

Conversion Therapy in Garrard Conley's *Boy Erased* and Emily M. Danforth's *Miseducation of Cameron Post*

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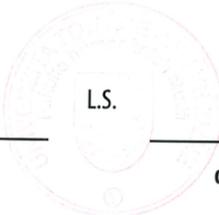
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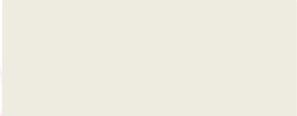
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ABSTRAKT

Termín konverzní terapie označuje snahu změnit něčí sexuální orientaci či genderovou identitu. Téma konverzní terapie je i nyní relevantní a dočkává se mu pozornosti i v literatuře a kultuře. Cílem této práce je rozebrat téma konverzní terapie v memoáru *Boy Erased* (2016) a románu *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012). Práce se zabývá otázkou, zda je konverzní terapie v knihách znázorněna pravdivě a odpovídá skutečným metodám. V první části práce bude rozebrána historie konverzní terapie, její dopady a její legální status. Druhá část práce analyzuje knihy skrze vybrané téma společně s dalšími, které úzce souvisí s konverzní terapií.

Klíčová slova: konverzní terapie, reparativní terapie, homosexualita, *Boy Erased*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, gender, náboženství, LGBTQ komunita, homofobie

ABSTRACT

The term conversion therapy stands for the effort of trying to change one's sexuality or gender identity. The topic of conversion therapy is still relevant today and is receiving attention in literature and popular culture. The aim of this thesis is to analyse conversion therapy in the memoir *Boy Erased* (2016) and the novel *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012). The thesis addresses the question of whether the conversion therapy in the analysed books is portrayed truthfully and correlates to actual methods. The first part of this thesis will focus on the history of conversion therapy, its consequences and its legal status. The second part will analyse the books through the theme of conversion therapy and other relevant themes.

Keywords: conversion therapy, reparative therapy, homosexuality, *Boy Erased*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, gender, religion, LGBTQ community, homophobia

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of conversion therapy, also referred to as reparative therapy, can be described as an effort to change one's sexuality or gender identity. Despite its harmful effects it is still present in today's world. As of April 2023, conversion therapy is still legal in countries like the UK and some states in the US. Reparative therapy has its roots in harmful societal beliefs, homophobia, pseudoscience, and the belief that homosexuality is an illness. In the past, homosexuality was illegal in many countries and homosexuals were not accepted in society, which also contributed to the spread of conversion therapy.

The practice is still prevalent because of religious groups that disregard homosexuality and try to "cure" it using their beliefs and ideology. Conversion therapy tries to achieve something that is impossible and in doing so it negatively impacts the individuals undergoing the practice. Lately, there have been calls for the ban on the practice, however the practice is still legal in most parts of the world and thousands of people are exposed to it every year.

The first part of this thesis will focus on the background of conversion therapy, including its history and current state. It will also explore the historical classification of homosexuality as a mental illness. The second part of this thesis will focus on the harms and efforts to ban the practice. In the last part of this thesis, I will explore the topic of conversion therapy and its consequences in two books, a novel *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily M. Danforth and a memoir *Boy Erased* by Garrard Conley. The analysis will examine themes connected to conversion therapy, with the main goal of showing how impactful this practice is. The analysis will also cover how the characters were harmed and how their lives were changed as a result of their experience.

This thesis will argue that *Boy Erased* and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* depict the means of conversion therapy and its outcome accurately, exposing harmful societal and religious beliefs thus emphasizing the need for a total ban on these practices.

1 HISTORY OF CONVERSION THERAPY

Conversion therapy also known as reparative therapy refers to practices and attempts to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. In the psychological field, these practices are not considered as a form of therapy, therefore instead of the term "conversion therapy" an abbreviation SOCE (sexual orientation change efforts) and GICE (gender identity change efforts) should be used to exclude the false advertisement of the practice being a therapy.¹ The term conversion therapy is not rightfully used, since there is no empirical background and data supporting this type of "therapy" and the results it promises.² According to the Williams Institute and their report more than 690,000 members of the LGBTQ+ community have received some form of conversion therapy just in the U.S. alone, while more than half of them went through conversion therapy as adolescents.³

Because of the widespread usage of the terms "conversion therapy" and "reparative therapy", in my bachelor thesis, I will be using those terms to refer to the practices, as both of them are used to describe the practices and attempts in both analysed books.

1.1 The beginnings

Attempts to change one's sexual orientation have been here for more than a hundred years. Early experiments took place in the late 19th century. One of the first people to claim that they had cured homosexuality was a German psychiatrist Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, who announced in 1899 that he had successfully cured a gay man through 45 hypnotic sessions in the span of four months.⁴ Years later, Schrenck-Notzing claimed to have cured more than seventy homosexuals and other individuals struggling with what was considered as perversion at that time, using suggestive therapy.⁵

A few years prior, Richard von Krafft-Ebing published *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892) in which he described homosexuality as a useless pathological abnormality, and perversion that cannot result in reproduction.⁶ Homosexuality was put in this publication under the same

¹ Douglas C. Haldeman, ed. *The Case Against Conversion "Therapy": Evidence, Ethics, and Alternatives* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2022), 4.

² Haldeman, *Case Against Conversion "Therapy"*, 4.

³ Christy Mallory, Taylor N.T. Brown, and Kerith J. Conron, *Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth: Update* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, 2019), 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep34870>.

⁴ Tommy Dickinson, *'Curing Queers': Mental Nurses and Their Patients, 1935-74* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 20.

⁵ Dickinson, *'Curing Queers'*, 20.

⁶ Haldeman, *Case Against Conversion "Therapy"*, 5.

label of perversion together with sadism, masochism, masturbation and other.⁷ This gave ground to people who based conversion therapy on the fact that homosexuality is of pathological character and therefore something that can be attempted to treat or cure. According to Haldeman, Krafft-Ebing's opinion on homosexuality and things related to it may have stemmed from his own inner conflicts as he was a cross-dresser, which was very controversial at that time.⁸

1.2 Sigmund Freud

Freud was a key figure in the development and founding of psychoanalysis. Homosexuality was not his main field of study, still he devoted some papers to this subject, for example *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman* (1920).⁹ Freud's main interest and research was related to psychoanalysis and studying the unconscious mind.

Freud believed everyone is born bisexual.¹⁰ He viewed this matter as people having both masculine and feminine attributes.¹¹ Similarly, according to Freud people possessed both homosexual and heterosexual component.¹² He also believed that in order to live a heterosexual life, one should control their homosexual component.¹³

Despite these opinions, Freud was not necessarily against homosexuals. In 1935 Freud wrote (at that time unpublished) *Letter to an American Mother*. The letter was an answer to a mother asking Freud to "cure" her son of homosexuality. Freud's response included: "homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness, we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development."¹⁴ This statement suggests that Freud's opinion was not typical at that time. He continued the letter with listing successful and respectable homosexual men, such as Plato, and Leonardo da Vinci. Freud expressed his

⁷ Haldeman, *Case Against Conversion "Therapy"*, 5.

⁸ Haldeman, *Case Against Conversion "Therapy"*, 5.

⁹ Jack Drescher, "I'm Your Handyman," in *Sexual Conversion Therapy: Ethical, Clinical and Research Perspectives*, eds. Ariel Shidlo, Michael Schroeder, and Jack Drescher (New York: Haworth Medical Press, 2001), 7.

¹⁰ Tom Waidzunus, *The Straight Line: How the Fringe Science of Ex-Gay Therapy Reoriented Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 42.

¹¹ Waidzunus, *The Straight Line*, 42.

¹² Joseph Wortis, *Fragments of an Analysis with Freud* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954), 99.

¹³ Drescher, "Handyman," 8.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Letter to an American Mother," in *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Ernst L. Freud (New York: Basic Books, 1960), 423.

admiration for these men when describing them “as one of the greatest men.”¹⁵ He then stated his views on the criminalization of homosexuality and how it should not be considered a crime. Freud concluded the letter with a suggestion that conversion therapy is not always effective and that only sometimes they managed to strengthen the heterosexual component in homosexuals and that it all depends on the individual.¹⁶ From the letter we can see that Freud did not view homosexuality as a disease, but more likely as an underdevelopment in sexual development.¹⁷ Nor did he think that it needed to be cured or could be cured.

While it may seem that Freud did not condone or believe in conversion therapy, there is one documented case where he tried to change someone’s sexuality, which happened 15 years before he wrote the aforementioned letter. This is the only case of a recorded conversion therapy attempt done by Freud.¹⁸ In 1920 he took on a case of a young girl, who was in love with an older woman, and her parents tried to seek help for her. She was brought in for a psychoanalysis after a suicide attempt stemming from the revelation of her sexual orientation.¹⁹ Freud published his findings and results in his paper *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman* (1920) in which he repeatedly expressed his concerns regarding conversion therapy as he seemed to be pessimistic about the achievability of a successful conversion:

The removal of genital inversion or homosexuality is in my experience never an easy matter. I have rather found that success is possible only under specially favourable circumstances [...] In general to undertake to convert a fully developed homosexual into a heterosexual is not much more promising than to do in reverse.²⁰

He then suggests that the psychoanalysis may not be exactly effective for treating homosexuality. Freud says, “in actual numbers the successes achieved by psycho-analytic treatment of the manifold forms of homosexuality are not specially striking.”²¹

Despite his doubts, Freud agrees to psychoanalyze the girl. After the psychoanalysis and interviews with the parents he suggests that the homosexual behaviour could have roots in

¹⁵ Freud, “Letter to an American Mother,” 423.

¹⁶ Freud, “Letter to an American Mother,” 423.

¹⁷ Freud, “Letter to an American Mother,” 423-424.

¹⁸ Drescher, “Handyman,” 9.

¹⁹ Drescher, “Handyman,” 9.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, no. 1 (1920): 129.

²¹ Freud, “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality,” 129.

the Oedipus complex that occurred when her parents had her younger brother and she became subconsciously jealous and hateful of her mother.²² The paper ends with Freud suggesting on the reasons behind the girl's homosexuality, but no clear conclusion whether the attempt to cure the girl was a success, or a failure. It can be assumed that the outcome of this case only supported Freud's opposition towards the attempts to change one's sexuality and why there is no other documented case of reparative therapy done by Freud. According to Jack Drescher the results of Freud's conversion therapy attempt only affirmed Freud in thinking "that homosexuality was not a neurosis, but a difficult-to-treat psychic disposition."²³

1.3 Mid-20th century

Many other psychoanalysts after Freud continued in researching homosexuality, such as Charles W. Socarides, Sandor Rado, Irving Bieber, Lionel Ovesey, Alfred Kinsley and Edmund Bergler.

In 1948 Alfred Kinsey published his research called *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. This research claimed that around 37 percent of the male population in the U.S. have taken part in some homosexual activity.²⁴ Up until then it was generally thought that homosexuals were a minority and were represented by a smaller percentage. These claims sparked up debates and rage, but at the same time hope for the LGBTQ+ community.²⁵ Kinsey's research method were questioned and his research deemed imprecise, since his methods came from the work he had done in the zoology field.²⁶ Also, he used data collected from marginalized respondents.²⁷ Following the publishing of Kinsley's report a few reactions of the public and government came including police regulations, and media and news coverage.²⁸ In contrast, a wave of support emerged after the study was published. For example, in the 1950's in the US, members of the Communist Party started organization called The Mattachine Society in support of homosexuals.²⁹

In 1952 American Psychological Association (APA) published their first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), in which they deemed homosexuality as a

²² Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality," 133.

²³ Drescher, "Handyman," 10.

²⁴ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 35.

²⁵ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 36.

²⁶ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 36.

²⁷ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 36.

²⁸ Dickinson, 'Curing Queers', 50-51.

²⁹ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 53.

mental disorder.³⁰ At the same time APA regularly held meetings and invited fellow psychologist/psychiatrists to present possible treatments for homosexuality.³¹ This decision probably benefited people building their careers and research on reparative therapies. As Glassgold says conversion therapy was the main treatment provided to homosexuals in the US in mid-20th century.³² This may have been a reaction to the DSM classification of homosexuality, while at the same time it could have been a reaction to Kinsey's research and its outcomes.

In 1962 Irving Bieber conducted a study (*Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study of Male Homosexuals*) that focused on over 100 homosexual men and 100 heterosexual men.³³ The study was based on questionnaires filled out by psychoanalysts about their patients and some of the questions focused on patient's relationship with their mothers and other family relationships.³⁴ One of the aims of the study was to find the reasons and causes behind homosexuality. The results of the study claimed that the total of 27 percent of the homosexuals turned to heterosexuals during the treatment.³⁵ According to Waidzunas, in order to be considered cured the patients had to act like heterosexuals and accept the reasons behind their homosexuality, and this was all judged by the analysts.³⁶

According to APA's report from 2009, behavioural therapy was widespread in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s and was frequently used for the purpose of conversion therapy.³⁷ Behavioural therapy developed in the mid-20th century and it included treatment methods such as paralysis, induced nausea, and electric shock therapy.³⁸ Behavioural therapy used for converting one's sexuality mainly the aversion treatment.³⁹ The first study on treating

³⁰ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 46.

³¹ Jack Drescher, "Gold or Lead? Introductory Remarks on Conversions," in *Ex-Gay Research: Analyzing the Spitzer Study and Its Relation to Science, Religion, Politics, and Culture*, eds. Jack Drescher and Kenneth J. Zucker (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 13.

³² Judith M. Glassgold, "Research on Sexual Orientation Change Efforts," in *The Case Against Conversion "Therapy": Evidence, Ethics, and Alternatives*, ed. Douglas C. Haldeman (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2022), 22.

³³ Drescher, "Handyman," 12.

³⁴ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 51-52

³⁵ Drescher, "Handyman," 13.

³⁶ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 53.

³⁷ American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2009), 22, <https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf>

³⁸ American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*, 22.

³⁹ American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*, 22.

homosexuality with aversion and behavioural treatment was conducted in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s by Kurt Freund on a group of more than sixty men, all of whom were subjected to aversion therapy and negative conditioning, such as inducing vomiting while watching images of nude men.⁴⁰

In 1957 psychologist Evelyn Hooker published a study *The Adjustment of the Male Overt Homosexual*, in which she attempts to challenge the classification of homosexuality. Hooker collected data from homosexual men and heterosexual men and had them participate in several projective personality tests.⁴¹ Projective personality tests focus on the responses from the patient and their reaction to various things like images.⁴² According to Cherry, the results are then supposed to “uncover patient’s feelings, desires and conflicts that are hidden from conscious awareness.”⁴³

After collecting the data, Hooker let a team of specialists compare the data from the two groups and had them decide which data belonged to homosexual men and which to heterosexual men.⁴⁴ When comparing the results, the experts could not clearly determine which data came from heterosexual men and which from homosexual men.⁴⁵ After the research was conducted, Hooker concluded that homosexuality was not necessarily of pathological nature and that it shouldn’t be classified as a mental disorder.⁴⁶ Even though Hooker’s study was not widely accepted in the psychology field when it was released (since the number of the study’s participants was too small).⁴⁷ Her work was then used in the early 1970s to challenge the classification of homosexuality by gay activists fighting for gay rights.⁴⁸

1.4 Removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

Since the publishing of APA’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1952, homosexuality was classified as a mental illness. The classification did not

⁴⁰ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 61.

⁴¹ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 56.

⁴² Kendra Cherry, “How Projective Tests Are Used to Measure Personality,” Verywell Mind, April 26, 2020, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-projective-test-2795586>.

⁴³ Cherry, “How Projective Tests Are Used to Measure Personality.”

⁴⁴ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 54-56.

⁴⁵ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 56.

⁴⁶ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 56.

⁴⁷ Dickinson, ‘*Curing Queers*’, 208.

⁴⁸ Dickinson, ‘*Curing Queers*’, 208.

change until 1968 when it was reclassified as a non-psychotic mental disorder.⁴⁹ Both classifications of homosexuality helped to shape the way public saw and perceived homosexuals.⁵⁰ The first classification of homosexuality served as a justification for conversion therapy, since something being an illness and being pathological implies having a chance in “getting better” and “curing”. Therefore, having homosexuality assigned under the classification of a mental illness, was incredibly harmful and it created a lot of stigma and misinformation surrounding this topic.

In the early 1970s the question of homosexuality not being pathological was brought up to APA by numerous psychologists and their research.⁵¹ This followed the Stonewall riots that started in 1969 and which led the way for gay liberation, even though the LGBTQ+ community has been fighting for equality since at least the early 20th century.⁵²

In 1970 and 1971 gay and lesbian activists, who did not believe in the current classification of homosexuality attended and interrupted the annual APA meetings.⁵³ These protests later allowed the activists to hold educational panels at the following meetings.⁵⁴ In 1971 a panel called “Gay is Good” was held, where it was explained to the attending psychiatrists by activists how damaging the classification of homosexuality is and the stigma around homosexuality in general.⁵⁵

In 1973 APA’s Board of Trustees successfully voted on the removal of homosexuality from the DSM.⁵⁶ One year after the removal of homosexuality from the DSM-II, several psychiatrists that were against this decision then unsuccessfully petitioned to overturn the removal.⁵⁷ Psychiatrist Robert Spitzer, who was at the time a member of APA’s Nomenclature Committee, was one of the key figures in removing homosexuality from the DSM.⁵⁸ In the 1970s he persuaded the rest of the committee into permitting an educational

⁴⁹ Nicholas C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 247.

⁵⁰ Edsall, *Toward Stonewall*, 247.

⁵¹ Jack Drescher, “Queer Diagnoses: Parallels and Contrasts in the History of Homosexuality, Gender Variance, and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39, no. 2 (April 2010): 434. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-009-9531-5>.

⁵² Melissa R. Michelson and Brian F. Harrison, *LGBTQ Life in America: Examining the Facts* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABCCLIO, 2022), 34.

⁵³ Drescher, *Queer Diagnoses*, 434.

⁵⁴ Drescher, *Queer Diagnoses*, 434.

⁵⁵ Drescher, *Queer Diagnoses*, 434.

⁵⁶ Jack Drescher, “Foreword,” in *The Case Against Conversion “Therapy”: Evidence, Ethics, and Alternatives*, ed. Douglas C. Haldeman (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2022), xii-xiii.

⁵⁷ Drescher, “Gold or Lead,” 14.

⁵⁸ Waidzunus, *The Straight Line*, 67.

panel held by a gay psychologist.⁵⁹ Following the panels and debates, and before the voting on the classification of homosexuality, Spitzer wrote a report for the Nomenclature Committee with the aim of proving that homosexuality does not belong in the DSM. He analysed the background of other pathological illnesses and compared it to homosexuality.⁶⁰ He concluded the report with saying that something can be listed as a disorder and illness only when it is causing subjective distress or any other significant burden to the individuals.⁶¹

After the removal of homosexuality, a new category was added to the DSM called “sexual orientation disturbance”, which served to homosexual people who experienced distress about their sexuality.⁶² The category was replaced in 1980 with a new one called the “ego dystonic homosexuality”, which was removed in 1987.⁶³ However, until then it allowed people and organizations that were convinced homosexuality was a curable illness to attempt conversion therapy on homosexual people.⁶⁴

With the removal of homosexuality from the DSM, in 1974 APA followed with expressing support to homosexuals and gay rights movements.⁶⁵ Although APA was very vocal about supporting the gay community, not every psychiatrist/psychologist was ready to do the same and some of them wouldn't consider homosexuality as a normal variant of human sexuality.⁶⁶

After homosexuality lost its classification in the DSM, people favouring conversion therapy lost the scientific background to justify such therapy. Still, some people continued to believe in the old and incorrect classification.⁶⁷ Despite the science backing up the impossibility of changing one's sexuality, the public divided into two groups, one believing that homosexuality was a regular form of sexuality and that it is permanent and untreatable, and the other holding the opinion that homosexuality was an illness/behavioural problem/spiritual problem that is learned and that it is possible to treat it using various methods of “therapy” and religious faith.⁶⁸

⁵⁹ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 67.

⁶⁰ Dickinson, *Curing Queers*, 212.

⁶¹ Dickinson, *Curing Queers*, 212.

⁶² Marshall Forstein, “Overview of Ethical and Research Issues in Sexual Orientation Therapy,” in *Sexual Conversion Therapy: Ethical, Clinical and Research Perspectives*, eds. Ariel Shidlo, Michael Schroeder, and Jack Drescher (New York: Haworth Medical Press, 2001), 169.

⁶³ Forstein, “Overview of Ethical and Research Issues in Sexual Orientation Therapy,” 169.

⁶⁴ Forstein, “Overview of Ethical and Research Issues in Sexual Orientation Therapy,” 169.

⁶⁵ Drescher, “Gold or Lead,” 15.

⁶⁶ Drescher, “Gold or Lead,” 15.

⁶⁷ Drescher, “Gold or Lead,” 17-18.

⁶⁸ Drescher, “Gold or Lead,” 17-18.

1.5 The era of gay liberation and ex-gay movements

Gay liberation is most notoriously tied to the Stonewall riots. Stonewall Inn was a bar in New York, that served as a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community. On June 28th, 1969, it was raided by the police and this resulted in the LGBTQ+ community fighting back.⁶⁹ This was followed by a wave of protests and riots that lasted days and exactly a year later the first pride parade took place as a commemoration of the raid.⁷⁰ As mentioned before, this pressure from the society and LGBTQ+ community helped with the removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1973.

The support for the LGBTQ+ community grew after the riots. A statement supporting the rights to get and attain accommodation and employment as a homosexual was released in 1973 by APA.⁷¹ APA also insisted on the repeal of sodomy laws, after that they continued in pledging support to the community by releasing other resolutions, while also trying to persuade other health organizations and workers into not discriminating the LGBTQ+ community.⁷² Media and television started to feature gay characters and the public opinion continued to shift towards the stance that homosexuality is a normal variant of human sexuality.⁷³

However, the group, that was still not accepting of homosexuality, had to reshape their arguments regarding homosexuality and conversion therapy, since it was no longer backed by science and professional organizations.⁷⁴ Most of them turned to religion, especially to Christianity, which portrays homosexuality as a sin and has very conservative opinions on same-sex relationships.⁷⁵ This marked the beginnings of ex-gay movements.

The same year when homosexuality was removed from the DSM, an organization called Love in Action was established by Frank Worthen a self-proclaimed ex-homosexual, and Kent Philpott a heterosexual minister, with the intention of providing help to homosexuals in changing their sexuality.⁷⁶ In 1976 the first ex-gay conference took place, which led to the

⁶⁹ Michelson and Harrison, *LGBTQ Life in America*, 38.

⁷⁰ Michelson and Harrison, *LGBTQ Life in America*, 38.

⁷¹ American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*, 23.

⁷² American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*, 23-24.

⁷³ Haldeman, *Case Against Conversion "Therapy"*, 5-7.

⁷⁴ Waidzunus, *The Straight Line*, 77.

⁷⁵ Waidzunus, *The Straight Line*, 77.

⁷⁶ Waidzunus, *The Straight Line*, 77.

establishment of the US's largest ex-gay ministry called Exodus International.⁷⁷ In 1983 Elizabeth Moberly published a theory that became frequently used among the ex-gay movement.⁷⁸ Moberly in her book *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* claimed that the origins of homosexuality stemmed from a damaged relationship of the homosexual with their same-sex parent.⁷⁹ Ex-gay movement probably used this pseudo-scientific book as a reasoning tool supporting their view that homosexuality is pathological and it gave them reason to dismiss homosexuality as a normal variant of sexuality. According to Waidzunas, Moberly combined different theoretical concepts with religious reasoning, such as that “heterosexuality is a part of God’s plan.”⁸⁰

In 2021 Netflix’s documentary *Pray Away* came out, featuring interviews with some of the most influential and famous ex-gay leaders, including Yvette Cantu, John Paulk and Michael Bussee, who had since then left the movement.⁸¹ Bussee was one the co-founders of Exodus and according to him these leaders believed that something was wrong and pathological about being gay, and that gay people could be “saved”.⁸² All the ex-leaders in the documentary have distanced themselves from the movement and revealed they were dishonest when they proclaimed they were “cured” from living a homosexual lifestyle.⁸³ The documentary also mentions that some of the activities related to reparative therapy used by some ex-gay ministries were: bible studies, group sessions, strengthening one’s masculinity or femininity, prayers, restraining from masturbation, and one-on-one sessions with the leaders or counsellors.⁸⁴

Jeffrey G. Ford, who was once subjected to reparative therapy, believes that the ex-gay movement shares similarities to religious sects or cults, since most of the participants have to be fully committed to the ideology and really believe in the ideas presented to them.⁸⁵ He argues that gay people crave acceptance and that is what the ex-gay movement offers them, although in a different way.⁸⁶ This membership is according to Ford another trait the ex-gay

⁷⁷ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 77.

⁷⁸ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 80.

⁷⁹ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 80.

⁸⁰ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 80.

⁸¹ *Pray Away*, directed by Kristine Stolaskis (Netflix, 2021), <https://www.netflix.com/cz/title/81040370>.

⁸² *Pray Away*, 00:04:40.

⁸³ *Pray Away*, directed by Kristine Stolaskis.

⁸⁴ *Pray Away*, 00:32:53-00:34:10.

⁸⁵ Jeffrey G. Ford, “Healing Homosexuals: A Psychologist’s Journey Through the Ex-Gay Movement and the Pseudo-Science of Reparative Therapy,” in *Sexual Conversion Therapy: Ethical, Clinical and Research Perspectives*, eds. Ariel Shidlo, Michael Schroeder, and Jack Drescher (New York: Haworth Medical Press, 2001), 72.

⁸⁶ Ford, “Healing Homosexuals,” 73.

movements share with cults.⁸⁷ Ford recalls that during his time in ex-gay movement many members were removed from the Exodus Board of Directors as a consequence of them participating in a homosexual lifestyle.⁸⁸

During the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s in the US, gay community faced another wave of criticism and harsh treatment from the public, nevertheless gay activist continued fighting for the community and new organizations like AGLP (Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists) were established.⁸⁹ Therapists and psychologists continued encouraging the perception of homosexuality as a normal variant of sexuality with publishing new texts and reports, creating journals focusing on the topic of homosexuality and developing gay-affirming therapy, which deals with clients trying to come to terms with their homosexuality and provides them with other types of support.⁹⁰ Even though the medical and psychological field was undergoing a shift in treating homosexuals, anti-gay publications were still being published in the 1980s and 1990s, for example by Charles Socarides, Elaine Siegel and Joseph Nicolosi.⁹¹

1.6 National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality and the Spitzer study

In 1992 a group of reparative therapists Nicolosi, Socarides, and Benjamin Kaufman founded an organization called the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality as a way to unite the same-minded individuals and as an attempt to resist the growing support of gay-affirming therapies.⁹² Nicolosi's website states that the ultimate goals of NARTH are: "to support mental-professionals who work with same-sex-attracted clients seeking change sexuality"⁹³ and to "promote respect within the mental-health profession for worldwide diversity."⁹⁴ In the 1990's NARTH still used the rhetoric of AIDS to justify their reparative therapy and to advertise it as a possible prevention of AIDS.⁹⁵ In 1995 the efforts to stop conversion therapy started and two years later APA published a

⁸⁷ Ford, "Healing Homosexuals," 73.

⁸⁸ Ford, "Healing Homosexuals," 82.

⁸⁹ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 82.

⁹⁰ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 83.

⁹¹ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 84-86.

⁹² Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 86.

⁹³ "About Joseph Nicolosi," Joseph Nicolosi, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.josephnicolosi.com/resume>.

⁹⁴ "About Joseph Nicolosi."

⁹⁵ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 91.

statement listing the wrongs of conversion therapy.⁹⁶ It featured the ethical problems and harms of conversion therapy and that it is based on discrimination and falsely advertising homosexuality as a mental disorder.⁹⁷ Despite all this effort from professional organizations no legal actions were taken against conversion therapy and the ex-gay movement. According to Drescher, other conservative organizations continued labelling conversion therapy “as a miracle cure and an alternative to being gay.”⁹⁸

In 1992 homosexuality was removed from the International Classification of Diseases by the World Health Organization (WHO), then in 2003 all sodomy laws in the US were overturned by the Supreme Court.⁹⁹

In 2001 Spitzer published his study called *Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change Their Sexual Orientation*, which focused on 200 participants from ex-gay ministries and NARTH.¹⁰⁰ Spitzer’s report claimed that after receiving reparative therapy 66 % of the participating men and 44 % of the participating women were now considered as functioning heterosexuals.¹⁰¹ He concluded with theorizing that the study serves as an evidence that some homosexuals are able to change their sexuality.¹⁰² Several professionals criticised the study, saying it was unethical and that the methodology was weak, since it was the ex-gays who reported the results and their behaviour and therefore served as an unreliable source.¹⁰³ Despite the criticism the study received attention from ex-gay organizations like NARTH, which used the study to further promotion of reparative therapy.¹⁰⁴

In 2012 Robert Spitzer released a statement dedicated to the queer community apologizing for his study.¹⁰⁵ The same year the president of Exodus Alan Chambers revealed that he stopped resonating with reparative therapy.¹⁰⁶ In 2013 he met with the survivors of the therapy to apologize for the damage the organization has done and then he announced the end of Exodus.¹⁰⁷

⁹⁶ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 92.

⁹⁷ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 92.

⁹⁸ Drescher, “Gold or Lead,” 16.

⁹⁹ Drescher, “Gold or Lead,” 15-16.

¹⁰⁰ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 95.

¹⁰¹ Robert L. Spitzer, “Can Some Gay Men and Lesbian Change Their Sexual Orientation? 200 Participants Reporting a Change from Homosexual to Heterosexual Orientation,” in *Ex-Gay Research: Analyzing the Spitzer Study and Its Relation to Science, Religion, Politics, and Culture*, eds. Jack Drescher and Kenneth J. Zucker (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 49

¹⁰² Spitzer, “Can Some Gay Men and Lesbian Change Their Sexual Orientation?” 59.

¹⁰³ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 102.

¹⁰⁴ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 104.

¹⁰⁵ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 149.

¹⁰⁶ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 149.

¹⁰⁷ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 149.

2 THE HARMS, REGULATION AND BANS OF CONVERSION THERAPY

According to Waidzunas the key role in the decline of conversion therapy in the US played a report released by APA's Task Force in 2009 called *Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*.¹⁰⁸ The report discussed the methodology problems within conversion therapy efficiency research, efficiency in general, provided historical background on conversion therapy and examined journals concerning the "success" of conversion therapy from the 1960s to 2008.¹⁰⁹

According to Glassgold, who was part of Task Force, the APA Task Force proved with their report that conversion therapy cannot be successful in changing one's sexuality.¹¹⁰ According to the Task Force report and the studies they examined, some individuals affected by conversion therapy may experience depression, anxiety, distress and suicidal thoughts as a direct result of the therapy.¹¹¹ Drescher lists as one the possible reasons for faith crisis and these results when the individual is unable to see any progress in their change.¹¹² Waidzunas claims that the Task Force report tried to refute the accuracy of self-reports of ex-gays, on which almost all ex-gay research relied on.¹¹³ Task Force's reason was that they have "poor construct validity"¹¹⁴ and therefore they serve as no proof of the efficiency of conversion therapy.¹¹⁵ After the report was published, more and more ex-gay survivors came out with their stories and Spitzer came out with his apology as did Alan Chambers later.¹¹⁶

In 2012, California as the first US state passed a ban on conversion therapy for minors. If a mental health professional attempted reparative therapy on a minor, they would lose their license.¹¹⁷ In 2013 similar ban passed in New Jersey.¹¹⁸ Those bills only refer to professional therapists/psychiatrists and not to religious organizations. Therefore, as long as the person performing conversion therapy is not a licensed professional the ban does not

¹⁰⁸ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 149.

¹⁰⁹ Glassgold, "Research on SOCE," 23.

¹¹⁰ Glassgold, "Research on SOCE," 29.

¹¹¹ American Psychological Association Task Force, *Report*, 42.

¹¹² Jack Drescher et al., "The Growing Regulation of Conversion Therapy," *Journal of Medical Regulation* 102, no. 2 (January 2016): 9, <https://doi.org/10.30770/2572-1852-102.2.7>.

¹¹³ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 170.

¹¹⁴ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 170.

¹¹⁵ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 170.

¹¹⁶ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 178.

¹¹⁷ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 180.

¹¹⁸ Waidzunas, *The Straight Line*, 180.

apply to them and no legal action can be taken against them.¹¹⁹ By 2016 another two US states (Oregon and Illinois) and the District of Columbia passed legislation forbidding practising conversion therapy on minors by licensed professionals.¹²⁰ As of March 2023, the regulations of conversion therapy in the US are: 20 states and District of Columbia have passed state laws banning reparative therapy for minors, 6 states and 1 territory have partially banned the practise for minors, 3 states currently cannot implement any bans on conversion therapy and 21 states have no laws regarding conversion therapy.¹²¹ The Movement Advancement Project estimates that almost half of the LGBTQ+ US population lives in states with regulations on conversion therapy for minors.¹²² Conversion therapy is fully or partially banned in almost other 20 countries, including Germany, France, Canada, Brazil, and other countries like UK, Spain and India are awaiting the approval of proposed bans on conversion therapy.¹²³

Regulations and bans against conversion therapy grow every year, but most countries are still without any restrictions. According to Williams Institute, in states with no bans on conversion therapy more than 16,000 minors will be exposed to the practice.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ "So-Called "Conversion Therapy" and LGBTQ Youth Mental Health," The Trevor Project, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/guide/so-called-conversion-therapy-and-the-lgbtq-youth-mental-health/>.

¹²⁰ Drescher et al., "Regulation of Conversion Therapy," 10.

¹²¹ "Equality Maps: Conversion Therapy Laws," Movement Advancement Project, accessed March 2, 2023, https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/conversion_therapy.

¹²² Movement Advancement Project, "Equality Maps: Conversion Therapy Laws."

¹²³ "What is conversion therapy and when will it be banned?," BBC, January 24, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-56496423>.

¹²⁴ Christy Mallory, Taylor N.T. Brown, and Kerith J. Conron, *Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth: Update*, 1.

3 BOY ERASED AND THE MISEDUCATION OF CAMERON POST

In this part of my bachelor thesis, I will focus on the memoir *Boy Erased* (2016) by Garrard Conley and the novel *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) by Emily M. Danforth. Both books describe a journey of characters through conversion therapy and issues related to it. In this part, I will focus on how conversion therapy is portrayed, how accurate it is, its implications and results, and the harm it has caused. I will also analyse the themes that relate to conversion therapy, such as homophobia, religion and gender.

3.1 The Miseducation of Cameron Post

Emily M. Danforth was born in 1980 in Miles City, Montana and she holds an MFA in Fiction and Ph.D. in Creative writing. She is part of the LGBTQ+ community. *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is her debut novel and since then she published her second book *The Plain Bad Heroines* (2020). Even though *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* features some similarities to Danforth's life (such as the setting being in the city Danforth was born in), the book is a work of fiction.

The Miseducation of Cameron Post follows the story of Cameron in the 1980s and 1990s in rural America. Cameron was born in Miles City, Montana. At the age of twelve, she begins to discover her sexuality and upon realizing she is queer, she shares her first kiss with her friend Irene. One afternoon while staying at Irene's house, Cameron's parents get into a fatal car accident. After that Cameron's legal guardian becomes her mom's sister Ruth, who is religious, and moves in with Cameron and her grandmother. Ruth implements changes in Cameron's life such as making her attend the church youth group. During high school, Cameron befriends Coley, who also attends the youth group. Despite Coley having a boyfriend, she and Cameron soon start going on "dates" and start kissing. After having sex one night at Coley's apartment, Cameron admits her love for Coley and Coley gets scared and confesses everything to her brother and mother. In the following days, Cameron is visited by a local pastor and after that Cameron gets sent away to a conversion therapy camp in Ruth's attempt to cure her. At the camp, Cameron faces various forms of reparative therapy, in which she does not believe, and refuses to try to cure herself. She also forms a strong friendship with Adam and Jane there and they are the only support system they have. After one of the kids at the camp tries to commit suicide, Cameron and her friends decide to run from the camp. The book ends with Cameron's escape and finding peace at Quake Lake where her parents died.

3.2 Boy Erased

Garrard Conley was born in 1985 in Arkansas. He has an MFA in Fiction and an MA in English. *Boy Erased* is his first published book, which documents his journey through conversion therapy. Currently, he teaches creative writing at Kennesaw State University, participates in movements against conversion therapy and conducts lectures on that topic.¹²⁵

Boy Erased is a memoir based on Conley's experiences with conversion therapy. Conley grew up in a fundamentalist family. His father owns a car store and in order to follow his devotion to God, he decided to become a pastor as well. Conley grew up surrounded by religion and his faith in God was an important part of his life. He had a girlfriend during high school, and even though he suspected that he is gay, he tried to play the part of a good religious kid. He broke up with his girlfriend right before college, where he met David. One night David raped Garrard and then, driven by the guilt, outed Garrard to his parents, not mentioning the rape. Soon after he was outed, Garrard was presented with a choice, either to undergo a "treatment" and "cure" his homosexuality, or his family would disown him and stop paying for his education. Therefore in 2004, Garrard agreed to attend a two-week session in a facility called Love in Action (LIA). He only lasted eight days in the treatment and then his mother pulled him out. During the "treatment," Garrard developed depression and started having suicidal thoughts. After he returned home, his family did not speak about his sexuality and what happened during the conversion therapy. Years later he started talking about it with his mother and she expressed remorse and guilt about putting him through conversion therapy.

¹²⁵ "Biography," Garrard Conley, accessed March 9, 2023, <http://garrardconley.com/biography>.

4 CONVERSION THERAPY IN BOY ERASED AND THE MISEDUCATION OF CAMERON POST

Both books feature conversion therapy and tell the story of two main characters (Cameron and Garrard) and their experiences with it. For *Boy Erased* the topic of conversion therapy is more central and being a memoir, features truthful experiences of Garrard. In *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* conversion therapy is not as dominant theme. Danforth did not experience conversion therapy herself, but she did extensive research to portray it accurately.¹²⁶ The books, therefore, feature the experiences of both a lesbian and a gay man in conversion therapy.

4.1 Homophobia, queer stereotypes, and background

Homophobia is tightly connected to the experiences of conversion therapy since the people undergoing it are usually faced with homophobia, judgment, prejudice, hate and discrimination.

A dominant part of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* takes place in the 1990s, a decade during which books and papers were still being published on conversion therapy and society was still divided in its opinion about homosexuality and the possibility of “curing” it. Cameron grew up in a rural town and those generally tend to be less accepting towards homosexuality and anything that deviates out of the norm. She was taught that heterosexuality was normal and “anything else was something weird.”¹²⁷ On the contrary, Cameron’s lesbian friend Lindsey lives a completely different life, she is from San Francisco and her parents are very liberal. At one point Lindsey mentions wanting to go to a Gay Pride, her mom having queer friends and that she will join a GLBU club at her school.¹²⁸ This shows how much of a different life queer people can have when they are accepted by the society and people around them. It is not clear how Cameron’s parents would react to her being queer but when she got sent to the camp she said “my parents would never send me to a fucked-up place like this.”¹²⁹ When Cameron kisses a girl for the first time she says, “even though no one had ever told me, specifically, not to kiss a girl before, nobody had to. It was guys and girls who kissed—in our grade, on TV, in the movies, in the world.”¹³⁰ This shows

¹²⁶ Penguin Platform, “Emily Danforth Q&A | Cameron Post, Conversion Therapy & Film Adaptations,” YouTube, October 19, 2018, 1:35 to 2:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hVNYDZqhw0>.

¹²⁷ Emily M. Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 11.

¹²⁸ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 87-89.

¹²⁹ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 282.

¹³⁰ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 10-11.

that homosexuality was not considered normal at that time. This societal attitude and prejudice lead Cameron to feeling guilty about being queer and at the same time it multiplied her fear of being discovered.

Similarly to Cameron, Garrard grew up in a community where homosexuality was a taboo. Even though his story takes place ten years later, the society was still divided in its opinion on homosexuality, nonetheless the support towards the queer people was growing. Garrard recalls that his church referred to homosexuals as perverts and that media played into stereotypes when regarding the LGBTQ+ community.¹³¹ Garrard has been surrounded by homophobia his whole life that when wondering about being openly gay he thinks: “I don’t even know what it would look like to be gay. I can’t even imagine a life where my friends and family would want to talk to me if I was openly gay.”¹³² This shows that Garrard was scared to live openly and that he decided to hide because he feared losing his family and friends, who would most likely not be accepting. This is a reaction based on their religious beliefs. In the early 2000s sodomy laws were repealed in the US and the question of gay marriage was beginning to be brought up, therefore homophobic started to attack the queer community even more. In *Boy Erased* this is portrayed when Garrard recalls Baptist pastors “blaming terrorism against America on homosexuality”¹³³ and people signing petitions against pride parades. These petitions are a direct reaction to the growing acceptance of homosexuality and the rise of gay rights. In the *Miseducation of Cameron Post* the situation is similar and when Cameron attends her church the pastor says, “Don’t be fooled by what you might see on television, the kinds of sick movements happening in parts of this country”¹³⁴ and then goes on how only people without God, such as prostitutes, junkies and mentally ill are turning to homosexuality.¹³⁵ This statement generates fear and spreads prejudice, which could be seen in the past when researchers like Kinsey conducted their research and only focused on the respondents from marginalized backgrounds and completely ignored the rest of the LGBTQ+ community.¹³⁶ Generating fear is a very common tool in the homophobic and anti-gay narrative, as it was frequently used for example during the AIDS outbreak. Both Cameron and Garrard lived in fear until they were outed, all because of the conditions they were raised in and the attitude of society.

¹³¹ Garrard Conley, *Boy Erased* (London: William Collins, 2016), 6.

¹³² Conley, *Boy Erased*, 223.

¹³³ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 127.

¹³⁴ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 100.

¹³⁵ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 100.

¹³⁶ Waidzunus, *The Straight Line*, 36.

The language in both books is specific and similar to the language that was commonly used amongst conversion therapy facilities and people who did not accept the fact that homosexuality is not an illness. Most of the time in both books, whenever someone from the conversion therapy facility or church referred to homosexuality it was either as sickness, brokenness, illness, sinful desire, or same-sex attraction disorder.¹³⁷ During one session with a counsellor, Cameron mentions homosexuality to which counsellor Lydia replies “There is no such thing as homosexuality, homosexuality is a myth perpetuated by the so-called gay rights movement.”¹³⁸ This shows us how they thought about homosexuality and how they do not even acknowledge it. For them, it was a sin, just like any other. The counsellors compared homosexuality to murder while saying “Do we let murderers throw themselves parades and meet up in murders’ clubs.”¹³⁹ Statements and comparisons like this try to twist the way people are thinking about themselves. They are trying to manipulate them into feeling guilty when comparing them to actual criminals.

Statements like these are trying to change how a person views themselves are harmful and led Garrard and Cameron to doubt themselves. They both experienced internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia is when a person struggles to accept themselves for being queer, this can be manifested in the form of self-hate, depression, denial, self-disgust and fear of being discovered.¹⁴⁰ They feel shame and guilt. Compared to Cameron, Garrard experiences disgust with himself and he even thinks about trying to change himself by sleeping with his girlfriend from church. All of those feelings are a result of what society and the church taught them about being gay and how bad and immoral it is, which is the case for most people who were exposed to conversion therapy.

Another thing we can assume at least partially stemmed from homophobia is the hypocrisy other characters display in both books. In *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* the hypocrisy is shown through Cameron’s aunt Ruth, who is the one who sends her to the conversion therapy camp. On the way to the camp, Ruth asks Cameron why wouldn’t she want to change when she can and that she is only going to “stay in the life of sinful desire.”¹⁴¹ Cameron replies by asking if the sinful desire is in the same category as premarital sex,

¹³⁷ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 99.

¹³⁸ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 290.

¹³⁹ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 290.

¹⁴⁰ “Internalised Homophobia,” The Rainbow Project, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.rainbow-project.org/internalised-homophobia/#>.

¹⁴¹ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 265.

which is an attack on Ruth since she was engaging in premarital sex with her fiancé.¹⁴² Therefore according to Bible, Ruth is as much of a sinner as Cameron. A similar case happened in *Boy Erased*, where Garrard caught his dad watching pornography, which is according to some interpretations of the Bible considered a sin. However, Garrard's mother dismissed this idea and is certain that he watched it "by mistake."¹⁴³ The reoccurring pattern in both books that is being preached is that sin is a sin. However, it seems to only apply when the sin is not concerning the parents/guardians of Cameron and Garrard. This shows that the characters acted hypocritically and had double standards.

Homophobia played a big role in both Cameron and Garrard's life, for example, they were exposed to slurs and insults. They both lived in fear, shame, and the guilt society put on them, the church, and various homophobic people in their life. We can see how the fear influenced Cameron's life when her parents died and her first thought was: "She doesn't know about Irene and me at all, nobody knows."¹⁴⁴ Before she found out her parents are dead, she thought she was about to be discovered. She was so scared of being outed that for a moment she felt relieved before the realization that her parents died hit. In *Boy Erased* Garrard found himself in similar situation, however in Garrard's case, the situation may seem even more complicated since he was religious and struggled with the acceptance of himself, while Cameron comes to accept herself all the more quick. This was one of the reasons why Garrard went into the "treatment". We can assume that the fear, guilt and shame may lead a person into conversion therapy since many people do not want to face discrimination and they want to escape these feelings like in Garrard's case. He went into therapy because of internalized homophobia, problems with acceptance, and the pressure of his family. On the contrary, Cameron went into therapy solely because of the pressure from Ruth. This chapter explored how societal and religious beliefs affected the main characters. It also showed how the facilities spoke about homosexuality, both used language that was and still is common among real ex-gay facilities. Both books also mirror the stance and opinions of society towards homosexuality at that time.

4.2 The facilities and methods of therapy

Both Cameron and Garrard were sent to conversion therapy after they had been outed. The guy who raped Garrard outs him to his mother and she then takes him home from the college

¹⁴² Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 265.

¹⁴³ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 70.

¹⁴⁴ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 29.

he has been attending. After he gets home his dad tells him: “You’ll never step foot in this house again if you act on your feeling, you’ll never finish your education.”¹⁴⁵ Since Garrard is not a minor anymore, his parents cannot force him to attend conversion therapy. On the contrary, Cameron is a minor when she is outed and therefore her legal guardian has the right to send her to attend conversion therapy. Cameron does not want to attend the camp which highlights why the ban on conversion therapy for minors is so important.

Out of fear and despair Garrard agrees on attending a two-week program in Love in Action. Even though he is presented with a choice, it is not really a choice since his dad threatens to disown him. He expresses this impossible choice when saying “to prevent myself from drowning, I agreed to my parents’ plan.”¹⁴⁶ And simultaneously he is still dealing with his inner conflicts. It may have seemed easier for Garrard to accept the conditions than to lose everything. After agreeing Garrard thinks: “I had too much invested in my current life to leave it behind, in my family and in the increasingly blurry God I’d known since I was a toddler.”¹⁴⁷ This shows that Garrard agreed to conversion therapy only under the pressure.

Love in Action (LIA) was briefly mentioned in chapter 1.5, it is one of the first conversion therapy organizations. The branch Garrard attended was run by John Smid. LIA based their “therapy” on treating homosexuality as an addiction caused by generational and childhood trauma. LIA had a twelve-step program that was similar to the system used by for example AA (alcoholics anonymous). Whereas the facility (God’s promise) where Cameron was sent to did not use the word “cure”, they described their treatment as “helping teens come back to God”¹⁴⁸ and that this would get rid of those “unwanted desires.”¹⁴⁹ Even though both facilities thought of homosexuality differently, still both believed that you could be cured. The inaccurate belief that homosexuality is curable is still prevalent amongst ex-gay facilities resulting in creating more stigma and spreading misinformation.

In *Boy Erased* conversion therapy is thoroughly portrayed. To “overcome” homosexuality Garrard had to finish the whole twelve steps, which could take years. The first step would be acknowledging “how you became dependent on things that are not from God.”¹⁵⁰ Since most reparative therapies worked on the “patient” believing in the change

¹⁴⁵ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 135.

¹⁴⁶ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 162.

¹⁴⁷ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 5.

¹⁴⁸ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 208.

¹⁴⁹ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 208.

¹⁵⁰ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 4.

and committing themselves to it, acknowledging would be the first step how to make them think so. In *Boy Erased* the method used the most was group sessions where they would share stories and do various exercises. One of the exercises was creating a genogram, which is essentially a family tree tracking down behaviour and behavioural patterns. Garrard and the group had to trace any “sins”, patterns of addiction and sinful behaviour like alcoholism, divorce, homosexuality, gambling and drugs.¹⁵¹ LIA believed that the cause of one’s homosexuality came from childhood trauma and generational sin. This excuse did not work in Garrard’s case since his parents had no issues and he had no recollection of any childhood trauma. One of the other LIA’s clients responded to this “They say sometimes the biggest sins skip generation.”¹⁵² LIA claims that homosexuality has roots in childhood and since sometimes their “patients” had no experiences to back this up, LIA had to come up with another reason because their logic would not work. The basis for most conversion therapy is that there is a reason behind why someone is homosexual. And if there is none they could use, they will just make one up, just like in Garrard’s and Cameron’s case. Even though homosexuality is a normal variant of sexual orientation and there is no reason why someone is a homosexual.

In the *Miseducation of Cameron Post*, Cameron was presented with a similar exercise like Garrard at her first one-on-one sessions in God’s Promise. It was the so-called iceberg exercise, where Cameron was given a picture of an iceberg and at the top was written “Cameron’s same-sex attraction disorder” and she had to gradually write things in the iceberg that were the “causes” of her homosexuality. She would have to write things related to her love for sports and phrases such as “Lindsey’s influence” and “unhealthy bonding with boys.”¹⁵³ God’s Promise argued that she would be free of the sinful desires once she dealt with the causes. The causes were mainly stemming from stereotypical gender norms, which Cameron was not fulfilling. This proves that in both books the facilities were looking for causes of homosexuality and that they were not accepting of the fact that homosexuality has no cause and that it is not a reaction to certain behaviour.

God’s Promise was also a boarding school, whereas LIA only offered daily sessions, meaning Cameron was completely shut off from the rest of the world because she could only spend time at the camp and on approved trips. She also could not communicate with anyone else for three months apart from the people at the camp. While Garrard only stayed at LIA

¹⁵¹ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 27.

¹⁵² Conley, *Boy Erased*, 32.

¹⁵³ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 296.

during the day, he also could not leave the hotel he was staying at, only with supervision or his mother and he could only go to places the LIA approved. In LIA they would also take Garrard's phone every day and kept it during the sessions, while the staff would go through it and look for anything "suspicious" like text messages and images. This suggests that the organizations wanted to have their "patients" under control to manipulate and control them more easily while keeping them under supervision. Both facilities claimed these rules are for security reasons and a tool that will help the individuals. Except it seemed more like a tactic to completely isolate people from anything else and feed them their rhetoric until they break or accept it. Cameron realizes this after some time in God's promise: "The longer I stayed at Promise, the more all the stuff they were throwing at me, at us, started to stick."¹⁵⁴ Garrard had a similar experience when he started to believe that his "sinful urges" were like the ones the guy who raped him had.¹⁵⁵ We can see that the facilities and their tactics slowly invaded their minds and thinking and made them question everything. When Garrard first got to LIA the receptionist said to him that "they are all one big family,"¹⁵⁶ which seems like a statement that is supposed to create a false sense of community and safety. All of this may lead to a false sense of acceptance in the community, which gets the person stuck there and makes it harder to leave or quit the "treatment". Garrard experienced a similar form of isolation when he was growing up. During his youth, all he knew was his community and the church, which rejected any other ideology and even denied evolution.

Both facilities used other means of conversion therapy, such as bible study and prayers, which were common amongst religious conversion therapy groups and still are popular. Since *Boy Erased* is a memoir, we can assume that the practices are portrayed truthfully and in the case of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, the author tried to portray the practices as realistically as possible. Both books portrayed the practices accurately to what it was like at the certain time period. The books showed us how conversion therapy and the ex-gay movement thought of homosexuality and what methods they used to perform these practices.

4.3 Gender identity

Gender plays an important role in both books and in terms of conversion therapy, several conversion exercises stem from the stereotypical gender portrayal and norms. Some people believe and assume that if a man is too feminine or a woman is too manly, they are

¹⁵⁴ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 361.

¹⁵⁵ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 133.

¹⁵⁶ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 18.

homosexuals. Some may also believe that this can be the cause of homosexuality although sexuality cannot be predicted and cannot be influenced by gender expression and gender identity, which is unique to everyone despite their sexuality.¹⁵⁷

In both books, the facilities provided exercises connected with strengthening one's femininity or masculinity. Both facilities had strict dress codes. Cameron had to wear a school uniform on weekdays, which featured a skirt and during the rest of the week, they had to wear appropriate clothing, that was approved by the staff. Garrard had to be dressed according to LIA's handbook, which stated:

Men: Shirts worn at all times, including periods of sleep. T-shirts without sleeves not permitted, whether worn as outer- or undergarments, including, "muscle shirts" or other tank tops. Facial hair removed seven days weekly. Sideburns never below top of ear.

Women: Bras worn at all times, exceptions during sleep. Skirts must fall at the knee or bellow. Tank tops allowed only if worn with a blouse. Legs and underarms shaved at least twice weekly.¹⁵⁸

These rules just conform to the gender stereotypes, like that women had to wear skirts and always have shaved legs and armpits, whereas men only shaved their facial hair. The rules also encouraged not wearing anything too revealing.

In God's Promise apart from sessions with counsellors the kids had to participate in gender-appropriate activities. For boys this would be something like going fishing, playing sports, helping out on ranches and hiking whereas girls had to go on trips to beauty salons, bake, learn how to care for a child and attend visits from cosmetic sellers.¹⁵⁹ These gender-appropriate activities came from the stereotype that boys should do the more masculine work and provide for the family whereas ladies should only focus on caring for the family and looking pretty. One of the counsellors in LIA called Cosby believed that for some boys the "lack of sports in childhood could lead to effeminate behaviour"¹⁶⁰ and that the lack of sports is the "masculine part that has been missing for so long."¹⁶¹ On the contrary, Cameron's interest in sports was put on her iceberg exercise as a reason behind her same-sex attractions.

While at LIA Garrard had to memorize a passage from the handbook that was on gender identity:

¹⁵⁷ Michelson and Harrison, *LGBTQ Life in America*, 105.

¹⁵⁸ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 3-4.

¹⁵⁹ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 300.

¹⁶⁰ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 143-144.

¹⁶¹ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 146.

We want to encourage each client, male and female, by affirming your gender identity. We also want each client to pursue integrity in all his/her actions and appearances. Therefore, any belongings, appearances, clothing, actions, or humor that might connect you to an inappropriate past are excluded from the program. These hindrances are called *False Images* (FI). FI behavior may include hyper-masculinity, seductive-clothing, mannish/boyish attire (on women), excessive jewelry (on men), and “campy” or gay/lesbian behavior and talk.¹⁶²

It has not been only LIA that has been pushing gender norms on Garrard. He has been facing them since he was little. When he was nine years old his parents arranged a treasure hunt for him and the treasure consisted of fake and real jewellery. Garrard liked to wear and play with the jewellery until his dad stopped him “because he was mocking the treasure”¹⁶³ and upsetting the pirate that had hidden the treasure.¹⁶⁴ These comments exposed Garrard to toxic masculinity and made him hide a side of himself. There is a similar case in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* when one of Cameron’s friends Adam comes back to God’s Promise after a Christmas break with a shaved head. He states that he had to shave his head because his dad told him that his hair was too feminine.¹⁶⁵

The rules about gender identity in God’s Promise also included a change in the language they used. For example, they were not allowed to use the word “guys” when talking about a group with girls in it.¹⁶⁶ No one was allowed to call Cameron “Cam”, since according to Lydia it was an “even more masculine adaptation of her already androgynous name.”¹⁶⁷ The facility also put emphasis on forming same-sex friendships to “affirm appropriate gender roles”¹⁶⁸ and create “gender-appropriate friendships.”¹⁶⁹ That meant that every person would be paired with a same-sex roommate.

We can see that both facilities believed in the stereotypical gender norms and tried to push them on the main characters. The facilities assumed that by strengthening the gender that has been assigned to their “patients” at birth, they would be able to “heal” themselves from homosexuality. Both facilities used this as a method of conversion therapy, which is an accurate mean of conversion therapy since ex-gay facilities use gender norms and force

¹⁶² Conley, *Boy Erased*, 15.

¹⁶³ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 64.

¹⁶⁴ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 64.

¹⁶⁵ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 357.

¹⁶⁶ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 327.

¹⁶⁷ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 383.

¹⁶⁸ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 253.

¹⁶⁹ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 254.

them onto their clients. This mirrors the harmful stereotypes society has about gender and gender roles.

4.4 Religion

Religion played an important part in the type of conversion therapy both Cameron and Garrard had to endure. Since the practice of reparative therapy is banned on the professional level in some states in the US, the only facilities that can still provide reparative therapy are the religious ones. Still, it is necessary to state that both books are set in times when conversion therapy was legal in any form and in all the states.

Garrard has much more of a religious background than Cameron. His dad is a Baptist pastor, and he grew up in religious community. He was religious before his time in LIA. On the contrary, Cameron didn't seem to have a such strong relationship with God. She describes all those times she has prayed as "no matter what the occasion, it had eventually ended up feeling phony, like I was playing at a relationship with God, just like any little kid playing house or grocery store or anything else, but not like it was real."¹⁷⁰ She then explains that she would need faith to make the praying feel real and she does not have it. Her relationship with religion does not change much during the book. During her time at the camp, she seems to mock religion and the religious aspect of the "therapy". We can see this when Ruth is leaving Cameron at the camp, and she screams "Quick! Fix me, fix me fast, Jesus. Heal me up! Quick, before it sets for life!"¹⁷¹ The pinnacle of her relationship with religion is the final scene in the book. After she escapes God's Promise with her friends, she arrives at the lake where her parents died. There she decides to swim naked in the lake and make peace with the loss of her parents and her time at God's promise. This whole scene feels very similar to the process of baptism. In a way, Cameron washes off everything that happened while swimming in the lake. Baptism can symbolize rebirth. This is something that Cameron experiences after making peace with everything in the lake. She makes peace with her parents dying and accepts herself. After that, she reaches the shore and is ready to begin her new life.

As mentioned before Garrard was raised religiously. However, due to his inner conflicts, he started to have a faith crisis. When he first got to LIA he prayed to God, but he expressed his doubts: "God, [...] I don't know who You are anymore, but please give me the wisdom

¹⁷⁰ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 39.

¹⁷¹ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 283.

to survive this.”¹⁷² In the book, Garrard numerously expressed his gradual loss of faith, which is very hard to accept because “how could his church be wrong.”¹⁷³ We can see that the doubts started even before Garrard’s stay at LIA. However, during his time in LIA, he experienced a more severe faith crisis. As mentioned in the first part of this thesis, faith crisis is common amongst religious “patients”, since they cannot change themselves and therefore are not fulfilling God’s wishes. They can then experience a loss of faith and start doubting their religion. “Lord, make me pure”¹⁷⁴ is something Garrard used to pray and repeat while in conversion therapy. Each time he said those words, they became more desperate and started to lose all their meaning.¹⁷⁵ This shows the desperation he felt as he slowly stopped feeling the presence of God in his life. All of this can then lead to more mental health problems, like depression or suicide.

Another thing that had Garrard stay in LIA was fear. More specifically fear of God and Hell. Garrard mentions that even as a little kid he had reoccurring nightmares about hell. This fear manifested even when a guy he kissed would smoke cannabis and talk about being gay. The only thing Garrard was thinking about was hell: “I needed to guard myself against all of this. I still believed, like my father, that Hell was real. I still believed that I would feel its fire licking my skin for all eternity if I continued on this path.”¹⁷⁶ After Garrard was raped, he feared what was coming for him in the afterlife. He was so focused on the idea of hell and punishment that he thought that the rape was his punishment for being gay. Religion clearly had an impact on how Garrard perceived the world and how he thought about homosexuality. He was not able to accept himself and struggled with a faith crisis that led to doubt, shame, fear and later to suicidal thoughts. After all this Garrard no longer talked to God and he describes his relationship with God as

“His voice is no longer there. What happened to me has made it impossible to speak with God, [...] My ex-gay therapist took Him away from me, and no matter how many different churches I attend, I will feel the same dead weight in my chest. [...] I will continue to search. And even if I no longer believe in Hell, I will continue to struggle with the feat of it. Perhaps one day I will hear His voice again. Perhaps not. It’s a sadness I deal with on a daily basis.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² Conley, *Boy Erased*, 5.

¹⁷³ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 55.

¹⁷⁴ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 9.

¹⁷⁵ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 142.

¹⁷⁶ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 309.

¹⁷⁷ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 337.

This explains how conversion therapy changed his relationship with religion. And how connected religion is with conversion therapy. Conversion therapy can negatively impact the person's perception of religion and their relationship with it. This chapter proves that religion plays tremendous part in conversion therapy. The portrayal in both books is accurate in how much of an effect it can have on a person, as for example Garrard seems to struggle with his relationship with religion after LIA.

4.5 Consequences and the harm

As mentioned in the first part of this thesis, conversion therapy has several negative impacts on the people undergoing it. When both main characters start conversion therapy, they quickly learn that it takes months or even years to “cure” homosexuality. In *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, they mention that no one has ever passed the program or cured themselves in the existence of God's Promise.¹⁷⁸ One of Cameron's friends then attacks the poor methodology for measuring the results, claiming that there is no real test that could prove the improvement.¹⁷⁹ Garrard has a similar realization when one of the other people in LIA shares the progress of their conversion: “There was no way to know if he was experiencing something real or simply faking it, [...] I can no longer be certain of his conversion that I can of any ex-gay's.”¹⁸⁰ This proves, that even the characters realize how inaccurate the ex-gay testimonies are. The inaccuracy of those testimonies then discredits the claimed success. Most of the “successful” results of conversion therapy stand on the testimonies of the “cured” patients and they are being discredited because of that. The books correctly describe the issue with that methodology.

During Garrard's early sessions he meets a middle-aged man, who shares his story with the group. He then confesses that he just attempted suicide for the seventh time since he is in the program.¹⁸¹ The reason behind those suicide attempts is not disclosed, but it can be assumed that it is related to the therapy and his time in LIA. As it is revealed later, it may have been because John Smid (the leader) told the man that “it would be better for him to kill himself than to live as a homosexual.”¹⁸² This statement is not only incredibly harmful, but it also shows the hypocrisy. They are all against sinning but here they advise him to kill himself, which is a grave sin according to Bible. Garrard also struggled with suicidal

¹⁷⁸ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 391.

¹⁷⁹ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 391.

¹⁸⁰ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 322.

¹⁸¹ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 22-23.

¹⁸² Conley, *Boy Erased*, 24.

thoughts even before his time in LIA. It started when he decided to commit to changing himself and fighting his homosexuality while also struggling to cope with the fact that he was raped. One day he goes to visit jail with his father “as an alternative to the suicide he contemplated almost nightly.”¹⁸³ The suicidal thoughts escalate during his time in LIA. He then reached out to his mom and confessed how he has been feeling. After that his mom decided to end the treatment. Considering suicide was the only reason he got out. Similarly, in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* there is a case of a suicide attempt. It is one of the kids at the camp who “used a razor to cut his genitals several times; then he poured bleach over the wounds.”¹⁸⁴ After this incident, Cameron and her friends realize that the only way how to survive this is to escape or wait till their graduate. They then decide to come up with an escape plan and leave the facility. In both books, the suicide materializes the threat conversion therapy represents. This was like a reality check for them. It portrays how real the harm is and how much influence it has on a person. Both books show the rawness of the harm conversion therapy can present, since many people that have been exposed to the treatment struggle with suicidal thoughts or even attempt/commit suicide.

Another similarity that Garrard and Cameron shared was the feeling of slowly losing themselves. After a few days in God’s Promise Cameron’s friend asks her “if she started to forget herself yet.”¹⁸⁵ She then explains that “Promise has a way of making you forget yourself. [...] Even if you’re resisting the rhetoric of Lydia. You still sort of disappear here.”¹⁸⁶ Later when Cameron goes home for Christmas she expects to feel like her old self. She describes this feeling as “I also wanted to feel like myself, as if it would land on me all at once, this feeling like I was me again because I was home. And it didn’t come.”¹⁸⁷ It is evident that Cameron slowly lost herself and with it even the sense of home. She did not feel comfortable there again and it disrupted the relationships with her family. In *Boy Erased* this is shown when Garrard has a breakdown and screams and curses at God. He described this as “therapy has turned me into someone I don’t recognize.”¹⁸⁸ This shows that the characters slowly stopped feeling like themselves due to the therapy. Several factors contributed to this; being forced into something you do not believe in, being fed harmful rhetoric, being forced

¹⁸³ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 162.

¹⁸⁴ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 380.

¹⁸⁵ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 310.

¹⁸⁶ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 310.

¹⁸⁷ Danforth, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, 344.

¹⁸⁸ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 275.

into following rules, and most importantly conversion therapy tries to erase and disregard an essential part of “patient’s” identity.

Since most patients attend conversion therapy under the pressure from their families, it may create a barrier between them and the family members. In Cameron’s case, we can assume that she decided to cut the ties. The book ends with her running away from the camp. However, it seems that she will not return home. Regarding Garrard, we know what happened after he left LIA. He did not talk about it with his parents until several years later when his mother started to open up and talk about it and show remorse and regret about sending him there. However, the relationship that was hurt the most was between Garrard and his father. The communication between them after LIA was often very brief. Eventually, years later Garrard’s dad says to him “I just want you to be happy.”¹⁸⁹ This symbolizes somewhat of a truce between them. Still, Garrard thinks that “their family will never be what it otherwise might have been.”¹⁹⁰

This chapter proves that conversion therapy had an immense effect on the characters as it affected their mental health, relationships with their family, their sense of self and it created many unpleasant memories. It also described the harms truthfully as many survivors of conversion therapy experience terrible things like Cameron and Garrard did. Both books portrayed most common harms which the survivors of conversion therapy experience.

¹⁸⁹ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 338.

¹⁹⁰ Conley, *Boy Erased*, 337.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to analyse the topic of conversion therapy and the relevant themes associated with it in the memoir *Boy Erased* by Garrard Conley and the novel *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily M. Danforth. The point was to show how both books portray the means of conversion therapy and its harms accurately, while exposing unaccepting opinions present in the society and religious setting.

This thesis explored closely themes that are directly connected to conversion therapy. First it looked at homophobia and harmful societal beliefs and opinions. It proved how much of an impact it has on queer people, since these opinions are pushed onto them and can lead to feelings of self-hate and self-disgust. Both books truthfully highlighted how divided the society was at those times. Gender stereotypes were also depicted in both books. The facilities used to them as a method of conversion therapy. Those methods stemmed from the gender norms that were and are present in society.

As mentioned several times before, religion is closely tied to conversion therapy. Especially lately when conversion therapy is prohibited to be performed by licensed therapists and psychologists in several states in the US. The whole concept of conversion therapy stands on false stigma surrounding homosexuality. *Boy erased* and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* exposed how the lack of acceptance in religious communities leads to harmful portrayal of homosexuality, ultimately harming queer religious individuals, resulting in doubt, faith crisis and eventually ruining their relationship with religion.

Both books depict the harm conversion therapy causes. The experiences of the protagonists show the undeniable harm that can be manifested through several harms affecting mental health such as depression, suicidal thoughts, anxiety and PTSD. The therapy was executed through methods that were/are commonly used by ex-gay facilities, including group sessions, one-on-one sessions, gender-appropriate activities, prayers, isolation and others.

In conclusion, *Boy Erased* and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* provide truthful insights into conversion therapy and its impact. Through the stories of Cameron and Garrard the need for a total ban on the practice is emphasized, together with the need for acceptance and equality for the LGBTQ+ community.

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