McKinney, and he even gave Matt a chance to escape (Kaufman et al. 41). However, Henderson always performed his gender as a follower, and was therefore unsuccessful in persuading McKinney and preventing Matt's death.

The purpose of this analysis is not to victim-blame. It is in no way Matthew's fault that he was attacked that night. Rather, the purpose is to use gender theory to explain the series of events which occurred. McKinney and Henderson served as Matthew's audience, and they clearly rejected his performance through violence. Many have argued that it was not his performance as a gay man, but rather as a wealthy man, which led to the attack. However, the attacker's homophobic motives became clear when McKinney hit Matthew for allegedly "trying

to grab his balls” (Kaufman 91). This shows that the performance rejection was driven by homophobia, and that Matt’s murder was indeed a hate crime. By understanding gender performance, we can understand the role that each boy played in the Laramie tragedy, and we can work to prevent future hate crimes.

Works Cited

Foss, Sonja K., Mary E. Domenico, and Karen A. Foss. *Gender Stories: Negotiating Identity in a Binary World*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2013. Print.

Gender Speak

Kaufman, Moisés. *The Laramie Project*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001. Print.

Kaufman, Moisés, Leigh Fondakowski, Greg Pierotti, Andy Paris, and Stephen Belber. *The*

Laramie Project: Ten Years Later. New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2012. Print.