Author's Statement: In an essay of 10-15 pp. (double spaced, 12 point-type) discuss a fictional narrative in any genre (text, film, video, music, photography, etc) or a non-fictional account of a historical event and provide an original explanation of how your topic reflects or illuminates the mythology of American violence. Discuss how the narrative you treat represents and interprets the violence it considers; how it understands the relation of that violence to American history or culture; and how the narrative relates to any of the three broader myths discussed in this course (Is it a version of one of these myths? A challenge or revision to such a myth? An alternative myth?, etc.) Draw on at least 6-8 published documents (e.g. critical or theoretical essays, works of historical scholarship, journalistic reporting, contemporary reviews) to develop a fully informed and considered view of your subject. Make use of a standard method of citation to identify the sources of ideas and information.

The Murder of Matthew Shepard: Why a Small-Town Tragedy Affected an Entire Nation

The night of October 6, 1998 started out like any other night for Matthew Shepard, an openly gay resident of Laramie who had recently moved to town to attend the University of Wyoming. After a long day of classes, he decided to go get a drink at The Fireside Bar, a popular spot among both gay and straight Laramie residents where townsfolk and university students would frequently go to mingle. At the same time, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, two 21-year-old Laramie residents with a growing history of run-ins with the law, were driving through town when they decided to stop at the Fireside themselves for a pitcher of beer. As the night wore on, Shepard was approached by McKinney and Henderson, and, after a mysterious conversation whose contents would be debated for years to come, the three ended up leaving the bar together in McKinney's truck.[1] No one saw Matthew Shepard again until the next evening, when a mountain biker crashed into a fence at the edge of town and discovered him tied to the fence without his wallet and shoes, bloodily beaten to the point of being essentially unrecognizable.

Over the next months, as the trials of the two men unfolded, the specifics of what had happened that night were slowly revealed to the public: after discovering Shepard was gay, McKinney and Henderson had convinced Shepard to leave with them by pretending they themselves were gay, and had then driven him to the edge of town, where they tied him to the fence like a scarecrow and beaten him with McKinney's .357 magnum. After robbing him, the two had sped back to the Fireside, where they ended up getting in a fight with two other young men that ultimately culminated in their arrest.[2]

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[1] Beth Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder*, New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, 1.
[2] Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard*, 2.

When Matthew Shepard died six days later on October 12 at Poudre Valley Hospital in Colorado, McKinney and Henderson were therefore already in police custody–though not for the terrible crime that would come to shake almost every part of the nation.

At the forefront of the American public's reaction to the seemingly unexplainable murder was a desire to understand both Shepard and his killers more completely. As the media soon jumped to reveal, Shepard came from a significantly different background than McKinney and Henderson. He had attended high school overseas in Switzerland, been raised by a loving family in a stable home, and was an aspiring political scientist. His father was a powerful executive at a multinational oil company, and Shepard had as bright a future as anyone could have had. Shepard was, of course, also gay, and according to his fellow classmates and many friends, would frequently vocalize his support for the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized groups as a member of many advocacy groups at the university.[3] Conversely, McKinney and Henderson had never even finished high school and were barely making a living at the time of the murder, picking up whatever odd jobs they could find here and there and living in trailer parks on the poorer West side of Laramie.[4] McKinney had grown up in an especially rough environment, spending large stretches of his childhood locked inside his house by his mother and often going days at a time without food.[5] McKinney and Henderson, while not actively invested in political discourse and advocacy, also held the complicated mix of conservative and

[3] *The Laramie Project*, *YouTube* (HBO Films, 2012), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1qiTmF0p4A.
[4] Todd Lewan and Steven K. Paulson, "Wyoming Death Seen as More than Hate," *The Associated Press*, October 18, 1998, sec. News, https://www.southcoasttoday.com/story/news/nation-world/1998/10/18/wyoming-death-seen-as-more/50557477007/.
[5] Lewan and Paulson, "Wyoming Death Seen as More than Hate," *The Associated Press.*

libertarian beliefs common in Laramie,[6] and as Kristen Price (McKinney's girlfriend at the time) said, were "real bad about meeting gay people."[7]

Seeking to make sense of such a complicated and terrible tragedy, the media ended up turning to these stark differences between the two parties as a possible explanation for the murder. They used the differences between them to present two main narratives to the American public, both of which lacked nuance and rejected complexity. One narrative was rooted in the idea that McKinney and Henderson had targeted and killed Shepard specifically because of his sexuality,[8] while the other placed the class divide between Shepard and his killers at the forefront of the conflict, suggesting that the murder was first intended to only be a robbery resulting from growing class tensions both within Laramie and throughout the country.[9] The most likely truth lies in some turbulent combination of these two hypotheses, but what was perhaps more notable than the accuracy of the narratives was the cultural significance they held: they both revealed a strong underlying belief in the emerging stereotypes of the "backwoods," rural parts of America that were becoming increasingly commonplace among more cosmopolitan and urban Americans.

These stereotypes resulted from a clear transformation in American society that occurred over the course of the nineteenth century. Once a primarily rural and agrarian society, America was gradually growing increasingly more urban as its economy moved from being primarily

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[6] Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard*, 3.
[7] *The Laramie Project, Youtube*, 17:50-17:52.
[8] Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, "The Politics of Navigating Public Tragedy: Media Framing of the Matthew Shepard Murder," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5, no. 3, 2002, https://www.j stor.org/stable/41939768, 484.
[9] Lewan and Paulson, "Wyoming Death Seen as More than Hate," *The Associated Press*.

agriculture-based to more reliant on manufacturing, technology, and cities.[10] As the metropolitan parts of the country became more technologically advanced while the rural parts remained rooted in the quickly-dying industries of farming and land cultivation, the two regions developed increasingly different cultural identities and stereotypes. Cities came to be considered progressive and cosmopolitan places where minoritized groups were able to take refuge, while small rural towns (like Laramie) were seen as more conservative and offered little economic mobility.[11] With newspapers, news stations, and other major media outlets establishing headquarters in cities like New York and Los Angeles, these urban perspectives and cultures came to dominate the coverage of political events in America, leaving rural perspectives largely invisible to the broader public.[12] Residents of towns like Laramie therefore found themselves shunned and left behind by the rest of America, but without a clear explanation for and understanding of why.

The differences between Matthew Shepard and his killers emphasized by the media's narratives fit perfectly into this emerging divide, offering a tangible way for both urban and rural Americans to process and make sense of the larger cultural and political changes happening throughout the country. For the majority of Laramie residents, Matthew Shepard–with his affluent background and "progressive" sexuality–became emblematic of the urban lifestyle. Many townspeople, especially those hailing from places similar to the poorer West side of Laramie that McKinney and Henderson came from, argued that Shepard deserved his fate because he had "made a pass" at his assailants (a claim never

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[10] James G. Gimpel et al., "The Urban–Rural Gulf in American Political Behavior," *Political Behavior* 42, no. 4 (May 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09601-w.

[11] Twan Huijsmans, Eelco Harteveld, Wouter van der Brug, Bram Lancee, "Are cities ever more cosmopolitan? Studying trends in urban-rural divergence of cultural attitudes," Political Geography, Volume 86, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102353.

[12] Gimpel, "The Urban-Rural Gulf in American Political Behavior," *Political Behavior*.

proven to be true). They were quick to believe McKinney's "gay panic" defense–that he and Henderson had decided to rob Shepard in order to "teach him a lesson not to come on to straight people."[13] The eagerness of rural residents to accept such a narrative was reflective of a larger-scale desire to stop metropolitan perspectives from dominating their everyday lives; they wanted to keep the small town motto of "live and let live" alive and well.[14] Just as rural observers viewed Shepard as representative of urbanization, urban onlookers, which included almost all of the media covering the murder, saw Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson as symbols for the technologically limited, "left-behind" parts of America. Using McKinney and Henderson as cautionary tales for the consequences of resisting the country's shift towards urbanism, they denounced the so-called "cowboy culture" of Laramie that they felt allowed such rampant homophobia and hatred to prosper and to ultimately kill Shepard.[15]

While the media coverage gave many Americans the vocabulary they needed to address the broader cultural and political divide occurring across the country, its oversimplification of the identities of McKinney, Henderson, and Shepard generated multiple problematic consequences, especially in relation to its impact on the larger public perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community.[16] Because the media held a more urban perspective on the murder, it played into many of the harmful and simplistic stereotypes of small towns like Laramie, suggesting that its "backwards," conservative, and intolerant politics left all of its residents deeply homophobic and filled with hatred for those different from them

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[13] *The Laramie Project*, *Youtube*, 17:54-17:58.
[14] Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard*, 3.
[15] Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard*, 12.
[16] Thomas R. Dunn, "Remembering Matthew Shepard: Violence, Identity, and Queer Counterpublic Memories," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2010), https://doi.org/10.2307/41940504, 612.

(an idea that clearly held some truth for people like McKinney and Henderson).[17] In putting forth this narrative, the media therefore made it seem like Shepard's murder was a result of an isolated form of homophobia, not one created by a broader society. In doing so, the media therefore exonerated the larger American public from their role in creating a homophobic culture throughout the nation by placing the blame solely on small towns like Laramie, which did little to address the more widespread issue of homophobia that had grown rampant throughout the 1990s.[18]

Along with its erasure of the culpability of the larger American public, the media's perspective was rooted heavily in the idea of metronormativity, a way of thinking that emerged alongside America's urbanization and subsequent political and cultural divide. The idea of metronormativity is rooted in a belief that cities are "better" and safer places for members of the LGBTQ+ community and other minoritized groups to live in, while back-country places are synonymous with homophobia and oppression.[19] Though the geopolitics of Laramie certainly fed into some aspects of the metronormative ideas put forth by the media, they were much more complicated than the public was led to believe. Making the sweeping claim that LGBTQ+ people were better off in urban spaces erased the experience of those who loved living in places like Laramie (of which there were more than one would think), creating the false and dangerous idea that gay people did not actually live in rural places and therefore tolerance and acceptance of them was unnecessary.[20] In the opinions of people like Jonas Slonaker and Zackie Salmon, two openly gay and proud residents of Laramie, positing urbanization as a solution to

[17] Ott and Aoki, "The Politics of Navigating Public Tragedy," 485.
[18] Ott and Aoki, "The Politics of Navigating Public Tragedy," 487.
[19] E. Cram, "(Dis)Locating Queer Citizenship: Imaging Rurality in Matthew Shepard's Memory," *Queering the Countryside*, 2020, https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479890897.003.0017, 269.
[20] Cram, "(Dis)locating Queer Citizenship," 270.

homophobia like the media indirectly did misplaced the responsibility of combating homophobia; members of the LGBTQ+ community should not have to uproot their entire lives to avoid persecution. Instead, residents of rural spaces like Laramie need to more deeply consider the roots of their own biases without outside perspectives telling them how to.[21] In the eyes of people like Slonaker and Salmon, the media's metronormative coverage of the implications of Shepard's death was therefore reductive and harmful.

In addition to perpetuating metronormativity, the media coverage's iconification of Matthew Shepard was also problematic for the larger battle for widespread acceptance and protection the LGBTQ+ community was fighting at the time. Many major news outlets, including *The Associated Press* and *The New York Times*, drew on Shepard's palatability to turn him into a figurehead for the entire LGBTQ+ community.[22] He was rich, white, and intelligent, and the media highlighted these characteristics to emphasize how much of a tragedy his murder truly was. By underlining Shepard's characteristics that would be considered most "acceptable" by society, the media was thereby able to turn him into a martyr that the entire country could mourn. Though certainly effective at generating widespread sympathy for Shepard, this narrative–however unintentionally–drew the focus away from the undeniable significance of Shepard's sexuality in the murder. Essentially, the way that the media iconified Shepard meant that the American public did not sympathize with Shepard because he was gay, they sympathized with him in spite of it.[23] It also left little space for an intersectional understanding of the LGBTQ+ community, as it reduced the LGBTQ+ experience to a singular,

[21] *The Laramie Project, Youtube*, 13:39-13:55.
[22] Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard*, 30.
[23] Ott and Aoki, "The Politics of Navigating Public Tragedy," 488.

narrow example. The combination of these two consequences made it much more difficult for activists to get laws like the Matthew Shepard Federal Hate Crime Bill passed; politicians did not see Shepard's sexuality as an important factor in his murder because of the media coverage.[24]

Not only did the media draw on the growing urban-rural divide and contemporary mythology about the LGBTQ+ community when discussing Shepard's murder, they also relied heavily upon the "killer-on-the-road" archetype. First and foremost, the media depicted Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson as quintessential killers-on-the-road; neither one had a strong sense of family or community, they were not able to hold down a job for very long, and their lack of a college (and high school) education left them with little opportunity for economic mobility.[25] They were shunned and forgotten by a quickly urbanizing nation, leaving them with little to turn to but a life of crime. The media's portrayal of the relationship and dynamic between McKinney and Henderson also draws many parallels to those of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Frank Chambers and Cora Smith in James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, both classic examples of the killer-on-the-road framework. McKinney, who had already accumulated a long resume of petty crimes at the time of the murder, was repeatedly posited as the coldhearted "mastermind" behind Shepard's murder by news outlets, just like Hickock and Chambers are depicted as the ringleaders of their own respective murders. Conversely, the media painted Henderson out to be the more sensitive and thoughtful sidekick, emphasizing the fact that he was a former Eagle Scout and member of

[24] Loffreda, "Losing Matt Shepard," 176.
[25] Lewan and Paulson, "Wyoming Death Seen as More than Hate," *The Associated Press*.

Laramie's main church.[26] Henderson therefore took on a similar role to the ones that Perry Smith and Cora Smith did.

However, the most notable comparison that can be drawn between the media's presentation of McKinney and Henderson and the killer-on-the-road archetype is the palpable combination of jealousy and hatred that factored into the murder the two committed. McKinney and Henderson possessed a contempt for Shepard and what he represented that was almost identical to the one Frank Chambers and Cora Smith hold for Nick Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Throughout the book, they refer to him only as "the Greek," turning to his "otherness" as a way of establishing the sense of superiority and power they so desperately seek to achieve in a world that has passed them by. Similarly, as the media coverage indirectly suggested, McKinney and Henderson's hatred for Shepard stemmed from a bitterness just like the one Chambers and Smith possess for Nick. After buying a pitcher of beer with the last remaining change they had in their pocket, McKinney and Henderson saw Shepard, a university student with all sorts of possibilities for his future, sitting with his expensive shoes and watch and were overwhelmed by an extreme sense of spitefulness and jealousy.[27] Their discovery of his sexuality was the final straw, and they subconsciously turned Shepard into a target for the larger hatred and resentment towards America and urbanization they were feeling. For McKinney, Henderson, Frank Chambers, and Cora Smith, their inability to fulfill the American Dream in a changing society combined with helplessly watching a "lesser" person be able to do so is the catalyst for the extreme violence they end up committing.

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[26] *The Laramie Project, Youtube,* 30:50-31:03.
[27] *The Laramie Project, Youtube,*

The media also followed the killer-on-the-road archetype on a larger scale through the way they depicted the urban-rural divide. As previously established, many news outlets blamed the backwards, "cowboy culture" of Laramie for Shepard's murder, thereby inadvertently making the town itself the killer in the story, not simply McKinney and Henderson.[28] Laramie–or at least the way the media ended up portraying it–was a place shunned by the cosmopolitan centers of society, also left behind by an increase in urbanization, just like the traditional murderer in a killer-on-the-road tale. Using Shepard as a symbol for urbanization, the media thereby posited the larger entity of urban America as Laramie's victim, a narrative that resonated with many Americans because of Shepard's aforementioned palatability and relatability and, of course, because of the growing disconnect between rural and urban America.[29] The same combination of fear and intrigue that grabbed the attention of readers of killer-on-the-road stories let the American public be captivated by the media's villainization of Laramie and victimization of urban America.

Despite occurring in the remote, isolated town of Laramie, Matthew Shepard's brutal murder ended up touching the lives of many Americans throughout the nation. The subsequent media coverage that followed his murder was simultaneously a result of the growing rural-urban divide throughout America, of the new notion of metronormative ideology, and of the killer-on-the-road archetype. The nation's widespread and unparalleled reaction to such a terrible crime was therefore due to a combination of a newfound awareness of the geopolitical separation coming to define the country and the palatability and relatability of Shepard himself. As we now find ourselves living in a

[28] Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard*, 7.
[29] Ott and Aoki, "The Politics of Navigating Public Tragedy," 487.

time of rural and urban disconnect even more salient than at the time of Shepard's death, we must remember the stories of Matthew Shepard's murder that were told, and keep in mind their shortcomings and limitations. To truly combat the hatred, bigotry, and division that allowed Matthew to be killed on that freezing, fateful night in Laramie, we must examine the American mythology we consume with a careful, thoughtful, and inclusive perspective.

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