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Struggling for Existence: An Analysis of Harvey Milk's Crucial Speech on the LGBTQ+ Community's Fight Against Eradication

On June 25, 1978, just three days before the nine-year anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man elected to public office in California, ridicules the "Anita Bryants" and "John Briggs" of the world who oppose, terrorize, and demonize the LGBTQ+ community. He simultaneously utilizes empowering vocabulary and strong language in his speech to encourage his queer audience to fight alongside him for equality. In order to establish that silence is equivalent to complicity, Milk displays his vehement exhaustion towards all the silence and suffering that the queer community has endured. Milk effectively urges his listeners to speak out even louder for their cause and bring forth equality for the LGBTQ+ community.

Harvey Milk heavily criticizes those who seek out to harass and terrorize the queer community, successfully disproving his moral opponents and painting them as ignorant hypocrites. Milk asserts that "Gay people, we are painted as child molesters. I want to talk about that. I want to talk about the myth of child molestations by gays. I want to talk about the fact that in this state some 95 percent of child molestations are heterosexual and usually committed by a parent" (Milk). Milk is able to take the offensive claims that homophobic people pin on the queer community, and swiftly disprove them with hard facts. His use of data also highlights the hypocrisy of his accusers by showing that the myth these people try to pin on gay people in actuality, is more likely to be true for themselves. Another example of Harvey Milk's clever criticism presents itself when he argues, "There is a difference between morality and murder. The fact that more people have been slaughtered in the name of religion than for any other single

reason. That, that, my friends, is the true perversion! For the standards that we set, should we look to next week's headlines?" (Milk) Milk puts a spotlight on the obscenity that is moralized murder. He's able to reveal the ridiculousness in the fact that the LGBTQ+ community is so often victim to violence and torment, from none other than those who practice a religion that aligns its values with kindness, community and empathy. He effectively illustrates the ignorant and amoral beliefs that homophobic people use to justify hatred and discrimination towards the LGBTQ+ community.

After addressing those who challenge his views, Harvey Milk then inspires his audience to fight for their rights by using emotionally charged words, and impactful figurative language. As is foreseen when Milk asks "Gay brothers and sisters, what are you going to do about it? You must come out. Come out to your parents. I know that it is hard and that it will hurt them, but think of how they will hurt you in the voting booth! Come out to your relatives. I know that it is hard and will upset them but think of how they will upset you in the voting booth. Come out to your friends. If indeed, they are your friends" (Milk). Milk uses a rhetorical question that forces his audience to answer his call to action. He employs a use of repetition to emphasize the importance in spreading the word and speaking out about LGBTQ+ rights. He even plays on his audiences' emotions by telling them they must speak up to those whom they hold dear. All of these techniques are igniting a fire in his audience that he needs to get them to take action. It should also be duly noted that Harvey Milk was a figurehead of inspiration for the queer community during this time, and thus his attempts to inspire his audience hold even more power when considering his status in the LGBTQ+ community. Milk uses his clever strategies yet again when he instructs his audience "But once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake. For the sake of the youngsters who are being terrified

by the votes coming from Dade County to Eugene. If Briggs wins, he will not stop. They never do. Like all mad people, they are forced to go on, to prove they were right. There will be no safe 'closet' for any gay person" (Milk). Milk appeals to his audience's emotions in the form of fear mongering as he describes a future that strikes fear into his audience. By doing so, his call to action no longer serves as a request to his audience, but rather a warning. Additionally, his use of repetition amplifies this warning and draws further attention to what he is saying. He effectively establishes the possibility that if his audience remains stagnant towards the cause, they are setting themselves up for a grim future. This has an additional effectiveness when taking the occasion of this speech into consideration. Milk's speech was given not even a decade after Stonewall, meaning many of the people in his audience probably knew people who participated in the riots or even participated themselves. Milk knows that his audience is filled with people who have already been on the forefront of the movement, and his warning serves as a reminder of what they are always fighting against.

Milk is once again able to force a drive in his audience by displaying his exhaustion towards all of the silence and stagnation in regards to fighting for queer rights. One example of this is when Milk asserts that "Here, in so-called liberal San Francisco, an anti-gay smear campaign was waged by so-called liberals. And here, in so-called liberal San Francisco, we have a columnist for the *San Francisco Examiner*, a columnist named Kevin Starr, who has printed a number of columns containing distortions and lies about gays. He's getting away with it" (Milk). Milk's repeated use of the phrase 'so-called liberals' is used to emphasize his disdain towards the false claims that San Francisco is a place where the LGBTQ+ community can find solace. This is but one example of Milk's clever use of repetition in order to amplify a message and/or display his loathing towards all the ways in which the queer community is so relentlessly wronged. He

utilizes this skill again when he asks the president in office at the time, Jimmy Carter, “How many more years? How much more damage? How much more violence? How many more lives?” (Milk) Harvey Milk displays the turmoil the LGBTQ+ community has faced in a way that emphasizes the necessity of support for the movement, whilst making sure not to portray the community as pathetic or helpless. Milk is able to do this by taking a moment to plead with the president, however he knows not to linger on this beseeching tone and instead the repetitive questioning establishes the exhaustion of the community. It reinforces the fact that the community can’t live in these conditions for much longer. By repeatedly using this strategy as a part of his speech the audience can feel the direness in his voice. It tells them that they need to fight now, before the fire dies out, because these people have endured for long enough. Milk even directly declares his exhaustion when he tells his audience “I’m tired of their myths. I’m tired of their distortions. I’m speaking out about it” (Milk). After Milk declares his contempt towards the many lies that are spread about his community, he immediately notes that he’s doing something about it by speaking out, thus encouraging his audience to do the same. Oftentimes his repetition has a duality to it, simultaneously expressing his fatigue, as well as his passion.

My reasoning behind selecting this piece of literature lies in its relevance to contemporary society. I wanted to bring light to a speech such as this, and display the horrid fact that while progress has been made, there are still areas in which the LGBTQ+ movement has become stagnant, or even backwards moving. So many of the threats and obstacles that Harvey Milk speaks on in his speech are still present in even the most progressive parts of today’s world. The fact that such a crucial speech for this movement was given, only for the speaker to be assassinated just two weeks later, is more than exemplary of just how relentless so many people and institutions are in not just suppressing, but eradicating the LGBTQ+ community. Even

worse, just three years later began the AIDS epidemic which would go on to take millions of lives, while society brushed it under and shunned those who were suffering in their faces. The only way to prevent that eradication is to speak out, so that's exactly what i'm doing, and that's why I found it necessary to choose this piece of literature

Works Cited

Milk, Harvey. "Harvey Milk's Gay Freedom Day Speech." *JSTOR Daily*, June 25, 1978?

<https://daily.jstor.org/harvey-milks-gay-freedom-day-speech-annotated/>. Accessed 12 September 2023.

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Struggling For Existence

As a proud gay man, it's easy to see why I want to bring light to the LGBTQ+ rights movement. Not only do these social issues impact my everyday life, but they affect the lives of so many people I know, love, and look up to. More than anything, I want to bring light to the areas in which the LGBTQ+ movement has become stagnant, or even backwards moving. I feel it's necessary for some people to see that while the fight is going strong, there are still so many prominent threats to the community today in even the most progressive areas of the world. The only way to stop these threats is to speak out, so that's exactly what I'm doing, and why I found it necessary to discuss a very famous piece of art that tackles this issue meticulously. Keith Haring's Spray Painted Mural *Unfinished Painting* consists of an unbalanced, mostly white, canvas with a bold purple and black illustration in the top left corner done in Haring's signature graffiti/pop-art style. The mural purposefully looks incomplete and the illustration drips color almost as if it were a bleeding wound. The piece is symbolic of Keith Haring's life that was cut short from AIDS and was made with his knowledge that he didn't have time to make a complete piece, so he instead left it incomplete as a reminder of the deadly negligence towards a struggling LGBTQ+ community in the 80's and 90's. The piece has now become a somber reminder of the many lives lost due to the alienation and demonization of an already struggling community faced with a deadly epidemic. Keith Haring's mural successfully exemplifies the tragedy of negligence toward the queer community in the 80's and chillingly illustrates the painful consequences that come with the purposeful incomprehension and demonization of the LGBTQ+ community.

When the famous gay politician Harvey Milk gave his speech about queer rights and equality, it wasn't a one-note preach of optimism and hope, there was a direness and urgency present in his speech that helped amplify his message tenfold. Keith Haring's piece similarly contains a call to action within itself that is one of a grim nature, rather than a positive one, which makes all the more sense when considering the years and years of the community fighting hate with hope, only to be treated with even more disdain and harassment. Haring's chilling piece successfully strikes fear into his audience by providing a visual portrayal of the queer life that was rotting away from societal neglect, similarly to Harvey Milk's warning to his audience of the consequence that comes with the absence of advocacy in his famous Gay Freedom Day Speech. Milk alerts his audience "But once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake. For the sake of the youngsters who are being terrified by the votes coming from Dade County to Eugene. If Briggs wins, he will not stop. They never do. Like all mad people, they are forced to go on, to prove they were right. There will be no safe 'closet' for any gay person" (Milk). Milk was aware of the necessity to ignite a spark in his audience, and he was aware that for some the only way to do so was to scare them into action. His speech plants a grim future in his audiences' heads so that they'd fight to prevent that threat from becoming a reality. Haring's piece used fear in a similar way, as it forced those who turned a blind eye to the LGBTQ+ community to see for themselves how cruel it was for so many innocent lives to be taken by an illness that nobody seemed to care about. It struck queer audiences even harder, as the piece's stark contrast from Haring's traditional works bluntly visualized to the community that their people were withering away. It was a PSA to any and all members of the community to keep fighting against the oppressors that so desperately wanted them gone from the public eye.

In contemporary society, many people debate the oppression of the LGBTQ+ community. Oftentimes the argument is presented that the discrimination is dismissible or that the oppression is so minute that no action needs to be taken. What these counter-arguments fail to acknowledge is the fact that even on the most minor scale, the negligence of oppression and discrimination creates room for tolerance of that behavior, and potential for further aggravation of it. Jen Scott Curwood touches on the many ways in which queer people are silenced and oppressed today, and mentions the escalation of violence that comes with the non-violent intolerance of the LGBTQ+ community. This coincides with Haring's unfinished work and how his piece is evident of the mortality that resulted from the queer isolationist ideology in the midst of the AIDS crisis. Curwood points out that in 2009 the world was still a very oppressive and unsafe world for people of the LGBTQ+ community. She exemplifies the westboro baptist churches' many heinous hate crimes toward the community, as well as the leader Fred Phelps' infamous incident in which he pinned the blame for the 9/11 tragedy on the queer community, along with other marginalized communities (Curwood 38). Even into the late 2000's there are multiple examples of ways people have fought against the LGBTQ+ without incriminating themselves through the use of violence. Haring's piece builds on this by exemplifying the detriment that fell upon the LGBTQ+ community, not by acts of physical violence and slaughter, but rather by the inaction and neglect of people who could have helped. Curwood further develops this notion as she provides a vivid example of the escalation of violence that stems from microaggression and institutionalized homophobia. She points out other occurrences and controversies that have happened in school environments such as a multitude of books banned for containing LGBTQ+ characters or themes, the censorship and banning of queer pride clothing, as well as the banning of an on-campus Gay-Straight Alliance club (Curwood 39).

Curwood more specifically alerts that “in 2008, 14-year-old Brandon McInerney stormed into his southern California high school's computer lab, armed with a small caliber handgun. He shot 15-year-old Lawrence King twice in the head, killing him. King was openly gay and professed to have a crush on McInerney, who was ‘tall, good-looking, popular, smart’-and who had rebuffed King, calling him a faggot (Broverman)” (Curwood 39). Jen Scott Curwood’s list provides an escalation of events, starting from mere censorship, but eventually leading to the death of an innocent child. This purposefully demonstrates the cycle of hatred present in society and how small injustices inform oppressors that they can push that boundary further and further, until it's too late to stop them. Haring’s work epitomizes this as it displays that same cycle of hatred. The suppression of a deadly disease, which caused people to generate a fear towards the LGBTQ+ community, until fear turned into contempt, and nothing was done about the countless queer lives lost during the epidemic. Haring’s piece encapsulates that narrative in the bold strokes and colors of his piece, which are forcefully halted much too early, with the clear implication that the piece didn’t come to its full fruition due to the fact that some external force ended it too early.

Another way queer mistreatment goes overlooked is when people undermine current issues by mentioning the fact that we’ve made so much progress over the years, often accompanying the counterpoint with the redundant statement that “at least it isn’t as bad as it was before”. This however, doesn’t make the issues that are still present today negligible and it certainly doesn’t mean that the people who still propagate violence and mistreatment today should be left unaddressed. Gayle Kaufman and D’Lane Compton provide an objective study on modern attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community and prove that while significant progress has been made, there are still actively groups of people who oppose and fight against the community. These results qualify one of the arguments that Haring’s painting made which was that there are

so many people in America who severely oppose the LGBTQ+ community, of whom are not only overlooked, but are even validated in many cases. In Kaufman and Compton's study, they found that "While we have seen extraordinary change with Obergefell and piecemeal change with state laws around LGBT protections, it is important to be cognizant of the political and social landscape when trying to understand current US public opinions toward same-sex marriage and LGBT protections" (Kaufman and Compton). This study was taken to find an objective conclusion, however when this statement is put into context it essentially alludes to the fact that there are places now where the LGBTQ+ community is broadly accepted and welcomed, however it is undeniable that there are many places where the community is unsafe, unprotected, and unrecognized. These places that meet the LGBTQ+ community with hostility and oppression are reminiscent of the hellscape that was created during Haring's time, amidst the AIDS epidemic. Just as it was then, in these smaller parts of America, innocent individuals are still reprimanded, isolated and mistreated solely because of their identity. This minority is not dismissible either as it is noted in the study that "a substantial minority (about 40%) of American adults favor the rights of small businesses to discriminate against LGBT individuals" (Kaufman and Compton). While this data only represents those who favor LGBTQ+ discriminatory practices, make no mistake that there is a present concentration of individuals within that statistic that are much more radically oppressive towards the community. As recognized in the previous scholarly journal, homophobia often follows an escalation of violence, which is what makes this statistic dangerous, and why this kind of discrimination, while minor, is impermissible. After all, Haring's death once again was not a result of violence, but rather inaction and the passive disgust of people who were unwilling to offer any kind of support to the LGBTQ+ community.

The elaboration on this piece and its relation to all of these sources will hopefully broaden conversations about homophobia and discrimination. I hope the example Haring made will show people that tolerance is not the end-goal, and that ignoring a community can near the consequences of oppressing that same community. All of these sources exemplify that in their own way, as they illustrate the importance of activism, the dangers of escalating violence and the overall importance of LGBTQ+ support. What still needs to be done lies in the government's hands, and the question of if they will decide to stand alongside the community, or leave it alone, potentially to its demise. However we can force their hand by continuing to advocate, protest, and bring awareness of the issue.

Annotated Works Cited

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English Journal, vol. 98, no.4, Mar 2009, pp. 37-43,

<https://www.proquest.com/pqrl/docview/237305695/fulltextPDF/CD96DA18235F40FEPQ/20?accountid=25324>. Jen Scott Curwood addresses the lack of progress made towards

diversity in modern-day classrooms. She elaborates on the effects of exclusion and points out the escalating consequences that occur due to small microaggressions and acts of institutionalized homophobia. Curwood additionally warns her audience that the tolerance of minor acts of homophobia allow for people to cause larger and larger acts of hatred towards the community until they eventually do lead to major acts of violence and hate crime.

Haring, Keith. *Unfinished Painting*. 1989, LACMA, Los Angeles, California

Haring’s Painting exhibits bold strokes and bright colors in the top left quadrant of the piece, leaving a blank space in the rest of the canvas, to exemplify a life unjustly cut short by a deadly virus that society failed to do anything about. The piece is a commentary on homophobia and its detrimental effects even through negligence rather than violence.

Kaufman, Gayle, and D’Lane Compton. “Attitudes toward LGBT marriage and legal protections

Post-Obergefell.” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, vol. 18, no. 2, 31 May 2020, pp.

321–330, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-020-00460-y> Gayle Kaufman and D’Lane

Compton compose an extensive study to find modern attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community. They find that while progress has been made, there are still concerning

substantial minorities that not only don't support but very strongly oppose the community and actively fight against the ratification of their civil rights.

Milk, Harvey. "Harvey Milk's Gay Freedom Day Speech." *JSTOR Daily*, June 25, 1978

<https://daily.jstor.org/harvey-milks-gay-freedom-day-speech-annotated/>. Accessed 12 September 2023.

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