

A BIG, GAY, HIV-FRIENDLY TV SHOW:
A QUEER CRITICAL RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF
THE TELEVISION SERIES *LOOKING*
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Chapter One:

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, or GLAAD (2015), reported some optimistic news. Brian Moylan (2016) details that in a segment called “Where Are We On TV,” GLAAD recounts that currently on television, there are 35 series regular television characters that identify as LGBTQ+. Moylan notes that, while this would appear to be great news for the queer community, this only makes up about 4% of characters represented on primetime networks. In other words, audiences do see gay characters portrayed on television but they are a far cry away from seeing many shows that “feature(s) mostly gay characters doing gay things with each other and having gay conversations about gay life and using gay words” (para. 2). Moylan, again, states, “That is amazing, and we’ll take every one of them. But there are currently more shows about women who have survived abduction than there are about a collection of gay people” (para. 3). Moylan laments that there is not much space in the televisual realm offered for a “big gay show.”

Furthermore, the same GLAAD report (2015) asserts that across the span of both broadcast and cable networks, only one character is represented as living with HIV. Jim Halterman (2016) writes that such an absence of HIV representation is not only negligent, but it is irresponsible, particularly for the queer community. With millions of HIV infections happening within the LGBTQ+ community, there is an increasing need for media portrayals of HIV from this very community—one that acknowledges the illness and allows its characters to function as normally as those with a negative status. Indeed,

as Halterman notes, there must be more exposure to HIV in the queer community, because without it, how can we ever come to terms with HIV as a lived-experience—one that, in 2017, is preventative and far from a death sentence?

This thesis explores the complex and underrepresented relationship between HIV and the LGBTQ+ community as portrayed on the HBO original series *Looking*. Utilizing both critical rhetoric and queer theory, I analyze *Looking* in relation to its portrayal of how HIV is represented. In 2015, *Looking* introduced the character of Eddie (played by Daniel Franzese). His character identifies as HIV positive, but as Franzese explains to Halterman, his HIV positive-status “was just going to be a part of Eddie’s life, he was never going to get sick [and] he was going to be pursued not in spite of it but maybe because of it. Because of the way he handles it, that’s why he is loved” (para. 8). Eddie’s portrayal was met with critical acclaim, and was later called “revolutionary” (Halterman, 2016, para. 8). Indeed, further attention must be paid to this series, due to its cultural impact regarding the queer community, as well as its attention to those living with HIV. Bearing these ideas in mind, I seek to answer two research questions in my thesis:

RQ 1: How does *Looking* liberate or constrain the LGBTQ+ community from traditional confines of HIV narratives?

RQ 2: How does *Looking* liberate or constrain the LGBTQ+ community from traditional confines of queer narratives?

In order to answer these research questions, this thesis is organized as follows. This analysis of *Looking* begins with a rationale for this thesis in Chapter One. The literature review begins in Chapter Two with a discussion of queer media studies and HIV representation through film and television, and concludes by presenting the politics

surrounding HIV. In Chapter Three, I establish the critical orientation I use in this project: queer theory and critical rhetoric. I begin by exploring the distinctly political nature of queer theory, and its involvement to dismantle previously held notions regarding gender and sexuality. Next, I unpack how rhetoric shifted from exploring more traditional texts like public address, to examining mediated texts. I then explore McGee's (1990) notion of fragments, and how critics can take fragments to create their own texts. I explain the combination of queer theory and critical rhetoric and discuss my chosen texts for analysis. Chapter Four is where I apply a critical rhetorical perspective to examine the television show *Looking* and investigate how the show portrays HIV in the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, in Chapter Five I discuss the implications and conclusions of this project.

Rationale

To better understand the impact surrounding *Looking's* depiction of HIV within the LGBTQ+ community, in addition to its negotiation of HIV in queer relationships, I outline the cultural significance of my study from a scholastic perspective as well as from the lens of cultural studies. The rhetorical examination of *Looking* is vital for three key reasons. First, the cultural moment within the LGBTQ+ community necessitates an emergence of texts that portray HIV openly—in direct contrast to the silence it had previously received. Second, media is a powerful tool to equip audiences with knowledge and an understanding of particular social issues. Finally, examining HIV rhetoric through a mediated context will add greatly needed research to the limited literature available.

To understand why *Looking* is especially significant to the field of communication and LGBTQ+ activists, it is vital to first outline the cultural moment in

which the HBO series is situated. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that at the end of 2011, 500,002—or 57%—of people in the United States living with HIV identified as men who have sex with men (2015). Additionally, between 2008 and 2011 roughly 72% of new HIV infections were from gay men between the ages of 13 and 24. Clearly, more attention must be paid to this subset of the queer community.

Unfortunately, discussions surrounding HIV infection—particularly from within the queer community itself—goes by unnoticed by mainstream media (Gillett, 2003). It is worth mentioning that, although the U.S. has seen a decrease in deaths from HIV/AIDS related illnesses with a dip of 29.4 to 8.8 per 100 person-years since 1998 (Palella, Delaney, Moorman, Loveless, Fuhrer, Satten, Aschman, Holmberg, & The HIV Outpatient Study Investigators, 1998), HIV is still an unspoken plague throughout the United States. And this silence is due, in large part, to media's ignorance or its falsely represented portrayals of those living with HIV. Interestingly, as Poole (2014) points out:

While the AIDS crisis claimed many lives, it served as a catalyst to open conversations about sexuality and gender that had been heretofore been difficult if not impossible, and consequently, the turn of the millennium ushered in a newfound examination of what had been defined as 'gay,' and perhaps not so positively, this queered space began to make 'gay' a commodity. (p. 280)

As I will argue in my literature review, media, though once used as a way to discuss the queer identity, is now being used as a method of silencing. My work begins to fill this void that media has long forgotten.

Second, and related, media texts offer the necessary tools to provide its audience with exposure and insight into specific social issues. Poole (2014) argues that media in

any capacity “is [the] central location for not only reflecting social and cultural phenomena but also for defining who and how we can *be*” (p 279). Indeed, media today is often used as an instrument for discussion and establishing power differences between groups. In particular, Julia Himberg and Lynne Joyrich (2013) assert, “television continues to be a crucial part of the media landscape” (n.p.). However, beyond the scope of mindless entertainment, they demonstrate how television has permeated into the realm of political discourse when they argue:

TV has had an intensely political history; as a domestic medium, located in the home, it has long provoked concerns about its influence on politics, social dynamics, and cultural values as well as its impact on the more minute politics of everyday life, personal relations, and intimate relationships. (2013, n.p.)

Essentially, our televisual daily programming is infused with political, highly influential messages; however subtle. These messages provide a basic framework to dissect the roles played by those who have consistently remained marginalized from those with increasing power.

Maria Levina, Craig R. Waldo, and Louise F. Fitzgerald (2000) notice that this search for power is “especially relevant for the gay and lesbian community” because this form of visibility not only proves the community’s validity, but also its existence in the first place (p. 739). Thus, a deeper examination by critics of queer relationships and characters is vital, because as Joyrich (2014) notes, these representations attempt to “[trouble] ideological norms” and shift the paradigm away from heteronormative texts (p. 133). Yet while studies surrounding the LGBTQ+ community do exist, media’s

representation of HIV positive characters and plotlines has continued to fly under the radar.

Finally, mediated texts such as *Queer as Folk* and *How to Get Away with Murder* have featured prominent storylines involving characters living with HIV. However, Stacey May Fowles (2015) notes that, while progressive and “admirable,” there is still needed work that must be done in the media’s representation of HIV (para 14). In particular, she notes that, in 2016, it is not enough to merely mention HIV and hope that it resonates with audiences. Rather, it is time to start a “very different conversation – one about the blame and stigma that continues to be heaped upon those who engage in casual sex” (para. 13). Essentially, the current media landscape is saturated by inefficient depictions of HIV from within the queer community. These portrayals are influenced by the current social climate surrounding HIV.

Because HIV is still considered to be an ongoing epidemic throughout the United States (Farrell, 2006), it is vital that gay men understand how this illness functions in a broader cultural setting. Farrell (2006) continues that, all-too often, HIV is depicted as an “us versus them” illness, whereby if individuals do not have an HIV-positive status; there is no need to worry. However, she notes this line of thinking is inherently problematic, because within the gay community especially, it ignores “this phenomenon in relation to themselves, their friends, and their futures” (p. 194). By illuminating the numerous facets of HIV within the queer community, a deeper understanding may be built to bridge communication processes between those who do and those who do not live currently live with HIV.

Undeniably, Hope Reese (2014) argues that with an influx of queer representation on television, from *Modern Family* to *Orange is the New Black*, programs still remain few and far between that tackle the complex nuances, yet realistic depictions of gay relationships. My thesis will work alongside Farrell and Reese's concerns because my project is in line with their goals for analysis. Additionally, it will add to and introduce conversations regarding HIV as a means to spark a much-needed dialogue from within the queer community. I detail below why *Looking* is an appropriate text to investigate a new framework of HIV representation.

An interesting representation of queer characters occurs in the series *Looking*. In 2014 and 2015, *Looking* challenged these troubling frameworks of gay men living with HIV. For instance, the protagonist of the series, Patrick (played by Jonathan Groff), must deal with the looming threat of HIV after a night of intercourse. However, the pinnacle of the series' discussion of HIV arrives in the second season premiere, "Looking for the Promised Land." It is here that the audience is introduced to Eddie (played by Daniel Franzese), who classifies himself as "the hairy-ass mother of the Mission," and lives with a plus sign tattooed on his arm. When Patrick's close friend Agustín, tells his close group of friends that Eddie, "is a big bear who cares about trans people and has a house in Virginia," indicating that Eddie is living with HIV, the series takes a realistic twist when no one freaks out; no one questions this facet of Eddie's identity, nor do they judge him (Straube, 2015, para 4). Instead, Agustín falls head-over-heels for Eddie and the two begin a relationship; consistently exploring nuances of the queer community that include discussion about HIV within the gay community.

Looking's portrayal of HIV has since been heralded for its honest representation of those who are both HIV-positive and HIV-negative. For example, HIV prevention advocate Damon Jacobs (2015) maintains that its impacts reach far beyond those of the characters in the series. He asserts, "the conversations and tensions [regarding the characters' negotiation of HIV]... [have] changed more than the lives of the fictional people on screen, and it has also radically broken the glass ceiling on how sexual expressions can be portrayed in American media" (para. 1). While simultaneously using humor and drama to propel these storylines, the cultural impact surrounding *Looking*'s depiction of HIV in the gay community is crucial to understand, because as Jacobs (2015) writes:

Television, cable or otherwise, has rarely discussed issues related to HIV sexuality with any sort of respect, honor, or integrity. The traditional way of portraying HIV-positive individuals at best has been to make them "sympathetic" by sexually neutering them, and at worst, to make them pariahs for acting on lust and desire. (para. 7)

By challenging the lens with which HIV is typically portrayed, *Looking* proves to be a worthy focus of analysis, because it does not reinforce the structures that originally dictated HIV rhetoric. Rather, it rewrites the narrative regarding issues surrounding HIV. This shift has the power to alter how HIV is portrayed through the media, and from this, how it is discussed today.

In relation to the discussion surrounding HIV in gay relationships, Saraiya found that "*Looking* provides a very rare portrait of modern-day infection, one overlaid with worry and a great deal of hope" (para. 4). She expands upon this idea further by stating:

Eddie stands very alone. The last character on television to be HIV-positive in their present-day timeline was Ron Rifkin's character Saul Holden on ABC's *Brothers and Sisters* in a story line that unfolded from 2009 to 2011. In the past decade, the number of HIV-positive characters on American TV is so small you can count it on one hand, depending on whether you count animated characters (*South Park*) or teen soap operas (*The Best Years*). (para. 3)

The series offered its viewers the chance to see how truly visible HIV can be in the gay community. As Franzese (Saraiya, 2015) stated in an interview:

... So many people would come up to me privately and say, *I'm positive and my partner is negative and I can't tell you how many times we've had a scare or how many times I've been through that with other men*. The feedback that I got was, *I wish I could've watched this season with my partner when we first started liking each other, so we could have had an idea of the things we might encounter. I would know how PrEP can help and how it's natural to be afraid sometimes, and how to deal with that*. I think watching that play out is going to help a lot of couples in the future. (para 8-9)

It is ultimately through this media exposure that we come to terms with the rhetoric surrounding HIV: that it is not invisible, nor is it hiding. It exists and is merely waiting to be discussed. Given the current cultural moment surrounding mediated portrayals of HIV in the queer community, in the next section, I review literature on queer media studies as well as on politics pertaining to HIV from within the LGBTQ+ community.

Chapter Two:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I discuss relevant literature that describes how the queer identity has been constructed through mediated portrayals. Next, I turn to a brief chronology of the media's representation of HIV in popular culture—notably, I look to the most current portrayals of HIV from within the queer community. Finally, I briefly examine literature that explores the history that has been present in HIV politics—primarily the origins of HIV in the United States and its impacts in the 21st century. Through this literature, I argue that depictions of HIV in the LGBTQ+ community are typically ignored by popular culture—and there is a greater need for more studies pertaining to how HIV is understood and portrayed in the queer community when it is featured at all. After all, as Errol Salamon (2017) explains, given the advent of social media in relation to media representation themselves, audiences now hold the power to “talk back” and create a dialogue about the media they consume.

Queer Media Studies

There is a rich, interdisciplinary body of work on the LGBTQ+ community and how the community is portrayed through mediated messages. This section of the literature review features that scholarship and argues that, although there has been an increase in mediated portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community, it is often through a tragic lens—rather than one of liberation or equality. To better understand this notion of “queer media,” I offer a concise definition of queer, and then turn to how these identities have been constructed through media. Initially, Lynne Joyrich (2014) defines *queer* as “the

subversion of the ordinary, as the strange, as the irregular, which would seem to necessitate some sort of disruption to our ‘regularly scheduled programming’” (p. 134). Because Joyrich grounds her definition through a mediated lens—as a means of exploring what is marked by difference in our scheduled programming, she recognizes the need to examine queer identities as they are depicted through various mediated platforms.

Critical media scholar Fred Fejes (2000) points to a recent pervasiveness of queer identities constructed through media. He writes that “the media [is] part of the larger social process of creating identities for gays and lesbians” (p. 115). Although Fejes is initially optimistic about representation itself, Janet Cramer (2007) elaborates on this idea further from a scholarly lens, insisting that although there has been a recent surge in queer representation on television, recent literature pertaining to gays and lesbians on television is particularly contained toward that community, limiting scholarly discussion—which, as I will discuss in a future section, is particularly “tragic.” Essentially, we, as critical media scholars, have determined that it is imperative to discuss who or what is being represented through these media portrayals, but have not found a way to dissect this further—as a means to understand the intricacies of the queer identity. It is not enough for critics to say that there is queer representation on television; it must be identified and then further examined.

Media scholar Bonnie Dow (1995) notes that fiction often reflects real-life issues, because it is typically grounded in reality. While her work is centered on mediated feminist messages, she argues that, “it is possible for television to be acknowledged as fiction and yet be experienced as realistic in its characterization or treatment of issues” (p. 5). For example, in an exploration of 1990’s sitcom *Ally McBeal*, Dow (2002)

synthesizes how the series' lead character, aptly named Ally McBeal, asserts her femininity in a highly masculine setting. While the series was presented as mediated entertainment, Dow argues that the series "performs the postfeminist trick of making the political into the personal at every turn" (pp. 261-262). While McBeal's appeal came from a recent rise in third-wave feminism, Dow complements the show's wit with its ability to become personal for women. In other words, the personal is often linked to the political. Thus, Dow demonstrates that media plays a pivotal role in forming and shaping cultural and personal identities. This notion extends beyond feminism, as media narratives impact options about race, gender, sexuality, and other identity categories. Clearly, as Miller and Lewallen (2015) assert, with a recent increase in LGBTQ+ exposure in the media, it is crucial for scholars to study such portrayals and recognize their impacts to that community, as well as to society at large.

This need to evaluate texts must begin from the start of television-- from the first portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community. Initially, authentic depictions of gays and lesbians remained relatively absent from television until around the mid 1970's—studies regarding such depictions began surfacing after this time. Subsequent studies garnered both positive and negative reception. Queer characters, until the late 1990's, typically existed as a foil to the leading character of that series. According to Suzanna Walters (2001), all of these roles were supporting characters who were demoted to the secondary role of victim, villain, or comedic relief. She also notes that these portrayals typically lent themselves to reinforcing stereotypes of the queer community.

It was not until a surge of social gay liberation in the late 1990's that there was also a surge in mediated depictions of the LGBTQ+ community. Here, gay men and women

carved a space for their own programming. However, Wendy Peters (2011) notes that even with shows in the 1990's that were wildly successful with mainstream audiences, such as *Ellen* (1994-1998) or *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), they still relied on comedy to be easily accessible for consumption. In essence, queer characters were allowed media exposure once they were viewed as digestible and even effeminate for mainstream audiences. As Brandon Miller and Jennifer Lewallen (2015) soon found, these comedic portrayals, while successful, ingrained problematic stereotypes pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community. Unfortunately, these characters' femininity would soon become synonymous with non-threatening and one-note for public consumption. They note that characters such as Jack from *Will & Grace* and Kurt from *Glee* fulfill the role of feminine gay man that has culturally been painted as the norm, and as such, a non-issue in the grand scheme of mediated portrayals. Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas (2006) argue that these illustrations depict the characters in the "ridicule stage of representation" (p. 31), where they become the butt of their own jokes.

Sidelining these characters to supporting roles and portraying them as a stereotype is not by accident. Scholars have noted that media portrayals of marginalized communities have been distorted to privilege dominant ideologies. Yet while these communities push back, it oftentimes proves futile. Media and communication scholar Rob Cover (2004) writes that, "In its political and advocacy modes, it frequently denounces the stereotyping of lesbians and gay men, arguing that stereotyping is a reduction of unique individuality and diversity into wrongful notions of group behaviour" (p. 81). What this creates, as Cover describes, is an "un-truth," or a false image of a group of people. However, because of the frequency in these false perceptions, due to the prevalence of these

portrayals, they will inevitably become real-world examples of those marginalized groups. Mireille Rosello (1998) notes that any attempt to publicly denounce a distorted stereotype is in vein, because it “effectively puts it further into circulation” (p. 29). Due to this bind, scholars have often wondered what the LGBTQ+ community can do politically and rhetorically. Edward Alwood (1996) writes that, “Ever since the Stonewall riots in 1968, which marked the beginning of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, the attention of gay and lesbian activists has turned to the media as a potential cause of hostile attitudes and also as a potential solution to problems of invisibility and discrimination” (p. 739). Therefore, as both Alwood and Cover suggest, even with the LGBTQ+ community pushing back against the problematic stereotypes, they are often upheld because they were still seen as intrinsically inferior to their heteronormative counterparts. In short, queer identities are still marginalized through mediated portrayals.

Acknowledging these, oftentimes silent, communities through a mediated lens offers unique insight into how that very community functions alongside dominant ideologies (Farrell, 2006). It is oftentimes the norm that argues that portrayals will inevitably lead to exposure, and however problematic the stereotypes may be, any exposure will lead to proof that the community exists in the first place. Queer media scholar Larry Gross (1991) justifies this statement further, by developing George Gerbner’s coined term: *symbolic annihilation* (Venzo & Hess, 2014), wherein dominant ideologies push out marginalized groups from media attention in order to maintain power inequality. He notes:

Representation in the mediated “reality” of our mass culture is in itself power; certainly it is the case that nonrepresentation maintains the powerless status of

groups that do not possess significant material of political power bases. That is, while the holders of real power – the ruling class – do not require (or seek) mediated visibility, those who are at the bottom of the various power hierarchies will be kept in their places in part through their relative invisibility. (p. 21)

This trend, distancing those based on their differences, is not particularly novel, however. In fact, scholars have been analyzing marginalized groups' invisibility for well over fifty years. These studies' origins trace back to Kenneth Burke (1959) when he established the notion of the Other, or the concept that a binary is established between the majority and the minority. Therefore, the Other is characterized by differences, as the silent minority that is viewed as less-than or unspoken. And, by this standard, the Other is often classified as immoral and inevitably exists within a tragic frame. And while Burke was not writing specifically about queer identity, his work is often used to analyze LGBTQ+ texts.

Professor of psychology Gregory Herek (1992) uniquely combines sexual prejudices with the psyche when he provided an additional take on these concepts within the realm of the LGBTQ+ community. He notes that it is through individual and cultural biases where anti-gay prejudice is rhetorically defined. He coined the term *heterosexism*, defining it as, “an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes an non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, and community” (p. 89). Thus, considering that the cultural rhetoric surrounding the HIV epidemic is that it is, as writer for legal LGBTQ+ issues Mark Stern (2015) puts it, the “gay plague,” any behaviors pertaining to this epidemic is upheld as heterosexist (para. 3). Therefore, the tragic frame is reinforced, and the LGBTQ+ community is neither liberated nor visible.

However, this tragic frame found in representations of the LGBTQ+ community is not merely coincidental. Claire Sisco King (2014) writes that positive portrayals of the queer community are few and far between, imposing a tragic frame to distinguish the stark difference between this marginalized group with its dominant counterpart. Heather Love (2007) calls into question this misguided attempt at representing the queer community, when she notes that these “bad feelings” are then used to unmask “frequently repressed part(s) of queer history” (p. 191). By imposing this tragic frame—matched with queer repression—it is clear then that previous notions of exposure leading to visibility is hopelessly inaccurate.

Looking back at Bonnie Dow’s (2001) essay on Ellen DeGeneres furthers the conversation of invisibility of the queer community, when she problematizes the media’s fixation on coming-out narratives. In particular, she analyzes DeGeneres’ coming-out as a lesbian on her ABC sitcom *Ellen* (1994-1998). She notes that when fictional character Ellen Morgan comes out during the series’ run, Ellen DeGeneres’ subsequent coming out as lesbian later reflected this. Although critics and audiences alike lauded this mediated political act, Dow mentions the unique problem this presented: public recognition of one’s identity—in this case, one identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community—comes with a price. This price came in the form of acceptance, or “gaining the approval of mainstream, heterosexual Americans” (Dow, 2001, p. 128). Fortunately, the episode’s reveal was applauded and would later land *Ellen* an Emmy for Comedy Writing. Yet Dow mentions that what could be viewed as emancipatory for the LGBTQ+ community is simultaneously damaging, because the dominant ideology is still privileged. She argues that *Ellen*’s handling of a precarious, political issue later becomes personal, and pertains

primarily to the straight people in Ellen's life that this decision most affects. What this denies, as stated by sociologist and gay advocate Jeffrey Weeks (1985), is that:

in a culture in which heterosexual desires, male or female, are still execrated and denied, the adoption of gay or lesbian identities inevitably constitutes a *political* choice. These identities are not expressions of secret essences. They are self-creations, but they are creations on grounds not freely chosen but laid out by history. (p. 209)

By merely delegating LGBTQ+ stories to how it affects the dominant community at-large indicates that it is not as emancipatory as it initially appeared. No longer a political act, but a personal one, coming-out is attempting to make a safe space for heterosexual audiences. Dow concludes by writing:

In the end, what is at stake here are basic issues of civil rights, freedom of choice, and social justice—issues that shouldn't be dependent on liking anyway. Media avoidance of such political stakes is more than mere omission; it should be recognized as an expression, indeed a production, of power. (p. 137)

Ultimately, although exposure is oftentimes the end goal for marginalized groups to create its voice, it is now clear that it is through sustaining that voice that liberation in any capacity can be achieved.

Jay Poole (2014) notes that as we move into a new millennium, "there is much hope with regard to the disruption of what has been defined as natural and normal by dominant social groups," implying that representation of marginalized individuals is consistently evolving (p. 289). Although literature is still scarce regarding the use of these texts as a method of liberation, their incoming impacts must not be denied.

Therefore, recognizing the inherently political nature of television helps to craft our senses of culture and identity, because as Poole (2014) points out, “media has... defined sexual identities, with heteronormative identities dominating the media landscape” (pp. 279-280). My analysis will work in the same spirit as Poole, wherein I argue that *Looking* attempts to subvert heteronormative structures. In the next section, I turn attention to mediated representations of HIV.

Media Representation of HIV

Scholars have argued media’s representation of HIV is ongoing and tumultuous—yet it is grounded in a rich, albeit one-sided history. Although it reached peak exposure in the 1980’s by means of media outlets (Kinsella, 1989), fictional accounts of the epidemic have withstood criticism and scrutiny. Its extensive background begins when the illness was first documented, yet scholars have studied both fictional and news accounts of HIV. Media scholar James Kinsella (1989) documents the initial uprising of the AIDS epidemic. He writes that on July 7, 1981, CNN aired a story covering Kaposi’s sarcoma, later rebranded to the public as HIV/AIDS. This marked the first time HIV was referenced on television, and thus began the general public unease throughout the United States.

Although American audiences learned about the sweeping death count pertaining to HIV/AIDS through media outlets, fictional accounts detailing the impacts surrounding HIV flew under the radar. Professor of Sociology Kathleen Farrell (2006) notes that its next mention occurred *briefly* almost two years later on the television drama *St Elsewhere* (1982-1988). She mentions that:

Networks reportedly feared that AIDS dramas would encourage backlash from

both gay rights groups and right-wing activists and chose, instead, to deal with AIDS on talk shows and news programs where audiences were often shown depictions of emaciated AIDS patients dying in hospital rooms. (pp. 195-196)

As it were, however, any recounting of those living with HIV was stuck in reality. After all, as Farrell notes, in a time of great fear and panic, audiences did not want to worry about HIV when they tuned into their fictionalized series, their primary form of escapism from that very panic.

This cultural script—of overlooking HIV’s existence in fictional accounts—significantly shifted in 1985, when NBC premiered the made-for-television film *An Early Frost* (1985). This was the first mediated text broadcast for public consumption that was specifically about gay men living with HIV. This drama focused on a young gay man who is diagnosed with HIV, and details his journey as he struggles to feel accepted and welcomed back into his family, particularly from his conservative, heterosexual parents. The film was a massive success, receiving stellar ratings and fourteen Emmy nominations. Lecturer, researcher, and LGBTQ+ advocate Steven Capsuto (2000) mentions that *An Early Frost* began shifting the paradigm for how HIV could be discussed in the midst of public uncertainty, and the impacts of the film extended far beyond its network, because it was also around this time that both ABC and CBS began developing television dramas pertaining to gay men living with AIDS.

Viewed as a critical and commercial success, *An Early Frost* paved the way for a brand-new future for how HIV could open up a dialogue, for those who were either positive or negative. Yet, while revolutionary for the time, Larry Gross (2001) writes that the media’s subsequent representation of gay men living with HIV/AIDS was dictated

purely by their ailment. In short, they were defined by their problems as outlined by heteronormative depictions of HIV, rather than from the gay culture in which it was currently situated. For example, *An Early Frost* details a man who is struggling to feel accepted by his family, rather than by himself or the LGBTQ+ community he is part of (Russo, 1987). Gross notes that this trend extended into the 1990's, where media's portrayal of HIV/AIDS depicted "white people with bad luck" (p. 144). Essentially, those depicted fictionally on television as living with HIV boiled down to three tropes: children who were infected from blood transfusions, middle-class straight white men who had one indiscretion with a prostitute, or a middle-class white gay man who slept with one partner who was living with HIV. These portrayals ignore the intricacies of HIV in the United States; instead, forcing the audience to either demonize the characters or to sympathize with them. There was no middle ground for these characters to be viewed as merely human.

This problematic trend continued further into the 1990's, but the portrayal of gay men started to shift. Robert Brookey (1996) examines the role that the 1993 film *Philadelphia* plays into the canon of predominantly queer texts that portray HIV. Indeed, while HIV/AIDS is at the forefront of the film's plot, wherein leading character Andrew Beckett is a lawyer who contracts HIV and is fired from his job, leading to him suing the company he worked for because of their discrimination against those living with HIV, Brookey mentions how the gay community is represented as affluent, however, unrealistic. And this places the LGBTQ+ community in a bind. Whereas many texts before *Philadelphia* show gay men struggling to find support because of their HIV status, *Philadelphia* paints a different picture altogether. Because Beckett is in a monogamous

relationship with a man and is shown nothing but support from his parents, Brookey argues that the film “illustrates the kind of lives the media chooses to represent when it constructs homosexual identities” (p. 47). In other words, the tragic frame of the gay man was partially uprooted—only to then portray these men as uncharacteristically lucky considering their circumstances. Still, gay men living with HIV, while portrayed with a significantly more positive lens, still suffered from one-note representations.

This is not to say, of course, that any mediated exposure to HIV was damning to those living with HIV/AIDS. Media scholar Christopher Pullen (2011) analyzes a 1994 cultural landmark for the LGBTQ+ community: Pedro Zamora from *The Real World San Francisco*. As an openly gay man who was publicly supported by his housemates on the series, Pullen insists that the media’s representation of Zamora was substantial in its attempt to humanize both Zamora’s queer identity, as well as his identity as a man living with HIV. As Pullen puts it, “This located him as a political icon for the gay community, in addition to his work in the field of AIDS education” (p. 404). The country was able to watch first-hand as Pedro dealt with his health issues, as he continued to negotiate his role as a gay man—both on *The Real World* but also in the real physical world. Unfortunately, as Pullen notes, Pedro’s story was established as one of tragedy, rather than triumph. The tragic personal narrative that Pullen mentions is marked by mortality and ultimately, Pedro’s death. Pullen writes, “Pedro’s personal tragedy was that he gave of himself for AIDS education, and the audience is encouraged to frame this loss through their knowledge of his demise as the ‘literal’ close of the narrative” (p. 405). Sadly, this means that once audiences turn off their televisions, HIV is no longer a real-life issue—it is just one that they can indulge in for an hour once a week. Therefore, while Pedro

brought issues of homosexuality and HIV to the forefront of popular culture, and Pullen mentions that he does so successfully, it is still difficult to break from the bind that mediated portrayals of HIV held many gay men in.

Disturbingly, there is a severe lack of literature that pertains exclusively to HIV from a mediated lens in the 21st century. With a general increase in representation, it is both puzzling and concerning to note this significant absence. Nishant Shahani (2016) attempts to bridge this divide between historical accounts of HIV and modern-day portrayals. His critique of the 2012 documentary *How to Survive a Plague* is grounded in the knowledge that “a renewed cinematic interest in historicizing the early moments of the AIDS crisis” (p. 3), but at the same time, has privileged white masculinity as the primary lens to fabricate these narratives. While the documentary is groundbreaking in its efforts to bring light to many of the facets surrounding the early AIDS crisis and organizations such as ACT UP, Shahani notes that we have come such a long way culturally to just ignore the complexities that exist within the crisis. At the rise of intersectionality in communication scholarship, Shanani urges historians and scholars alike to take into account the diversity that is presented through this troubling time. As he states, “If our lessons on how to survive a plague culminate in bleached pedagogies of queer heroism, we risk losing what was – and what continues to be – more vitally transformative about queer political thought and action” (p. 27). In other words, gone are the days where HIV is recognized as merely tragic or as a disease only for white gay men, and it is time for that understanding to be made abundantly clear in the 21st century.

Recent mediated texts such as *The Normal Heart*, *Beyond the Candelabra*, *Dallas Buyers Club*, and *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* have all featured

characters living with or prominent storylines surrounding HIV. Even in 2017, the critically mixed ABC miniseries *When We Rise* details the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and offers noteworthy rhetorical implications regarding HIV. Their significance in the cannon of popular culture must not be denied. Yet as Sonia Saraiya (2015) points out, “the time when AIDS mattered was in the past” (para. 1). And although series such as *Queer as Folk* have portrayed gay men living with HIV, it is ultimately pushed to the wayside and depicted as an issue that can, and should be, overcome. When competently portrayed, HIV is considered from the perspective of its HIV negative lead characters who are debating whether or not to engage in sexual relations with those who have a positive status. Ultimately, although oftentimes positively viewed, HIV is still seen as a condition that, according to the characters on the series, can be “handled” or overcome. Essentially, portrayals of HIV are represented through those who are negative, rather than those who are positive. Thus, as Rodriguez (2014) explains, HIV depictions are steeped in privilege—based merely on one’s status.

Similar to recent mediated texts, scholarly publications that discuss media coverage of HIV look to the history of the illness, rather than its role in the 21st century. Obviously, media coverage is not the same as a television portrayal, but it contributes to the media landscape of HIV understanding. Mollyann Brodie, Elizabeth Hamel, Lee Ann Brady, Jennifer Kates, and Drew Altman (2004) sought to understand trends in the coverage of HIV over time, but the article only focuses on 1981 to 2002. There are no articles that examine media coverage of HIV/AIDS after 2002. As they note, coverage of the crisis in the early 80’s was lackluster, and decreased significantly after a peak in 1987, “total coverage of HIV/AIDS increased during the early 1980’s, peaked at over

5,000 stories in 1987, and declined steadily to fewer than 1,000 stories in 2002” (p. 2).

When the media did heavily report on HIV, no individual event gained more than 5% of all HIV-related media coverage. This lack of focus prevents a public narrative from being built; it is impossible to follow the HIV crisis, because the low quantity of individual stories causes them to seem unrelated and difficult to follow. When the media did manage to focus on a topic within HIV narratives, those stories did little to reflect the average person living with the condition. This is demonstrated by the fact that Magic Johnson got the biggest share of media coverage from 1981 to 2002, but even Johnson, a superstar basketball player, only received 3% of all media coverage. News coverage of HIV causes the public to conceptualize it as a problem of the past. When the media viewed it as a current issue facing America, the coverage lacked focus to the point that the audience could not parse out what they were supposed to glean from it.

The limited information about HIV offered to audiences both through fictional portrayals or news coverage indicates a severe lack of adequate discussions about the illness. For instance, LGBTQ+ blogger Trenton Straube (2015) laments that even in the 21st century, HIV is still referred to through harmful slang terms or hurtful language as a means to avoid discussing it at all. Depicting those with HIV as immoral or dirty hurt the self-perceptions of those living with the disease, as well as to those who do not (Farrell, 2006). Media has fabricated a problematic cultural narrative surrounding HIV in the sphere of popular culture, if portrayed at all. And unfortunately, due to the growing nature of television as an interactive space for audiences, Salamon (2017) notes that these negative representations have seeped into social media outlets, and, thus, permeate into public discourse that extends beyond television. Because narratives pertaining to HIV

have been constructed socially, in the next section, I outline the complex policies in place that further stigmatize HIV. I argue that the social landscape is important given the information that television and media accounts of HIV are insufficient. The marriage between the sociopolitical landscape and the mediated one is necessary to track given my desire to study *Looking* through a critical rhetoric lens. As I will argue more in Chapter Three, the cultural vernacular surrounding HIV is severely lacking.

HIV Politics

In this section, I review literature that pertains specifically to politics about HIV. By initially examining the media portrayals of HIV, understanding the highly politicized nature of HIV will help put these representations into focus. Additionally, there are underlying ideologies and perceptions that surround the HIV/AIDS epidemic that this review of literature will address. I begin with a brief synopsis of how HIV came to be viewed in the United States. Next, I examine the pivotal role in activism regarding issues about HIV. Finally, I unpack why communication-surrounding HIV is paramount. Ultimately, the literature implies a much-needed exploration of HIV politics for gay men in a modern-day setting, leading to a new discussion of HIV in the 21st century.

Although *Looking* takes place in present-day San Francisco, the politicization of HIV is steeped in a history filled with socially harmful policies, biases, and taboos. This, in turn, created a culture of fear and resentment regarding those living with HIV (Shrage, 2014). Considering critics and audiences lauded the media exposure of Eddie's HIV status on *Looking* as a means to escape the misperceptions that run rampant surrounding HIV portrayals (Saraiya, 2015), a deeper examination of the politics pertaining to HIV is

crucial. By turning to the rich, extensive history that HIV has within the U.S. —positive and negative alike—we will see just how disruptive *Looking*'s depiction is—or could be.

This review of literature is imperative, because it uncovers the underlying ideologies that exist within the realm of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Clearly, media plays a powerful tool in shaping the minds of its viewers, and by taking into account the narratives portrayed of those living with HIV, understanding these ideologies may offer a more nuanced approach to depicting HIV in 2016. Additionally, by understanding the socio-political history that eventually led to a series such as *Looking*, we, as audience members, cultivate the necessary insight into how one's HIV status and relationships were understood by the general public (Hawkins, 2014). In essence, the literature reviewed serves as a template to recognize how and why certain mediated texts can simultaneously be considered political texts, and should be discussed among gay men in today's political and social climate. I begin with a brief historical account of HIV's inception.

The Origins of HIV

Although there were strains of HIV/AIDS across the globe spanning back to the early 1900's (Engel, 2008), the first notable death in the United States occurred with the passing of fifteen year-old Robert Rayford. American science journalist Gina Kolata (1987) explains that, although Rayford passed in 1969, his sudden death baffled his doctors at Washington University in St. Louis. It was not until 1984, however, that the same doctors released a statement saying that the “diagnostic tests confirmed the presence of the AIDS virus” (Kolata, 1987, para. 4). This finding indicates that HIV may have “been introduced and re-introduced into the American population on several

occasions, but that it may have died out for lack of a large, very sexually active population to transmit it” (Kolata, 1987, para. 6). Interestingly, Dr. Robert May, professor at Princeton University who specialized in HIV transmission, remarked that, "It wouldn't be surprising if AIDS appeared once, twice, three times before it finally took” (Kolata, 1987, para. 9). Essentially, HIV may have manifested itself in bodies as early as the 1900's, but without the proper medical treatment, no diagnoses could be made. Thus, the literature implies that there is no easy way to pinpoint exactly when or where HIV began.

Advocate for LGBTQ+ equality and founder of *POZ Magazine*, a news source about HIV for those living with HIV, Sean Strub (2009) recounts the first media report about HIV occurring in 1981 in the LGBTQ+ affiliated newspaper *New York Native*, claiming “Disease Rumors Largely Unfounded,” and while the magazine paid close attention to the early signs of HIV among gay men, the article was not prominently featured in the magazine, and therefore, viewed as culturally insignificant (p. 109). Strub notes that as more men were diagnosed with this mystery illness and the disease picked up media coverage, there were still barriers faced by the LGBTQ+ community to even talk about HIV. He mentions the fact that “there were woefully few public venues for gay men to meet” in order to discuss this blossoming epidemic, indicating a severe lack of public knowledge about safer sexual practices for these men to engage in (p. 115). In a time where the LGBTQ+ community was finally enjoying their own sexual liberation, Strub laments that, simply put; gay men did not want to discuss HIV in the 1980's.

Healthcare professional Kimberly Holland (2013) found that it was not until 1982 that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) coined the acquired immune deficiency

syndrome (AIDS) by its name, which in turn, led to the eventual opening of the first AIDS clinic in San Francisco. It was not until the death of prominent writers and actors, such as Gia Carangi, Michel Foucault, and Liberace that the country began to take notice of this epidemic. For instance, the death of Rock Hudson struck fear in the hearts of America after Hudson left \$250,000 in his will to fund the American Foundation for AIDS Research (Holland, 2013). By 1987, the impacts surrounding HIV/AIDS were known. People, 46% identifying as gay men, were dying at rapid rates, Ronald Reagan gave his first major speech regarding the issue, and the AIDS Quilt was established (DeLuca, Harold, & Rufo, 2007). DeLuca, Harold, and Rufo (2007) argue, though, that these efforts were a mere stepping-stone in uncovering and understanding precisely how HIV impacted the American public. There was still so much to be known. Holland (2013) notes, that with thousands dead, by 1994, HIV/AIDS had become the leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 25 and 44.

Throughout the 2000's and well into 2010's, Mark Heyne (2016) notes a shift in the perceptions of HIV from within public discourse—both medically and socially. He recognizes that HIV is no longer a death sentence—as many of those infected go on to live healthy, productive lives. However, with perpetuated stereotypes and misperceptions of HIV, especially regarding the LGBTQ+ community, there are still preventive measures in place from within the community to help combat the recent stigmatization. Although much has been speculated about the spread of HIV, especially about the LGBTQ+ community, pre-emptive steps are being taken in order to reduce the number of HIV contractions. There is no greater example than pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, which according to their website, is medication that can be used to reduce the risk of

becoming infected with HIV. Of course, as lawyer and advocate for LGBTQ+ rights Rick Zbur (2016) mentions, PrEP is by no means the be-all-end-all of HIV medication, but it is a step in the right direction when advocating for basic human rights when HIV is concerned. Although *Looking* does not explicitly tell stories about activism in the plot, the series functions as a political text, however inadvertent. Therefore, in the next section, I highlight how activism plays a crucial role in understanding HIV.

The Crucial Role of Activism in HIV Visibility

Undeniably, modern-discourse has painted HIV as alienating and damaging to the queer community. This has led to an increase in activism from the perspective of the gay man. For example, Queer Voices Senior Editor for *The Huffington Post* Curtis Wong (2016) reports a recent campaign that has surfaced entitled “We The Brave,” that depicts two seemingly queer men kissing passionately in front of a third party—a supposed heterosexual counterpart. Its slogan, “We’re brave enough to come out. So we’re definitely brave enough to cover up,” is directed toward gay men to engage in safer sexual practices to reduce the transmission of HIV. The simple act of kissing, however, is not isolated from the queer movement. Charles Morris and John Sloop (2006) studied the political impacts of queer kissing, noting that from the “collision of queer lips is sparked a conflagration sufficient to scorch the heteronormative order in US public culture” (p. 2). By positioning kissing as more than a simple act between two partners, but rather as a “*queer juggernaut*,” Morris and Sloop argue that this action is by no means insignificant. In fact, it rejects the dearth of literature that presupposed most media must desexualize and refocus the attention gay men have obtained thus far. Kissing does not only lead to visibility. Instead, it transcends its physical action and is reintroduced as a means of

pleasure—one that is both political and personal. “The queer body,” Berlant and Freeman (1993) observe, “as an agent of publicity, as a unit of self-defense, and finally as a spectacle of ecstasy becomes the locus where mainstream culture’s discipline of gay citizens is written and where the pain caused by this discipline is transformed into rage and pleasure” (p. 205). By overtly relating kissing to the spread of HIV, it is clear that such campaigns and studies are laced with political intent; as a statement to the modern-day queer community. This small step toward empowerment offers gay men the chance to use their positive status as a symbol for resistance and action. It is in these mediated campaigns that *Looking* may potentially situate itself: as both a piece of entertainment, but also one defined by its inherently political nature of portraying HIV in the first place.

Chapter Three:

CRITICAL ORIENTATION

In this section, I outline the key concepts that are crucial to understanding the theoretical orientation I take in this project. I first explicate both queer theory and critical rhetoric, the two primary methods for my study. Next, I explain how these two orientations work together to form a cohesive construction of *Looking*. Finally, I describe the texts I have chosen to carry out for my project. By examining these texts, I seek to uncover the answers to the following research questions:

RQ 1: How does *Looking* liberate or constrain the LGBTQ+ community from traditional confines of HIV narratives?

RQ 2: How does *Looking* liberate or constrain the LGBTQ+ community from traditional confines of queer narratives?

Queer Theory

Queer theory often works as a means of subverting dominant ideologies. And these exceed beyond texts that merely discuss those who identify as LGBTQ+. James Cherney and Kurt Lindemann (2014) unpack the Othering that occurs on the beloved NBC series *Friday Night Lights*, a series that garnered critical acclaim long after its series finale. In their work regarding disability and sports, Cherney and Lindemann use queer theory as a means to “illuminate ways of seeing athletics as visually enmeshed in and between compulsory systems of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness” (p. 3). In other words, by using queer theory through this lens, they attempt to “reveal how organized sport works to reinforce gender normativity and ‘traditional standards of bodily integrity,’

thereby uniting queer and disabled populations as ‘unruly bodies’ that challenge these social regimes” (p. 3). Studies such as this indicate a switch in how queer theory can be applied to modern texts. Initially used as a method of examining queer texts, it has since become more fluid, one that engages the critic to now ‘queer’ seemingly normative texts.

For example, in a critical approach to Bravo’s *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Celeste Lacroix and Robert Westerfelhaus (2005) found that, indeed, there is much to be celebrated from a show that glorifies the queer identity. After all, gays are now represented on television. Unfortunately, through a close analysis of two episodes of *Queer Eye*, they found that the series is also counter-productive to LGBTQ+ causes, because it illustrates a new “Closet,” or a space that contains the queer identity.

Next, queer theory works to subvert the power structures that critical rhetoric also seeks to identify. Where Sloop referred to critical rhetoric as an opportunity to “shift public knowledge,” James McDonald (2015) asserts that, “Queer theory is widely regarded as a research paradigm that is unapologetically political in that it seeks to disrupt the so-called natural order of things and shake up some of our most foundational assumptions about reality” (p. 320). For instance, Anna Breckon (2013) examines the 1972 film *Pink Flamingos* and its portrayal of queer politics. Vying for “The Filthiest Person Alive,” Divine plays its lead character, known for her collaborations with director John Waters. Breckon argues that this partnership, while simultaneously using disgust as a means to shock its audience, is effective in evoking empathy, rather than difference from the queer community. In other words, by using queer theory as a means of disrupting the “so-called natural,” the film demonstrates that there is more to value in recognizing one’s differences—no matter how grotesque—than merely writing them off

as different. And in recognizing this, Breckon makes sense of the fact that such a portrayal is inherently political.

With queer theory dating back to the early 1990's, it is important to note how it has shifted drastically in time—in particular, the jump from the personal to the political. McDonald (2015) furthers his work by insinuating that there are two primary assumptions that underlie modern-day queer theory: “(hetero)normativity must be contested and resisted and politics are not tied to or articulated in terms of identity categories” (p. 320). First, any notions of “normality” are antithetic to the movements produced from queer theory. Here, McDonald gives the example of marriage. Where, for so long, same-sex marriage was viewed “just like” opposite-sex couples, queer theory “seek to dethrone marriage from its perceived superior status” (p. 320). David Halperin (2003) notes that these methods of uncovering and dismantling what we view as normal may shock or startle those who embrace the norm, but are ultimately empowering for those who do not.

Second, queer theory argues that viewing any person under a label or category is inherently problematic. For example, McDonald (2013) finds that the term “woman” is a blanket category, denying each member of that community their own experiences. As Eve Sedgwick (2008) puts it simply: “people are different from each other” (p. 22), and McDonald notes that it would be nearly impossible to assume that all individuals “who identify in a particular way share a political agenda” (p. 321). Simply, although the mere practice of queer theory by critics is propelled to be political does not necessarily mean that those who use it subscribe to the same ideology. After all, that would negate the very

nature of queer theory. Next, I outline the principles of critical rhetoric, and also highlight the various ways in which it functions effectively with queer theory.

Critical Rhetoric

In the same vein as queer theory, critical rhetoric is concerned with disrupting social order and dismantling normative power structures. Traditionally, rhetorical criticism is used as a method to analyze a single text. While helpful, it does not take into account the fragments that make up the cultural moment. Indeed, Michael Calvin McGee (1990) took notice of this increasing need in scholarship, and developed a method of understanding new systems of rhetoric: critical rhetoric. In this application, he discusses the basic definition of a text—in particular, how critics tend to simplify the way texts are viewed. Rather than simplifying texts, McGee takes a more critical approach. For him, this means that reading, and subsequently interpreting texts, is based on how critics categorize and understand these texts within the larger cultural, political, or social climate. In this sense, he argues that the text transcends a mere “reading.” He writes, “texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent” (p. 279). In other words, there are multiple layers to a singular text—and it is the responsibility of the critic to unpack these layers. He furthers that:

Rhetors *make* discourses from scraps and pieces of evidence. Critical rhetoric does not *begin* with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the other bits of discourses from which it was made. It is fashioned from what we call “fragments.” (p. 279)

Essentially, by picking apart multiple different texts into “fragments,” critics can discern and synthesize larger cultural texts. Importantly though, McGee attests that critics use the fragmentation of texts as a means to understand the significance of larger rhetorical texts and to eventually construct larger texts themselves.

This notion of picking apart and constructing bits is particularly helpful with mediated texts, because as McGee (1990) explains, “The public’s business is now being done more often via direct mail, television, sports, documentaries, mass entertainment and ‘quotable quotes’ on the evening news than through traditional media...” (p. 286). In other words, audiences are interacting with the media they consume—beyond merely watching or reading. As such, recognizing how fragments work in this interaction between media and audience is crucial. Raymie McKerrow (1989) points out:

To approach mediated communication as rhetorical is to see it in its fragmented, unconnected, even contradictory or momentarily oppositional mode of presentation. The task is to construct addresses out of the fabric of mediated experience prior to passing judgment on what those addresses might tell us about our social world. (p. 101)

Therefore, fabricating a larger narrative from the mediated experiences provide critics with an opportunity to unpack how these texts function in a grander cultural setting with its audience. McKerrow furthers this argument by insisting that fragments work in tandem with television series, because rather than being viewed as one singular text, each episode serves as a fragment unto itself. As an example of this need to analyze fragmented texts, through the lens of critical rhetoric, McKerrow turns to *Facts of Life* and argues:

Facts of Life may never aspire to inclusion in the ‘canons of oratorical excellence,’ but it may have more influence on a teenager’s conception of social reality than all the great speeches by long-dead great speakers. To ignore ‘symbols which address publics’ in all their manifest forms has, as its ultimate consequence, the perpetuation of sterile forms of criticism. (p. 91)

Mediated texts are messy and complicated—there are sometimes dozens of episodes to get through in order to form a coherent argument. McKerrow insists, however, that such analyses lead to fruitful, beneficial findings for different types of audiences.

John Sloop (2004) highlights three key implications that critical rhetoric offers for present and future scholarship. I additionally argue that these three implications complement my use of queer theory in dynamic ways. First, critical rhetoric focuses on doxastic knowledge. That is, rather than focusing on the knowledge of the essence of objects, Sloop asserts that critical rhetoric is more concerned with “public argument and public understanding about these objects” (p. 18). Sloop provides the example of “sex”: wherein, if one believed that sex could be known outside of culture, critical rhetoric would attempt to understand how gender and sexuality function in that culture. An example of this type of scholarship comes from Sloop’s own work (2004), where he discusses the public argument regarding the John/Joan case. After a botched circumcision at the age of six months, male-born David Reimer was reassigned as a female. Years later, after learning of this, David chose to be “surgically and socially reassigned once again” (Sloop, 2004, p. 25). Sloop dissects this further, looking to the representation of this case in a public setting, where he notes that most media identified it as an example of “gender constructedness,” or in other words, that gender can be learned. After all,

considering David had no inkling of the fact that they were born male; they lived their lives in a seemingly normal fashion as a woman until learning otherwise. Sloop's analysis highlights doxastic knowledge, wherein David's sexuality and gender were misinterpreted and misrepresented by the media. But because the public misunderstood David, sexuality and gender is recognized as outside traditional cultural values. This notion matches succinctly with queer theory, because Sloop's examination of the John/Joan case highlights the inherently political nature that is entrenched within sexual politics.

Second, and similar to queer theory, critical rhetoric views itself as a political practice. For example, Michele Hamers (2006) uses critical rhetoric to analyze *The Vagina Monologues*. In her work, she details, "This collection of monologues draws attention to the importance of women's ability to talk about, to look at, to imagine, and to relate to their vaginas as part of their ability to embrace their sexuality and sexual agency" (p. 238). However, she then problematizes this idea by establishing a dichotomy between public and private. By demonstrating this dissonance in the dialogue that women create about their vaginas and their femininity, Hamers ultimately uncovers that through this discussion in a public space, women empower themselves and embrace their womanhood directly as a political act. This idea directly coincides with Sloop's work, ultimately proving that critical rhetoric works as "an attempt to alter or shift public knowledge by illustrating how that knowledge has been constructed" (p. 18). Thus, in very much the same way that queer theory handles performativity and the body, criticism in itself functions as a political performance.

Finally, critical rhetoric is concerned with the “materiality of discourse” (p. 18). In other words, it is centered on the notion of power—particularly how power is a material good that is used in public debate. Celeste Condit (2008) furthers this idea when she examined 2005 and 2006 publications of *Science Magazine*—particularly how these publications framed the use of the word “racism.” By approaching her study with the intent to undermine how racism is unpacked in a scientific sense, she noticed that language and science are often at odds with each other. She notes that collectively, we as a culture use “words not solely as a product of structuring machines, but also as emergent interactions among inherently social bodies” (p. 390). Critics are urged to question themselves because, as Sloop (2004) puts it, “once taking on... identities and cultural meanings, [critics can] work change within those meanings.” (p. 19). Sloop asserts that critical rhetoric is fluid and functions as a means of unseating power structures, in very much the way queer theory does. Clearly, all three implications provide a solid foundation for how critical rhetoric is understood in parallel to queer theory, and ultimately, how it can be used in future scholarship.

Ultimately, critical rhetoric attempts to disrupt what critics in rhetorical criticism have typically expected. By taking into account the nuances of different texts, rather than just one, critical rhetoric works to expose power imbalances, reveal social structures hopefully change how these structures are viewed. It is messy, and it can be difficult. However, as McKerrow (1992) explains:

The goal, in this process, is not to produce a master text encompassing all known and possible conditions of its making. Rather, the goal is to pull together those fragments whose intersection in real lives has meaning for social actors—meaning

that confines them as either subjects empowered to become citizens or social actors with a potential to enact new relations of power. As such, the invented text functions to enable historicized subjects to alter the conditions of their lived experience. (p. 62)

Therefore, a critical rhetoric approach was especially suitable for my study, because when matched with queer theory, it requires the critic to use fragmented texts as an opportunity to understand, argue and critique the current political climate—as a means to make political statements in the process. I utilized critical rhetoric, by taking into account the textual and visual fragments represented through *Looking*, as well as media being written about the series, and examine how these fragments function into the larger cultural moment surrounding HIV from within the LGBTQ+ community.

My study is guided by past studies pertaining to queer texts that combine elements of critical rhetoric and queer theory. For example, in an analysis of *Fight Club*, Robert Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus (2002) focus their critical attention on the film's DVD commentary offered—and how it ultimately negates the rumors that the film functions as a homoerotic text. Their study implements crucial steps to achieve a concise, yet thorough examination: describe, isolate, and interpret (p. 30). In other words, they unpack the goings-on in the film and commentary, pick out key scenes and conversations that undermine the interpretation that the film is somehow homoerotic, and finally synthesize how the conversations from the commentary work to negate the film's subtext. Therefore, their work effectively utilizes critical rhetoric and queer theory to expose *Fight Club*'s commentary as strictly heteronormative. I studied these texts as fragmented episodes—each culminating into one clear message surrounding HIV in gay culture. By

appealing to a queer experience as a lived-in experience, I argue that *Looking* is inherently a queer text—one that subverts the expectations pertaining to queer texts. And because it works as a queer text, it is also a political one.

Texts Chosen for Analysis

The text I chose to examine for this analysis were the two seasons and the subsequent TV film to the HBO original series *Looking*. It follows its leading character, Patrick Murray, as he navigates his work, love, and social life throughout present-day San Francisco. Guided by his friends, Agustín, Dom, and Doris, the characters negotiate their roles as gay men (and the straight women who love them, in Doris' case) as they attempt to find love and meaning in their lives. Throughout the series, Patrick is caught in a love triangle between hairdresser Richie and his boss with a boyfriend of his own, Kevin. Although Patrick is the central focus of *Looking* and my investigation into the series reflects this on occasion, my analysis drew rich examples from many of the secondary characters—notably, Agustín. At the start of season two, Agustín begins a mild flirtation with Eddie, a man who is living with HIV. They become friends, then lovers, then a couple. Finally, the film ends with their marriage. Because the intent of my thesis was to examine how HIV functions in mediated texts, Agustín and Eddie's storyline followed the necessary trajectory of a two men's relationship—where one is living with HIV.

Looking premiered on HBO on January 19, 2014 and was met with critical acclaim for both its first and second season. However, shortly after the final episode of season two, *Looking* was cancelled due to low ratings. As blogger Brian Moylan (2015) notes, though, due to the consistent fan-base that *Looking* garnered in its two years, the series was revived for one final film—to wrap up loose ends between the characters. For

my project, I analyzed the dialogue, storylines, characters, and visual elements to the series. I paid close attention and took careful notes of common themes that run throughout the series' two seasons and film—season one contains eight episodes, season two has a total of ten episodes, and the final film runs 85 minutes. I obtained personal DVD copies to both seasons and made-for-television movie. Thus, I watched the series in its entirety in order from the first episode of season one to the film. By combining critical rhetoric and queer theory for my study, I investigated the following research questions:

RQ 1: How does *Looking* liberate or constrain the LGBTQ+ community from traditional confines of HIV narratives?

RQ 2: How does *Looking* liberate or constrain the LGBTQ+ community from traditional confines of queer narratives?

Chapter Four:

ANALYSIS

In 2016, Jacob Anderson-Minshall and Tyler Curry compiled a list of “The 13 Most Unforgettable HIV Storylines in TV History” for *Plus*, a magazine devoted to HIV issues around the globe. Included on this list was the contemporary and lived-in romance between Agustín and Eddie from HBO’s *Looking*. Anderson-Minshall and Curry note that, when paralleled against more historical texts, Eddie served a new and necessary function: to educate both Agustín and the audience the complexities of living with HIV. And this is not by accident. Anderson-Minshall and Curry incorporate interviews into their article, where they quote the actor who played Eddie, Daniel Franzese when he acknowledges the very real nature of Eddie’s illness, stating, “We [the writers and actors] tried to infuse things into *Looking* and we worked with the creators to try to get messages in there” (para. 2). The authors conclude by noting that, “The fact that they [portrayed this characterization] well made Eddie one of the best HIV-positive characters on TV” (para. 2). Intriguingly, though, HIV is not only discussed through Eddie—it is a conversation point for many characters throughout the show’s duration. It is through this unique and seemingly honest depiction of the illness that establishes *Looking* as different from many more mainstream texts that portray HIV. The central storylines on *Looking* may not pertain exclusively to matters surrounding HIV, but the series still manages to comprehensively examine issues relating to sexuality, HIV, and the inherent politics wrapped into these identities in dynamic, thoughtful ways.

In this chapter, I analyze *Looking*'s representation of HIV. While the character of Eddie offers the most straightforward and prominent portrayal of HIV on the series, there are additional plotlines and pieces of dialogue shared between characters that help to guide my analysis. Using both seasons of the show and the movie made after the series' cancellation, I outline three recurring themes that appear in the text regarding HIV. The three primary themes are uniquely blended together and include: intimacy, humor, and metaphor. Ultimately, I argue that *Looking* largely resists the heteronormative and stereotypical representations of HIV typically seen on television. In particular, utilizing queer theory to guide my analysis affords me the opportunity to problematize current discourse regarding HIV in popular culture, because *Looking* inherently critiques mainstream media's representation of HIV, particularly from within the queer community. The series offers a critical foundation for HIV to be portrayed in a new light—one that allows for discussion, negotiation, and catharsis.

Intimacy

On *Looking*, intimacy functions as a means of exploring the nuanced perspectives of its characters. After its first season featured characters only briefly mentioning HIV in any capacity, Nic Holas (2015) breaks the news to his readers on *Gay News Network* that the series is going to feature Eddie, a supporting character who identifies as HIV positive and will serve as a future love interest for Agustín. This is a significant step in the cannon of popular culture, because as Holas puts it, "Gay men are still the bread and butter of HIV diagnoses in the West, and the issue has become a touchstone in gay storytelling since the 1980s" (para. 10). Essentially, when audiences bore witness to storylines involving HIV/AIDS, it is from the tragic frame of gay men and subsequently, this had

become the standard for mediated portrayals. *Looking* offered potential to destigmatize those living with HIV, and to show audiences that, as Holas puts it, “This is 2015 after all, and the storylines of AIDS funerals and ‘my life is over’ diagnoses are the ghosts of gay series past (RIP *Queer as Folk*)” (para. 7). Because of its rejection of past cultural narratives pertaining to HIV in the LGBTQ+ community, Holas writes that *Looking* could subsequently situate its characters and their relationships into a new realm of mediated HIV portrayals—from one of tragedy to one of acceptance.

At the center of *Looking*’s representation of HIV is the relationship between Agustín and Eddie. The series follows their story from casual acquaintances, to friends, to friends with benefits, to a steady relationship, to a married couple. The significance of their relationship reaches far beyond the scope of a fictional television series. Daniel Reynolds (2016) recounts an experience with series creator Michael Lannan and actor Daniel Franzese, during a Q&A for *Looking: The Movie* that took place at the Outfest Los Angeles LGBT Film Festival—a California based festival devoted to queer representation on the screen. After the film’s premiere, Franzese disclosed that Eddie and Agustín’s wedding must be understood in the larger cultural moment, because they were Hollywood’s “first serodiscordant marriage – that is, between HIV positive and HIV negative characters” (para. 6). This discovery is made particularly relevant in 2016, at a time when PrEP is working its way into discourse surrounding HIV for gay men. Franzese emphasizes this importance when recounting a story, in which a serodiscordant couple, or a relationship where one partner is HIV positive and the other is negative, thanked him for this portrayal. One of the partners said to Franzese, “I hope that my relationship lasts forever. But if it doesn’t, I will always show *Looking* season 2 to

anyone I ever date and say, ‘If you can handle this season, then you can handle me’” (para. 7). Not to misconstrue this as the be-all-end-all of queer representation regarding HIV, it is crucial to highlight how intimacy works on *Looking* as a means of unpacking elements of living with HIV. In order to elucidate the significance of Agustín and Eddie’s relationship within the current cultural, social, and political moment, I highlight key scenes that shape an audience’s understanding of intimacy on the series.

Intimacy between Agustín and Eddie is presented through space and place throughout *Looking*. And although it is oftentimes portrayed as a barrier for the relationship to take place, the series’ representation of HIV ebbs and flows naturally—implying that any portrayal of HIV should be fluid and ever-changing, exploring the dynamics of the relationship honestly. Eddie’s introduction into the series begins in the opening episode to season two, “Looking for the Promised Land.” When Patrick, Dom, and Agustín journey to a remote location in California for a weekend getaway, they find a nighttime party known as the “Promised Land,” where LGBTQ+ individuals congregate outside to party underneath the stars—not to mention a plethora of strobe lights. Here, Agustín meets Eddie, and they break off separately to skinny-dip in a nearby river. As the two swim, they banter and get to know one another. They ask the inevitable “What do you do?” questions—Agustín is a failed artist, Eddie works at a homeless shelter that “supports gay and transgender teens”—and when Eddie jokingly dunks him underwater, Agustín notices Eddie’s tattoo. It is a giant red plus sign on his wrist. With no visible knowledge behind its meaning, Agustín blurts out, “Cool tattoo.” After a brief pause and looking at it himself, Eddie replies, “Thanks,” and the scene ends there.

In their first scene alone together, the series foreshadows the attraction the two characters share. After all, they yank off their clothes separately and jump together into a river in the dead of night. The act is not sexual, yet it is still deeply intimate. As J. Nelson Aviance (2014) explains, intimacy in same-sex relationships is often misconstrued for sex—and gay men constantly run the risk of being viewed as promiscuous using this problematic reasoning. However, Aviance furthers that intimacy involves talking, disclosing information, getting to know one another, and sharing private details about one's self. This detail is especially crucial when analyzing Eddie and Agustín's relationship in their first scene together. Although it ends before we witness Eddie disclose his HIV status to Agustín, the tattoo is a symbol of Eddie's identity: he is a man living with HIV. Transcending the superficial questions they ask each other prior, Agustín noticing Eddie's tattoo and further inquiring about it implies the very real threat that is HIV. Even without seeing Eddie's disclosure unfold on screen, this sets the stage for the relationship Agustín and Eddie will have throughout the season—one that is based on the weathering away of insecurities, doubts, and biases in small but certain increments.

Although HIV is portrayed as an initial barrier to Eddie and Agustín's romantic relationship, *Looking* also demonstrates the very possibility of intimacy between these two characters through various plot points. For example, the support of Eddie's HIV status is the focus of conversations between other characters on the series—most notably, Patrick, Dom, and of course Agustín. Considering Eddie is the first HIV positive character to be portrayed on *Looking*, his introduction as an HIV positive character is marked by a surprising absence of explicit conversations about HIV. The knowledge that

he lives with HIV is discussed and hinted at, but it is Agustín who mentions it later on in the episode when he talks to Patrick and Dom—without Eddie present. Still, even when the subject is brought up amongst the three friends in “Looking for the Promised Land,” it is only briefly mentioned, and then the men continue on with their conversation, detailing their sexual exploits from the night before. Interestingly, when Agustín discloses Eddie’s HIV status to Patrick and Dom by merely stating, “[He’s] HIV positive,” both nod approvingly and Patrick replies innocently, “Oh!” In fact, as Trenton Straube explains, in this scene, “And then something miraculous happens: No one freaked out” (para. 5)! Initially, it would seem that all three characters are completely supportive of Eddie, that they hold no reservations regarding Eddie’s HIV status. Up to this point, aside from portraying Eddie as a good-hearted man, one who works at a homeless shelter for LGBTQ+ teens and identifies as “Saint Eddie” by his friends, this initial acceptance from Agustín and his friends implies that the series is clearly interested in humanizing Eddie, of exploring his HIV positive identity, and to make his inevitable partnership with Agustín meaningful. In other words, HIV will prove to be a barrier that separates Agustín and Eddie throughout the second season, but the support of Dom and Patrick demonstrate an acceptance of HIV, proving that intimacy is still possible.

Immediately, Agustín and Eddie’s relationship is marked by emotional and physical closeness. They are playful with one another, building rapport with each passing moment. They begin as friends, attending a rugby match together, hanging out, and having platonic sleepovers. There are instances throughout their conversations where HIV could become the focal point, but are circumvented, indicating Eddie’s aversion to discussing it with Agustín. For example, in one scene in “Looking Down the Road,”

Agustín is pouring coffee into Eddie’s “I Heart Anal” coffee mug. They initially joke about the meaning behind the mug, where Eddie looks at Eddie and asks, “Really?” Eddie then adopts a faux British accent, saying, “Oh, does the Queen of England not approve of anal?” prompting Agustín to answer, “No, I heart anal, too.” During this exchange, Eddie removes different pills of various shapes and sizes out of pillbox, and then reaches around Agustín to set the box down. Before Eddie begins taking the pills, Agustín watches intently and becomes inquisitive. The following exchange occurs:

Agustín: Is that your cocktail?

Eddie: This pill is my cocktail, this is my fish oil, this is my B-12 with zinc, and that’s my One-a-Day. Any other questions?

Agustín: So... you wanna get breakfast?

(Looking Down the Road)

Before Agustín asks his second question, about getting breakfast, he takes a long pause as the two characters gaze at one another. This seemingly straightforward conversation implies Agustín’s curiosity with Eddie’s HIV status. He is fully aware that Eddie takes a bevy of medication to keep his status at bay. And until this point, the subject of HIV had not been brought up between the two. Yet when Agustín chooses to explore this facet of Eddie’s identity and makes a vague inquiry about Eddie’s “cocktail,” Eddie chooses to address every other pill that he is taking—conveniently, pills that do not pertain to his HIV status. Clearly unsettled that Eddie will not acknowledge this avoidance head-on, Agustín changes the subject, perhaps as a means to avoid making the moment any more uncomfortable.

Given this context, *Looking* minimizes Eddie's HIV status in both positive and negative ways. First, we are led to believe that Eddie's status is not an issue. Just from his physical appearance and how he acts when he enters the kitchen, he comes across as perfectly content and healthy. He is taking different medicines for many purposes—he tells Agustín so himself. However, the fact that Eddie is taking this medication in front of Agustín is not viewed in a negative light, nor does it indicate a failing in Eddie's health. The series does not function as a means to force its viewers to sympathize Eddie because of his HIV status—it is just a part of his normal routine. Essentially, this moment in the series highlights the medical necessities that accompany living with HIV without pathologizing Eddie's status or his relationship with Agustín. At the same time, Agustín's quick subject change denies these two men the opportunity to negotiate the looming presence of HIV in the present moment. It is through this avoidance that HIV becomes its most threatening—where its detriments are left unspoken, and perhaps most egregiously, out of the series' discourse.

This lack of attention paid to conversations about HIV, particularly from those in relationships such as Eddie's and Agustín's can prove to be harmful. Carissa Wolf (2009) explains that, in relationships where one partner is living with HIV and the other is not, a lack of communication makes the threat of the other partner contracting HIV all the more prevalent. In the context of *Looking*, not only does this lack of communication imply HIV's ever-present danger, the series forces its audience into an uncomfortable scenario: we know that HIV is out in the open between Eddie and Agustín, they both have the knowledge of Eddie's status. Therefore, these are issues regarding his status that Agustín should know. Unfortunately, the series does not afford this conversation to develop—to

give Agustín, and by extension the viewer, the opportunity to learn about what it means to be living with HIV.

Later on in the same episode, Eddie invites Agustín to join him at the LGBTQ+ teen homeless shelter where he works. At the shelter, the teens swarm Agustín, call him Eddie's boyfriend, and ask, "Are you poz too?" Agustín does not know how to respond. Poz, slang for being HIV positive, is clearly an uncomfortable topic for Agustín, leading Eddie to intervene and say, "This is Agustín. He's a friend, and he's visiting for the day, so be nice." And because Eddie emphasizes the word friend, the audience witnesses the definition of the relationship. As Eddie gathers the teens into a circle, he invites Agustín to join them. Although this scene cuts away shortly after, it is also clear that Eddie is interested in Agustín being a part of this tradition, of talking with teens, and allowing them to disclose personal information with him. In this regard, Eddie is showing a different side to himself; once sassy and snarky; he is now warm and comforting. And Agustín has now joined this inner sanctum. Without explicitly mentioning it, this scene is indicative of Eddie slowly opening up to Agustín, and conversely, Agustín becoming familiar with Eddie's perspective. And because Agustín accepts this invitation into Eddie's work life, the notion signifies to the audience a gradual acceptance of Eddie's HIV status from Agustín's viewpoint.

Until this point in the series, Agustín and Eddie's relationship was strictly platonic. Agustín clearly has feelings for Eddie, and because these storylines are told through Agustín's perspective, the viewer watches as he tries to win Eddie over. This culminates into a scene in "Looking for Truth," where Agustín and Eddie are dancing sensually in Eddie's living room. They are laughing and enjoying one another's

company. Suddenly, though, Agustín leans in to kiss Eddie, prompting Eddie to recoil, asking what he is doing. This scene reveals a deeper layer to Eddie's personality and suggests that he is trying to preserve his emotions. Oftentimes, he attempts to put up a wall against Agustín—and this particular scene is a clear indication of this. Yet after making Agustín squirm, asking him why he is interested in Eddie in the first place, Eddie begins to kiss him back, saying that he just needed to work a little more to garner his affection. That said Eddie warns, “This isn't anything official.” Clearly, even when he succumbs to his physical urge for Agustín very much in the way he does in this scene, there is still a barrier that Eddie puts up to potentially mask his insecurities. In other words, while he does start to kiss Agustín back, he still has to warn that this simple act of kissing is nothing more than the physical act. After all, anything “official” would mean that he must confront emotional vulnerability and closeness. The subtext indicates a history of discrimination and humiliation because of his HIV status—a premise that will become clearer in later episodes.

Through these discussions, it is clear that Eddie guards himself from discussing his HIV status—the subtext indicates an avoidance of the issue altogether. This trope is not uncommon. Hannah Booth (2011) explains that often those who are living with HIV attempt to minimize or hide their status from friends, family, and significant others—in other words, as a means to keep it private. *Looking* works to deconstruct this narrative. When Agustín asks how long he has been living with HIV and after Eddie cracks some jokes to lighten the mood, he tells Agustín he has known that he was positive for three years. And despite opening with a joke regarding how he contracted it, he reveals that, “I got it from a guy who said he was negative when he wasn't. A boyfriend at the time.”

There is a brief pause here; Agustín does not know what to say in return. Eddie asks if Agustín was hoping for something more dramatic, something funnier or even more tragic. Agustín swiftly answers no, and the quickness to which he replies to this question serves as a key point in Agustín's gradual acceptance of Eddie's status. This is a significant step in their relationship—Eddie so clearly guards his emotions in very much the way he guards his HIV story. Disclosing this to Agustín represents the emotional intimacy shared between these two characters. It is mutual and built on respect from each other's perspectives. It is from this unique exploration that *Looking* portrays HIV from both the lens of those who are positive and negative, representing a shift in the narrative that shied away from diving in the viewpoint of those who identified as HIV positive.

As Agustín and Eddie become more intimate emotionally, so too, do they sexually. In episode eight, "Looking for Glory," their first scene together is engaging in sexual intercourse. There is no music, no clever editing, and no hiding the fact. Agustín is on top of Eddie, when Agustín urges Eddie to pull off his condom and cum on his chest. In a brief moment of hilarity, Eddie overshoots (no pun intended) and ejaculates into Agustín's eye. Disoriented by this, Agustín laughs and excuses himself to the bathroom. As Eddie waits outside, asking Agustín if he is okay, Agustín is vague in his replies, stating that he is totally fine. But perhaps the most significant shot in this scene comes shortly after, where the camera focuses on Eddie, standing outside the bathroom waiting by the door: he is leaning against the wall completely naked. In this moment, he is exposed, raw, and vulnerable—aspects of his identity that he had avoided until this point. Additionally, this scene is marked by the space between them as both are situated on either side of the door. As such, while Agustín quietly freaks out in the bathroom, Eddie

waits on the other side, concerned by his own insecurities, but also by those that Agustín has demonstrated by fleeing his very presence.

As comfortable as Agustín claims to be about Eddie's HIV positive status, there are still uncertainties that Agustín cannot shake. This is made abundantly clear when, shortly after, Agustín laments his fears to his close friend Dom, states, "You're just freaked out because there's a possibility you may not be equipped to date someone who's HIV positive. It's not 1994. Just... go on PrEP. Get over it." Even without Eddie there, this scene is a turning point for Agustín. Although he would never admit that he has this trepidation that Dom claims he does, it is also clear that he must come to terms with this panic. As Dom claims, this is not a crisis—it is an inherent discrimination Agustín has against Eddie's status. In other words, this has nothing to do with Eddie's HIV status, but with Agustín's perceptions of Eddie's HIV status. Additionally, this scene further cements the impact that Agustín's friends have on his relationship with Eddie. Whereas in "Looking for the Promised Land," where Dom and Patrick nod receptively that Agustín met someone he is interested in who also happens to be living with HIV, here, Dom clearly spells out to Agustín that there is nothing wrong with Eddie living with HIV. Any problems that Agustín has are his and his alone.

This storyline culminates to a confrontation between Eddie and Agustín. Perhaps surprisingly, it is Eddie who brings up the subject. Whereas before, it is Eddie who shies away from his status, now, he claims ownership of it. He tells Agustín that he cannot do it anymore, he cannot engage in a relationship where Agustín recoils at the thought of inadvertently contracting HIV. Despite Agustín insisting that he is okay with Eddie's status, Eddie bites back with:

No, do you have any idea what it's like to a big poz queer in this town? Everyone in San Francisco loves to talk about how well informed they are and how inclusive they are. But, like, really, when you get down to it, they're just the same self-hating, close-minded, racist gays that you see prancing on Santa Monica Boulevard in WeHo. (Looking for Glory)

This monologue gives the viewer the necessary insight into Eddie's vulnerability about dating another guy who identifies as HIV negative. The city is full of stigma, humiliation, and ultimately, rejection. There is no reason to subject himself to such hurt all over again. As much as he likes Agustín, it is not enough to stay with him if he will inherently discriminate against him. However, this initial rejection is crucial, because this is the first time that Agustín catches a glimpse of this shade of Eddie's character. He puts on a brave front, but at the same time, he is cautious about pursuing any romantic engagements—after all, it is Eddie who insists that his fling with Agustín is nothing “official.” And he has finally put these fears to words and relayed them back to Agustín. This prompts the following conversation:

Agustín: Okay, okay, look. I got weird, okay, and I don't know why. It's something I gotta work on.

Eddie: Yeah.

Agustín: Yeah, yeah, but I will work on it, okay? Because for whatever reason, I'm super into you.

(Looking for Glory)

A smile is shared between the two and they quickly change the subject to their plans for the evening. This level of intimacy may be brief to the viewer, but is significant for these

two characters. Not only does Eddie fully express his concerns, but Agustín also admits his shortcomings pertaining to Eddie's HIV status. They are fully clothed, out in public, but perhaps even more vulnerable and exposed than they were just scenes ago. Therefore, the intimacy Agustín and Eddie share is pivotal toward the inception of their romantic relationship.

However, in the confines of their interpersonal romantic relationship, this conversation—honest as it may be—falls short. After Eddie's monologue, Agustín admits that there is a lot that he needs to work on to win Eddie over. And ultimately, he does succeed in winning Eddie over. After all, we as viewers know that Eddie and Agustín will become a couple, even if they are not quite there yet. Unfortunately, as well intentioned as Agustín is in this scene, his claim that his weirdness is something that he can work on alone, without Eddie. This implies the slow acceptance that Agustín feels toward Eddie's HIV status, but at the same time, this denies the very needed negotiation between Eddie and Agustín to discuss the issue at all. Furthermore, should necessary conversations like this take place, it is off-screen, leaving the viewer to make sense of Agustín and Eddie's relationship on their own. Which, as Matt Bloom (2016) explains, is detrimental. In an interview with Tarell Alvin McCraney, playwright of *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, Bloom recounts McCraney stating, "We have a responsibility in that way to engage the community and give those heroes to the people. The stories are there, they just don't make it to where we can actually see them and [the viewers] can reflect" (para. 11). In other words, this representation is crucial because it has the power to shape attitudes regarding HIV in both positive and negative ways.

As season two progresses toward its finale, Agustín and Eddie's relationship finally takes shape. After revealing his own weirdness and biases, Agustín begins taking active steps to become more accepting of Eddie's HIV status. Entrenched in their relationship is also the inherently political nature surrounding PrEP. Although the series does not dive head-on into the facets of PrEP, particularly the drug's initial intent or controversy, it plays a key role in Agustín and Eddie's relationship. In "Looking for Sanctuary," Agustín tells Eddie that he has begun taking PrEP, because as he puts it, "Well, you know, it's the socially-responsible-San-Francisco-gay-man thing to do." Eddie replies coolly by saying, "Right," but the implication behind Agustín using the drug in the first place is centered on the idea of sex and liberation, a parallel that I will extend further in my analysis. If Agustín and Eddie continue to engage in intercourse, the two men must negotiate how to use PrEP and what it means for their relationship. In other words, the series implies the characters will have a healthy sex life; Eddie's HIV status is out in the open, but without an explicit conversation pertaining to Agustín choosing to go on PrEP and negotiating that with Eddie, we are not clued in to the consistent looming presence of HIV in their relationship.

Although Agustín feels comfortable briefly disclosing to Eddie that he is currently taking PrEP, they have not reached the level of intimacy where they feel comfortable calling each other their boyfriend. After all, they are already sexually intimate with one another, but they still avoid any act of emotional closeness. During a run-in with Agustín's ex, he refers to Eddie as his "friend," leading Eddie to become agitated that Agustín did not call him his boyfriend. Naturally, Agustín calls out Eddie's hypocrisy, believing that Eddie cannot have it both ways. This exchange is shared:

Agustín: I've liked you since the moment I met you, since we got into the river and took all our clothes off, and you smiled at me.

Eddie: I do have a winning smile.

(Looking for Sanctuary)

Finally, Eddie asks the question: will Agustín be his boyfriend? Of course he says yes.

This season saw a drastic change in Agustín's character; he shifted from self-centered and self-loathing to compassionate, caring, and honest. And this is due, in major part, to the development of Eddie in his life. Unashamed of himself, owning his HIV status, and proudly living his life, Eddie demonstrated a level of intimacy that Agustín had not been accustomed to. In turn, Agustín showed Eddie that being vulnerable and opening up to someone, despite his HIV status, could be rewarding and honest in its own way. In that regard, *Looking* alters the narrative surrounding HIV portrayals for gay men: where intimacy can play a pivotal role in offering thoughtful discussions that have historically been represented as fraught with creating the Other, the tragic character.

After an entire season of relationship struggles between Agustín and Eddie, *Looking: The Movie* takes place approximately one year later and at the center of the film's plot is Eddie and Agustín's upcoming wedding. Interestingly, after a season of negotiating Eddie's HIV status and Agustín adjusting to Eddie's illness, the film makes no mention of HIV—not from within their relationship, or from any other character. This notable absence does not necessarily indicate a negative portrayal. Rather, because their relationship is never at stake, nor is the wedding in peril of being called off, it is now clear that HIV is no longer an issue between the two. Eddie is living with HIV and Agustín has slowly reduced the stigma, which has paved the way toward acceptance and

transparency. It is in this unique way that *Looking: The Movie* normalizes HIV altogether, where the implicit narrative is straightforward: that HIV is not something to fear, but something to be talked about and negotiated.

The general absence of this HIV plot line can be both positive and negative. While the normalization of HIV is effective, demonstrating that it is no longer a death sentence in the LGBTQ+ community, it also eliminates the possibility of a discussion and further representation. Mark S. King (2013), a gay blogger and HIV/AIDS advocate since his positive diagnosis in 1985, explains that a severe lack of coverage regarding HIV in the media can be both positive and negative—however, this depends on the cultural moment. For instance, he notes that in August of 1998, there was not a single obituary for anyone dying of AIDS in the *Bay Area Reporter*, a San Francisco based newspaper dedicated to LGBTQ+ issues. This was the first of its kind in over a decade. Clearly, King identifies this as exceptional news for those living with HIV. After all, it indicates a shift in the morality rate of those living with HIV for the time period. However, he also mentions that it was simultaneously damaging because, “HIV/AIDS [had] largely moved off the front page and out of public consciousness” (para. 5). King is left to wonder if HIV has become a relic of the past. After the massive outcry in the 1980’s and 1990’s, had HIV become yesterday’s news? He furthers that in this modern-age, with the queer community still grappling with HIV infections and exposures; it is not enough to fear it. Instead, King insists that the LGBTQ+ community must step up and discuss it, and urge for reliable and thought-provoking coverage and representations of HIV in the queer community. Without this dialogue, King laments that HIV would soon become the “vanishing virus.” For the most part, *Looking* carves out a safe space for HIV to be

portrayed and discussed, but if carried out insufficiently, media's representation of HIV runs the risk of falling into traps that problematize it further—including, in part, the two themes I outline below.

Humor

Looking is a television series that was pitched as a hybrid between comedy and drama—commonly referred to as a dramedy (Andreeva, 2013). This entails pieces of dialogue and plotlines that are played for laughs, and there are additional moments that are deeply emotional. Therefore, humor plays a key role in how HIV is discussed through the series. After all, as Seldes (1956) argues, “comedy is the axis on which broadcasting revolves” (p. 133). This idea bleeds uniquely into popular culture, as television in particular has been pushed into the foray as a unique disseminator of information, as means of escapism and public awareness. Therefore, humor serves as a vehicle that unpacks seemingly uncomfortable topics in unique and dynamic ways.

Comedy serves a higher function than producing laughter, but rather, “humor [is] an essential weapon for outsider groups in dealing with discrimination and prejudice” (Cooper, 2003, p. 514). Comedic mediation of conversation between different groups initiates a restructured method of interpersonal communication. Because this technique “comically correct(s) the tragic frame of invisibility,” the Other uses comedic communication as means for expressing barrier breaking ideas and concepts (Silverman, 2013, p. 268). Cooper asserts that television shows that use comedy as means of mediated conversation offer “validation to the outsider group represented,” offering individuals the opportunity to be seen and heard, rather than forgotten (p. 531). Groups must remain weary, however, in fear of using this humor to the point it is deemed ineffective. As Dyer

(1999) warns with potentially irresponsible use of humor, “we can keep mocking ourselves to the point where we really do think we’re a rather pathetic, inferior lot” (p. 111). In other words, humor can be used as a method of self-expression, or as a means to create a dialogue. That said it is important to remain cognizant of the strategies used to employ this humor—as too much of it could potentially damage the self image of those marginalized groups being represented, or could render any meaningful commentary on that community nonexistent.

Humor functions on *Looking* in two juxtaposed ways: as a barrier from thoughtful discussion and to humanize individuals who identify as HIV positive. For example, in “Looking for Results,” Patrick worries that he has contracted HIV based off a small rash he finds on his stomach. The episode then follows Patrick as he panics to his friends, to an over-the-phone consultation provider, and to HIV clinic workers. As his fear grows, he reaches out to more and more people to ensure that he does not have HIV. And to further combat his own panic, Patrick resorts to humor as a method of coping. While on the phone with Noelle, a kind woman who Patrick claims sounds like Angela Lansbury, Patrick even states that he knows he must get tested in order to reduce his fears. When asked if he needs the address of an HIV clinic, he quips that he lives in San Francisco: HIV clinics are offered everywhere, like coffee stirrers. This one-liner, matched with the fact that Patrick refers to this supposedly anonymous specialist by name indicates a moment marked by its comedy, rather than diving into the seriousness of one’s potential of contacting HIV. By making light of the situation in the wake of his irrational panic, Patrick employs humor as a way to mask his fears. However, this is also indicative of a

larger movement—of preying off the audience’s insecurities, of denying any real answers by turning to humor as the base lens for understanding HIV.

When he finally gets tested, he inquires about the effectiveness of the test, the worker replies that it does not test whether he has HIV. Rather, it tests the body’s response to HIV, very much like how a pregnancy test checks for a female body’s response to a baby. Awkwardly, Patrick says, “Hey, everyone. I’m pregnant... with HIV!” As the episode indicates, Patrick is truly worried about whether or not he has contracted HIV. However, the use of humor that *Looking* employs is brought to alleviate the tension, but this also comes at the expense of a more nuanced approach to understanding HIV given the context. In other words, humor becomes a method that Dyer (1999) cautions audiences to avoid: one that jokes about a concept so much that a thoughtful discussion is not occurring in its place, rather than using that specific type of humor to uniquely unpack the ideas represented in the joking. And unfortunately, as Trenton Straube (2015) explains, the series does not offer an in-depth look at how HIV is tested for in clinics, nor does it take into account the nuances of how these tests may work. Instead, it makes light of HIV, allowing no space for any engagement with its complexities to develop. Therefore, Straube laments that the series favors humor over accuracy, which presents detrimental consequences for its viewers. After all, without elaborating on the necessary insight surrounding HIV clinics and testing, there is nothing else to do but laugh, leading to a severe lack of knowledge pertaining to the risks associated with HIV.

Next, the humor that *Looking* employs is not entirely problematic, because it is also used to humanize Eddie, the only character on the series who identifies as HIV

positive. Cooper (2003) explains that comedy that is used to enhance and discuss the voices of marginalized characters is most effective when employed by the marginalized characters. For instance, in the context of gay characters represented through television, Kirby (2001) cites acclaimed producer and director for *Will & Grace*, James Burrows, when he states that “gay writers... see the world a little more skewed than others see it... I think it would hurt us if we didn’t have gays on staff” (p. 33). The jokes created offer commonplace language and actions that incorporate humor as means of expression. Having firsthand experiences dictate the humor that is needed to open the floodgates of discussion. The writers for both *Will & Grace* were gay men, furthering the notion that this mediation must initially take place within the group that has been viewed as the Other in the first place.

Looking demonstrates this idea in “Looking for Truth.” When Agustín finds out that Eddie called in sick from work, he arrives at his apartment to cheer him up and bring him soup. Surprisingly, though, Eddie called in sick to have a personal mental health day—basically, he wanted the day off. Agustín scoffs at this idea, that Saint Eddie is not quite the “Saint” he initially thought. This leads to the following exchange:

Eddie: I’ve been known to play the poz card now and again. It’s the one positive thing about being positive.

Agustín: HIV humor. Jeez.

(Looking for the Truth)

Clearly, Eddie uses HIV in different ways than Patrick did earlier on in the season. This creates a more positive and holistic examination of HIV on *Looking*, wherein the viewer learns more about what it means to live with HIV from those who actually live with it on

the series. For example, in reply to Agustín’s comment, Eddie whips out his arm and says that he has every right to joke—after all, he is the one who is positive. The conversation develops further, leading Eddie to disclose precisely how he contracted HIV, but known for his snark and wit, he is not entirely straightforward:

Eddie: I was doing a lot of meth, and I was at this dungeon sex party in a sling as the courtesy bottom. So really it could’ve been any number of guys who took their turns.

Agustín: Wow.

Eddie: ...I’m kidding.

(Looking for the Truth)

Eddie obviously uses humor as a method of self-protection. In this moment, he does not feel comfortable sharing his HIV story. Yet, at the same time, the humor works to explain Eddie’s backstory. As the exchange continues, Agustín asks Eddie if he has told his family, to which Eddie replies, “Not yet.” This brief scene between Agustín and Eddie indicates the significance of humor as a method of expression. Importantly, though, this humor gives a voice to someone who is living with HIV. He is not static, nor is he perfect. He is flawed, sometimes afraid to share his intimate feelings. In a sense, this portrayal privileges Eddie over Agustín —after all, it is Eddie who has the answers to Agustín’s questions.

At long last, when Agustín confronts Eddie about his phobia of commitment, he waits to hear Eddie ask the inevitable question—will Agustín be his boyfriend? This scene is pivotal for Eddie, because as Nowalk reveals, “He’s been hurt, but he’s finally ready to let someone back in” (para. 7). In this moment, a season’s worth of attraction,

insecurities, and uncomfortable silences culminate—where Eddie must shed his doubts and ask Agustín if they can be together. Brandon Nowalk explains that, “Eddie makes a joke, because he’s Eddie, but Agustín’s still serious” (para. 7). The viewers watch as Eddie takes a momentary pause and asks the inevitable question: “Agustín Javier Cristober Lanuez, will you please be my boyfriend?” The moment is touching and heartfelt, as Agustín says yes and then kisses him. But then the truth is revealed—Javier and Cristober are not his middle names. In this way, *Looking* uses humor as a method of exploring every shade of Eddie’s character. Even here, he makes light of the situation, but he still takes it seriously. This scene is simultaneously thoughtful and lighthearted, especially considering his HIV status. Ultimately, we watch the beginning of Agustín and Eddie’s relationship blossom—and this seemingly heartfelt moment is framed with a comic lens. Silverman (2013) further asserts that this reframing establishes a sense of unity and cohesion for multiple groups, because “the use of comedy allows each character to be constructed as a real person with a distinct identity” (p. 263). By situating humor as the basis for understanding and discussion, communication is not only enhanced, but has also created a safe space for marginalized groups.

Metaphor

Finally, *Looking* utilizes metaphors to cultivate conversations pertaining to HIV. Of course, using metaphors to discuss potentially uncomfortable topics is not a novel choice made by scholars. In fact, there is a slight bevy of work that unpacks the use of metaphors to dissect the subtle nuances of the AIDS crisis in the 1980’s. Often, metaphors are used to disguise one thing for another. Susan Sontag (1989) quotes Aristotle when she explains that metaphors are “giving the thing a name that belongs to

something else” (p. 5). Again, this definition is not groundbreaking. However, Sontag’s work builds off this idea extensively as she explores the ways in which HIV/AIDS has been stigmatized through its initial outbreak. Interestingly, she ties this arching premise by relating the AIDS crisis to countless other diseases and even military action. For instance, as a cancer survivor in the 1970’s, Sontag noticed a trend of secrecy and shame from cancer patients—they were afraid to speak the name and unwilling to discuss it with the general public. She experienced this humiliation firsthand, and while cancer is understood as more commonplace today (however heartbreaking), HIV has now become the new secret to hide. In many ways, though, HIV and cancer parallel in many facets—notably, that it is “an invasion” of the body (p. 17). Ultimately, Sontag argues that it is being a part of a “risk group,” or a community of pariahs that links these two together; at least, from within a specific context. In other words, today, cancer is not viewed in the same way as it was in the 1970’s, nor is HIV understood from the same lens as it was in the 1980’s and 1990’s. However, she notes that stigma still persists. It just manifests itself in unique, detrimental ways.

Clearly, the use of metaphors works to discuss uncomfortable worldly issues. For instance, Tony Adams (2008) explores the metaphor behind “coming out of the closet,” as a rite of passage for members of the LGBTQ+ community. Adams mentions that, because the existence of a closet is entirely metaphorical, there is no research that asserts what precisely the closet is at all. Therefore, while our general ideas of this rite of passage must be transformed, this idea can only begin to change once we define what the closet is. Breaking down larger concepts through the use of metaphors has also found its way into works of popular culture. For example, Patrick Hogan (2016) explains that

Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling used the character of Remus Lupin, a Hogwarts professor who also moonlights as a werewolf, as a metaphor for the stigma faced by those living with HIV. He quotes Rowling when she says:

Lupin's condition of lycanthropy was a metaphor for those illnesses that carry a stigma, like HIV and AIDS. All kinds of superstitions seem to surround blood-borne conditions, probably due to taboos surrounding blood itself. The wizarding community is as prone to hysteria and prejudice as the Muggle [non-wizarding] one, and the character of Lupin gave me a chance to examine those attitudes.

(para. 5)

Of course, the effectiveness of such metaphors is subjective, but their impacts reach far beyond mere literary merit. By giving the "thing" a name that belongs to something else, Sontag (1989) argues that critics are more readily prone to deconstruct arguments and decontextualize stigma.

Metaphors that both directly and indirectly affect its portrayal of HIV are present in *Looking*. For example, in the midway point of season one, Patrick begins to date Richie. After a morning of passionate sex, they convene over breakfast at a local diner. When the subject of blowjobs is brought up, Patrick states that he feels uncomfortable "swallowing." When Richie asks why, the following conversation takes place:

Patrick: I'm just paranoid. I sneeze and I think I've got HIV. I get tested all the time even though I'm incredibly safe.

Richie: So, why do you get tested?

Patrick: You know, just to be one hundred percent safe.

(Looking for the Future)

Patrick telling Richie that “I sneeze and I think I’ve got HIV” works to explain Patrick’s irrational fear of HIV, but also serves as a catalyst for a conversation about the issue. Once Patrick says this, he and Richie engage in a brief exchange regarding HIV, wherein Richie discloses that his last boyfriend identified as HIV positive. The moment is slight and Richie reveals that he does not have HIV. But what this piece of dialogue demonstrates is the significance of metaphors as a means of carrying on a meaningful conversation about an uncomfortable topic. Of course, Patrick knows that sneezing does not lead to HIV, but the fear he places in the illness is representative of how easy he feels it is to contract. When Richie claims that HIV is just something you deal with, it speaks to the commonplace nature of HIV based on his own experiences. It was not traumatizing, nor does he indicate that the couple broke up because of his ex-boyfriend’s positive status. After all, with Patrick’s general unease about HIV/AIDS, Richie talking about this part of his life helps to break the tension and fear Patrick may have. In essence, a simple, off-handed comment where Patrick relays contracting HIV to something as commonplace as sneezing leads him and Richie down a conversation that works to demystify how HIV can function in critical discussions.

After a first season with minimal discussions surrounding HIV, season two of *Looking* opens strong—with Eddie, a character living with HIV. As previously mentioned, his status is implicitly introduced in an exchange between Agustín and Eddie. Explicitly, though, it is the morning after, when Agustín reconvenes with Patrick and Dom. As they recount their goings-on from the night before, Dom brings up Eddie to the group:

Dom: Agustín made a new friend too.

Agustín: Yeah, I did. He's cute. A big bear who cares about trans people and has a house in Virginia.

Patrick: Oh, I've always wanted to visit the South.

Agustín: A "house in Virginia"... HIV positive.

Patrick: Oh!

(Looking for the Promised Land)

After Agustín and Eddie's introduction together earlier on in the episode, with Agustín noticing the tattoo on Eddie's wrist, this is the first mention of Eddie's HIV positive status. It is important to note that this mention is expressed through metaphor, through the use of the phrase "House in Virginia." Of course, Agustín clarifies shortly after, but this casual mention of Eddie's status makes it easier for Agustín to say HIV positive, and subsequently, gives room for Patrick and Eddie to reply positively. After all, Patrick's "Oh!" is not of disappointment or fear for Agustín—but that of acceptance.

Later on in season two, Patrick and Agustín host a Halloween party at their apartment—a party attended by all principal characters. A relevant introduction, though, comes from Richie's new boyfriend, Brady, a writer for a local San Francisco newspaper. In the midst of all the drinking and partying, a conversation breaks out between the characters, because Brady just had an article published about why he is HIV negative but still taking PrEP. The following exchange takes place:

Brady: If there's a pill that can prevent HIV, everyone should take it.

Eddie: Believe me, I would've been the first in line.

Party Guest: Yeah, but taking a pill just so you can fuck? I mean...

Doris: Yeah, it's like birth control, actually.

Brady: It's not really the same. In the same way that birth control liberates women, PrEP can liberate gay men.

(Looking for Gordon Freeman)

Doris, Dom's best friend, directly links a medicine that prevents the spread of HIV to a pill women take to prevent becoming pregnant. This thought significantly contributes to Sontag's (1989) work, wherein we as consumers and critics, relate unknown topics to something relatable, something that has proven to be effective. *Looking* provides a unique spin on this idea, though. With birth control claiming a very controversial space in popular discourse, PrEP clearly has carved out a parallel space for gay men living with HIV or those who are attempting to prevent contracting HIV. When is it acceptable to take a pill that prevents HIV? Is it acceptable at all? This question is not answered in the episode—after all, there are too many dissenting opinions occurring in this exchange. What this conversation demonstrates, though, is the direct link that HIV has with PrEP. As Matthew Rodriguez (2015) explains, "*Looking's* decision to discuss... PrEP [is] notable in several ways. Rather than discussing HIV as a historical phenomenon, as we have seen many times in recent years, it shows the reality of HIV as a part of gay men's sexual lives today" (para. 6). Therefore, inherently linked to the politics surrounding HIV, *Looking's* inclusion of discussions surrounding PrEP offers a layered approach that recontextualizes stigma and HIV prevention.

Additionally, the idea of liberation plays a pivotal role in this conversation. In very much the way Adams (2008) analyzes the metaphor of gay men "coming out of the closet" as potentially liberating, so too, is discussing preventative measures behind stopping the spread of HIV. It's simply a matter of reframing the topic and

recontextualizing its impacts. The conversation reaches an awkward boiling point, leading Eddie to say, “Okay, well you know a party’s really awesome when everyone starts talking about AIDS. As fun as this is for me, I’m gonna go to the bathroom right now and jerk off to feline leukemia.” As humorous as this quip may be, it also speaks to the impacts of speaking in metaphor: it creates a space to make these jokes in the first place and to make the unknowable less abstract. In other words, Eddie uses “feline leukemia” as a clear link to HIV, both issues typically viewed as taboo. He co-opts this linkage as a means to create a middle ground—one that allows for humor and discussion. Therefore, *Looking* finds functionality beyond merely using metaphors. Instead, the metaphors work to expose very real trends and shed light on issues that were once denied from previous HIV narratives.

Chapter Five:

CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing *Looking* offers unique possibilities for understanding the role that intimacy, humor, and metaphor play when examining HIV in mediated portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community. In doing so, the series presents a unique perspective on this already marginalized community and fosters in a dynamic approach toward understanding how HIV may function in the context of the 21st century—particularly through a mediated lens. In the midst of this cultural moment, where portrayals of HIV are steeped in stigma or are absent entirely from discourse, it is imperative to analyze texts such as *Looking*.

This chapter answers my research questions and investigates conclusions about how the show portrays HIV and queer narratives in a modern context. I then unpack the role that representation plays within my analysis. Finally, I present limitations to my study, as well as ideas for future research. In this thesis, I examined how the show *Looking* addresses and potentially challenges the traditional confines of HIV and queer narratives. In particular, I sought to unpack whether or not the series liberates or constrains the LGBTQ+ community from these traditional narratives. Thus, I return to my research questions. First:

RQ 1: How does *Looking* liberate or constrain the LGBTQ+ community from traditional confines of HIV narratives?

On one hand, *Looking* begins to rewrite the narrative surrounding television's portrayal of HIV—from one of tragedy to one of acceptance, however gradual. It is no longer

depicted as a death sentence, nor does it consume the lives of those living with it. Clearly, Eddie is portrayed beyond the scope of his HIV status. In that regard, *Looking* liberates the LGBTQ+ community—particularly those living with HIV, indicating that there is more to life than one's status. On the other hand, however, the series also constrains its audience—by limiting the instances of relational negotiation when it comes to HIV. Because the audience never sees more than a handful of explicit conversations about what it means to engage in safe sex or to actually be living with HIV, it is very difficult to assert that *Looking* liberates the LGBTQ+ community from these traditional confines of HIV representation. Yet also, because HIV is never negotiated beyond the perspective of gay men, it also poses the threat of constraining HIV narratives for anyone who does not identify as a white gay male.

This idea leads to the second research question:

RQ 2: How does *Looking* liberate or constrain the LGBTQ+ community from traditional confines of queer narratives?

Particularly through its use of metaphor, *Looking* liberates the LGBTQ+ community. Dissecting complex and nuanced subtleties that pertain to HIV can be complicated, especially for those a part of the LGBTQ+ community. After all, HIV is steeped in damaging historical perspectives. Metaphors work to parse out difficult issues of the queer identity, and *Looking* provides that space for conversations and self-reflection. Additionally, combining critical rhetoric and queer theory was especially helpful in answering this question. By fragmenting Agustín and Eddie's storyline across the span of season two, rather than making it the central focus of the series, audiences watch as Eddie slowly opens up about his HIV positive status and as Agustín confronts his

discrimination and challenges it. As indicated through my analysis, navigating the tricky terrain of one's queer identity can be intricate, forcing some to guard themselves from vulnerability. *Looking* challenges this, and revels in its characters' queerness—or those qualities that make them different from normative portrayals. Whereas many narratives before this series privilege heteronormative standards of representations—wherein the crux of these narratives depend on queer characters feeling accepted by the majority, *Looking* embraces and celebrates what it means to be queer.

The Role of Representation on *Looking*

Bearing these answers in mind, I turn now to the role that representation plays on *Looking*. Compared to many series that have come before it, the series does offer groundbreaking examples of how same-sex couples negotiate HIV in their relationships, as well as to conversations surrounding PrEP and the effectiveness of practicing safe sex in order to maintain a sexually intimate relationship. That said the series was already familiar with controversial opinions regarding race, as its first season was met with some trepidation due to its lack of diversity. Indeed, Justin Huang (2013) explains that, “Being gay transcends race. It should unite people of different colors, not exclude them” (para. 6). While it is impossible to say *Looking* does race “right” across the board, for the most part, HIV is still culturally written as an illness that comes from the perspective of white gay men. And unfortunately, as Bichell (2016) elucidates, although it is still gay white men who are still dominantly living with HIV, it is Black and Latino gay men who are still contracting HIV the most. It is through this lens that *Looking* does not offer much in the way of exploring how race functions in discussions surrounding HIV in the LGBTQ+

community. What this means is that HIV is worthy of being talked about on our televisions now—but who is represented in these discussions is balanced unfairly.

Unfortunately, what we see through these representations such as those on *Looking* reflects and shape how we frame HIV and LGBTQ+ issues in general. This has widespread effects beyond just how HIV is portrayed on television. This notion of whitewashing extends into other facets of queer lives—most notably in queer history, the Pulse shootings. Garcia (2016) notes that, in very much the way that HIV privileges the white gay male, so too did the tragic incident in Florida in 2016—leaving a detrimental space for gay men of color. In other words, history has written of queer lives from the perspective of white men, and for the most part, *Looking* is no different. Agustín is of Cuban descent, but the general make-up of the remaining characters indicates a history of affluent white families. From mediated portrayals such as those on *Looking* to real-life tragedies, the cultural narrative being written implies a hierarchy—where white men sit comfortably at the top. Without a diverse set of queer lives throughout history, there is no reason to expect the same for television.

Beyond race, *Looking* still does not work to explore the numerous intersections that exist in the LGBTQ+ community regarding HIV. For example, the series does not show any of its characters, particularly Eddie, struggle socioeconomically. After all, with a bevy of medication that Eddie consumes throughout the series, one would assume that this takes a toll on him financially; especially considering his only job is at a youth center for troubled LGBTQ+ teens. Removed from the conversations are the very real struggles that permeate for those living with HIV—particularly in San Francisco, a city known for high living expenses. Without a thoughtful discussion of one's socioeconomic status,

there is no way to engage with that crucial component to living with HIV in the first place. Sadly, this indicates that audiences from more conservative, oftentimes dangerous regions may be less likely to tune into stories where characters unlike them are not represented.

Hope is not completely lost, fortunately. Scholars including Shahani (2016) have begun dismantling the ways in which we view the history of HIV, particularly through our perceptions of public memory. In a cultural moment that has seen an increase in mediated portrayals of HIV in the LGBTQ+ community—portrayals that depict HIV as an illness that one simply lives with, Shahani asks, “How then is the trauma of AIDS culturally represented at a historical moment in which traumatic experience no longer has material proximity aesthetic practice? Under what material, cultural, and legal circumstances do the ‘postscripts’ of AIDS circulate and proliferate” (p. 2)? Beyond this notion, Shahani points out that, “We must intervene into the ideological terms of memory’s performative potential so that the ‘story’ of AIDS history is one that is not simply framed as a fight for inclusive representation” (p. 27). There is a bigger battle than asking who is represented in these portrayals.

In essence, *Looking* might get the ball rolling when pertaining to opening up avenues of discussion for HIV, but in order to combat the illness and the stigma that it carries with it, we as audience members and consumers of these texts, must become cognizant of the rich history that HIV is steeped in. Diversity truly does matter, but as *Looking* indicates, we have a long way to go so far as representation is concerned. As Shahani puts it, we must remain “collectively united in anger” (p. 27) in order to make HIV/AIDS an issue of the past, rather than one of the future. Therefore, despite its

limitations, *Looking* functions as a singular text that attempts to explore HIV and all of its complex fragmentations. It may be one small step for representation, but is certainly a giant leap toward generating thoughtful discourse about HIV.

Directions for Future Research

In my analysis of *Looking*, I justify this study by arguing that there is a void in the literature addressing the role that media has played in shaping HIV portrayals, particularly in the 21st century. As such, this project only begins to discuss this issue. Bearing this idea in mind, there are numerous avenues for future research for which this thesis can serve as the basis—from both mediated and theoretical perspectives.

First, *Looking* offers very necessary contexts with which HIV is studied—culturally, politically, and socially. As my analysis indicates, gone are the days where HIV is misconstrued as a death sentence. As such, future research must be conducted that frames HIV as an illness one simply lives with, but subsequently, how those living with it carry on in their day-to-day interactions. In essence, HIV research from a communicative standpoint must reflect the current social moment. Furthermore, from a mediated approach, while *Looking* provides a rich depiction of HIV through its LGBTQ+ characters, more research should be done from series that are more readily available for mainstream audiences. After all, *Looking* aired exclusively on HBO, a premium cable channel accessed only by paying subscribers. Perceptions regarding queer texts and texts pertaining to HIV might shift audiences' opinions depending on a new context altogether—e.g. another more accessible network, the characters being portrayed, or even the genre of the text. Therefore, future research must take into account each of these distinct contexts to determine how these texts represent HIV to its audiences. For

instance, an analysis of the ABC miniseries *When We Rise* might offer fruitful discussion for how HIV is depicted on a more mainstream network.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, using queer theory for my analysis offered unique insight into media's portrayal of HIV. After all, as Al Green (2002) explains, queer theory is about highlighting what makes each identity unique from one another—taking into account not just sexuality, but race, gender, age, and everything that culminates into who we are. However, because *Looking* still privileges notions of whiteness, future work must be done that critiques queer theory—as it predominantly upholds perspectives of queer voices, so long as they are queer white voices. James McDonald (2015) explains that, “whiteness is inadvertently reified as the universal norm of queer subjects when heteronormativity is critiqued” (p. 319). Unfortunately, my analysis of *Looking* coincides with McDonald's findings. Future research must be conducted that critiques queer theory's narrow frame and broadens it to be as inclusive as Green states it was originally intended. Additionally, because queer theory often works in tandem with additional theories, more research must be done that connects queer theory with Burke's (1959) notions of the tragic and comic frame and how these figures are presented to the public at large. McDonald believes that, “Ultimately, the conversations and insights generated by further engagement with queer theory can be generative of communication theory that exposes previously hidden voices, explores new ways of organizing, and shatters the (hetero)normativity of everyday life” (p. 326). In other words, queer theory offers unique possibilities to explore how identities are constructed and how they function in a normative society—and future research must reflect the numerous intersections that emerge from this construction.

Conclusion

Looking is a series that, even with its flaws, provides depth and nuance to what it means to live as a member of the LGBTQ+ community in the 21st century. Additionally, it is an essential text that explores the complexities of living with HIV in a time where HIV is still underrepresented through mediated portrayals, and as such, the romance of Agustín and Eddie functions beyond its mere entertainment value. Rather, their relationship affords viewers the distinct opportunity to learn about HIV and to gain the necessary perspective toward its many facets.

Furthermore, the marriage of critical rhetoric and queer theory provided necessary insight into texts that attempt to portray HIV—as both theoretical perspectives are concerned primarily with uprooting conventional power structures and giving voice to those disenfranchised. In this way, *Looking* gives HIV a voice in current social discourse. It is surely not the only voice, but a necessary one all the same. And as scholars continue studying the texts surrounding HIV from within the LGBTQ+ community and perhaps beyond, only time will tell if *Looking* will remain as groundbreaking as it is today. With this in mind, societally, we must turn to the future and acknowledge that prospects are *looking* optimistic.

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