

Notes on ACT-UP! by Benjamin Shepard

Something extraordinary has taken place over the last decade. Yet much of it stemmed from a single source. For all of my life as an activist, one group has remained a fixture on the cultural landscape: the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). I first heard about ACT UP when I was in college. “Silence = Death,” the group’s mantra, immediately spoke to me, informing me that I should let go of the shame I felt as a teenager about needing to get tested (translated as, having had sex without condoms or with strangers). “Silence=Death” meant the shame my godfather felt about having queer sex and testing positive was no longer necessary. In the years before he died, his veterinarian wrote that he had lots of pets as justification for prescribing so many medications he was taking for himself. They were drugs that AIDS treatment activists knew saved lives. Unfortunately, these life saving medications had not yet been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for human use. “Situation normal, all fucked up...,” unofficial ACT UP scribe David Feinberg concluded of the whole mess.

As the years went on, the notion that sexual freedom was ok would become a more and more embattled idea. Many of my friends from the club days of the '80s would encounter discrimination, positive test results, and social derision for their choices to live autonomous sexual identities. By the early '90s, we went from ecstasy to ACT UP meetings together. One of the most important notions of ACT UP was no that one ever asked you what your identity was as long as you cared to get involved. I protested, shared stories, watched friends die, and became queer with ACT UP. There was never an official tally of membership lists but at its peak in the early 1990’s, cities around the world maintained ACT UP chapters. Today, chapters in New York and Philadelphia continue to thrive, while countless affinity groups have spun off into differing organizations. This report considers just a few of these tributaries. While there is not room to look at the group’s history in its entirety, this collection of vignettes serves as brief reconsideration of ACT UP’s history and legacy on the activist landscape.

From Rage to Sartorial Splendor

Fall 1993: we poured the ashes of friends we'd lost to the virus all over the steps in front of the California State House for my first action with ACT UP. I met everyone in the Safeway parking lot at 18th and Market Street for the bus ride from San Francisco to Sacramento. G'dali, one of the organizers from ACT UP/Golden Gate, gave a brief orientation. Wearing faded, beaten-up jeans with "Clean Needles Save Lives" and "Free AIDS Drugs" stickers, leather boots, and jacket, this fierce activist gently explained the best ways to hold our hands if we were arrested, among other tricks. Later, we recalled the names of all the friends we'd lost. I recalled my godfather, who'd died only three years earlier. Armed with a bundle of emotions ranging from rage to grief, placards, and whistles, we marched to the state house, to protest Governor Pete Wilson's vetoes of health care spending. Drummers hit solemn measured beats. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence walked alongside a coffin carrying the ashes; a Gregorian chant droned through the air. The police beat a number of us with batons as we poured the ashes. One of my favorite memories of the day is the image of a man in a leopard skin leotard, rhinestone drop earrings, and a lush moustache, carrying a sign proclaiming, "Looks Don't Kill, Wilson's Vetoes Do!"

ACT UP brought that sensibility - a certain sartorial splendor - to every action it did, and in so doing transformed the way activism was conducted. "Who do you have to fuck in this town to get arrested?" David Feinberg wondered during an office takeover when it seemed no one could get arrested at the FDA. I remember laughing out loud reading Feinberg's words. It was the same feeling as reading Woody Allen's *Without Feathers*, except Feinberg was writing about maintaining a sex life, living, and ultimately dying with the virus.

That was the beauty of ACT UP. The group offered an outlet for an otherwise horrendous

situation. Sometimes it was through humor, style, and camp; sometimes it was through direct action.

The group recognized the subversive effectiveness of a joke, as well as the sentiment that many were tired of spending their days mourning lost friends, possibilities, and sexual communities. "Don't mourn, organize," IWW organizer Joe Hill pleaded on eve of his execution after frame-up for murder; ACT UP concurred. Long-time member Bill Dobbs explained the approach: "People have long wondered how we were able to cross the *au courant* downtown life with uptown politics. It combined sex, politics, and brains in an electric way. It drew the boys out of the bars and into the streets."

AIDS/Sex Panic....

And the boys needed to be drawn out of the bars. AIDS threatened to wipe out many of the gains of the gay liberation years of the 1970's. For Liberationists "gay" was a revolutionary identity capable of dismantling institutions which pathologized sexuality. Their movement would free sexuality from the constraining cultural prerequisites of sex and gender. The over-arching motto 'Our Bodies, Our Selves,' served as both a health slogan and call for self-determination mobilized a generation of Women's and Gay Liberation activists. AIDS and the right wing attack it signified threatened this notion. Panic constituted much of the early response to the epidemic. Sexual panics, such as those which accompanied the AIDS years, stem from the larger overarching idea of moral panic which accompany periods of structural changes. AIDS panic become a specific irrational response in to the disease in and of itself but are part of sex panics. Sex panics are generally the product of cultural backlashes. "During a sex panic, a wide array of free-floating cultural fears are mapped onto specific populations who are then ostracized, victimized, and punished." Historian Allan Bérubé defines a sex panic as "a moral crusade that leads to crackdowns on sexual outsiders."

Cultural institutions draw parameters around deviance during a moral panic. Stanley Cohen

describes the process:

...a condition, episode, person or groups of persons emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented as a threat to societal fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people... Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk-lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and

long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way that society perceives itself.

Sex panics organize anxieties around stigmatized groups, from witches to communists to queers. The AIDS panic targeted queers, Haitians, prostitutes, and leathermen. Morality crusades always require their targets.

Bath House Closures

Long before today's new gay right (Gabriel Rotello, Michelangelo Signorile, Andrew Sullivan, and Larry Kramer), Randy Shilts, another gay journalist, lamented about queer sexuality in the *San Francisco Examiner*, the most widely distributed paper in the city. In story after story, Shilts supported the case for the closures of the baths which he patronized. In *And the Band Played On*, Shilts used age old stereotypes to describe those on the margins of gay life. The tone of his writing suggested that certain subgroups were to blame for the AIDS epidemic. In a famous passage, Shilts described Ken Horne, a leatherman and an early casualty of the epidemic, along conventional moralistic lines:

As the focus of sex shifted from passion to technique, Ken learned all the things one could do to wring pleasure from one's body. The sexual practices would become more esoteric; that was the only way to keep it from getting boring. The warehouse district alleys of both Manhattan and San Francisco had throughout the 1970's grown increasingly crowded with bars for the burgeoning numbers of leathermen...

What leathermen endured in the early years of the epidemic, as their bars were padlocked, serves as a microcosm for the anatomy of sex panics. Even though evidence to link leather sex with higher rates of HIV was never demonstrated, the AIDS panic came close to wiping out an entire subculture, the leather underground of San Francisco.

The process was repeated as bath houses were closed. Scientific discourse masked prejudice only thinly. Medical sociologists Murray and Payne note: "Traditional moralism better explains the public health policy initiatives taken and not taken regarding the incurable diseases AIDS than does existing scientific evidence." Centers for Disease Control data found use of the baths had no statistically significant

effects. The authors of a San Francisco Department of Public Health study on the baths, McKusic et al looked at two groups, bath goers and bar goers, concentrating on two self reported behaviors. McKusic found those in the bath-going sample were no more likely to have had receptive anal intercourse with new or secondary partners than the bar-going sample. 56% of the bath-going sample reported no anal sex in comparison with 50% of the bar sample. In spite of these results, McKusic et al consistently referred to bathgoers as sexual compulsives. Merv Silverman, the head of the San Francisco Department of Health who lead the bathhouse closures, confessed that he had never had data to confirm bath-going as an HIV risk factor. Yet the baths, a significant institution for a group with few safe havens in a culture which outlaws their sexual activity, were closed in San Francisco and New York.

In the following years, good gays divided from bad as Leatherfolk became scapegoates. Thompson continues, "Leatherfolk are well aware, too, of their betrayal by gay leaders who distance themselves for the sake of mainstream approval. There's a political naiveté about sacrificing the civil rights of a few for the acceptance of the many." Yet, this is exactly what happened. Eric Rofes recalled, "As a community, we told ourselves that if we were the best little boys in the world" and publicly distanced ourselves from the bad gays, hoping the AIDS nightmare would end swiftly. It was a foundation built on sand. Leatherfolk, "know that a duplicitous myth of 'good' versus 'bad' gay people is good for no one." Nonetheless, AIDS phobia was real. A long term survivor recalled the initial cultural message of getting HIV: "'So and so I know has got the Gay Cancer but he was a slut.' It was that kind of a reaction, 'He deserves it.'" It just reinforced what we had been told."

AIDS panic built on a series of panics, from the Great Kiddy Porn Panic of 1977 to the Meese Commission Report of 1986. Both played on age old stereotypes and fears. The Kiddy Porn Panic took hold after a number of states passed gay civil rights ordinances in the mid 1970's. In response, Anita Bryant and John Briggs began their national campaign to "Save our Children" from Homosexuality. The ordinance would have banned gay teachers from the schools. Briggs and Bryant skillfully played on fear of homophobia and its contagion to stir grassroots opposition gay civil rights ordinances in Florida, Minnesota, Kansas, and Oregon. Child seduction hysteria was a key ingredient in this initial backlash against sexual liberation. The Reagan era Meese Commission Report on Pornography seized on the same

cultural anxieties and phobias to call for the censorship of adult materials almost a decade later.

Child seduction scares create mass hysteria to generate support for "otherwise unacceptable" investigation and prosecutorial powers. The child seduction model follows a careful schema by which we organize and evaluate information. It assumes "sex monsters" pose such a terrible threat to women and children that we must give up our most basic rights to stop them. Anyone who rejects this assumption either naively and/or perversely denies that sexual abuse, harassment, or discrimination exists or is a "sexual monster" himself. While the sex monster schema achieves its maximum political potency when used to invoke fears for the safety of children, it can also be applied to those who enjoy nonnormative sexual practices and cultures.

Child seduction hysteria linked queer sexuality and criminality in a way that split the movement. In an effort to gain respectability, many of the "good gays" and lesbians turned their backs on the ravages of the panic. Their silence opened the door for a generations of intrusions of those on the margins of the queer world. Pat Califia explained:

The police do whatever we let them get away with. They don't bust the biggest gay-lib organization or the most popular bar in town. They close the hustlers' bars, the drag bars, and the leather bars. Right now they can get away with collecting the names of men who might be pedophiles, entrapping boy lovers, and putting them in prison. They can get away with intimidating and prosecuting lesbian and gay minors. Does anybody seriously think they will stop there unless we force them to? There are enough archaic sex laws on the books- laws relating to pornography, sodomy, public sex, and prostitution - to put many of us in prison if the police are allowed to use entrapment and surveillance.

And surveillance continued after 1977. Over the next two decades, surveillance only got worse as queers continued to be arrested for having sex – even in their homes.

Sex Panics Began at the Margins

Literature for ACT UP/Golden Gate featured Pastor Martin Niemoller's saying from 1945: First they came for the Jews but I wasn't Jewish, etc... In the AIDS panic, first they came for the leathermen, the fetish communities, the Haitians, the prostitutes, the promiscuous gay men, and finally everyone else. Cultural biases let this happen.

In the initial phases of the health crisis, with little information or epidemiological data, people fell back on cultural biases to explain the little understood new affliction. "Early on, we believed it was something that would only hit leather men, then we thought it only hit men in San Francisco and New York, then it hit my lover. That's how we learned about the disease," one long-term survivor remarked. Before the disease spread across the world, leathermen, a group on the periphery of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) world, were thought somehow to be the cause of the new disease. Rubin notes: "Stereotypes that leather sexualities (particularly SM and fisting) were inherently dangerous, unsafe, undesirable, or unhealthy have been easily assimilated into concerns over AIDS-related hazards. Thus leather sexualities have been prominent among the ideological scapegoats for AIDS fear, panic, and loathing." Mark Thompson notes: "Moral revisionists propagated the belief that men into leather were in some way responsible for AIDS; the perceived excesses of radical sexuality, in this case were seen to equal death."

ACTing UP Against a Script of Domination

By 1985 a new radical politics emerged to challenge this script of domination. "No matter how you look at it, you're being pushed," Vito Russo screamed at a crowd of 700 as the bathhouse closures were taking hold in New York. "And I don't want you to jump out of the windows. I want you to push back." The night was November 14, 1985. New York Governor Mario Cuomo had just signed legislation prohibiting "high risk" behaviors - oral and anal intercourse - in commercial establishments, i.e. baths, tea rooms, etc. Vaginal intercourse was not included in the ban and GLBT activists cried foul. Bathhouse closures played into a pernicious homophobic cultural script.

Bad news continued in 1986 with a supreme court decision, which further legalized the state based attack on homosexuals. The story of Bowers vs. Hardwick began in 1982, when Michael Hardwick was arrested in his own home for having sex with another man. He appealed the case up the Supreme Court, who upheld Georgia's sodomy law in 1986. In essence, the Supreme Court was ruling that the constitutional right to privacy does not extend to gay people. In his dissent, Justice Harry Blackman argued that the issue facing the court involved a fundamental question of self determination. "In a country

as diverse as ours, there may be many 'right' ways of conducting relationships." Blackman, the author of *Roe vs. Wade*, suggested the right to choose a partner should be considered along the same lines as the right to sovereignty over one's body. Just as there is a constitutional right for women 'to choose' whether or not to have an abortion, there should also be a right for people to choose with whom they would like to form intimate bonds. Blackman concluded:

In a variety of circumstances we have recognized that a necessary corollary of giving individuals freedom to choose how to conduct their lives is acceptance of the fact different individuals will make different choices... The court claims that its decision today merely refuses to recognize a fundamental right to engage in homosexual sodomy; what the Court really has refused to recognize is the fundamental interest all individuals have in controlling the nature of their intimate associations with others.

The decision offered a glimpse of what Eve Sedgwick would describe as a lack of benign sexual variance. Civil rights laws extend protections to people on the basis of race, class, and gender but fail to address choice of partners. *Bowers vs. Hardwick* reaffirmed the usual criminal status assigned to queer identity. Its aftermath sparked a new wave of pro-sex, queer activism.

Vito Russo and countless others like him became involved in an activism dedicated to speaking up after the decision. "Revolutions begin when people who are defined as problems achieve the power to redefine the problem," explains sociologist John McNight. Russo's anger embodied the beginning of a revolution in activism. ACT-UP was formed under the rubric, 'silence equals death' to condemn the placators. Crimp and Rolston wrote: "Silence = Death declares that silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, *then and now*, must be broken as a matter of our survival."

Artist David Wojanarowiz articulated ACT UP's pro-sex argument in stating: "I will not stop exploring the possibilities of my own body!" Wojanowitz's screams, before his death, refuted a culture which assumed gays should just give up on sex. The mantra sexuality = life became a kernel of AIDS activism. Faced with *Bowers vs. Hardwick*, the Bath House closures, and AIDS phobia, ACT UP sought to reverse a cultural narrative which defined AIDS within a moralizing lens. Legal and medical discourses advanced this script by utilizing science to label people with AIDS in terms of deviance and stigma. Storylines were drafted in black and white contrasting terms: clean or dirty, hetero or homo, natural or

immoral, pure or impure. Themes of morality and retribution, death and cancer dominated a story cast with injection drug users, sex crazed fags, whores, victims, disease carriers, and crack babies. This normalizing script privileged heteronormative cultural practices while utilizing the full administrative technology of the state to punish anything which deviated. ACT UP aimed to turn the storyline on its head.

Acting UP against the Professionalization of Reform

The first wave of AIDS activism was marked by the creation of institutions for service delivery. It was followed by a second angrier wave in the late '80s that gave birth to ACT-UP, the Names Project, World AIDS Day, grass roots political and semi-political actions. ACT UP led this second wave.

Cleve Jones, Eric Rofes, Stephen Genden, old time gay liberationists and first time activists converged for the National Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Washington DC in June 1987. 64 were arrested for stopping traffic in front of the Capital as the Names Quilt, a collection of individual memorial quilts for those who had died of the virus, was first unfolded. ACT UP was but three months old. For a brief moment, gay and queer worlds, radicals and incrementalists, united against governmental indifference to the epidemic. From that day forward, the schism between those who considered AIDS a day job and those fighting for their lives only grew.

For the next three or four years, ACT UP merged its anger with the legacy of Gay Liberation, snatching the gay movement out of the hands of an assimilationist civil rights lobby. The group's 1989 Stonewall 20 rally clearly marked the link between AIDS and queer activism. AIDS topped the GLBT civil rights agenda. Carrying a banner reading: "The Tradition, Lesbians and Gay Men Fighting Back!!!" marchers chanted:

Arrest us, just try it.
Remember, Stonewall was a riot.

A definitive battle line of the second wave of AIDS activism involved the institutionalization of the epidemic. To receive funding dollars, organizations needed to look respectable. New York's Gay

Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the first AIDS organization on the East coast, provides a case in point. Originally formed to fight for people with HIV/AIDS, as funding increased, the organization's grass roots character was overshadowed by public policy "advocacy" and service delivery. By the end of the decade, GMHC had become an arm of local and state governments seeking to enhance their legitimacy among the economically powerful gay community in Manhattan.

By the early 1990's, GMHC had become caught up in contradictions of the welfare state dating back to Johnson's Great Society. War on Poverty programs encouraged community participation in handling local problems. Successful groups were funded. In turn, many used the money to lobby for more. By the early 1970's, a backlash emerged. Future grants were granted with stipulations regulating speech and lobbying. The result limited the message of cash strapped groups, such as GMHC, who accepted federal monies.

The rapid growth of GMHC fell into a pattern Daniel Patric Moynihan describes as the Professionalization of Reform (PoR). Moynihan identifies four components of this process:

- 1) Profound economic growth.
- 2) The exponential growth of knowledge within the social sciences.
- 3) The professionalization of the middle class.
- 4) The rise of foundations.

Although a new class of professional reformers were employed, there is little evidence that these professional groups were able to achieve stated goals of reducing poverty or ending the AIDS crisis. With increased funding, GMHC shifted from critique to coexistence. Numbers of community participants dwindled as they were replaced by professional staff members. In the process, a community organization was supplanted by a social service agency. GMHC had undergone a mission slip.

Funding has the effect on an organization of separating the management from its membership base. The base loses influence on the leadership as staff are hired and policy decisions are made based on a criteria outside of the needs of the membership. The result is those lobbying for community programs are not sufferers but professionals, confident they know what community members need. Yet, all too often groups, such as GMHC, undergoing institutionalization ignore their membership base. The evolution of

GMHC, as an organization, embodies a phenomena which would divide the loyalties of gay community groups for the next decade.

ACT UP Fight Back!!!

"Do you want to start a new organization devoted solely to political action?" GMHC founder Larry Kramer screamed in front of a crowd at the Gay Community Center the night of March 10, 1987. Kramer, GMHC's founder, had grown increasingly frustrated with GMHC's reticence to use direct action or use its influence to aggressively fight for new AIDS drugs. A generation earlier labor organizer Saul Alinsky had bid good riddance to similar grass roots group for leaving his methods behind. "Not only is pressure necessary to compel the establishment to make its initial concession, but the pressure must be maintained to make the establishment deliver. The second factor seemed to be lost on [The Woodlawn Organization]. ACT UP was born in Alinsky's spirit. While GMHC represented mainstream interests and courted grant monies, ACT UP members racked up arrests. To the extent that AIDS activism had been defined by service provision, ACT UP redefined the crisis in terms of sexual politics.

Not long after the Sacramento demo, I interviewd G'Dali Braverman about his life as an activist. He had been there at the very beginning, volunteering for GMHC in 1982 before joining ACT UP New York in 1988. The ethos of ACT UP clearly unfolds within his narrative. Braverman, who had known and worked with Fineberg before he died, reflected on his first days with the new group:

I think the root of AIDS activism necessitated our looking at issues around basic gay homophobia to begin to identify why the world wasn't facing up to AIDS..... I had received a couple of flyers in the mail about ACT-UP. I breezed through them and, basically, tossed them. When ACT-UP passed we stood on the sidewalk, at Gay Pride in 1988, a year after its formation, I took one look and said, "I am going to go to the next meeting of that organization." There was a sense of power, a sense of action. It didn't appear to be about pity or shame or sadness or guilt. It seemed to be about anger and action. I think that as the individual that I am and as a Jew those were things that I could identify with.

My first meeting was right after Gay Pride. It was on the first floor and it was packed. People flooded out the doors. People were in the hallways. There was no ventilation. But there was the sense that this was the place to be, all the energy, all the focus around HIV was happening in that room. And I just listened. It was probably young gay men mostly, 23-35, physically fit, an exceptionally large number of attractive people, energetic, articulate people. Probably 30 to 40 percent of the organization was composed of Jews. Jews have always been at the center of leftist movements which has always ended up fucking them over in the end. An agenda was put together. The meeting went on for three and half hours and people stayed. All ages, 16-60, the whole gamut. Men, women, boys, girls, parents, but mostly gay men and you didn't know who was HIV positive or not.

Even from that early time there were only a few of us who identified as positive. I was one of

those people. I found out in early '87. I don't remember it definitely. By that time I had accepted the fact that chances were that everybody I knew was going to die and that I was going to die and it was just a question of time. It just seemed the logical conclusion. In retrospect it *was*.

Actions were proposed every week at that point. I can remember feeling a buzz in those earlier demonstrations. I'd be leaving my office or my apartment and walking or being on a subway and having this sense of the unknown in my gut this feeling that I was putting myself at risk and this response circulating through my blood of "You have to! You must. This is just something that you are going to do" and hearing myself think, "What's going to happen? Is there going to be brutality? Are people going to be fighting? Is there going to be a confrontation? What is my response going to be? Am I going to be able to stick to our non-violent guidelines? Am I not going to feel a need to reciprocate aggression on a physical level?" As a new person you go through this constant inner checks and balances because you are so filled with a fury. We helped perpetuate that anger in the discussions that we had around the actions so that you are a bottle of emotions with a great sense of purpose. When you were at the demonstration you sustained yourself on an adrenaline rush because you were chanting the whole time whether it was a half an hour or an hour and a half. Physically maintaining that energy level does incredible things to you. You walk away from the demonstration feeling elated, really elated and purposeful.

ACT-UP was working on a multitude of issues. There were probably a good 20 committees existing, treatment issues, housing, local issues, city issues, a media committee, etc. There were people working on those issues that were meeting several times a week outside of the regular Monday meeting.

By the mid-1990's, the group could boast a list accomplishments including: forcing expedited FDA approval for new medications, pressuring Burroughs Wellcome to reduce the price for AZT, highlighting the need for health care reform, and pressuring the National Institutes of Health to increase spending on research, among others.

One of the group's more difficult tasks involved implementing the use of harm reduction principles to HIV prevention. When New York Health Commissioner Woodrow Myers took the moralistic position that drug users need to face the consequences of their behavior, ACT UP New York organized an illicit needle exchange program in New York city's Lower East Side. Ten ACT UP members were arrested for distributing clean needles. They later challenged the case in court successfully arguing needle exchange was "a medical necessity" needed to stem the spread of HIV. From a pragmatic approach to drug use to unapologetic queer identity, ACT UP taught America it had better face its demons and get over its biases.

Over the next decade, ACT UP would evolve with the ever elusive nature of the virus, staying together longer than anyone could have expected. Leadership changed, activists died, and Monday night meetings continued. With each level of carnage, the task of halting the epidemic's progress become more daunting. AIDS was fully entwined within the mosaic of poverty. Within this context, the group struggled to maintain focus. To deal with AIDS involved addressing endemic social problems of race, income inequality, and discrimination faced by the truly disadvantaged in America.

In the 1960's, social theorist Herbert Marcuse outlined an idea called pure refusal, a position which stipulates that participation within a problematic system is tantamount to complicity. ACT UP would follow this mantra. Few social movements are able to remain entirely outside of a policy framework of the provision of services. And ACT UP's adherence to this idea took its toll, yet the group persevered. Along the way, some found a way to the policy table while others continued to scream from the street.

In, 1994, long time gay liberationist Hank Wilson reflected:

I want to be around. I want to fight it. I think when I look at my ACT-UP group, we've got these cycles too in our group. Sometimes you need to ride it through but sometimes it's important for people to keep together. I think sometimes we spent too much time fighting with people we disagree with and never coalesce with people.

Under the surface, a number of burdens wore on the movement, most notably grief. Long time ACT UP New York member Bill Dobbs observed:

Consider the larger landscape. Nothing is happening on AIDS. Activist pressure has subsided. The best media coverage is in the obituaries. AIDS is just one more given in an ugly world. More deaths and more memorials. Continued anti-gay and anti-sex attacks by all levels of government.

When I go to ACT UP meetings these days I keep feeling the ghosts in that room. Marty Robinson, Vito Russo, Bob Rafsky and many more. I hope to get the paper and read that Jesse Helms, Newt Gingrich, Phil Gramm, Ralph Reed and their ilk are no more. And I hope that a now-dead David Wojnarowicz will fly through walls to find Signorile and Rotello and the other collaborators. David will wake them up with that soft deep voice of his and say, "Your time's up."

Cleve Jones elaborates:

You know, it's kind of hard to describe what it's like to lose everybody you know but that's what happened. The people who joined the struggle in ACT-UP, many died, many of them got burned out, or have chosen to stay home to take care of themselves or others. Others have gotten jobs in the industry. As for what's happening now, what we are seeing is the accumulated toll of 15 years of death. People like to talk about what's happened with ACT-UP but the single most fundamental thing with ACT-UP is that they have died.

AIDS Activism as Queer Politics?

For a while, queerness and ACT-UP walked hand in hand. By the early 1990's, this hegemony was slowly falling apart. Queers were linking the AIDS struggle with deeply embedded problems of outsider status in America. ACT UP was as much about the difficulties faced by intravenous drug users,

welfare moms, and illegal immigrants as it was about homophobia. "Housing is an AIDS issue! Housing equals health!!!" a cross section of queer activists, PWA's, and social workers chanted in front of NY City Hall in 1998. Queerness, by association and identification with "outsider" status, was transforming and expanding a political arena. Once involved in the fight to end the AIDS crisis, queer identity was never quite the same. This is not to imply that queer no longer encompassed certain sexual acts; it did. But as Crimp posits, "it also entails a *representation* between those practices and other circumstances that make very different people vulnerable both to HIV infection and to the stigma" of outsider status. Actions served to combine both acceptance of the gay- AIDS connection while actively resisting the link at the same time. The interrelation between gay and AIDS identities proving increasingly vexing. By confronting HIV and sexual stigma, activists from a wide range of movements became a little queerer.

Queer community organizing emerged from the AIDS wreckage bending cultural identifies, gender roles, and expectations. Some envisioned a new politics which rejected interest group representation, defining itself against "the normal rather than the heterosexual." Others considered queerness as an essential separatist identity. As notions of queer entered contemporary political discourse, battle lines were drawn as groups sought to interpret and put its often elusive goals into operation. Queer theory's anti-homophobic critique and its cultural riddles played out in dramatic ways the new politics.

By the early 1990's a vast array of organizations dedicated themselves to the new politics. Queer Nation grew out of ACT UP New York posing profound questions about social categories using graphic arts, kiss-ins, and political theater. "From the first time I joined ACT UP, there has been tension over what is and is not AIDS related activism," reflected New York activist Ann Northrup. While combat against AIDS and homophobia had been dubiously interlinked as the chief targets, questions about what

could be AIDS activism persisted. Northrup recalled: "Repeatedly in ACT UP meetings someone would bring up some particular incident that seemed to be only lesbian and gay related. Someone would inevitably stand up and say, 'What does this have to do with AIDS?'" (Marcus 1992,487-8).

By the early 1990's, queer identity was emerging with more and more cultural recognition. As visibility increased, so did the attacks. ACT UP did not have the energy to both take on both fronts of the AIDS battle, homophobia and the pandemic itself (Crimp 1993, 316). Ten years into the seemingly unending epidemic, the need to outline an agenda for a homophobic critique outside the parameters of AIDS activism became an emotional necessity.

The group sought to apply ACT UP's grassroots tactics to transform public sexual discourse. Public space needed to be safe not only from discrimination but for demonstration, spectacle, and joy (Berlant and Freeman 1993,198). Queer Nation utilized once ordinary space for rituals capable of transforming a culture (Turner 1969), queering hostile public space with fun and merriment. The group built on ACT UP's successful work of occupying unfriendly geography, challenging what had been assumed was heterosexual space. One project involved planting a billboard with the slogan, "Fags and Dykes Bash Back" on top of Badlands, a gay bar off Christopher Street, facing the West Side Highway. The sign stopped traffic (Marcus 1992,488-9). Within such actions, Queer Nation broadcast the totaling problem of compulsory heterosexuality dominating public space (Berlant and Freeman 1993,198-201, 205, 207, 208).

From Jesse Helms' 'no promo homo' campaigns to *Bowers vs. Hardwick*, queer bodies were marginalized while Anglo Saxon, seronegative, heterosexual bodies maintained privilege (Healey 1990). Queer Nation sought to scramble this convoluted message of citizenship by openly denying closeting assimilation as they built on the legacies of the black power and feminist movements. If queers did not take care of themselves, few else would. As such, Queer Nation called for gays to appreciate a mutuality of queer power. In so doing, they conceived of a GLBT nationality as a fixed ethnic model.

The slogan "We're here. We're queer. Get used to it" firmly placed notions of Queer Nationality within a public sphere. Actions included "Queer Nights Out" in the park after a sniper shot several gay

men in Central Park's Ramble and "Kiss-Ins" meant to queer those spaces where violence loomed. Combinations excitement and pressure, merriment and menace, eros and anxiety always accompany the presence of the other. Through "Kiss-Ins," official spaces such as an administrative plaza or a bland mall becomes the location for the juices of unofficial fun: pleasure, longing, jealousy, and even reaction formations capable of producing public scandal or cultural transformation.

Women, HIV, and the Lesbian Avengers

Women endured perhaps the most painful brunt of the AIDS pandemic. A full decade ensued as women suffered from a full range of HIV related opportunistic infections not recognized by the Centers for Disease Control. As such, many women did not qualify to receive appropriate benefits, despite suffering from any number of OBG GYN related opportunistic infections.

Through ACT UP and Queer Nation, lesbians lead fights along with gay men against the inherent sexism, racism, and homophobia indebted within the health crisis. 1970's questions, however, never went away. Coexistence between lesbians and gay men was not without its problems, particularly as female contributors were taken for granted. Like much of the rest of the culture, ACT UP and Queer Nation chapters were never devoid of racism, patriarchy, or sexism. Conflicts over gender, class, and race tore at the fabric of a number of ACT UP and Queer Nation chapters. And much of the time, lesbians and gay men seemed to be just as estranged along the lines of gender as heterosexuals.

In response to this picture, the Lesbian Avengers cropped up after the 1992 New York Gay Pride Parade. Founder Sara Schulman recalled their beginnings:

We were in ACT UP and we realized that younger women were not getting it together and learning the skills that we had. And we thought we'd just start this small group in New York to teach them basic skills. And the people who started the Avengers were just hardcore political people, you know, people that had been in the Cuban Revolution, Irish Republicans, a woman who had been in CORE and me and people who really knew what they were doing. And we came up with this idea and it just went boom! It just became so large so fast and then it just fell apart.

The best thing was the march on Washington that we did without a permit. Forty thousand dykes. We started the Dyke March. That was the best thing that we ever did. No permit. That was so great because the official march on Washington that year was so lame. 1993 it must have been. That was great. We ran a few ballot measure campaigns in other states that were really wonderful.

One of the ballot propositions drew particular attention. November 9, 1994 Californians passed

Prop. 187, a ballot measure banning immigrants from use of basic social services including education. The same night gays gained seats on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Instead of celebrating a narrow victory, the Lesbian Avengers, marched during the Night of Rage, the next day participating in the student walk outs against Prop. 187. Members of the group ate fire in protest to the state and national swerve to right, embodied in the three strikes law, anti homeless ordinances, and the defeat of national health care. Such thinking suggested a new queer universalizing politics, opposed to narrowly defined minoritizing lenses of interest group participation. Despite its complexities, throughout the 1990's branches of queer community distinguished themselves by linking the struggle for sexual social justice with broader cultural questions.

Sex and Social Justice

ACT UP emerged from a series of movements, community groups, and cultural battlefronts. The group's members played key roles within the feminist sex wars, debates over outing, and the introduction of queer theory into political discourse. And countless groups and movements were born from ACT UP. Former ACT UP New York member author Sara Schulman recalled, "All those groups: Church Ladies for Choice came out of ACT UP; Queer Nation came out of ACT UP; Lesbian Avengers came out of ACT UP; everything came out of it; you know, Housing Works, they all came out of ACT UP."

Yet, by the mid 1990's times were changing. The legacy of ACT UP's pro sex position was challenged as a number of former ACT UP members, including Gabriel Rotello, Larry Kramer, and Michelangelo Signorile argued against central tenants of the Gay Liberation movemet, ACT UP had helped nurture. Long term ACT UP New York member Bill Dobbs explained:

In 1995, 26 years after we pushed the police back at Stonewall, gay men now spark raids on queer gathering places. Freedom means the ability to make choices, whether wise or stupid. Plenty can and should be done to improve AIDS prevention, but get the sexcops -- those with and without badges -- out of our lives. Who are these creeps who tell me with whom I can have sex or whom I can love? (Fruit, 1996.)

What ensued was a five year sex war between social justice minded queers and the new gay assimilationists. Eric Rofes outlined what was at stake: “Among the most effective ways of oppressing a people is the colonization of their bodies, the stigmatizing of their desires, and the repression of their erotic energies.” Former leaders of ACT UP formed the AIDS Prevention Action League and SexPanic! to challenge the new gay right. The result was a dynamic conversation and debate about the meaning of queer sexuality and AIDS legacies.

In 1997, ACT UP celebrated its ten year anniversary with another trip down to Wall Street as a new generation of activists was coming of age with the group. By that time, ACT UP spinoff groups were evolving into still further offshoots as SexPanic! members moved on to organize countless ad hoc rallies within the rubric of a new formation, the Fed Up Queers (or FUQ). Fall 1998 FUQ organized a small political march that would turnout to be the largest queer riot since Stonewall. New Yorkers remember it as the Matthew Shepard political funeral. Some eighty of us would be arrested within the evening.

From ACT UP to the WTO

Throughout the 1990’s, conversations about ACT UP involved post mortems. What ever happened to ACT UP people would ask. Over the years, ACT UP members died, high risk groups have changed, three presidents have retired, and Monday night meetings have gone on as the group continued to set the tone for AIDS and cultural activism. As the years wore on, ACT UP recognized that what had happened to queer communities would happen to people all over the world. Cleve Jones, the founder of the Names Project AIDS quilt reflected: “That’s part of it. That terrible feeling of screaming as loud as you can scream and no one can hear you.” Yet ACT UP built on these years.

Of course, for twelve years before Seattle, ACT UP and AIDS activism was becoming an international movement. After returning from South Africa and observing long lines of people waiting for treatments they were not going to get, Cleve Jones, the founder of the AIDS quilt, recalled a strange déjà

vu: "It felt like 1981 at San Francisco General Hospital all over again..." ACT UP made battling drug companies a cornerstone of its work. By the late 1990's, queer/AIDS activists were taking these lessons and applying them to the inequalities of access to AIDS drugs across the world. ACT UP and its offshoots played an important role in the history and the battle for AIDS drugs and global justice. In the months before the Seattle protests, the group pushed for one of their greatest wins.

Battling Global Apartheid

Long term ACT UP member Ann Northrop explained, "I got into the streets with ACT UP because I was taken with the tactics – direct action. We don't have the corporate power or the media. Our tool is our public humiliation." In the months before the Seattle WTO meeting, ACT UP used these tools to make Al Gore's life miserable. The problem was in South Africa, where an estimated 25% of the population has HIV. In accordance with WTO rules, the South African government under Nelson Mandela had passed a law stating that the country could bypass global intellectual property laws. During the planning of a demonstration in opposition to African Growth and Opportunities ACT, members of ACT UP obtained a copy of what ACT UP founder Eric Sawyer recalled called the "smoking gun memo." He explained, the February 5, 1999 memo, from a State Department staff member, intended to convince a New Jersey representative that the Clinton/Gore administration was doing everything in its power to support the interest of several large international pharmaceutical companies in the representative's state in their battle to prevent the South African government from producing their own generic versions of AIDS and cancer medications. The memo listed courses of actions, including 301 Trade Watch List inclusions and threats to withhold trading rights and foreign aid from South Africa if the country did not stop pursuing the production of inexpensive drugs. The vice president threatened to sanction South Africa for manufacturing generic versions of expensive patented life-saving drugs. The U.S. Trade Department bragged that Gore had held firm against poor countries standing up to world trade laws. Sawyer was outraged at this information and at the fact that Vice President Al Gore had taken an active role in issuing some of these threats at various meetings.

In response, ACT UP members drove to Nashville for Gore's announcement of his plans to run for president, picketing his speech and placing signs in between Gore and the cameras proclaiming, "Gore's Greed Kills!" By the time the weekend was over, ACT UP had disrupted appearances in New Hampshire

and New York, garnering significant news coverage and throwing Gore into a frenzy. Within the week, Gore's rhetoric on drugs had changed and he backed down. In a testament to the efficacy of a smart, well targeted campaign, by the end of the year, the group had forced a sitting vice president to reverse the U.S. trade policy.

Jimmy McNulty worked with ACT UP on that campaign. He recalled some of the direct action involved: "The target was Charlene Barshefsky, the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), reporting directly to Al Gore, who was that day off to Seattle for the first of the WTO talks. So this was timed and targeted carefully and was the method that would, among other things, raise critical awareness and get some attention that led to the embarrassment, which led people to make public statements which bring the issue up out of their own mouth. Two weeks, three weeks later the Al Gore acknowledged, 'the activists were right'." A number of activists from ACT UP/New York, ACT UP/Philadelphia, and New York's Fed Up Queers used a decoy to clear the entrance to Barshefsky's office, where they locked themselves down and asked for a meeting with the trade rep. All this occurred within a Federal Building, on Federal property close to the White House.

McNulty explained, "As everybody knows, the whole fucking world is a con game. You walk in with confidence, and we walked up the stairs. You can practically walk through armed guards. Then we walked right into the metal detector. I can't even remember because it was so intense, but I'm sure it went 'beep, beep, beep, beep, beep.'" The activists were on the second landing before anyone on the ground floor noticed to point out they could not go there. Calmly they explained, 'This is an office takeover. No one is going to be hurt. This is non-violent. We have someone we want to talk to, Charlene Barshefsky.' Once inside the activists locked themselves inside Barshefsky's office where they remained for an hour before being arrested and taken away. But that one hour was enough to force a change in federal trade policy. The November 27, 1999 Time Magazine on the upcoming "Battle in Seattle" specifically mentioned the USTR office takeover. The following spring the Clinton/Gore administration softened its stance on defending AIDS drug patents.

There is a famous poster that hangs in South Africa now. With an image of Nelson Mandela's face, it reads, "Survived Apartheid, Killed by Drug Company Greed." By 2001, Nelson Mandela and South Africa were sued by 39 drug companies for trying to produce their own AIDS drugs at cost. Given

how many people are affected by the virus, South Africa's democracy is threatened by lack of access to AIDS drugs. ACT UP's argument is that Africa needs the sovereignty to make its own decisions about what's best for its people. Community sovereignty versus corporate greed. It's a civil war being fought on a thousand fronts across the world.

From ACT UP to Chiappas

"ACT UP was the embodiment of queer theory," recalled Ricardo Dominguez, a veteran of ACT UP Tallahassee who borrowed on his experience with ACT UP to create a theory of electronic civil disobedience used by hactivists around the world. The point was that a theory existed within an action, a question, a principle. "ACTION=LIFE." Dominguez explains:

One of the things that really occurred out of these massive actions was that ACT UP really brought to the foreground that is the politics of the question as opposed to the politics of the answer. ACT UP was really calling for a single question to be answered: "Is there a cure?" It wasn't that we were saying that we were going to overthrow the state, that we were going to overtake the world or that we had answers. But we were asking the single question that was very difficult, one for the therapeutic state to answer, another for pharmaceuticals to answer, and, of course, one for the regulatory beurocracy to answer. Why wasn't there a cure? What was going on? What was the hold-up?

The politics of the question became a central tenant of the successful international Zapatista rebellion, in which Dominguez played a role. He continued:

But you saw it again in 1994, this kind of rise up of the ACT UP tradition of the politics of the question. What the Zapatistas soon learned out of net war was to begin to ask a question: "What does democracy mean for indigenous communities in Mexico? What is it? Is there a democracy for Mexico?" This began to break all sorts of barriers and questions, constitutional questions.

From 9/11 to Global Apartheid

In the days since the World Trade Center disaster, the questions ACT UP has asked all along have only become more and more resonant. In the days after 9/11 and before the next round of World Trade Organization talks in Doha, Qatar, global attention has turned to root questions about global poverty. Even the often unsympathetic *New York Times* has followed ACT UP's position, editorializing, "for

millions of AIDS sufferers, patents that keep drug prices high are a major reason that AIDS treatment is out of reach. Anthrax has killed a handful of Americans so far. AIDS has killed 22 million worldwide. Americans today can surely understand the need to give poor countries every possible weapon to fight back.”

Three weeks later, Archbishop Desmond Tutu called HIV/AIDS South Africa's "new apartheid" and criticized his country for dithering while people died of the disease. In many ways, the global justice movement has inherited the mantle of the Anti-Apartheid movement. An injury to one is an injury to all. ACT UP has said it all along. “8000 people die every day. Demand AIDS DRUGS FOR ALL.”

A proliferation of Stories...

In 1988 Vito Russo argued: “After we kick the shit out of this disease, I intend to be able to kick the shit out of this system, so that this never happens again.” In other words, fighting the AIDS pandemic meant fighting institutional racism, sexism, the class system, as well as homophobia. Over the next thirteen years, “kicking the shit out of the system,” would grow to mean fighting undemocratic international trade laws, the prison industrial complex, poverty, unresponsive government, budget cuts, a disaster in healthcare and countless mechanisms of a bureaucracy which puts profits ahead of people.

To a certain extent, ACT UP helped open up countless culture tales – from Housing Works’ anti-racist AIDS discourses to the Church Ladies’ implicit point that AIDS/QUEER activism=sexual liberation and translates into reproductive rights to the Zapatista’s use of the ACT UP’s politics of the question to force the world reconsider, “What does democracy mean for indigenous communities in Mexico?” ACT UP left few stones unturned while helping us see how neither science nor theology nor the state were outside the influence of cultural bias or interpretation. No one has a monopoly on the truth.

ACT UP taught us to recognize that AIDS was more than a disease, it functioned as discourse. Recognizing this, ACT UP opened up the storylines for countless movements and ways of being in the world, reminding us of routes outside of imposed ideological structures and expectations about gender and culture, creating spaces for personal and social transformation, all the while placing sex and social justice at the center of the new global justice movements. Without justice there can be no pleasure. ACT UP helped teach us that without pleasure, there can be no justice.

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