Book Review – *Dying to Be Normal: Gay Martyrs and the Transformation of American Sexual Politics*, by Brett Krutzsch.

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In the last decade, American society has witnessed a consistent fluctuation in the dynamics of LGBT rights. In 2015, the Supreme Court's landmark decision in the Obergefell v. Hodges civil rights case guaranteed the legitimacy of same-sex marriage. However, deviating from the progressive tendency, the conservative poliBcies of the Trump administration (2017–2021) – including the restrictions on transgender military servicemembers – are a reminder of the gloom of discrimination affecting the LGBT community in the United States. While President Joe Biden's appointment of Rachel Levine as the Assistant Secretary for the Department of Health and Human Services in 2021 encourages us to imagine the emergence of the first LGBT cabinet members, LGBT citizens still face considerable bigotry.

Beyond the tension between the liberal and conservative political attitudes to the LGBT community in contemporary American society, Brett Krutzsch's monograph *Dying to Be Normal* casts light on the forgotten process of the memorialisation of gay martyrs and their martyrdom. Through several case-studies of the deaths and legacies of American gay figures, he examines the interferences of Christianity and religious rhetoric together with the cultural representation of gay martyrdom in contemporary American society and its recent history.

Beginning with the death and legacy of Harvey Milk (1930–1978), an iconic figure in LGBT history, the first chapter primarily explores subtle connections between the gay rights and Black civil rights movements. Murdered in 1978, Milk was an active participant in the gay rights movement when he was alive. He was chosen to be enshrined as the heroic martyr by LGBT activist organisations. Through a comparison to Martin Luther King, he was described as "Saint Harvey" of the LGBT community.

After examining Milk's martyrdom, Chapter 2 focuses on an ordinary gay person – Matthew Shepard (1976–1998). Unlike Harvey Milk, Matthew Shepard had not been a public figure before he died. As Krutzsch states, "in death, though, he achieved remarkable popularity and widespread veneration" (p. 47). Examining the process of memorialising Shepard and

constructing his martyrdom, Krutzsch recognises the predisposition of secular LGBT activists to use Christian rhetoric in the portrayal of Shepard. Despite the difference in their lifetime, Shepard's and Milk's legacies underwent the same process of being enshrined as significant "saints" in the American LGBT community.

The monograph then shifts to a gay man's life and legacy in the new millennium. Chapter 3 examines the representation of Tyler Clementi (1991–2010), who died by suicide, in American popular culture in the 2010s. When discussing the drama "It Gets Better Project" which memorialises Clementi's death, Krutzsch reveals how it "reflected early twenty-first-century white, gay assimilationist trends," in which a/the gay youth is assumed with white middle-class identity.

Following the visual representation of gay martyrdom to the general public, the last section of this monograph switches from individuals to cinematic depictions. This chapter traverses the LGBT-themed films *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Two Spirits* (2009), and *Out in the Night* (2014). In contrast to the memorialisation of the three figures mentioned above, Krutzsch demonstrates the films' success in disclosing "how gender, class, race, religion, and their constant intersections shape not only the lives of gender-variant and sexually variant people but also who the public embraces as having lives of value" (p. 121). This indicates the intersectionality of racism and homophobia in the formation of gay martyrdom and memory.

Besides those prominent figures and films exemplifying the emergence and transformation of gay martyrdom, the epilogue of this monograph deals with the more recent tragedy of the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2019. It "became the largest mass killing of LGBT Americans in U.S. history" (p. 150). The memorialisation of this terrible event resonates with Krutzsch's argument that there is a persistent tendency of stigmatisation and discrimination of Gay martyrdom in post-war American society. As Krutzsch states: "the queer memorialisation following Pulse suggested that an unapologetic celebration of righteous anger, the non-normative, the gender-subversive, and the explicitly sexual represented the best strategy LGBT citizens had to upend America's insidious sexual and gender hierarchies" (p. 160).

Situated in the proliferation of academic literature involving the representation of the LGBT community in American culture and history in the last decade, Krutzsch's monograph highlights the convergence of religious rhetoric and the representation of LGBT figures. Thanks to the construction of political correctness in contemporary American society, direct discrimination seems to be eliminated for the most part. However, underlying the neutral narrative of those gay people's deaths from murder or suicide, politicians and the public are still insistent on discriminatory positions when speaking of LGBT people. This prevalent

homophobia and prejudice are embedded in history, which continues to influence the formation of the memory of LGBT figures.

Overall, this thought-provoking book illuminates forgotten parts of public memory about gay people and their deaths. It may encourage further research on the changing meaning and representation of gay people in contemporary American society.

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