

FROM THE CLOSET TO ST. PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL: ACTS OF RAGE AND  
OPACITY WITHIN QUEER SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **FROM THE CLOSET TO ST. PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL: ACTS OF RAGE AND OPACITY WITHIN QUEER SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

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With every decade that society progresses, majority groups in the United States and internationally hail how much improvement has occurred for inclusion of minority groups into social, political and economic structures. However, despite these cries of progress, minority groups still suffer from normalized attitudes and expectations that push their experience and identities into the category of the abnormal, unnecessary or excessive. This thesis attempts to analyze the Co-cultural tactics utilized by queer movements during the early periods of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and situate that discussion within the broader context of a longer debate between strategies of rage and opacity for muted groups like queer individuals.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

BECAUSE ... silence actually does equal death...

BECAUSE ... action actually does equal life...these are not metaphors or gym wear...

BECAUSE ... there may not be all that much time left...

BECAUSE ... my strongest art- and life-filled moment last year was a civil disobedience action in front of the federal building in L. A. And with each outline of a friend dead from AIDS drawn on the pavement ... pure spectacle was happening ... drums were beating ... hearts were pounding ... hands and bodies covered and gritty with chalk ... trying to make the big picture ... which more and more seems to be the one that matters most to me ...

BECAUSE ... maybe any function of art that does not basically work in some kind of direction toward healing the sick ... fostering communication ... easing suffering ... feeding bodies ... or saving the planet just ought to get back to an apolitical conceptual 1980 where it would be much more comfortable ....

-Tim Miller, *Body Blows*

Queer oppression has been an issue of peripheral concern for society both within history and modernity. Societal power structures almost always operate from a normalizing stance that pushes that which is considered abnormal to the margins, as the excess or the unwanted in society (Yep, 2003). Because of this ordered normalization, queer individuals operate from a minority status that acts against power structures without the political and social capabilities to effectively reform these systems. The main

issue at stake is this: how can or should oppressed groups respond to their oppression? This thesis will focus on investigating queer movements that utilized methods of rage to combat oppressive power structures, specifically the ACT-UP movement during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and compare their tactics with other groups who advocated for a more passive approach, opacity, in order to articulate the strategic possibilities of deploying covert and overt tactics under different circumstances.

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT-UP, was a group established by Larry Kramer in New York City to combat the AIDS epidemic and meet “the challenge of the AIDS epidemic and its crisis of conscience with vigilant acts of political and cultural provocation – thereby giving voice to the essential creative will of our humanity.” (ACT-UP NY, 1988) While thousands of gay individuals were dying from an incurable disease in a context of extreme public stigma and silence, a grass-roots group of people in the gay community organized with the hopes that they could open up dialogue and action against AIDS:

The gay ghetto was a tinderbox by March 1987. Ten thousand New Yorkers had already become sick with AIDS; half were dead. Along Christopher Street you could see the dazed look of the doomed, skeletons and their caregivers alike...Overnight, images bearing the radical truism SILENCE = DEATH appeared on walls and scaffolding all over lower Manhattan. The fuse was set—and then the writer and activist Larry Kramer struck a match...“If my speech tonight doesn’t scare the shit out of you, we’re in trouble,” he began. “I sometimes think we have a death wish. I think we must want to die. I have never



been able to understand why we have sat back and let ourselves literally be knocked off man by man without fighting back. I have heard of denial, but this is more than denial—it is a death wish.”...Just like that, a new, grassroots direct-action movement congealed. Within weeks it would adopt the name ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and a deceptively simple demand: Drugs into bodies... ACT UP revolutionized everything from the way drugs are researched to the way doctors interact with patients...Act up also redrew the blueprint for activism in a media-saturated world, providing inspiration for actions like Occupy Wall Street. (France, 2012)

In order to effectively analyze the ACT-UP movement and its utilization of rage, I will first identify the specific tactics that differentiate opacity and rage. Opacity is a term found specifically from an analysis of the character, Topsy, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Major contributing scholars articulate that in order for the Black body to navigate and survive under White supremacy, they must be "tricksters" like Topsy (i.e. act obedient while quietly working to dismantle White supremacy) (Townes, 2006). While the strategic discourse underpinning this methodology is that being part of the “undercommons” allows Black individuals to be safe against structures of oppression, the similarities in this “safety” rhetoric to the drive for queer individuals to seek the closet is obvious (Townes, 2006).

On the other hand, the foundation for the concept of rage depicted in this work stems from grassroots discussions by queer groups originating during the Stonewall Riots and the campaigns by gay activists in New York City during the HIV epidemic. In

comparison to opacity, which is a focus on covert actions, rage operated during these queer movements from the premise that systems of power must be overtly fought against in order for any change to occur (QRT, 1990). During the plague of AIDS, queer activists pushing for a fight against the system articulated that the spread of AIDS and lack of action by power systems guaranteed queer death, therefore overt struggle even under the potential for violent backlash was critical to have any chance of overcoming the inevitability of queer death (Stanley, 2011).

Ultimately, this application will then investigate the overlap of that logic with the criticisms of the queer rage movement during the HIV/AIDS outbreak in the 1980s to frame how these methodologies from previous periods of queer and Black oppression can be applied to modern scenarios concerning queer individuals. The goal of this thesis is to take the literature written during the "Queer rage movement" of the 1980's and beyond in regards to "the closet" and "death" and apply it in criticism of the logic behind strategies of opacity.

Using Orbe's (1996) theory of muted group response within co-cultural theory, this thesis will explicate rage and opacity for application and making sense of how responses from oppressed groups can be and are operationalized. While Orbe does not specifically differentiate "rage" and "opacity" as types of tactics for muted groups, he provides a list of characteristics that these groups use, which can be separated and categorized into those two overarching themes. After categorizing Orbe's list of tactics into the themes of rage and opacity, I will draw on these themes to explore the arguments of activists responding to the confrontational tactics of ACT UP in the 1980s. Then,

having analyzed the case, I will draw out some lessons that can be applied to co-cultural theory and current political struggles over racism and homophobia.

For the purpose of this research, delving into the intricate history and complexities of the queer rage movements' actions against HIV/AIDs in the 1980s is crucial. Drawing on muted group theory and selected authors in queer and critical race theory, my thesis will investigate the intra-movement debate about this shift from opacity to rage and will ask the following research questions: First, what was the intra-movement debate over the "rage" strategy and the confrontational tactics of groups like ACT UP? In short, what were the arguments for and against this strategy at the time? Second, how did this argument play out, and with what political and cultural consequences? And third, what can we learn about the strategic choices facing current struggles for queer liberation from analyzing this historical case?

To investigate these questions, I will first draw on a review of the literature to define what I mean by opacity and rage, and how these concepts relate to muted group/co-cultural theory (Chapter 2: Literature Review). After this review of the literature, I will explain the specific methodological parameters and approach that I used for my research (Chapter 3: Methodology). Then I will turn to the historical case itself, with the goal of analyzing the debate over opacity and rage in the case (Chapter 4: Queer Rage and HIV/AIDs). Then, I will apply the lessons of this historical contemporary struggle (Chapter 4: Struggle over Strategy). Finally, I will draw some conclusions about muted group theory (Chapter 5: Muted Groups Application and Future Research) and point the way toward future research in this area.

Considering the increasing convergence of identity scholarship by intersectionality studies, research concerning new methodologies for critical race studies necessitates comparative analysis from queer studies, and vice versa. In this vein, an additional theoretical goal of this thesis is to provide a critical bridge in academia connecting race and queer studies. Because of the impact that oppressive political and social structures have on Black and Queer identity, understanding the most effective means to address these structures is incredibly important for individuals experiencing these oppressions. This research will also provide critical education for activists by highlighting the interconnections and positive and negative consequences of deploying rage and opacity strategies within varying instances of oppression, a subject that is becoming increasingly important to understand considering current events like queer assimilation through marriage rights and violence and targeting of Black individuals like the Ferguson incident.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Co-Cultural and Muted Group Theory**

Before understanding how Co-Cultural Theory (CCT) works within communication studies, one must first understand what a co-culture is. A co-culture is a group that has little or no say in creating the dominant structure in society. Orbe (1998) utilizes the term co-culture as a replacement for ideas like “minority” and “sub-group,” which frame groups that are non-dominant as being inferior. Instead, the phrase co-culture operates under the idea that the United States is comprised of many different cultures, but due to a long history of colonization and imperialism, a Eurocentric white supremacist and patriarchal culture became dominant, pushing other cultures to the periphery – such as ethnic and religious minorities, queer individuals, and women.

In particular, Orbe’s co-cultural theory explores how people traditionally situated on the margins of society communicate within dominant social structures, and in conceptualizing co-cultural communication, Orbe drew upon two long-standing feminist theories, Muted Group Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory.

First, Feminist Standpoint theory argues that each group in a society has partial knowledge, but that, due to social hierarchies and structures of privilege, the partial knowledge of subordinate groups is more complete. The standpoint of dominant groups

not only achieves great visibility in the culture (e.g., in schools and in the media), but knowledge of dominant perspectives and ideologies becomes crucial to the ability of subordinate groups to conduct everyday life. Dominant groups, content to have their standpoint visible and taken-for-granted--are not so constrained. Because of this invisibility of subordinate groups in representation, in decision-making structures, and in knowledge production, Feminist Standpoint Theory argues that it is important to learn the perspectives of subordinate groups in order to create a better understanding of their experience and to understand how subordinate positionality is shaped by histories of domination and subordination.

Second, Muted Group Theory articulates that society is configured to prop up dominant narratives and power relations, which indirectly (and directly) works to silence, or mute, non-dominant or minority narratives and voices (Kramarae, 2005). Although muted group theory was originally developed to address the power dynamics that suppress feminine voices within society, this idea can be applied to other marginalized identities because the basic dynamics of power relations in communication are very similar. Just as society's reliance on patriarchal understanding of a masculine superior and feminine inferior allow for the suppression of feminine voice, society's foundational reliance on heteronormative ideology pushes queerness to the periphery. Ultimately, power relations serve to allow for the majority's desires, identity and influence to determine what is most acceptable and productive. Therefore, muted group theory is a starting point to "investigate the restrictions of a white, middle-class, hetero-male

oriented language upon those whose perspectives of the word may be quite different.”  
(Kramarae, 2005)

The ability of muted groups to communicate as effectively as those in dominant positions is hindered in several ways. First, dominant groups tend to *disrespect the speech* of muted groups. This can be seen in the way that White culture attempts to disparage Black speaking styles as being “less-educated” or “ghetto.” (Kramarae, 2005) Second, majority culture influences what is considered to be *acceptable and sufficient knowledge* for high-level communication, like public decision-making and policy making, therefore pushing non-dominant groups to the periphery of those discussions. (Kramarae, 2005) An example of this is seen in the construction of the “‘trope of the angry feminist’ ...designed to delegitimize feminist argument even before the argument begins, to undermine feminist politics” (Tomlinson, 2010).

Third, muted group *experience is often defined and interpreted* by individuals that are not muted, therefore skewing and changing their narratives to suit dominant culture and identity – or eliminating the narrative altogether. (Kramarae, 2005) Take, for instance, ethnographic research, which risks distortion of the true narrative of minority groups through interpretation by outsiders. This allows the outside to shape and define the meanings of the cultural practices and experiences of these groups (Tuck and Yang, 2014; Spivak, 1999). For example, Shimizu (2001) discusses a particularly egregious example of this “speaking for” minority groups in their critique of O’Rourke and Roc” documentary film on Asian women in the pornography industry—a film which

positioned the film-makers as heroic allies of these women even as, on one occasion, O'Rourke engaged in sex with one of the women.

A final obstacle for muted group communication is the problem of *false representation*. Dominant discourse often attempts to claim a universal potential to represent all individuals within its dialogue, therefore encouraging minority groups to remain silent about their concerns or ideas under the assumption that they are already addressed within the “democratic” speech of the dominant group. All of these obstacles make it easy for those who maintain communication privilege to continue “stifling and belittling the speech and ideas of those they label outside the privileged circle.” (Kramarae, 2005)

Later, Co-cultural Communication Theory (CCT) built upon this analysis of how minority voices are stifled within dominant dialogue in order to investigate how these silenced groups *navigate within* dominant dialogue. Co-Cultural Theory identifies that co-cultural groups use communicative tactics and practices to negotiate being in a marginalized position in dominant society, specifically in positioning themselves toward or against those who have direct access to institutional power.

Co-cultural theory argues that there are certain communication assumptions that exist, and understanding these assumptions is necessary to investigate the specific communication practices of co-cultural groups. First, co-cultural group members' communicative experiences are responses to dominant societal structures that label them as outsiders. Second, the selection of different communicative practices is the result of



ongoing, constantly changing series of evaluations, implementations, and revisions.

Third, communicative practices are selected and employed for reasons that vary among co-cultural group members. Fourth, each co-cultural group member has several strategic options from which to choose, and the process of selecting a certain communicative practice is influenced by several interdependent factors.

Within these communicative assumptions, a co-cultural group will choose communicative practices based on six universal influences. The first influence concerns the preferred outcome sought by the co-cultural group member. In other words, when choosing a communicative practice, co-cultural group members try to match the behavior to their goal or preferred outcome. According to Orbe, there are three preference outcomes: assimilation, accommodation, and separation. *Assimilation* is the attempt to dispel cultural differences in order to fit into dominant culture. For example, a person who recently immigrated to the United States may choose to “Americanize” because they would rather fit in with the dominant culture of the United States than retain their cultural identity. The goal of *accommodation*, however, pushes back against dominant cultural, demanding changes to dominant culture which incorporate the perspectives and experiences of the co-cultural group. An example of accommodation would be Black History Month, which attempts to educate American society of the historical experience of Black individuals in the United States in order to change the dominant white scripting of history. Finally, the goal of *separation* rejects the notion of forming a common bond with the dominant group and instead seeks to maintain separate group identities outside the dominant structure. Amish communities in the United States are an extreme example

of separation, in that they attempt to live within the region, but outside of the cultural identification in the United States.

The second universal influence on the decision to pursue a particular communication behavior is *field of experience*, which refers to the past interactions a co-cultural group member has had with dominant group members and how these experiences may influence their current behavior. For example, if a woman has previously experienced harassment in the workplace, and her superior ignored the complaints that she lodged, she may choose to attempt to solve the problem on her own if a similar situation arose.

A third universal influence, according to co-cultural theory, is abilities, or the physical and psychological limitations an individual or group has in communicating with the dominant culture. For example, a woman who attended college may have the ability to negotiate better pay, despite the common factor of a gender pay gap, because they attended a university that trained its students in pay negotiation; whereas another woman without a college degree may instead choose to work harder than her male colleagues in the hope for a raise, because they do not have the training to negotiate salaries.

A fourth influence is the situational context of the interaction. Different situational or contextual factors will shape the communication strategies pursued. For example, a Black person may feel safer to protest against racialized police targeting in a large group of protesters with media presence than when they are being confronted by a police officer without anyone else present. One situation provides both safety in

numbers, as well as documentation of police reaction to the situation, whereas the other does not.

Also important are the *perceived costs and rewards* of particular communication strategies—that is, what an individual stands to gain and lose from an interaction with a member of the dominant culture. For example, a queer individual may choose to come out of the closet based on whether or not they perceive that the negative reactions of friends and family will be outweighed by the potential rewards of being able to connect with the queer community and their individual identity.

The final communication influence is a question of communication *approach*, a term which addresses the style or manner in which the co-cultural group member will choose to pursue their preferred outcome. According to Orbe, there are three different communication approaches that a co-cultural individual may choose to employ: non-assertive, assertive, and aggressive. A non-assertive approach puts the needs of others first and would lead to inhibited and non-confrontational behaviors; an assertive approach prioritizes self-enhancing expressive behaviors while also taking the needs of others into account; and finally, an aggressive approach utilizes communication practices that can be perceived as hurtfully expressive and self-promoting. Aggressive practices attempt to achieve control over the choices of others, such as attacking, sabotaging, confronting, gaining advantage, mirroring and strategic distancing.

Table 1. Orbe’s Co-Cultural Communication Orientations

	Separation	Accommodation	Assimilation
Nonassertive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Avoiding</li> <li>● Maintaining interpersonal barriers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Increasing visibility</li> <li>● Dispelling stereotypes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Emphasizing commonalities</li> <li>● Averting controversy</li> </ul>
Assertive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Intragroup networking</li> <li>● Exemplifying strengths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Using liaisons</li> <li>● Educating others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Extensive preparation</li> <li>● Overcompensating</li> </ul>
Aggressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Attacking</li> <li>● Sabotaging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Confronting</li> <li>● Gaining advantage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mirroring</li> <li>● Strategic Distancing</li> </ul>

As Orbe writes, these three communication approaches can be mapped along with three preferred outcomes discussed above to produce a grid that offers an elegant means of distinguishing multiple communication strategies based on the nexus of approach and outcome (see Table 1). For instance, moving vertically, we can see a clear distinction between *non-assertive* separation strategies (“avoiding,” “maintaining interpersonal barriers”) and *aggressive* separation strategies (“attacking,” “sabotaging”). Likewise, moving horizontally, we can see clear distinctions between assertive strategies devoted

to separation (“intragroup networking,” “exemplifying strengths”) and assertive strategies devoted assimilation (“extensive preparation,” “overcompensating”).

In short, Co-cultural theory focuses on how non-dominant cultures deal with dominant culture’s stifling and oppression of their voices and experiences. I will use this theory in my study to frame the various actions and tactics used by members of ACT-UP to understand and explicate how these actions can be considered acts of rage or opacity, and evaluate the intra-group debate behind the different actions of ACT-UP.

### **Rage as Co-Cultural**

According to most queer scholars, a silence has been placed over societal gaze when it comes to queer oppression. Using scholarship from authors like Deleuze and Guattari, queer scholars articulate that power structures and society constantly reject the deviant in characterizations related to sexuality and productivity (Winnubust, 2006). Modern approaches to societal construction also place queer identity on the outside, as something to be forgotten and cast aside (Winnubust, 2006).

Queer rage activists argue that most contemporary approaches to fight queer oppression are formulated from a stance of assimilation and complicity. Gay pride parades and artistic commodification of queer experience, like Macklemore’s “Same Love,” operate within a form of silent complicity in the dominant structures of heteronormativity (Winnubust, 2006). Instead of fighting for solidarity within oppressive structure, queer rage highlights how modern structures and institutions are incapable of achieving any type of safety for queer bodies. Instead, queer rage focuses on strategizing

means with which to aggressively break down systems rooted in oppression (Winnubust, 2006)

The major source of academic discussion and research concerning queer rage stems from literature concerning activist responses during the HIV/AIDS outbreak. For this part, queer theorist J. Halberstam (1993) articulates queer rage as a means of introducing imaginary or real violence against power structures, locating itself in a position of the impossible to break apart the monolithic control of current violent structures. This unexpected, unpredicted violence attempts to create a fissure in modern power narratives that perpetuate binary controls on society. Halberstam (1993) argues that creating a place for rage is critical to break apart the dominant space that exists of homogeneity and production based desires. If no one fights, no one realizes the fight is possible; if no one imagines, reality continues.

Queer rage scholarship articulates that assimilating strategies for queer individuals are complicit with and prop up formality and decorum over actual disruption and solution (Puar, 2011; Puar, 2007; Halberstam, 1993). Modern methods of resistance that abide by the law in order to get a modicum of acceptance ultimately prop up and make even more pervasive the law they want to reform (Puar, 2011; Puar, 2007; Halberstam, 1993).

Society functions through order simply because no one is willing to force their fight into the middle of that order to confuse, refuse and diffuse its power. A method that makes that order anxious for its life creates instability and transfers societal control into

the hands of the oppressed. Only when societal boundaries are understood, denoted and stable can power continue (Smith, 2010; Halberstam, 1993). Imagined or real violent reactions of queer rage blur those boundaries and disrupt the plane between what is real and what is imaginary, what is possible and what is not. Giving people hope that real violence can happen, can be successful, and can liberate is critical to removing the complicit power that exists in the status quo. (Halberstam, 1993; Seem, 1983)

By refusing “the real’s” notion of permanence, queer rage can destabilize the structures that keep the real in place. This "reverse discourse" becomes something else, something more than simply "homosexuality beginning to talk on its own behalf" (Pinar, 2003; Halberstam, 1993). Halberstam explains the effect of queer rage’s reverse discourse:

The reverse discourse gathers steam, acquires density until it is in excess of the category it purports to articulate. The excess is the disruption of identity and the violence of power and the power of representation; it is disintegrational; the excess is queer. It challenges hegemonic definition, and hegemony itself. (Halberstam, 1993)

Queer rage’s heavy emphasis on the logic of reality’s permanence provides a counter-critique to status quo notions of effective knowledge production and decision-making. The “real” has become a place of complicity, inaction and failure. Queer scholars within rage literature argue that actions that neglect to step away from nonviolent resistance are doomed to perpetuate the logic that civil society holds a

position of undefeatability (Halberstam, 1993). This monolithic construction through focus on organization and placation will continue unless we take a step away from the predictable and instead move into the unreal, the unexpected, and the spontaneous realm of fantasy – a place of rage (Halberstam, 1993). Only through counter reality can we develop a strategy powerful enough to disrupt the known and break through to the imagined realm of possibility – a world where the system has no power, because those deemed powerless refuse to give it (Chambers, 2007; Halberstam, 1993; Deleuze and Guattari, 1972).

Beyond highly theoretical literature by scholars like Halberstam, grass-roots approaches within overt queer movements have also argued that rage must be structured as a cry against the system that refuses to end until society listens. As a popular pamphlet (*Queers Read This*, 1990) passed out at a pride march in New York City during the HIV/AIDS epidemic said:

I hate having to convince straight people that lesbians and gays live in a war zone, that we're surrounded by bomb blasts only we seem to hear, that our bodies and souls are heaped high, dead from fright or bashed or raped, dying of grief or disease, stripped of our personhood. I hate straight people who can't listen to queer anger without saying "hey, all straight people aren't like that. I'm straight too, you know," as if their egos don't get enough stroking or protection in this arrogant, heterosexist world. Why must we take care of them, in the midst of our just anger brought on by their fucked up society?! ...Let them figure out for themselves whether they deserve to be included in our anger... They've taught us



that good queers don't get mad. They've taught us so well that we not only hide our anger from them, we hide it from each other. WE EVEN HIDE IT FROM OURSELVES. We hide it with substance abuse and suicide and overachieving in the hope of proving our worth. They bash us and stab us and shoot us and bomb us in ever increasing numbers and still we freak out when angry queers carry banners or signs that say BASH BACK...LET YOURSELF BE ANGRY. Let yourself be angry that the price of our visibility is the constant threat of violence, anti-queer violence to which practically every segment of this society contributes. Let yourself feel angry that THERE IS NO PLACE IN THIS COUNTRY WHERE WE ARE SAFE, no place where we are not targeted for hatred and attack, the self-hatred, the suicide - of the closet. The next time some straight person comes down on you for being angry, tell them...go away until they have spent a month walking hand in hand in public with someone of the same sex. After they survive that, then you'll hear what they have to say about queer anger. Otherwise, tell them to shut up and listen.

ACT-UP operating under an interesting positionality that insinuated itself against societal opinion. Fighting against the inevitable death the queer community saw hurdling quickly around the corner inspired activists in the queer community to embrace a "queer collectivity founded on principles of resistance to normalization" in order to push momentum for action. (Rand, 2012)

Despite the literature surrounding the necessity of queer rage, this thesis will attempt to fill the gap in the literature to analyze the arguments that activists articulated

for or against “rage” or “opacity” strategies in order to offer recommendations for current activism.

### **Opacity as a Co-Cultural Strategy**

Black scholarship concerning opacity stems mainly from Dr. Emilie Townes extrapolation of the character, Topsy, from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. While common literary analysis describes Topsy as the precocious child slave in the narrative, Townes articulates that “Stowe’s gross stereotyping of Topsy also contains a liberatory note” (Townes, 2006). While Topsy proves that she is intelligent and capable of performing tasks assigned to her, her failure when acting out said tasks is a choice to covertly reject obedience (Townes, 2006).

Townes also explains that the attempted bond between the white female slave owner, Miss Ophelia, and Topsy is a perfect lens with which to understand how inter-group solidarity is impossible and destructive for Black individuals:

Cast in a more contemporary light, this attempt by Miss Ophelia to forge a bond with Topsy reminds me, all too often, of those instances when those of us who have some measure of power—either by position in our sociopolitical hierarchy or by the dint of our own will—decide to attempt solidarity with groups or individuals who are among the dispossessed. It is usually dismal business that erupts. The expected answers are never given, the hoped for common vision does not emerge, a recalcitrant commitment to justice remains deferred because the genuine differences among us are either glossed over, ignored, treated as impassable barriers, or viewed with an impregnable ignorance that veers into

solipsistic ruminations about “why can’t they be like us, act like us, talk like us, feel like us, be us.” Growing Topsy means that naive and ill-designed attempts at solidarity are questioned and debunked. As Topsy and her kinfolk and friends pull up their own chairs to the postmodern welcome table and begin to speculate on what it takes to grow, notions of solidarity and difference must be met face-to-face. (Townes, 2006)

While Topsy is solely a literary character, Townes articulates that her character’s metaphor is one that should be used to portray and carve out the formulations of Black identity as a collective, as she shows the necessity to elucidate and create a space for Black experience and narrative by disconfiguring the structural antagonisms that exist in civil society. As Towne’s articulates:

What happens when Topsy speaks? ...What happens when Topsy moves from a literary character functioning as metaphor to the material history and lives of African American children, men, and women? What does it mean when the crude burlesque of the pickaninny who has been described and categorized by others starts to carve out and speak out of an identity in which she is an active agent? What does it mean to say that the dismantling of evil signals a commitment to conscious reflection on the interplay between culture, identity, community, theory, practice, myth, memory, history, life, death? How might we lean into, walk into, run into, crawl into, shimmy into a truly liberatory space—a space in which Topsy and all her kin and friends can speak? A place that invites listening and hearing. A space that invites us to dare faithfulness, to drop our defenses, to

accept responsibility to live in genuine accountability because we know that if we do not right the wrongs of the past (or at least attempt to do so), we leave it to future generations. (Townes, 2006)

A critically important aspect of Black opacity that is provided by the narrative of Topsy is “the undercommons.” Moten and Harney (2004), developed this concept out of their work on the role of Black critical scholars in contemporary universities. As they argued, due to the increasing focus on professionalization and pro-establishment concepts within the University, scholars who hoped to provide a critical fissure in the academy’s foundations had to find a way to “work within” without “working with” in order to avoid backlash from those establishments. The undercommons, as they coined this space, becomes a liminal or “set aside” place where Black individuals are able to exist without oppressive structures – a place that, as Harney defines it, provides a radical form of action to disrupt enlightenment perspective and what Foucauldian scholars call biopolitical control.<sup>1</sup>

Moten and Harney’s undercommons has similarities with Fraser’s (2003) “subaltern public sphere,” which she argued is a necessary space for subordinated groups to talk amongst themselves, away from the prying eyes of dominant groups. In academia, the space of the “subaltern public sphere” or under commons is specifically important, as

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<sup>1</sup> Harney (2013) explains biopower within the university as a means of control over information dissemination and knowledge production. The biopower of the university acts in ways to discover minority dissenters in order to construct and eliminate differing perspectives.

it offers Black individuals a means of appropriating white strategies in order to coopt their political potential:

After all, the subversive intellectual came under false pretenses, with bad documents, out of love. Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong...Perhaps the biopower of the enlightenment knows this, or perhaps it is just reacting to the objecthood of this labor as it must. But even as it depends on these moles, these refugees, it will call them uncollegial, impractical, naive, unprofessional. And one may be given one last chance to be pragmatic – why steal when one can have it all, they will ask. But if one hides from this interpellation, neither agrees nor disagrees but goes with hands full into the underground of the university, into the Undercommons – this will be regarded as theft, as a criminal act. And it is at the same time, the only possible act. (Harney, 2013)

This idea of the undercommons can also be connected to the creative utilization of narrative technique by queer writers during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. To be sure, some queer activists saw the desire to paint stories of queer experience through melodramatic narratives, like the best-selling Hollywood screenplay *Borrowed Time*, as assimilative and reflecting a retrograde desire for “social acceptability” (Eiser, 1997). At the same

time, other writers argued that the strategic use of dominant culture's narrative forms and genres would enable writers to subtly and strategically humanize the tragedy of the disease and thereby break through the ceiling of homophobia that continued to marginalize the queer community and the AIDS epidemic (Eiser, 1997). Eiser articulates the queer undercommons through narrative best when he delves into the comparison the queer community could make between their own tactical use of narratives with radical feminist's use of narrative:

Douglas Crimp argues that to write uncritically in a bourgeois genre rein-scribes its most traditional conventions (248), which for gay male subjects, contains and, perhaps more importantly, eradicates male-male sexuality. But in her discussion of cultural products produced for women, Tania Modleski describes ways in which narratives resist male domination even as they seem to condone it (23-25). Modleski describes counter-plots which undermine the hegemonic force of the main plot: "these plots have had to be 'submerged' into more orthodox ones just as feminine rage itself, blocked in direct expression, has had to be submerged, subterranean, devious" (25). The main plot is the one that will enable the reading or viewing public to "recognize" the events as "realistic," as something that can happen. But the counter-plots abuse this constructed reality by suggesting that there are other equally significant plots which the main plot and the reading public may refuse to recognize.

Finally, others have argued that a strategy of opacity can be necessary not only in the struggle against dominant groups, but also *within* social justice movements as well.

For example, as we will see below, although many within the queer community found that ACT-UP activism inspired community building and a sense of safety, others felt marginalized within this co-cultural group. Specifically, lesbians, bisexuals and others often felt pushed to the side and forced to juxtapose their desire for intra-community building with the demands for inter-community aggression. As Rand (2012) writes, “to the extent that an “affective network” can be a source of collective power, it must also be understood to have the opposite effect: to exclude, to divide, and to marginalize” (p. 37).

While ACT-UP’s strategy focused on fighting for change and changing the stereotypical framing of the effeminate, unproductive queer, actions by the queer community writ large were often more passive. People who contracted HIV/AIDS were considered sexual deviants who proved their abnormality through their diagnosis. Society defined homosexuality as the cause for HIV/AIDS, and being straight as the cure. Considering that the 1980s was a time where many individuals still sought the closet to escape the dominant portrayals of “queer as sin,” the stigma of AIDS propped up the shame that already tied itself to queer identity. (Rand, 2012)

In response to this hostile cultural environment, some gay communities began to work towards community building in order to enforce new practices within queer sexuality as part of a larger attempt to encourage what many scholars depict as assimilation. In this sense, while ACT UP was on the streets, others were doing work largely out of sight, including caring for the ill or dying and promoting “safe sex” and “responsible” AIDS prevention. However, as Rand (2012) writes,

Gould points out that the “proud rhetoric of responsibility” of this period...remained deeply ambivalent because it was invested in a politics of respectability. Since responsibility was concerned with social acceptance (motivated by the urgent need to gain a sympathetic response to AIDS from medical, governmental, and other institutions), it was implicitly and intricately linked to respectability. Respectability was defined, of course, in heteronormative (and what would come to be known as homonormative<sup>7</sup>) terms, and thus the pride that emerged during this period was premised, at least to a certain extent, on a disavowal of gay sexual practices and cultures. (p. 39)

Another idea articulated by individuals in the queer community who were opposed to the rage tactics of ACT-UP during the AIDS epidemic was the likelihood that rage would alienate potential allies. A specific instance of this referenced within queer communication was the oppositional tactics juxtaposed against opaque coalitional political maneuvers. For instance, during an AIDS conference in 1990, a large protest was staged by ACT-UP that drowned out the speeches being made at the conference:

Before he had even begun to speak, AIDS activists unfurled a banner saying, "He talks, we die." The secretary's address was drowned out from beginning to end by a roar of shouts and whistles. It's hard to think of a surer way for people with AIDS to alienate their best supporters. What could have caused such a pointless breakdown in sense and civility? It's not as if society had turned its back on AIDS and those whom it strikes. Gay groups using conventional political methods have persuaded Congress to finance a widespread research effort, now amounting to



about \$1 billion a year. Though treatments and vaccines are painfully slow in coming, it's not now for want of effort or resources. (New York Times, 1990)

These instance of opacity tactics are rather reminiscent of the strategies utilized by other marginalized groups, like feminist activists, who strove—within the undercommons—to challenge the dominant lexicon and to rearticulate societal space in connection to the experience of marginalized feminine identity, along the way inventing “new terms for describing social reality, including "sexism," "the double shift," sexual harassment," and "marital, date, and acquaintance rape.” (Fraser, 1990) These subaltern counterpublics, as Fraser (1990) articulates, “are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.

In this way, as Fraser (1990) notes, although strategies of opacity may be oriented toward self-protection and building intra-movement solidarity, they can also formulate effective tools with which to break apart these systems entirely – opening the space for more radical actions and change. With this in mind, considering how interconnected passive and active strategies were for the ACT-UP movement, an examination of previous literature may suggest rage and opacity tactics are not mutually exclusive for queer navigation of dominant power dynamics. Fraser (1990) explains:

On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational

activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies. (p. 12)

Overall, this review of theory and research has found that rage and opacity strategies are historically rooted in the social justice struggles of the queer community, but also in the struggles of muted groups writ large. Further, this review suggests that these commonalities are rooted in the communication challenges all muted groups face, including the tendency for dominant groups to disrespect the speech of muted groups, the power dominant groups exert over what knowledge is acceptable or sufficient for communication, the ability of dominant groups to define and distort muted group experiences, the long history of dominant groups co-opting and “speaking for” muted groups, and—most fundamentally, the muting or eliding of minority groups’ experiences, needs and voices in public discourse.

These issues can all be seen in the discourse surrounding the AIDS epidemic as it unfolding, such as when newspapers like the New York Times treated Larry Kramer like a pariah for writing articles concerning AIDS, or governmental addresses of the epidemic attempted to “play down” the suffering of the queer community, or evangelists like Jerry Falwell defined AIDS as the justified punishment for the queer community’s deviance (Papp & Turnan, 2014; Eskridge & Johnson, 2007).

Just as CCT attempts to provide examples of how muted groups navigate obstacles like the examples listed above, I will investigate the tactics utilized during the AIDS epidemic by ACT-UP to not only explore the roles played by rage versus opacity strategies in their struggles against a homophobic and uncaring culture, but also to reconstruct the arguments for and against these tactics. The goal of this analysis is not only to assess the strengths and weaknesses of rage versus opacity strategies at the time, but also to think carefully about the relative utility of rage versus opacity strategies in contemporary struggles for social justice. In doing so, as noted above, I will explore the following research questions: 1) What was the intra-movement debate over the “rage” strategy and the confrontational tactics of groups like ACT UP? 2) How did this argument play out, and with what political and cultural consequences? And 3) What can we learn about the strategic choices facing current struggles for queer liberation from analyzing this historical case?

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

With these research questions in mind, and following the traditions of critical inquiry, I approached the research from a historical perspective in order to construct the narrative of opacity and rage within both scholarship and actual grassroots discussions concerning social movements. I compiled theoretical texts to use to make sense of and interpret the writings and reports on the activists. This included books by key activists (like Larry Kramer of the ACT-UP movement) and social movement scholars (like Mark Orbe's co-cultural theorizations, Judith Butler's discussions of queer theory and bell hooks' race discussions), news reports, TV interviews and even archives in libraries concerning the past movements. An important part of this research placed a heavy reliance on unconventional scholarship like poetry, narratives and screenplays (i.e. *The Normal Heart*) produced during and after the HIV movements and Civil Rights Movement that are related to these methodologies along with other aspects of the academic undercommons concerning these issues.

After compiling this research, I chose three subsets to use to perform a critical textual analysis to investigate the debate over rage and opacity strategies in the context of 1980s HIV/AIDS activism. The first subset that I chose for the textual analysis is academic literature analyzing the ACT-UP movement. Although some of this academic

literature is explained within the literature review, instances within academia that provide specific articulations in favor of or against rage and opacity tactics within academic discussions are an important part of the ongoing debate that has occurred concerning these issues. Therefore, inclusion of academic works in the analysis of this thesis provides a more holistic understanding of the themes articulated within queer activism. The second subset of text used for analysis within this thesis is specific dramatic interpretations of the HIV/AIDS movement by integral actors within ACT-UP, such as Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* and reviews of it from the queer community. Justification for the inclusion of these texts is best articulated when one understands how artistic expression specifically connects to muted groups like queer activists:

Because women, as well as other marginalized groups, have experiences that differ from the conceptualized [White, middle-class, Protestant, able-bodied, etc.] masculine norm, to better understand their experiences scholars must pay heed to their standpoints and the various ways they might be expressed, including through artistic means such as dance, music, visual art, and performance. (Huber, 2010)

Because a large aspect of muted group communication deploys artistic portrayal, I believed that ignoring the rich cultural depiction within art and drama of the HIV/AIDS epidemic would leave a gap in thematic analysis of queer activism by ACT-UP. For example, one of the largest protests coordinated by ACT-UP was a dramatic interpretation of prostrate dead AIDS victims in the middle of a Sunday morning mass at Saint Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Art and drama was a specific tactic used by queer activists to build coalitional support, therefore analysis of some of the major artistic

works during that time by queer activists like Larry Kramer is necessary to understand queer strategy.

That last subset that will be used for the textual analysis was news portrayals of ACT-UP during the 1980s by queer news media in New York City versus the New York Times. In order to effectively identify the narratives provided by queer news media during that time, it is important to compare intra-movement news to a “mainstream” source. Not only will analysis of these two differing news sources provide a comparison, but will also offer context to filter queer reactions to “mainstream” portrayal and action (or lack thereof) concerning the HIV/AIDS crisis.

After compiling these texts, I began to formulate exactly how I would perform my analysis. To begin, I separated the co-cultural communicative approaches that Orbe (1998) identifies as either opaque or rage, by asking the question “Is this approach indirect/covert/passive/assimilative or direct/overt/aggressive/separatist?” If the approach fit within any one of those identifying characteristics, it was separated into the respective category of opaque or rage tactics. I chose these different identifying themes because they are the most common characteristics provided by my original research for the literature review.

Using the approaches listed under each umbrella theme of rage and opacity, I then began the initial coding process for the three text subsets. At this point, I began to shift away from a completely deductive approach to coding into a more hybrid approach. Understanding that Orbe’s list of communicative strategies for muted groups may not

exhaust the strategies (or the arguments about the strategies) either performed by ACT UP (or discussed by their supporters and critics), I made sure to keep an open mind to see if there was anything within the text that does not completely fit into the themes identified for rage and opacity. Arguments about these tactics were separated into a third group and recoded by asking the same question that I proposed in the original coding of Orbe, “Is this approach indirect/covert/passive/separatist or direct/overt/aggressive/assimilative?” By asking this question, I was able to effectively separate these new arguments into the overall themes of opacity and rage categories.

Drawing on Orbe’s theory, I was then able to make sense of the arguments of the activists who were arguing either for or against specific tactics of ACT UP. In short, this qualitative coding and analysis allowed me to explore the extent to which the intra-movement arguments resonated with the co-cultural strategies identified and discussed by Orbe. Finally, I used this analysis of the arguments of activists regarding ACT UP to explore what this historical debate regarding tactics of ACT UP tell us about both the strategic promise of rage versus opacity in the current political moment, as well as what they tell us about the existing value and future development of Co-Cultural communication theory.

## CHAPTER 4: ACT UP BEGINNINGS

It was as if we had all found a beautiful field where we could go and play, celebrating our bodies, having sex, and our affection for each other. A cloud appeared from nowhere, and as the thunder roared the lightning struck without warning, and around me lay friends dying and dead, while I stood unscathed. How do you begin to make sense of the capriciousness of it all and live your life?

-Unknown

### ACT UP and Death

The outbreak of AIDS signaled a point in history at which homophobia became not only “morally justifiable,” but utilitarian (all because queer individuals could be labeled as a scourge to the heterosexual population). In the early 1980’s, rampant vitriol was encouraged by the media in which AIDS first became the “gay disease” that was spreading throughout the United States. It was not until AIDS became a straight disease as well that this became an issue of national importance. Yet, even during this time of “enlightenment,” the overarching rhetorical portrayal of AIDS in the United States was one that casted the queer population as the actual disease. Queerness was spreading, and the poor straight population was suffering as a result of their sinful actions (Wojnarowicz, 1992).



When co-cultural groups are faced with the potential for mass extermination by a disease that seems to have no cure, many different options exist for how to handle that situation. Do you mourn your lost friends and loved ones? Deny that this death is happening? Become angry and find some sort of scapegoat for that anger? Cling to the friends and loved ones that are still living and hope for a cure? During the AIDS epidemic, the queer community was faced with the struggle of navigating mass instances of death, and deciding how they would act, with the knowledge that it was becoming increasingly likely that they would be next:

I have come to the realization that I will almost certainly die of AIDS...The treatments simply are not there. They are not even in the pipeline. A miracle is possible, of course. And for a long time, I thought one would happen. But let's face it, a miracle isn't going to happen. One day soon I will simply become one of the 90 people in America to die that day of AIDS. It's like knowing I will be killed by a speeding car, but not knowing when or where...The world is moving on, uncaring, frustrated and bored, leaving by the roadside those of us who are infected and who can't help but wonder: Whatever happened to AIDS? (Schmalz, 1993)

With the likelihood of dying from AIDS increasing with each day, ACT UP was formed to ensure every possible treatment or cure had been unearthed, fought for, and examined (Leavitt, 1989). The specter of death was in this case ironically liberating: if you are going to die anyway, doing something—anything—will not make the situation worse.

Yet, under the threat of death, and to the chagrin for ACT UP's founders, many individuals in, and outside of, the queer community attempted to deny the potential of infection. Until death touched people individually, it was easy to ignore the message portrayed on news outlets and through the gossip grapevines in the fear that somehow engaging in discussions about death via AIDS would make one more susceptible to catching HIV (Leavitt, 1989). Therefore, in direct opposition to this silence, ACT UP chose to *engage* the specter of death, introducing the question of what the gay community was going to do about the fact that "in five years you could be dead from AIDS," and create a movement that focused on direct action to fight AIDS rather than what they viewed as complacent mourning. (Leavitt, 1989)

In order to understand the gravity of ACT UP's "call to arms," if you will, an examination of historical context is necessary. When the AIDS outbreak first began, the queer community had just made significant strides in making being queer not a complete plague in and of itself. Queer communities were finally reaching a point in their history where they encouraged one another not to be ashamed of their sexuality, and to reject categorizations of queerness as being deviant. In many US cities, the first pride parades commemorated a time in queer history where shame was meant to engulf queer subjectivity, and celebrated a new era of pride in queer culture and identity.

Then, AIDS arrived. In 1981, the first official case of AIDS, then called Gay Related Immune Deficiency, was identified. While the disease is argued to possible have started decades before this year, it was not until the disease began to affect a large

amount of gay men in the United States that a pattern was identified to determine that a new disease existed (Avert, 2014).

For several months after the first case of AIDS was reported by the news in 1981, the people dying from AIDS were solely gay men. Thus, AIDS was initially called Gay Related Immune Deficiency. After drug users and individuals who were not gay men contracted the disease, the CDC changed the name to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) (Avert, 2012). Because AIDS infection rates were high among gay men in the early stages of the disease's spread, preachers and politicians alike began to zealously argue that gay men were finally receiving the penance for their sins. Rhetoric surrounding AIDS made being gay, particularly engaging in gay sex, dirty again. Maybe in dominant society's view it never stopped being dirty. However, these narratives began to unravel the progress of previous decades, including with regard to how gay individuals viewed themselves.

So, when Larry Kramer—a playwright and founder of ACT UP—yelled to a group of students at Yale in 1983 that they could be next, one can imagine the discomfort that created for young queer individuals who finally felt free to express their sexuality. The path back into the closet did not seem as constricting anymore in comparison to the death sentence being preached by Kramer and the aggressive stigmatization of gay men due to the association with AIDS and death (Leavitt, 1989). Yet, at the same time, Kramer's constant preaching of the war against gay men started to resonate as more and more gay lovers, friends and boyfriends died. People began to see the truth behind the prophecy of “you could be dead in five years.”

The pride parades that the gay community rallied around were taken over to depict queer bodies inside concentration camps, because queer life could not be happy in a time such as this, when a plague was quickly exterminating such a large part of the queer community (DeParle, 1990). The pink triangle, a symbol of homosexual oppression by Nazi Germany that had been reappropriated to symbolize the community building and resilience of the queer community, was again repurposed to spread the message that Silence = Death (DeParle, 1990; Leavitt, 1989).

But death for the queer body was not a new narrative. “Notions of death have been at the heart of nearly every historical construction of same-sex desire.” (Eisner, 1997) In fact, many in the queer community saw the framing by activists in ACT UP of impending doom for queer individuals as buying into the depiction of homosexuality being a social death, or the creation of people with AIDS (PWAs) as the abject. (Eisner, 1997) The capitalist notion that the queer will never be productive in society seemed to become entrenched in the idea that PWAs have no hope of a productive existence. (Eisner, 1997) This debate within the queer community writ large also occurred internally within ACT UP. PWAs within ACT UP became the rallying symbol, but at the same time many of these individuals felt that their subjectivity was replaced with the referent point of victim, or the walking dead. (Shulman & Carlomusto, 2002)

### **Gay Men’s Health Crisis & ACT UP**

Similar to why history provides important context to why the framing of death and AIDS was so significant for the queer population, understanding the foundations of AIDS activism is necessary before delving into the particulars of ACT UP activism. This

foundation sets the stage for exactly why Larry Kramer and the other activists who organized ACT UP focused so heavily on direct action tactics.

Despite the significant gains made for AIDS treatment by ACT UP, the organization was not the first to attempt to speak out against dominant media portrayal of the epidemic. ACT UP's protest had its foundation in the voices of many others who were willing to speak against the stigmatization of queer individuals during the AIDS crisis. However, the overt criticisms of the structures that allowed for AIDS to go unchecked were mainly individualistic and did not come with the power of a group rallying effect like ACT UP, which thus can be known as the energy and catalyst for an *activist* movement in response to AIDS. (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002)

But despite ACT UP's position as the catalyst for AIDS activism, a significant part of the groundwork for their "drugs into bodies" campaign was laid by the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the original AIDS organization created in 1982.

When AIDS was first discovered in 1981, it was originally warned to be a rare form of pneumonia affecting a small group of gay men in Los Angeles. Later that year, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that this was a rare cancer, named Kaposi's sarcoma, which was affecting gay men. As the number of deaths began to approach the triple digits, a group of eighty men gathered together in a prominent gay writer named Larry Kramer's apartment to discuss options. From this meeting, six of those men, Nathan Fain, Larry Kramer, Larry Mass, Paul Popham, Paul Rapoport and Edmund White, officially established the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in 1982 (GMHC.org, 2015).

In their first year of operation in New York, GMHC established an answering machine line in one of the volunteer's homes, which acted as the first AIDS hotline. They also produced and distributed tens of thousands of free newsletters to doctors, hospitals, clinics, created a buddy program to help PWAs with their everyday needs, funded litigation efforts for AIDS discrimination suits, sponsored numerous AIDS fundraising events, and published safe sex guidelines. All of these efforts focused on either making living with AIDS more manageable or encouraging prevention efforts (GMHC.org, 2015).

Ultimately, GHMC's reluctance to adopt direct action activism is what led Larry Kramer to rally a significant number of GHMC activists behind the concept of creating a *new* group, one dedicated toward direct action for AIDS issues – an organization that placed activism at the forefront. On March 10, 1987, Kramer spoke at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in Manhattan, where he called for the formation of an AIDS activist group. Two days later, three hundred people organized to establish a non-partisan group united in anger and committed to non-violent direct action to end the AIDS crisis, coined the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power – ACT UP (ACT UP New York, 2009).

Two weeks after Kramer's initial speech, ACT UP held its first direct action, a protest on Wall Street of the profiteering by pharmaceutical companies of AIDS drugs, such as AZT, by Burroughs Wellcome (ACT UP New York, 2009). From that day on, ACT UP attempted to hold loud initiatives to bring notice to the AIDS epidemic, such as their demands that the Reagan administration do something to help in the fight against the spread of AIDS during the March for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Washington D.C. in

October of 1987 (ACT UP New York, 2009). Up until that point, Reagan had been silent on the issue of AIDS, which many AIDS activists argued was the reason the disease continued to flourish (White, 2004). As the next two years progressed, more branches of ACT UP opened, largely because AIDS began to spread to more and more cities. However, most of ACT UP's more public events were led by either the New York or Los Angeles branch (ACT UP New York, 2009).

In October of 1988, ACT UP protested the FDA for its slow drug-approval policy which resulted in thousands dead from lack of access to life-saving drugs. Within a year, the process was greatly accelerated (ACT UP New York, 2009). The next year, ACT UP held two of its more notorious initiatives. The first, on September 14<sup>th</sup>, was a protest of price-gouging by pharmaceutical companies. While the purpose of this protest was similar to ACT UP's first AZT protest, this initiative actually stopped trading on the New York Stock Exchange for the first time in its history (ACT UP New York, 2009). The second event in 1989 was ACT UP's "Stop the Church" campaign, where almost five thousand protestors attended to protest the Catholic Church's "deadly, homophobic, misogynistic AIDS and abortion policies" (ACT UP New York, 2009).

After their first few years as an organization, ACT UP continued to protest issues related to AIDS and push for governmental action and programs for the crisis. They interrupted numerous speeches by governmental officials to draw attention to those individual's hypocrisy or lack of action in the fight against AIDS, and protested the CDC for disseminating false information. They established needle exchanges that collected dirty needles in exchange for clean ones. They stormed the NIH to demand more AIDS

treatments and to end the underrepresentation of women and people of color in clinical trials. They protested George H. W. Bush's excessive spending on the Gulf War while claiming there was no money for AIDS programs, staged die-ins to prove that the crisis continued, and held political funerals in Washington D.C. In the 1990s, they continued to protest price-gouging by pharmaceutical companies, fought for expanded access to new drugs, and held an eighteen month campaign against Clinton for his failure to combat AIDS and bans on needle exchanges (ACT UP New York, 2009). While these were not the only actions by ACT UP, it provides a background for the specific style of initiatives that ACT UP was known to stage.

ACT UP was thus the more confrontational progeny of GMHC. While the GMHC did not engage in direct action, they were in this way noteworthy as the first organization to encourage increased awareness of AIDS treatment options and prevention tactics (Schulman & Ma, 2003; Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002). The GMHC tailored their educational outreach to initiatives like safer-sex forums, treatment options, and media campaigns to dispel the negative representation of living with AIDS:

I remember one safer-sex forum that was mixed. It was really great to be sitting around in a group of men and women talking about sex practices. I learned a lot. I never had heard of, what is shrimping? I didn't know what shrimping was...GMHC needed someone to coordinate audio-visual aspects of their expanding mission. So I took the job...I went for it because I thought that we needed to shape a new message. And my being at GMHC would become, for me,



a way to do interventions around representation...to do the cable show *Living with AIDS*, to produce our own material. (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002)

Analyzing the original tactics of the GHMC, one can see that their underlying purpose was to make AIDS manageable. While ACT UP focused their message on finding a cure and increasing access to medication, the GMHC tailored their tactics toward helping the people who had AIDS figure out how to live with their condition, part of which entailed campaigns to challenge stigmatizing messages circulating within dominant culture. The GHMC saw challenging and re-articulating stereotypes concerning people living with AIDS as being a necessary hurdle to achieving any progress in the battle against it (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002).

At the same time, a major hurdle that existed for the success of the GHMC was their lack of resources. Most of the different initiatives being pushed barely had the staff to cover the operation and budgeting was always a concern. (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002) The constant shortages of funding and staff undermined GHMC's ability to reach their goals. In comparison, ACT UP's later focus on fundraising and recruiting large pools of volunteers gave the organization larger and more varied ability to jumpstart their projects.

Moreover, because of the GMHC's focus on managing the effects of AIDS, most of their efforts never spilled outside of the gay community. Although this may have meant that they were helpful to gay individuals living with AIDS, their goal of dispelling

the stereotypes related to AIDS was not as successful considering their internal focus on the gay community (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002).

Another factor that may have contributed to the opinion that the GHMC was a failure was what some coined as the “unnecessary acrimoniousness” between GHMC and ACT UP. Although the organizations used different tactics, they nonetheless pursued similar goals. Yet activists from each group tended to demean involvement in the other. For example, ACT UP represented the GHMC as “stodgy” and “bourgie,” despite the fact that GHMC was in part successful because they were able to create an ethic of community involvement among gay individuals. However, ACT UP flipped this script into being an “AIDS chic” or more self-consciously revolutionary type of engagement, arguing that direct action through an activist model was the proletariat’s means of engaging the AIDS epidemic. (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002)

This tension between GHMC and ACT UP created an ideological conflict that left individuals with a choice between the professional model of the GHMC that focused on caring for people by setting up a professional organization to manage the care and advocacy of people living with AIDS and the activist model of ACT UP, which was defined by a sensibility that one member, Jean Carlomusto (Schulman and Carlomusto, 2002) described as “the rules are fucked and nothing’s going to change until we get out there and we change them, and we advocate” (p. 24).

Despite ACT UP’s desire to translate postmodern criticism of societal inequalities for individuals with AIDS or those oppressed by homophobic stigmatization, some AIDS

activists, particularly women, viewed ACT UP's tactics as flamboyant elitism that wasn't applicable to the communities they were trying to help (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003). The ability of ACT UP activists to center their activism on getting arrested and protesting in aggressively visible means "smacked of a kind of elitism and privilege that [the] women themselves who worked in these agencies were skeptical about" (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003).

So, interestingly, just as ACT UP activists criticized their predecessor, GHMC, for bourgeois AIDS engagement, the more aggressive stance of ACT UP also created tension within the wider AIDS activism community for failing to create a movement that could be applicable to organizing and mobilizing communities outside of ACT UP's core constituency of white gay men:

So, that split, that tension between what it meant to be providing services for gay white men, and what it meant to be providing services for other communities that were organizing, was alive. And, you know, you've said to me, and I agree with you, that that wasn't actually what was happening in ACT UP, but it certainly was how ACT UP was perceived (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003).

In the balance of this chapter, with this historical overview established, I will first discuss two different strategic frames that individual activists within ACT UP drew upon when advocating for particular direct action tactics: reformism and anti-queerness. Then, I will move to a discussion of Orbe's concept of ability, and how specific examples of

ability determined which tactics were chosen by different individuals in ACT UP and ACT UP as a holistic organization.

### **Reformism**

In short, as we have seen, ACT UP positioned the stance of GHMC as one of fatalistic mourning. Larry Kramer specifically argued that the constant ritual of mourning over the increasing number of AIDS victims created a demobilizing view of inevitability surrounding death that stifled any action toward finding a cure. Action needed to be taken to facilitate change, or else there would be no one left to mourn the dead. As Rand (2012) writes:

The tension between the need to mourn for lost friends and lovers and the need to organize forceful protests against the political and medical institutions that did not prevent their deaths thus became increasingly significant throughout the 1980s. Some activists, such as the vituperative Larry Kramer, were alarmed by the quiescence these events seemed to condone. In his characteristic polemic style, he goads his fellow gay men, "You are going to die and you are going to die very soon. Unless you get off your fucking tushies and fight back. Unless you do, you will forgive me, you deserve to die." (p. 22)

ACT UP viewed the obsession with devastation and grief as counterproductive, because grief should not be the end point. Instead, ACT UP wanted to *use* the grief associated with this constant dying as a means to motivate anger and engagement with social transformation (Rand, 2007). While sadness may be inevitable, only by shifting the

focus from mourning to anger can replace feelings of devastation and fatalism with rage and courage:

I never want to forget my pain, or what my friends endured. I embraced that pain, I took it to heart, and I use it to feed the bilious rage that has taken root in my soul. I know I would lose my mind, if not my life, if all these people we love so much ended up dying for nothing but the ineptitude of a racist, sexist, classist, homophobic political regime and an apathetic public. That's why I fight instead of cry. (Rand, 2007, p. 19)

The shift from mourning to activism by ACT UP came with the acceptance of what they considered a true inevitability, which was political structures. ACT UP activists argued that because political structures will always have some sort of control that limits the success of social movements, activists must connect criticism with material challenges in order to successfully spotlight the unethical behavior on the part of major actors in the AIDS crisis and create material change that benefits individuals connected to the epidemic (Elbaz, 1995).

A problem that individuals in ACT UP saw was that while they suffered from the effects of institutional bureaucracy (including especially the slow-moving process of approving new pharmaceuticals), organizations like drug companies were able to profit off of those bureaucratic decisions. Drug companies learned how to rig the system to maximize their economic gain, while ACT UP had failed to work the system in ways that would change those laws to prevent this profiteering (Elbaz, 1995).

In the face of mass deaths due to AIDS, some activists within ACT UP advocated a reformist approach to direct action. In short, these activists argued that working within the system (the same system that many viewed to be the cause of their suffering) seemed the most pragmatic means for achieving tangible gains for people with AIDS. If the system was what made drug dissemination riddled with hurdles and red tape, crafting approaches to change the legislation surrounding that problem created a solution for what activists saw as the problem at hand (Elbaz, 1995). While institutional homophobia may continue, reformist activists believed they could initiate means that reduced the capability of the institution to detrimentally operationalize against queer bodies:

Working from "inside the system," ACT UP's initiative [sped up] AIDS research...The AIDS Cure Act would mandate the creation of a special space for scientists -- freed from bureaucratic wrangling and economic dependencies -- and foster speed and creativity in research. The new research environment would promote multiparadigmatic approaches and the concept of cure would be understood broadly to include quality of life (Elbaz, 1995).

Legislative wins by ACT UP allowed for activists to better do their work. While stigma exists against drug users that prevented institutional gains against needle use transmission of AIDS, activists were able to argue for court decisions that could allow for legal needle exchanges by ACT UP. They achieved this by using legal precedent like the ground of necessity to allow for activists to carry needles to provide to drug users (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002).

Overall, the ideology behind institutional engagement by AIDS activists in ACT UP was that persistent pressure achieves incremental change that can not only help work towards treatment and prevention of AIDS, but it would also motivate other activists to join the fight when they witnessed the material successes achieved by working pragmatically within the legislative and judicial process (Elbaz, 1995). In short, individuals in ACT UP who operated under the ideology of reformism understood that while they may not be able to save the people that had already died from AIDS or were dying, being willing to do something was better than fatalistically mourning the dead. The dying needed hope that the future was not one that guaranteed a death sentence for those who were positive, and this hope depended on signs of pragmatic, material progress (Schulman & Moore, 2003).

### **Anti-queerness**

While the reformist paradigm was embraced by many within ACT UP as a means to address the material suffering that the queer community and people with AIDS in general were experiencing, other activists in ACT UP saw this viewpoint as tunnel vision. If the means used to address systemic inequalities are propping up the very system that created those problems to begin with, reformism does not resolve the true reason for material conditions of queer bodies (Rand, 2012). A frame that attempted to bring the queer community and AIDS victims into a position of societal acceptability only risked suturing over the anti-queerness present in civil society, while propping up the dominant heteronormative culture that “allowed” queerness to be “brought into the fold” (Rand, 2012). With this in mind, another dominant frame within ACT UP was that raging

against structures that allowed for anti-queerness can dismantle the power that these systems have (Rand, 2012).

The desire to assimilate into structures in order to reform them was framed by these activists as corporate “sell out” that reinforced the heteronormative structures that made queerness something to be ashamed of in the first place. To counter this, activists who operated from a frame of anti-queerness attempted to expose “hypocrisies of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement” and to create “a radical outsider queer culture” (Rand, 2012, p. 13) While to some this may seem counter-intuitive to embrace the peripheral positionality that heteronormative framing had created, this stance was one conceived to “perform a double movement through shame” (Rand, 2012).

First, this affirmation was a means to undercut the idea that individuals should cast off the shame they feel because of heteronormative construction of queer as deviant. These activists saw the idea of “pride in queerness resolves marginalization” to be short sighted. Because of the pervasiveness of heteronormativity on mainstream ideologies, understanding how that dominant position has crafted one’s subjectivity is important to crafting “collective resistance to normativity” (Rand, 2012). In short, not “we are normal,” but “there is no normal.” Second, instead of shame being a weapon that heteronormative structures deploy against queer individuals to keep them closeted, this framing allowed for this shame to be placed upon institutions and individuals who have failed the queer community by trading “radical roots for a place at the table” (Rand, 2012)



In short, institutional neglect and violence to queer individuals, particularly because these acts could now be justified by deeming queers as the infected carriers of AIDS necessitated a radical movement. Queer activists operating under the idea that anti-queerness was an inevitable characteristic of civil society framed their violent protests as being the only means to position oneself when so many people were dying and homophobia continued unchecked:

There's a virus ticking its way through the arteries of people we love. That would be enough to make us crazy, right there...even as our friends keep dying, the hatred of homosexuals flourishes...Homophobia is thriving like mosquitoes in August ...If you're gay and you're not angry, you're just not paying attention. I myself belong to ACT UP...I've chained myself to the White House gates. I've committed these and other acts of civil disobedience in the company of people I consider heroes (Cunningham, 1992).

Although some queer individuals outside of ACT UP constructed these activists' "obsession with death" as some sort of Freudian death drive, in reality they were finally confronting how social death of the queer body had realized itself in biological death. Activists operating from a frame of anti-queerness argued that the reason the epidemic spread without response was homophobia (Crimp, 1989). Therefore, understanding how social death creates the possibility for both external and internalized violence is necessary to countering both institutionalized effects of anti-queerness, as well as psychic effects (Crimp, 1989)

Before AIDS, the violence toward most queer individuals was solely psychic, because the closet existed as a mechanism of invisibility. However, AIDS changed how the closet operated for closeted queer individuals. People who before could operate under relative privilege, because queerness could be hidden, could no longer hide the physical manifestation of their “deviance” (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003). The mark of AIDS became the scarlet letter that violently pushed queer bodies out of the closet:

But, at that time, those men were in the closet, and had power. And then, they got AIDS. And suddenly, they were not in the closet – not by choice, because they caught a fatal disease. So, they were abandoned because they were gay in a society that was completely homophobic and AIDS activism and queer activism that came on its tail – or is the same thing, or whatever – you know, has, like, completely changed in some – at least, about visibility, you know – maybe only about visibility – how one can be gay, you know (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003).

Once the safety of the closet disappeared, anti-queer framed activists argued that assimilation would never be positive, because queer identity would only be accepted insofar as normative society could use it for its own gain. Rage, then, was a means to reject assimilation and to fight for queer identity. AIDS made sexual freedom that was tied to the gay community dirty. Rage allowed for disavowal from the aggressive accommodation or assimilation that was expected within the gay community (i.e. to dispel those stereotypes or to blame the promiscuous gay people that “spread” the disease). It became a way to blame those doing nothing to stop it, rather than the individuals getting AIDS (Rand, 2007)

Not only could rage allow for individuals to create a positive subjective position outside of dominant structures, but it also provided a means of catharsis in the face of anti-queer civil society (Staggs, 1990) If violence to the queer body is inevitable because of anti-queerness, rage provided an outlet for the grief that the queer community would face because of it. Yes, ACT UP's more radical activists argued, solutions to the death sentence of AIDS may come through reformist measures, but the cathartic nature of rage provided a message to these activists that future generations will know that they stood up and fought against structures that allowed death to continue at such large rates (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2012).

In some cases, this rage can be compared to martyrdom. If queer bodies were inevitably going to die because of the AIDS crisis and lack of governmental solutions, at least they could use their death to make the future better for other queer bodies. Raging against a system that will inevitably construct itself against queer groups was an example of fantasmic disruption of reality's hold on queer subjectivity:

We saw a similar example in Wojnarowicz's claim to have reached into the TV to rip the health official's face in half to an imaginative retelling of an event that can only possibly be rendered as 'real' from the perspective of the future. What is important in terms of the politics of representation is how Miller refuses assimilation as an option and posits direct usurpation as the fantasy or the not yet real. Fantasy's most notable appearance in my own work occurs in a narrative about how my rage at a staunchly heterosexual AIDS-prevention ad taught me that *I could breathe fire*.

Notably, uncaring protesting and acting against expectations within heteronormative construction of reaction disrupted reality, and allowed for queer individuals to embrace their position of oppression and use it positively. One particular example was the affective choices of protestors during ACT UP. While the normative frame of being pushed onto the ground by a police officer and forced to stare at their boots would be one of powerlessness, these individuals chose to disrupt that with an uncaring embrace of this position to create a new imagination that could mobilize people from the state of abject:

As Kuromiya and Russell lay on their stomachs, hands cuffed behind their backs, Kuromiya began to lick the boots of his arresting officer. Without comment, the agent bent over and slowly tightened the cuffs around Kuromiya's wrists.

Russell, witnessing this spectacle unfold, pointedly asked her friend, "what are you doing?!" to which Kuromiya hissed under his breath, "Shh, I'm having a scene" (Emmer, 2012).

The affective use of scenes like the licking of a cop's boots during protest allowed for a new positioning of queers within protest – one that rejected the hold that dominant society had on their lives (Emmer, 2012). "Kuromiya, by way of example, exhorts us to channel our imaginations into new possibilities and avenues for action. His 'scene' is motivating as political allegory, but I believe it also speaks to a greater yearning for mutual recognition, across a chasm of collective loss, between activists of different generations" (Emmer, 2012)

It is also important to understand the power that being willing to place oneself in a position of arrest had. Queer history has shown the potential for violence that comes with interaction with police. Therefore, activists' willingness to be arrested showed queer individuals that they did not have to fear arrests or the consequences of protesting the system, but should be more fearful of living in a world where we capitulate to the power we think the system has over us. Patrick Moore (Schulman & Moore, 2003), an ACT UP member, explained: "I think, with making people feel comfortable with getting arrested. And, I didn't feel particularly afraid anymore. I had listened to that process so many times."

Specifically, rage created the possibility to disrupt the inevitability queer bodies saw of their deaths. While mourning and reformist strategies articulated that death was something that we needed to manage and embrace, rage tactics like political funerals combined mourning the dead with unexpected anger in public places, which shifted the narrative to mourning through anger, allowing for a disruption of the "real" connection to death:

We Americans are terrified of death. Death takes place behind closed doors and is removed from reality, from the living. I want to show the reality of my death, to display my body in public; I want the public to bear witness...I want my own funeral to be fierce and defiant, to make the public statement that my death from AIDS is a form of political assassination...he imagines his political funeral as an opportunity for a new kind of existence, in which death and mourning need not preclude activism, opposition, and social transformation (Rand, 2007)

While some may feel a certain amount of discomfort from an example like Kuromiya's "scene," it is this exact discomfort that provides these tactics with their power. Rage from the position of the abject queer left people "on edge, excited, proud, enraged, and uncomfortable. It is that discomfort that remains the source of ACT UP's power and the hallmark of its legacy" (Vaid, 1997). The honesty associated with confrontation of normative power structures created an excitement within queer individuals that showed these power structures might now be monolithic in the way we believed them to be, making action against them possible (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002)

Ultimately, members of ACT UP attempted to converge these two ideologies, often creating contradictions in the means and messages that they promoted (such as arguing that they needed to be "loud and queer," while also pushing to assimilate into normative structures in order to more effectively curry favor with businesspeople and politicians). These contradictions will become prominent in Chapter Five, where we explicate the specific tactics utilized by ACT UP.

However before venturing into a deep discussion of ACT UP tactics, we first need to understand what influenced choice of tactics. For this, a discussion of Orbe's notion of *ability* as it related to individuals within ACT UP is necessary.

### **Ability and Action**

According to Orbe (1994), an important aspect that determines the tactics a co-cultural group member uses is *ability*. For some co-cultural group members, this may be a question of economic disparity preventing the ability to engage in protests in the fear of losing one's job. For others, this may mean being able to fund campaigns because of a

more privileged economic background. For a large portion of ACT UP activists, who came from relatively privileged backgrounds, this meant that they had a wider range of abilities or resources that they could use to formulate their actions (Elbaz, 1995; Schulman & Ma, 2003).

The greater economic means enjoyed by the majority of ACT UP members meant that they were able to network with colleagues, connect with doctors who were sympathetic to their cause, or use their profession as a tool for outreach efforts (such as professors within ACT UP who were able to use their research skills to engage with the biomedical community) (Elbaz, 1995). Often, the ability to communicate was integral to outreach and educational efforts, so ACT UP members with public speaking experience from theatre and similar professions were able to use those skills to formulate tactics of negotiation (Elbaz, 1995)

However, even for the relatively privileged activists of ACT UP, there still remained certain restrictions on their ability that shaped the activism of ACT UP. Although activists' privileged class positions meant that they could often afford treatment measures, that economic capital did not extend to providing the resources necessary to buy enough media attention or effectively mobilize individuals into the movement (Elbaz, 1995).

In this way, the more privileged people within ACT UP used class-based advantages to protest more loudly, understanding that having economic means meant that one could handle the consequences of an arrest after a protest (Schulman & Bordowitz,

2002). For example, even though distributing needles was against the law, the economically privileged members of ACT UP were willing to face the possibility of getting arrested for handing out clean needles because they were able to afford court costs (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002).

Ultimately, ability determined how people within ACT UP chose to fight within the organization. As AIDS began to affect a larger group than the most-often spoken of affluent gay white man, the different abilities within the group also evolved (Leavitt, 1989). More individuals of a lower socioeconomic class, lesbians, drug users, and Black individuals began to join ACT UP. Given that many of these members did not have the same resources or, as Orbe puts it, “abilities,” as upper-class gay white men, these newer members had to learn to negotiate within ACT UP in different ways.

The challenge of cultural difference within ACT UP meant that those who belonged to intersecting oppressed groups, like Black and Latina women, had to use tactics of negotiation not only toward the macro-political structures, but toward the micro-political group of ACT UP itself (Elbaz, 1995). While the more powerful voices within ACT UP chose to overtly fight, because their voices had the potential to garner some amount of reaction, whether it be sympathy or fear; members who belonged to multiple co-cultural groups often chose more covert tactics like providing informational pamphlets to their communities (Elbaz, 1995).

Interestingly, while these initiatives could have been launched by creating new stand-alone organizations, working within ACT UP had the advantage of drawing on the



organization's existing clout and resources. This meant a greater potential for success, and for this reason members of intersecting co-cultural groups often chose to ingratiate *into* ACT UP in order to use that organization's ability for their own purposes. As ACT UP activist Alexandra Juhasz explained, activists from these co-cultural groups often viewed their work within ACT UP as a means of tapping into institutional privileges and resources that otherwise would have been inaccessible:

It was an incredible learning lesson about power, about how you can be as smart as anyone and not have access to it and you can – it's like a lot of the people who came to ACT UP – the politicians, who had come from other organizations and who had worked in struggles that stayed small and stayed poor and stayed invisible. It's not like people were smarter in ACT UP – but, people just tapped into money, the places where there's power. You know – the heads of hospitals, the heads of news agencies, the person who runs The New York Times – whatever it was, you know? (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003).

Yet, women within ACT UP also had a certain amount of power, because they brought knowledge of organizational politics to the group. This knowledge acted as a type of ability, which gave these women the opportunity to claim leadership positions within ACT UP (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003). However, despite women within ACT UP having the ability to lead meetings, speak loudly during discussions and control other aspects of ACT UP, women's power within the organization was often only accepted insofar as it was utilized for the major issues being pushed, and not "women's issues" (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003). As one woman (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003) who was

involved in ACT UP stated, “ambivalence would describe the relationship of the organization as a whole to women and women’s issue.”

In short, a large part of ability surrounding AIDS activism within ACT UP centered on how one’s social location, or that of the community one is trying to reach, magnified the concerns of AIDS. A white gay man with AIDS faced a much different battle than individuals who belonged to more than one co-cultural group. Issues like social class, gender and race mattered because it changed the resources and influence individuals had to be an activist or live with AIDS.

However, it is also important to note that, despite these intra-movement divisions and differences in terms of class, gender, and race, there was also and at the same time a common experience of stigma and marginalization—an experience that cut across these divisions. In short, while a large part of ACT UP operated from a relative position of privilege, racially and economically that is, being labeled as queer often neutralized that privilege. Individuals could have large quantities of money, but no people in their life who cared about them because of their “deviancy” (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003). The psychological and emotional toll that was exacted during the AIDS epidemic, losing friends, becoming caregivers, being forced to come out because you became positive, slowly feeling like you are dying, and knowing you will die soon; there is an “emotional currency that is not the same as money – which, it may be, in some places where oppression exists” (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003). The emotional and psychological state that this put many activists in also, in a sense, set the foundations for what tactics they would choose to use within ACT UP.

## **ACT UP Homogeneity**

With this discussion of ability and how that determines tactics that are chosen comes a question of how identity can either unify or divide social movements. In short, how can the reality of unequal resources of different identity-groups within a social movement escalate tensions or possibly create fissures that are impossible to mend? As Rand (2012) writes:

While some found ACT UP to be a space of shared values and validation, others felt left out and that their needs were not being met...to the extent that an “affective network” can be a source of collective power, it must also be understood to have the opposite effect: to exclude, to divide, and to marginalize (Rand, 2012).

In contemplating why ACT UP has receded as a political force, many members argue that the “overwhelmingly white and male membership was in some ways what tore it apart” (Vaid, 1997). While ACT UP still exists and still advocates for people with AIDS, in many ways it has lost the power that it once had. And, for some writers, this loss of efficacy has been ironically due to its initial foundations of attracting impassioned, well-connected, upper-middle-class people “radicalized by loss and fear” (Vaid, 1997). In the early and most active period of ACT UP activism, this profound sense of loss and fear ultimately inspired activists (predominately white, affluent, gay men) to engage in an “ends-justify-the-means mentality” that was detrimental or less connected to the needs and interests of those who were not as well served by a narrow focus on “drugs into

bodies”— notably, women, people of color and feminist men (Vaid, 1997) As Vaid (1997) explains:

Was ACT UP going to press only for drugs and treatment, or was it also going to fight for broader access to health care? Why did it have to choose? Would it commit to challenging the racism of AIDS organizations or fighting the sexism of the National Institutes of Health? Eventually such disagreements split ACT UP chapters into two, as was the case in San Francisco, or resulted in spin-off organizations with a specific focus, like the Treatment Action Group in New York. (p. 14)

It is crucial to note that the co-cultural groups who were pushed to the side in decision making within ACT UP during the 1980s and 1990s are now the predominant groups affected by AIDS: women and people of color (Schulman & Ma, 2003). However, women and people of color within ACT UP did not sit idly by while initiatives like “drugs into bodies” (discussed more in detail below) were pushed that did not help their co-cultural groups. As mentioned earlier, the silencing of their voices led separate groups to be formed within ACT UP that were dedicated to addressing AIDS issues that were specific to women and people of color, like the Women’s Caucus and the Asian Partnership Initiative (API) (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002). Similar to ACT UP’s deployment of rhetorically powerful slogans, like Silence = Death, to push people to action, these groups used the tools of activism that they learned from being a part of ACT UP to create their own momentum for their issues. For example, the Women’s Caucus often led rallies to push for equal access to healthcare and education about AIDS for

women, centering their fights on the motto “How many more [women] have to die before you say they qualify”:

Before that we were all chanting, we were marching and chanting. “How many more have to die before you say they qualify,” was one of the chants I remember. But when that horn went off, everybody shut up. And I remember specifically when Iris De La Cruz took the megaphone and spoke about not being able to get health care. She said her physician didn’t take food stamps. Clearly women—their needs weren’t being met (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002)

Beyond ACT UP simply acting in a way that indirectly pushed co-cultural voices within the organization to the side, dominant members of ACT UP also communicated within the group in a way that refused to acknowledge structural differences for racial minorities in the organization. In many ways, despite the fact that most individuals, particularly those seen as leaders within ACT UP, were a part of a co-cultural group, ACT UP as an organization still operated in ways that muted the voices of those deemed different:

That may have been especially true in so far as some white participants vigorously resisted acknowledging their white privilege and how racism was exacerbating the AIDS epidemic. ACT UP/NY member Robert Vazquez-Pacheco remembers that when issues of race would come up, “everyone would just sort of like go into that stunned, ‘Don’t call me racist, don’t call me racist’ [mode].” (Gould, 2012)

The examples of ACT UP operating in a way that privileged upper-middle-class white men with AIDS are numerous. For instance, as mentioned above, one of the foundational goals of ACT UP was its “drugs into bodies” campaign. However, even this initiative, which seems relatively sound, often missed the larger discussion of who had access to those drugs. While pushing pharmaceutical companies and the FDA for more drug trials and innovation definitely helped many individuals, these individuals had to be able to afford to participate in the trials and pay for the risky drugs (Gould, 2012). Another question arose of education about these options. While protest movements, the tactic of choice for ACT UP, pushed to ensure treatment *existed*, it did not guarantee that many communities who did not have the privilege of information even knew about its existence (Gould, 2012).

Yet, when women and people of color within ACT UP pushed for discussion of how AIDS affected other marginalized communities, many white male members saw this as “getting off track” (Gould, 2012). The theoretical lesson is clear. Even within an organization that is co-cultural, there are still intersecting oppressions that allow for certain co-cultural voices to be valued more than others. Because of this, ACT UP activism created both unity and disunity: community for the dominant muted groups and periphery for the minority muted groups (Juhasz, 2012).

However, this marginalization of co-cultural groups within ACT UP was not solely intra-movement. Outside institutions and practices have contributed to this erasure as well. Even in modern recollection of ACT UP, stories of those who do not fit the cookie-cutter image of well-off, white, gay male are often pushed out of public memory.

Activists who chose to be street-based, postmodern and confrontational “got and get most of the attention because it could and can and it wanted to” (Juhasz, 2012). From the normative perspective—a perspective adopted by later media and historical treatments of the movement—these men were “sexier” and fit the public’s desire for spokespeople that were as close to the dominant ideal as possible. Simply put, those individuals were photographable, whereas the feminists, lesbians, drug addicts, people of color, homeless people, poor people, immigrants, mothers, and Haitians who were also engaged in activism at this time were not the “type of people” the media wanted to be the face of ACT UP (Juhasz, 2012).

In this chapter, we have investigated how death motivated anger and action of ACT UP, the timeline of AIDS activism from GMHC to ACT UP, the specific viewpoints that motivated queer action (reformism and anti-queerness), the abilities that determined queer tactics, and how ACT UP often operated to mute intra-movement co-cultural differences. With that foundation, the next chapter will attempt to explicate the tactics used by ACT UP using Orbe’s table of co-cultural tactics included in Chapter 2. After each application, I will also connect these tactics to the broader discussion of rage versus opacity strategies, as reviewed in Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 5: EXPLICATING ACT UP TACTICS

With a smile the martyr ascends. Killing for peace.  
Dying for peace. Thrives for peace.

With a smile the martyr ascends. Paradise in eyes they die.  
Tears in eyes they die. Twisted ties of us all seem to die.

With a smile the martyr ascends. As he ascends he lives on.  
Everyone mocks the martyr and where he will live on. Some  
claim he will not live on.

Martyr martyr I believe you live on. Your cross can carry you,  
Into the caressing arms of your dreams. Martyr martyr can you  
take me?  
I've wanted to be happy for so long.

-Unknown Author

As mentioned above, this chapter will use Orbe's Co-cultural Communication Orientations (seen in Table 1) to explicate ACT UP's activist strategies, and then argue whether these strategies would fit under a framework of opacity or rage. The first three sections of this chapter will be dedicated to connecting the activism by ACT UP to Orbe's three preferred outcomes (assimilation, accommodation, separation) that were discussed in Chapter 2. The final section will discuss representation of AIDS and activism during the time of ACT UP in the art world, which functioned as the queer



under-commons of the time. Specifically, this section will tie in lessons learned from explication of Orbe in the first three sections to understand how this debate over rage versus opacity was conducted in this artistic under-commons, which, as opacity scholars and activists would argue, functioned as a space of safety for queer ideas to flourish. The final section will analyze the previous chapter's explication of these co-cultural tactics to identify which strategies would qualify as rage and which as opacity, as why.

### **Assimilation**

#### **Nonassertive**

**Emphasizing commonalities.** When confronted with the question of how best to motivate social concern for the AIDS epidemic, one tactic ACT UP activists embraced attempted to humanize the victims. This task was obviously difficult considering the rampant homophobia in the United States, yet activists discovered that within the struggle to combat AIDS, there was one aspect of the epidemic that could be utilized to garner sympathy, or at least attention, from society – death.

While individuals in the United States during the outbreak of AIDS were largely bigoted against homosexuality and those who identified as queer, one commonality that AIDS activists began using was to deploy AIDS as the enemy to an otherwise happy life for gay individuals, while in the process downplaying the “deviancy” of queer individuals as much as possible (Eisner, 1997). *Borrowed Time* is an example of this tactic, as it captured the everyday minutiae and roller coaster emotions of living with AIDS, taking us from the main character's lover's first personal exposure to the epidemic via an old friend, through the nineteen months between his diagnosis and death (Library Schmieder,

2010). This tactic was especially popular in artistic representations of the AIDS epidemic, as a means to encourage the reader to understand that untimely death is something that all individuals can understand should be avoided, and push the reader to desire to help those struggling against death because of AIDS (Eisner, 1997).

Beyond simply connecting society to the common struggle against death, artistic representations of ACT UP and AIDS attempted to make the victims of the tragedy seem normal in order to create sympathy from dominant structures. While these tactics had some success, it brings into question the exact costs of this strategy for the queer community. If the only means to generate public sympathy and actions is to reinforce heteronormative conceptions of subjectivity and tropes of relationships, can the queer community ever be liberated? Or, will dominant heteronormative controls continue to go unchecked? Eisner (1997) explains:

Borrowed Time's brilliance is in its ability to corporealize this anger onto the body of the lover, Roger. But by doing this, it also decorporealizes male homosexual desire by reproducing standard generic tropes. A favorite subject matter for film, television and literary melodramas has been stories of illness and handicap, and AIDS, "the epidemic of the century," is no exception.

Beyond dramatic literary interpretations like *Borrowed Time* of the common bond between the gay community and society, ACT UP also engaged in other opaque tactics to garner public sympathy and connection. One such example is the AIDS Quilt. The AIDS Quilt is an over 48,000-square quilt commemorating victims of AIDS that is publically

presented all over the country. The quilt was first presented in 1987 in San Francisco. Each square of the quilt pays tribute to an individual who lost their life to AIDS. When the quilt was first presented, it received a massive amount of media attention across the nation, as it represented just how many lives were being lost to the epidemic in a way that most Americans could connect to: Americana. Rand (2007) explains:

This is due in no small part not only to the existence of the Quilt as a public memorial, but also to its particular resonance with traditional Americana: by utilizing a symbol of American folk art and mythology—the patchwork quilt—the Quilt was able to encourage nationwide mourning, even if those being mourned continued to be reviled.

The AIDS Quilt was an impressive nonassertive tactic, as it shifted the AIDS narrative away from the stigma of the “gay disease” to one of national tragedy, by emphasizing the commonality of American lives being lost to AIDS (Rand, 2007). It is important to note, however, that in many ways the quilt also allowed for a collective mourning that justified lack of action by those who felt like sharing in mourning purged their guilt (Rand, 2007). Similar to a like on a Facebook status about starving children in Africa, joining in sadness over the loss represented in the AIDS quilt allowed for individuals to argue that they had “leaned in” to the AIDS struggle without having to take any action to help.

Besides artistic emphasis on commonalities, even some direct action tactics operated from a non-assertive assimilation stance. For example, during protests against

Washington City Hall, the New York Governor's office, and other governmental buildings, ACT UP members often wore their work clothes. While this may not seem like an attempt at assimilation on face, if one examines the effect of this image, it definitely does. Considering that many ACT UP activists had professional, white-collar careers, coming to a protest in work attire meant that you looked very much like the individuals in the office that you were protesting. Leavitt (1989), remarking on a protest that he attended in Washington said that they "might have been any crew of Wall Street-bound lawyers and bankers and secretaries. Suddenly it was that much more difficult, from both sides, to tell 'us' from 'them.'" This tactic obviously ensured that media portrayal of these events did not show a group of rag tag, violent protestors, but rather individuals that society in any other instance would have argued should be respected because of their social class. At the same time, however, it also contributed to the erasure of women and people of color from discussions and actions concerning AIDS.

**Averting controversy.** While emphasizing commonalities was one tactic used to make AIDS a national discussion instead of a problem the gay community had to deal with, there were still debates within ACT UP over other tactics and goals. With this in mind, assimilation was not just a macro-level goal. Factions within the organization of ACT UP had to decide how exactly they would avert controversy *within* the group in order to make the mission of the group as a whole more effective. Often, this meant that even if individuals within ACT UP disagreed with a specific strategy, they would capitulate to majority opinion in order to allow for some sort of progress to be had. For example, within the Women's Caucus, activists understood that they needed to avoid

controversy within their faction since they were already a minority opinion within ACT UP. Therefore, when a disagreement rose over a direct action initiative at Shea Stadium<sup>2</sup>, several activists chose to allow the majority opinion to decide their course of action instead of continuing the controversy (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003).

This intra-movement push to avert controversy was not universal. As the years passed, people within ACT UP began to realize that disagreement over strategy was inevitable with such an increasingly growing and diverse group. For example, Schulman and Carlomusto (2002) write, when people were faced with constantly rising death tolls and pervasive homophobia and stigmatization from AIDS, explicit arguments arose over whether to push for societal change for the queer community in general or continue to fight for treatment for PWAs. From this debate, direct action proponents were able to force their opinions into primary focus, pushing social change activists' opinions to the side (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002).

At the same time, however, decisions to avert controversy were common throughout the movement's history. Individuals who had slight disagreements with the broad strategy of direct action often chose to avoid conflict over tactics, in order to allow for any sort of progress to continue. While other ideas existed, one means that alternative

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<sup>2</sup> In 1988, The Women's Caucus organized an event at Shea Stadium to shed light to how heterosexual men also needed to be responsible when it came to AIDS and prevention tactics, like wearing condoms. Over four hundred tickets were bought for a game, which meant that they were able to get a message on the big screen. Activists spread out in the stadium holding signs that said phrases like "Don't balk at safe sex," "AIDS kills women," and "Men! Use condoms!" See Sommella, L. & Wolfe, M. (1997) *This Is about People Dying: The Tactics of Early ACT UP and Lesbian Avengers in New York City*, From the book: "Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance", edited by Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, Bay Press, Seattle Washington.

thinkers within ACT UP used to avert controversy was to participate in direct action, but continue to do their own strategies on the side (Schulman & Ma, 2003). One example of this tactic was the Asian Partnership Initiative (API), who used tactics of direct action in Asian clubs while also using that scene to pass out information about AIDS in different languages for the Asian community (Schulman & Ma, 2003). While the event itself was “sexy” enough to not spur controversy from ACT UP, they supplemented that “rage” tactic with more opaque strategies to make it fit their co-cultural group.

### **Assertive**

**Extensive preparation.** According to Orbe, co-cultural group members often engage in extensive amounts of groundwork before interactions with others. In an analogous way, when considering how to communicate to power structures, ACT UP often had to pull away from the original tenets of the organization in order to effectively get their message received. This required extensive preparation within the group. The original idea behind ACT UP was to immediately band together and fight through direct action, but many activists within the organization soon realized that even fights had to be planned to achieve the best effect.

For example, even though police arrests were an accepted consequence of protests and other initiatives led by ACT UP, activists in the group needed to plan how to craft this narrative, not only for the media writ large, but for police and institutions in order to prevent unnecessary targeting. One instance of how they planned their portrayal was to cordon off demonstrations that were meant to have backlash afterwards in order to get the biggest media attention, like zapping pharmaceutical companies and chaining themselves

to the gates of companies, from initiatives that were more opaque in design, like needle exchanges. ACT UP activists framed initiatives like needle exchanges as being prevention tactics that contained the spread of AIDS, which was something even the police could agree was beneficial (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002).

For this reason, ACT UP members who participated in initiatives like the needle exchange efforts coordinated with the police in order to send a message about needle exchange, thus showing a desire to prepare and cooperate with “the opposition” in some cases. While this cooperation with police began as a means to ensure that there was not backlash, in many ways turned their measures into publicity stunts (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002). The larger instance of preparation in this case was that this entire initiative was created in order to get several people arrested so that ACT UP could start a year-long court case about needle exchanges:

The police didn't want to be stuck with needles, so we coordinated the arrest because we wanted to address the concerns of the police. We thought that in this instance, since it was ten people getting arrested, and it was really all about getting the press—saying, “There's a group of ten people down on Delancey and Essex handing out sterile needles.” It wasn't really about the arrest. It was about the court case. So we all walked into the vans. They searched us. It was all over in like ten minutes—lots of press, lots of pictures. We handed over our sharps container, our few token containers of clean needles. Ten of us walked into the police vans, and that was it. Then we were in court for like a year (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002).

A final example of extensive preparation was the other reason for ACT UP recorded as many of their public events as possible: safety. While extensive preparation went into planning an event to ensure the maximum potential of publicity and reaction to an ACT UP initiative, the organization also made intricate plans of how cameras would record events where there would be a police presence, or the presence of individuals who could violently react to ACT UP. Ensuring that camera recording existed for events was a way to prepare in case documentation was necessary in a court room, and to also serve as a deterrent to police or citizen violence (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002).

### **Aggressive**

**Strategic Distancing.** While ACT UP showed co-cultural individuals working with their group to negotiate systems of power, there were still examples of how these activists strategically distanced themselves from certain queer activists who still embraced the Stonewall era of sexuality. Generational differences within ACTUP presented a different understanding toward sex. Queer groups had to pull away from making ACTUP erotic, because that would not assimilate the cause into societal configuration of normalcy. Even to queer individuals, queer sexuality had to be constricted to make their movement successful (Crimp, 1989).

Not only did ACT UP have to assert that they were not “those queers,” in order to promote societal acceptance, but these were also factions within ACT UP that had to disassociate with other members in order to achieve their own personal goals related to AIDS activism. One example of this tactic of strategic distancing are the Women’s Caucus and Black Caucus that were mentioned previously. These groups within ACT UP



chose to move away from loud, disruptive protest to more “profitable” means of solutions, such as volunteering in needle exchange programs and even going to medical school to learn how to find a cure for AIDS (Bruni, 1997).

### **Accommodation**

#### **Nonassertive**

**Increasing visibility.** While ACT UP was established to counter the inaction surrounding the AIDS epidemic, their actions did much more for the queer community as a whole. ACT UP revitalized the gay rights movement, which many feared would die along with the disease before ACT UP was formed, as groups like GMHC had no idea of what direct actions could be taken to combat AIDS and had resorted to simply mourning the dead in many cases.

For most people in the gay community, funerals were becoming more common than birthdays (Leavitt, 1989). People feared that those who did not die from AIDS would kill off any attachment to queerness, retreating back into the “safety” of the closet (Leavitt, 1989). So, when ACT UP came along, proclaiming themselves as “rude and loud and strong and queer,” the queer community saw a light that AIDS had begun to snuff out... a hope that queerness could be visible without inevitably being marked for death (Leavitt, 1989).

The most monumental aspect of change was individuals being willing to come out of the closet, because every additional brave soul willing to make themselves visible was another person that could persuade not only their friends and family, but society as a

whole, that the victims of this tragedy were humans that needed to be protected (Ross, 2012). “The revolution would happen: one lonely kid at a time.” (Ross, 2012).

Not only did ACT UP push to queerness out of the closet for society to witness, but the actions made for AIDS progress were also rooted in achieving visibility for the disease, in order for America to understand that unless action was taken the spread would continue (Bruni, 1997). ACT UP placed a heavy emphasis on controlling media framing of AIDS. Considering that their protests were dramatically planned, artistically rebellious events, they could guarantee that their actions would be more “newsworthy” than other news related to AIDS. With that in mind, ACT UP’s media visibility became a large means with which they could craft the narrative surrounding AIDS. For instance, when ACT UP led a campaign against the FDA for drug trials getting caught in red tape, ACT UP ensured that camera documentation of the event showed massive images of a burning poster of Reagan and protesters shouting seize control (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002). The visibility of this event crafted the story of who was to blame (Reagan and the FDA) and what should be done about it.

However, just like any individual or group who is given power such as this, great responsibility for how one uses this power is necessary. In many ways, as ACT UP continued their activism, they became too obsessed with media representation. Publicity stunts were often favored over action that could facilitate true systematic change. Many activists within ACT UP became too enamored in becoming visible that they forgot why they needed to be seen in the first place. Play-acting took the place of progress:

I mean, a lot of those actions involved going to drug companies and doing stuff in offices. And, I felt probably too unsafe to go to an action where there would be three or four people arrested. I liked larger actions with, kind of broader goals. I liked the church. One of my favorite actions was we went to the Republican National Women's Club – I think it's called – on the upper East Side, when Bush was speaking. And we all dressed in our little Republican outfits, and then, when Bush began to speak – and it was a small room, it was as big as this house – we pulled out our signs and everything. And, I thought those actions were very clever and very exciting and I loved those (Schulman & Moore, 2003).

Ultimately, the thrill of the action sometimes distracted from the goal itself. This contradiction between motives and goals was matched by other tensions and contradictions. For example, as noted above, there was a disconnect between the message and means in ACT UP's tactic of strategically distancing themselves from the perceived sexual excesses of the Stonewall era, while also pushing forth the message of the loud queers who did not fear public disapproval. All social movements are complex and contradictory formations, and ACT UP was no exception.

**Dispelling Stereotypes.** One of ACT UP's most evident affective interventions was their attempt to counter the predominant representations of people living with AIDS as passive, shameful victims with images of angry, defiant, and proud activists (Rand, 2012). In order to garner public support for AIDS initiatives, ACT UP focused on convincing individuals that the fire and brimstone preaching that AIDS is the punishment

for queerness by individuals like Jerry Falwell was wrong (Rand, 2012). ACT UP presented an image of a strong and passionate queer community, rather than one ravaged by AIDS and too weak to fight.

While some in society argued that protection of the queer community was not necessary, because “they obviously did not care enough to protect themselves,” ACT UP flipped that script by banning together and chanting that every person in America, no matter their sexual preference, drug history, etc., deserved healthcare (Leavitt, 1989). ACT UP activists being willing to dispel stereotypes of the queer community as “soulless narcissists” created a space for people in America to slowly change their opinions of queer life. After one year of ACT UP fighting for action for AIDS, the number of people in the United States who believed that gay sex should be illegal dropped from fifty-seven to thirty-six percent (Ross, 2012).

However, in many ways ACT UP worked to dispel stereotypes, while putting on a new one: the mourned and mourning. While ACT UP attempted to move away from mourning without direct action, as they attributed to GMHC, they still operated to portray the mourning subject for society in order to achieve their goals. Mourning was socially acceptable when death occurs, so many gay individuals cast off the stereotype of “perversion” for an identity that would inevitably be tied to death. This mourning subjectivity created an acceptable queer populace, because they were no longer a threat to society. Rand (2007) explains:

On the other hand, when they are constituted as "mourned subjects," the agency of gay men is significantly constrained, and their potential for activism is severely limited. After all, the range of activities accorded to one who is mourned is essentially restricted to suffering and death. "We didn't like you fags and junkies when you were wild, kinky and having fun. We didn't like you when you were angry, marching and demanding rights. But now that you're dying and have joined 'nicely' like 'a family sewing circle,' we'll accept you."

One must ask why exactly this should be considered an achievement? Why should we celebrate that fewer individuals in the United States thought that queer individuals should be literally *put in prison* for their queerness, when still over a third of citizens held that view? And, to what lengths should the queer community go to achieve this goal? In order to dispel stereotypes surrounding the queer community and AIDS, ACT UP in many ways needed to denounce queerness and don a "proud rhetoric of responsibility" (Rand, 2012). The goal of accommodation, or acceptance, brings the consequence of respectability politics. How much of queer culture and identity needs to be dispelled before queerness is respectable, especially when respectability is defined by heteronormative power structures?

### **Assertive**

**Using liaisons.** In order to make their activism more effective, ACT UP often worked with liaisons. While members of the organization had ability of their own to use for their direct actions, a critical aspect of ACT UP ability was their connections. Thus, incorporating willing allies into their engagement pushed their endeavors into forums that

would not have been accessible without assistance from individuals outside of the organization.

For example, when outside protests of the drug company Hoffman-La Roche did not achieve expanded access to drugs that treated potentially deadly opportunistic infections, ACT UP worked with doctors to organize a boycott of the company (Elbaz, 1995). Doctors began to recommend and prescribe substitutes from other companies, thus forcing Hoffman-La Roche to change their access policies (Elbaz, 1995).

“Stop the Church” was another example of activism by ACT UP that brought in allies who were willing to cooperate. In this instance, Stop the Church brought in groups outside of ACT UP whose interests aligned with acting against the Catholic Church. Reproductive rights advocates, like Women’s Health Action and Mobilization, had their own qualms with the church, so this initiative provided an intersectional activism against a common enemy (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003).

A final example of using liaisons was ACT UP’s overall shift in their engagement with the pharmaceutical industry. During ACT UP’s initial acts, they protested, sabotaged and raged against the pharmaceutical companies that Larry Kramer identified as murderers. However, Kramer and many other leaders within ACT UP began to work closely with these companies, even having dinner with them (Bruni, 1997). Ultimately, When ACT UP began to achieve success for their drugs into bodies campaigns, and change in legislation from their earlier direct actions, working with these institutions instead of against them became more of a possibility (Schulman & Moore, 2003).

On the other hand, the drawing in of alliances for ACT UP required a significant amount of bureaucratic wrangling that established a professionalization of AIDS activism (Schulman & Ma, 2003). While many viewed this institutionalization as a necessary component of progress, this very professionalization was what allowed for the queer community to be used as another pawn in the heteronormative dominant structures that allowed for inaction in the face of queer death in the first place (Puar, 2007; Halberstam, 1993).

**Educating Others.** The tactics discussed above, like visibility and dispelling stereotypes all ultimately hoped to educate others of issues related to AIDS. ACT UP argued that delivering accurate information was necessary to paving the way for numerous necessary societal changes, such as legislative change, expanding drug access, teaching the public about treatment options and infection potential, and reducing institutional and societal homophobia (Leavitt, 1989).

One specific need ACT UP members believed that education fulfilled was the necessity to communicate against the dominant scripts of abstinence only education occurring for those outside of the gay community:

I saw how AIDS was becoming a useful tool for the far right in its never-ending battle to scare people away from unconventional sex, and to scare young people away from any sex at all. Teaching teen-agers about safe sex would mean admitting teen-agers had sex; to give drug addicts clean needles would mean admitting people shot drugs. So the religious right went on, interfering with the

life-saving efforts of sex educators in order to protect a mythical abstinence which no one really practiced. Meanwhile, men and women were dying, while urban teen-agers - already badly educated about sex, not to mention AIDS - were put at perhaps the gravest risk of all (Leavitt, 1989).

ACT UP focused on using dominant mediums of communication to portray messages about safe sex for both the gay community and society in general. The Women's Caucus of ACT UP in particular worked to make information available to large masses of people in unexpected places. For example, the Shea Stadium event proved that ACT UP could take slogans like "No glove, no love" to scores of men who needed to use condoms (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002).

Along with inserting messages of safe sex to the general public, ACT UP also needed to educate others on the false messages being spread by the news and "trusted" individuals about AIDS. For instance, Robert Gould, a clinical professor of psychiatry at New York Medical College, argued that women could not get aids through vaginal intercourse, because vaginas are "rugged" and "can repel infection." Despite being an advocate overall for AIDS issues, Gould's message was one that needed to be spoken out against. In many ways, Gould being seen as an AIDS advocate meant that his message held weight, so ACT UP focused on delivering information about sexual transmission in order to educate the public about infection, even for women and their rugged vaginas (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003).



## **Aggressive**

**Confronting.** When a problem goes unaddressed for a significant amount of time, like the ever increasing death toll of AIDS victims during the peak of the epidemic, more aggressive measures are often required. ACT UP's direct action tactics were often premised on the point that slow responses required fast confrontation (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002). The most poignant example of aggressive confrontation by ACT UP was their Silence=Death symbol.

First, ACT UP utilized the triangle that Nazi Germany used to single out and murder queer individuals during the Holocaust as a means to compare the lack of action by institutions as a genocide of the queer population (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002). Not only that, but this symbol was disseminated all over, placed on posters and t-shirts, handed out with flyers, and used as a chant to confront the apathy of institutions to the victims of AIDS. This artistic rendering became not only a symbolic confrontation of societal failure toward PWAs, but a rallying cry for support in the face of media misrepresentation (Schulman & Moore, 2003).

## **Separation**

### **Nonassertive**

While instances of most of Orbe's co-cultural communication tactics can be witnessed in some form by ACT UP activists, ACT UP represented a shift away from nonassertive separation tactics by queer activists. Whereas in the past, queer groups practiced avoidance to put space between themselves and heteronormative society or maintained interpersonal barriers when physical space was impossible, ACT UP operated

to force heteronormative society to see and interact with queer individuals. While this was uncomfortable at times for those within ACT UP, that discomfort was something they embraced, because it went both ways (Schulman & Moore, 2003). The whole point of ACT UP was to fight against the notion of silence and hiding in the closet.

*Silence=Death*. Therefore, the discomfort involved in confrontation and being loud and coming out was viewed as crucial to survival. We must make the dominant culture uncomfortable as well. We must make them acknowledge us. Otherwise we die.

### **Assertive**

**Intragroup networking.** ACT UP gained power because there were simply so many individuals who played a part in the organization, finding power in numbers. The people who joined ACT UP came from different generations, backgrounds and networks. Some arrived with the deaths of numerous friends and lovers on their minds, whereas others came hoping to prevent the deaths of strangers (Leavitt, 1989).

One common theme in why many individuals joined ACT UP was the desire to join a network that could teach them the tools of advocacy and activism. In particular, for co-cultural group members affected by the AIDS crisis, finding a group that was comprised of people that you could identify with was a beacon of safety, considering the stigmatization of queerness, or counter-culture individuals in general (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003). ACT UP represented a group of experienced activists, which drew interest from younger individuals who wanted to network with learn from people who had that experience:

All of those people were learning from each other. So, you know, there was an incredible – the politicians, who were in the room – and I would not call myself one of those people – I was a kid, you know – the grown-ups, I mean, all of us would sit – I certainly sat in awe of the knowledge they had of American civil disobedience and American organizing (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003).

Networking in ACT UP benefited activists beyond just learning the ropes of activism from kindred spirits. It also provided PWAs within ACT UP with a group of PWAs that they could rely on to assist in negotiating treatment decisions and tackling all of the information surrounding their condition (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002). On the other hand, you also had individuals who joined because being immersed in queer culture was “sexy,” like straight member, Juhasz (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003):

I mean, I was a fag hag at that time. I was a straight woman who had a lot of gay male friends, and a lot of lesbian friends. And, I loved being in rooms with gay men. I loved going dancing with gay men. It was exactly like being at a disco, you know? It was sweaty and people were – it’s what a fag hag – and you know, I use it only in a loving way – loves about – you’re in a sexual situation where you’re not implicated. There are just looks everywhere and people touching each other and, you know, it was hot, and it was fun to watch, you know?

But at the same time, recently out queer individuals saw the opportunity to immerse themselves in the queer community that they could finally admit to being a part

of as an amazing possibility for connection and safety. Moore (Schulman & Moore, 2003) explains:

I think the reason was is that I had never felt any connection to gay people before, and when I went to ACT UP, for whatever reason, I felt connected for the first time. And that was an incredibly powerful thing for me. Because I had never – I'd never wanted to be around gay people.

Yet, for individuals who had been out for a longer time, ACT UP in many ways operated as a social event – a place to find new sexual partners. A large portion of ACT UP members at some point in their involvement developed romantic and/or sexual relationships with other group members. A common theme within ACT UP was “If I can't fuck – I don't want your revolution” (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002). Considering that the dominant narrative of the queer community at this point was sexual deviants whose sins were killing them, many saw embracing their sexuality as necessary to negotiating these narratives (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002).

In this way, intra-group networking functioned in a particular way in ACTUP, as opposed to GMHC. In GMHC, intra-group networking and support were the primary goals of an organization that looked inward and sought refuge from a hostile culture. In ACTUP, however, intra-group networking emerged *out* of the experience of direct action against that hostile culture. Within-group networking and connections also became a means which the courage and will to confront was generated. Again, this is opposed to

GMHC, which focused on intragroup networking to the exclusion of more direct and aggressive tactics.

### **Aggressive**

**Embracing Stereotypes.** The energy associated with ACTUP was often found in its connection to embracing the power of the stigmatized queer, the individual who before this point was considered a waste or excess (Schulman & Juhasz, 2003). By embracing and re-articulating the category of “queer,” ACT UP forced society to see that the connotation of “waste” and “excess” was emphatically not the case. Embracing stereotypes associated with ACT UP became a way to bring power to queerness, similar to how embracing the identification of queer is a means to flip the script on heteronormative codes.

Another example of embracing stereotypes surrounding AIDS and queerness can be found in AIDS theatre during the time of ACT UP. Chesley’s play *Night Sweats*, was, in many ways, a celebration of gay sex on the stage. Gavrila (2013) writes of the liberating potential of the film, in that it moved away from the shaming rhetoric of queerness toward a discourse of hope and freedom:

There is no weeping, no one kills himself or herself, and no one bursts in to shame them. This scene remains striking because in the discourse surrounding AIDS, and gay men sex has been stripped of its erotic possibilities and reduced to safety practices. In the early years of the crisis, when this play was produced, the representation of a healthy, happy sex act between two men, two men who were potentially infected, was the very essence of hope and continued freedom.

Allowing queer individuals to see a life in the face of death was significant, in that it broke down the power that AIDS taboo had created on queer subjectivity. If the wages of queer sex (sin) was death, that death would be glorious, not dirty or filled with despair (Gavrila, 2013). This does not necessarily mean that these portrayals completely embraced death, but rather almost a Nietzschean understanding that death is inevitable, and only living a life filled with dancing (or in this case, loving and making love) can make the life we have meaningful and hopeful. As the closing scene of *Night Sweats* said:

Live until the very moment you die! And make love! Make love in every possible, safe, sensible way...Just—for heaven sakes—do it with love! Rejoice! Rejoice in your body...Have the courage to love. And have the courage to hope. You can wake up from this nightmare! (Act 2, Scene 7) (Gavrila, 2013).

While this example may not seem to embrace stereotypes on its face, it is important to remember that there were multiple stereotypes being preached during the AIDS epidemic, one being that in order to be queer one either had to be abstinent and forsake love or be fearful of death each time one loved. *Night Sweats* argued that life is only worth experiencing if love is a part of it, even if that meant risking death. This represented a significant separation from the predominant view that AIDS meant that each queer individual had to live in fear.

**Attacking and Sabotaging.** Attacking and sabotaging are similar to confrontation, in that they are both aggressive strategies. However, while confrontation simply attempts to bring an issue into the light of dominant society and aggressively force

acknowledgment, attacking and sabotaging attempt to remove the power from dominant structures that allowed for that issue to be unacknowledged in the first place (Orbe, 1998).

Being that ACT UP was an activist group centered on direct action against power structures, the most obvious tactics present during their initiatives were attacking and sabotaging. These can be grouped together, because most of the attacks that ACT UP organized against institutions and corporations also attempted to disrupt those organization's ability to run effectively in order to push them to change various policies related to AIDS issues. Direct actions also opened the door for political changes that could reform institutional inequalities. Vaid (1997) explains:

Without street actions, pickets, sit-ins, or the swift, specifically targeted "zap" actions that helped make ACT UP famous, there is no muscle to a political movement. Confrontation is often the most effective way to make visible the immorality of unjust government policies. Street demonstrations require a level of personal involvement that moves people far more personally than other forms of democratic political participation (such as voting). And the empowerment that comes from standing up to those who want to ignore, silence, or oppress you fuels all social change.

An example of ACT UP attacking institutions was their first protest in 1987, a massive demonstration in front of Wall Street demanding that pharmaceutical companies like Burroughs Wellcome lower the price of AZT (Elbaz, 1995). Initiatives like these

were responsible for changing the operations of the medical establishment and models of treatment in the United States (Schulman & Ma, 2003).

In the first five years that AIDS was discovered and drugs like AZT were introduced to combat the effects of AIDS, pharmaceutical companies realized that a new sector of capital had opened up that they could exploit. Because not many drugs were being innovated for AIDS, companies like Burroughs Wellcome were able to take advantage of the supply and demand gap, as well as their monopoly over AZT, to gouge prices so high that many individuals could not afford to buy them (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002). This initial issue was one of the main reasons that ACT UP was established: to push for direct action that could help that suffering from AIDS and fight for treatments and an eventual cure. Peter Staley, a prominent ACT UP activist who participated in the protests, explained:

They ignored us, so we did an invasion of their headquarters a few months later. I was very aware of how corporations try to make employees happy to work there. It's very important to corporations. So I wanted to make everyone at Burroughs-Wellcome feel guilty about working there. We started getting inside intelligence from employees telling us [what was going on] — because gays are everywhere — and we said, 'This is only Round One. Lower the price or we'll escalate.' The whole industry was watching and were horrified. And the New York Times editorialized against [Burroughs-Wellcome], and there were Congressional hearings. Forty-eight hours after [the demonstration], they buckled and lowered the price by 20%. From then on, the industry said it's probably



smarter to try to talk to [activists] and placate them as much as we can (Szalavitz, 2012)

Other examples, like ACT UP's actions against the FDA, focused on making the problem of red tape visible to the public (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002). In 1988, ACT UP organized an initiative dedicated to "Seize Control of the FDA." During the protest, they plastered banners all over the Rockville, MD. headquarters, picketed outside, passed out pamphlets, and even tried to break into the building before police began to arrest busloads of protestors. While the buses tried to leave the area, protestors gathered around to prevent them from leaving, creating massive pandemonium. The event created enough havoc to hinder the FDA from effectively working that day (Schulman & Bordowitz, 2002).

Actions like these also confronted the glaring problem of PWAs not controlling decision-making concerning treatment. For example, when dominant media had closed off the voices of women with AIDS from AIDS discussions, ACT UP staged a crash of the set *People Are Talking*, sneaking onto the set and then marching on the stage to demand that they be allowed to speak (Schulman & Carlmusto, 2002). Intervening on a set where the show was pre-scripted created such a pandemonium that it completely disrupted the entire function of the show that day.

Then, there are the numerous times that ACT UP staged phone zaps, where they would have thousands of people call drug companies, clogging up communication lines in order to force them to change their drug trial policies (Schulman & Bordowitz). Or,

when ACT UP had an entire network of supporters call an airline that had mistreated a passenger with AIDS to falsely book flights – costing the airline so much money that they had to amend their policies to avoid further disruptions (Schulman & Moore, 2003).

But, perhaps the most memorable sabotage attack was the demonstration in Saint Patrick's Cathedral, the namesake of this thesis. The Catholic Church was a large reason that homophobia ran rampant throughout the United States during the AIDS epidemic. ACT UP thought that the political sway of the religious right was one of the main reasons that so many people were left to die from AIDS without so much as a word from Reagan (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002). ACT UP staged a die-in during Sunday mass in the cathedral, attempting to show the Church the gravity of their bigotry. While this initiative received backlash from the church, arguing that sabotaging a religious service was “an act of desecration,” for the individuals who participated, the die-in was their own prayer – for self-preservation:

To many parishioners, the recent invasion of St. Patrick's Cathedral by dozens of angry AIDS protesters was an act of desecration. But to Christopher Hennelly, a former seminarian among those arrested inside the church, it was a prayer for self-preservation. "The strongest prayer I've ever made in my life was on the floor of St. Patrick's," he said (DeParle, 1990).

However, many of the people who participated in the die-in now regret that it created such divisive response and possibly hurt too many people (Schulman & Moore, 2003). On the other hand, Stop the Church only hurt people who were too ingrained in

the establishment (i.e. rich queens), but forced the government to pay attention because they feared the potential violence, even if it was only emotional violence, that ACT UP represented through the demonstration at St. Patrick's:

I think we alienated a lot of people with Stop the Church, but I think they were mostly people who were kind of already vaguely supportive of what we were doing. They were like rich queens who kind of didn't want to be associated with anything naughty – who were still part of the establishment. So, who cares, really, if you alienate those people, because they weren't doing anything anyway. But, what I think it did for ACT UP is that it made people feel that we were violent, even though we didn't do anything violent. It was so emotionally violent, that I think that it really raised our effectiveness in terms of, maybe the government taking on larger issues, or just having to deal with this somehow (Schulman & Moore, 2003).

One important lesson that St. Patrick's shows is that combining tactics is often necessary. Some activists in ACT UP argue that Stop the Church had such a negative reaction because individuals in ACT UP allowed the church to frame the narrative of the event, instead of ACT UP's usual tactic of using the media to tell their story. After the initial negative portrayal, many within ACT UP felt guilty for "taking things too far," instead of rallying together to change how the event was being portrayed (Schulman & Carlomusto, 2002).

## Artistic Undercommons

Similar to the explanation of the undercommons for Black individuals from Chapter 2, many activists used art and theater as “set aside” spaces to exist apart from oppressive structures and articulate their thoughts about AIDS. In short, during the AIDS crisis, many members of ACT UP and the queer community writ large turned to art to express their emotions and opinions of the crisis, and what should be done about:

Popular entertainment also allows us to contemplate aspects of our lives we may normally not feel permitted to address: sexual desire, pleasurable impulses, forbidden fantasies. We are permitted for the moment to experience what we are not allowed to experience—or often even think about—in what is fancifully called “real life,” where the reality principle gives way, if only for a time, to the pleasure principle. The use of pleasure in popular culture to reinscribe the status quo stands in sharp relief to the more radical function of pushing or transgressing the boundaries of social thought and experience.

Powerful queer artists chose to stop being commodified by the art world, and instead use the art world for political purpose. As Patrick Moore, an artist within ACT UP, put it:

But, I think the effect of ACT UP in terms of the New York art world was not on art. I think it was more about – first of all, powerful gay men in the art world coming out for the first time, or doing something political for the first time. I think there was an acknowledgement that certain things were so important that the rules had to get skewed. And that was mostly about gay men finally using their power in the art world (Schulman & Moore, 2003).

ACT UP's use of art provided a representation to the world that allowed people in the art world to connect to it, because for the first time, art actually tied in real personal feelings about AIDS. People in art culture found a way to participate and help the cause (Schulman & Moore, 2003).

In many cases, theatre was the most common source of literature and information about AIDS (O'Quinn, 1997). The stage opened up a dialogue about the experience of PWAs, the source of the problem, and a place to critique power structures that allowed death to continue, without fear of political infiltration (West, 2012).

The two most notable dramatic works during the peak of the AIDS epidemic were Larry Kramer's play, *The Normal Heart*, and William Hoffman's play, *As Is*. Where AI asks of its audience compassion and tolerance, TNH aims to incite rage, anger, and activism (West, 2012). Because of those aims, these works are perfect examples of the intra-group debate over opaque and rage tactics within ACT UP. This chapter will explore the tactics represented in both plays in order to show the undercommons discussion over tactics that mirrored the debate that occurred within ACT UP in real applications.

**The Normal Heart.** One of the most well-known plays produced during the AIDS epidemic is *The Normal Heart*, by Larry Kramer. Toward the end of Kramer's involvement with GMHC, he wrote *The Normal Heart* as a narrative of his evolving frustration with their tactics. The play tells the story of the onset of the HIV-AIDS crisis in New York City in the early 1980s, taking an unflinching look at the nation's sexual

politics as gay activists and their allies in the medical community fight to expose the truth about the burgeoning epidemic to a city and nation in denial. The main character, Ned Weeks (modeled after Kramer himself), witnesses first-hand a mysterious disease that has begun to claim the lives of many in his gay community and starts to seek answers.

Ned visits a doctor named Emma Brookner, the only doctor attempting to determine the cause of this disease. Brookner tried to convince Ned to persuade gay men to remain abstinent, as she theorized the disease was sexually transmitted. However, when Ned organizes a meeting at his house with members of the gay community, none of them want to listen to these warnings, and argue that they fought too hard to encourage gay men not to be ashamed of themselves to encourage gay men to stop having sex.

Later, Ned meets with a *New York Times* reporter named Felix, who eventually becomes his lover. However, Felix is too fearful of repercussions from readers and his employers to focus his work on AIDS. Ned meets similar roadblocks when he and his friends attempt to fundraise for the disease, receiving no interest from the gay community. As time goes on, and more friends die, Ned is able to bring several of his friends together to establish the Gay Men's Health Crisis. However, after several months of Ned writing bombastic, angry articles about the epidemic and appearing on television interviews accusing the government of "a conspiracy to kill gay men," they remove him from office and ask him to leave GMHC.

After this, we learn that Felix has contracted AIDS. He eventually gets placed into the hospital, but the situation is painted as rather bleak. Motivated by the continued

spread of the disease, Dr. Brookner pushes government officials to provide funding for her research, and loses her temper when it is refused, demanding to know how many more people have to die before AIDS becomes as important as seven deaths related to Tylenol, which received a large portion of governmental funds. Soon after, the final scene is the death of Felix.

The play was written in 1985, pre-dating the creation of ACT UP by two years. Even though the plot of *The Normal Heart* takes place during the establishment of the GMHC, Kramer's intent was to paint the narrative of the struggles over strategy that shaped the establishment of ACT UP.

There is one particular scene in TNH that shows the sides between tactics of rage (Ned) and opacity (the rest of GMHC), which is the scene where the other members of GMHC remove Ned from the organization. Ned's friend and the President of GMHC, Bruce, reads a letter that the members wrote informing Ned of his removal:

We are circulating this letter widely among people of judgment and good sense in our community. We take this action to try to combat your damage, wrought, so far as we can see, by your having no scruples whatever. You are on a colossal ego trip we must curtail. To manipulate fear, as you have done repeatedly in your 'merchandising' of this epidemic, is to use the gesture of barbarism. To exploit the deaths of gay men, as you have done in publications all over America, is to us an act of inexcusable vandalism. And, after years of liberation, you have helped make sex dirty again for us – terrible and forbidden. We are more angry at you

than ever in our lives toward anyone. We think you want to lead us all. Well, we do not want you to. We beg that you leave us quietly and not destroy us and what good work we manage despite your disapproval. (The Normal Heart, Scene 13)

Ned's reply, however, shows his disgust with quiet struggles against the disease that seemed to accept the inevitability of death without the desire to fight. The rage that is ever present in this play thus mirrors that of the activism at the heart of ACT UP:

I belong to a culture that includes Proust, Henry James, Tchaikovsky, Cole Porter, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Christopher Marlowe, Walt Whitman... These are not invisible men. Poor Bruce. Poor frightened Bruce. Once upon a time you wanted to be a soldier. Bruce, did you know that it was an openly gay Englishman who was as responsible as any man for winning the Second World War? His name was Alan Turing and he cracked the German's Enigma code so the Allies knew in advance what the Nazis were going to do – and when the war was over he committed suicide he was so hounded for being gay. Why don't they teach any of this in schools? If they did, maybe he wouldn't have killed himself and maybe you wouldn't be so terrified of who you are. The only way we'll have real pride is when we demand recognition of a culture that isn't just sexual. It's all there – all through history we've been there; but we have to claim it, and identify who was in it, and articulate what's in our minds and hearts and all our creative contributions to this earth. And until we do that, and until we organize ourselves block by neighborhood by city by state into a united visible community that fights back, we're doomed. That's how I



want to be defined: as one of the men who fought the war. Being defined by our cocks it literally killing us. Must we all be reduced to becoming our own murderers? (The Normal Heart, Scene 13)

Ultimately, the rage expressed in *The Normal Heart* provides critical impetus to audience members. The portrayal of these emotions allow audience members to see that action is necessary in the face of mass death, or else we will all “be reduced to becoming our own murderers” (Kramer, 1985). Looking at queer history can promote queer future, and reinvigorate new means for revolution:

“People have been lulled into believing that because of AIDS drugs the pandemic is over, and AIDS is just another chronic illness. The reality is far different, and here you have a play that doesn’t just bring reality to life, but, I think, also shows how a small group of people can make a difference.” “Maybe this play will inspire audience members to come up with new great ideas in the fight.” As these quotes demonstrate, TNH’s intergenerational emotional relay is not fear, despair, or wallowing in sentimental nostalgia, but instead a reflective sadness and rage about the relative progress of HIV/AIDS prevention, hope, and pride in one’s past as a guide to the future (West, 2012).

**As Is.** Another play produced during the AIDS epidemic, that actually received more initial popularity (making it to Broadway, when *The Normal Heart* was performed Off-Broadway) was the play *As Is* by William H. Hoffman. The play centers on the two

characters, Rich and Saul, former lovers who find each other again by leaning on one another when Rich is diagnosed with AIDS:

When Rich is diagnosed, he is breaking up with Saul, a photographer who has been his longtime lover. Saul has been badly hurt by Rich, but not so much so that he will turn his back at a time of grave need. Even as the two men bitterly split up their household possessions - from copper pots to "the world's largest collection of Magic Marker hustler portraits" - Saul decides to stick by Rich come what may, to accept him "as is" (Rich, 1985).

Unlike *The Normal Heart's* focus on pulling away from nostalgic sentiment in favor of rage filled action, a large aspect of the plot in *As Is* centers on remembering what the queer community lost because of AIDS – not really on how to change it. Even the phrase “remember” was ever present in the screenplay:

SAUL: I miss my filthy old ripped-up, patched button-fly jeans that I sun-bleached on myself our first weekend on the Island. Remember? It was Labor Day. And we did blotter acid. Remember acid before they put the speed in it? And we drank muscadet when we got thirsty.

RICH: Which we did a lot.

SAUL: Remember?

RICH: Remember Sunday afternoons blitzed on beer?

SAUL: And suddenly it's Sunday night and you're getting fucked in the second-floor window of the Hotel Christopher and you're being cheered on by a mob of hundreds of men.

RICH: And suddenly it's Friday a week later, and he's moved in, sleeping next to you, and you want him to go because you've met his brother Rod or Lance.

Along with this focus on nostalgia and loss was also a focus on mourning the loss of sexuality—a concern which Kramer's character, Ned, specifically felt was stupid considering how many people were dying during the AIDS epidemic. One notable line in *The Normal Heart* centered on Ned yelling at his gay friends for being too obsessed with thinking with their cocks instead of their brains. Since people were dying and sex needed to take a backseat to saving the community from this plague. However, *As Is* relied heavily on mourning the loss of sexuality, in many ways hinting that the loss of sexual freedom might be worse than any other consequence of AIDS:

SAUL: God, I used to love promiscuous sex.

RICH: Not "promiscuous," Saul, nondirective, noncommitted, nonauthoritarian--

SAUL: Free, wild, rampant--

RICH: Hot, sweaty, steamy, smelly--

SAUL: Juicy, funky, hunky--

RICH: Sex.

SAUL: Sex. God, I miss it (RICH lowers his eyes. SAUL nods and goes to RICH.

He takes RICH's face in both hands and tries to kiss him square on the mouth.

RICH pulls away frantically)

RICH: NO!

SAUL: I don't care!

RICH: You don't know what you're doing!

SAUL: It's my decision!

For these reasons, as an artistic representation of the AIDS crisis, *As Is* does not attempt to make a message heard, but instead leaves this message open for interpretation. Indeed, many of the ideas in the play can be connected to those of GMHC. Just like the GMHC relied upon educating the public about AIDS and informing PWAs about treatment options, *As Is* focused on educating the public about the AIDS experience. The portrayal allowed for the audience to reinterpret their original notions of queerness, after they had been juxtaposed with the humanity portrayed in the play.

Highly steeped in metaphor, poetic lines and almost cavalier, ironic portrayal of AIDS, *As Is* was a very different play than that of *The Normal Heart*'s much more obvious political messages. However, different co-cultural communication tactics can still be seen in this opaque representation of AIDS.

For example, the assimilation tactic of disparaging other groups was highly present in the racist language of the main character, Rich:

RICH: What other little details are you keeping from me? They let him lie there like a dog. What else? (A Hispanic hospital worker comes in to empty the waste basket) You! Váyase! Get the wetback out of here! Váyase!

HOSPITAL WORKER: I not do nothing! He crazy.

RICH: You, get out of here before I breathe on you! Ahora! Ahora! Váyase!

NURSE: Mr. Farrell, please.

SAUL: Come back later. Más tarde, por favor.

RICH: Go back to your picket line (To SAUL) They want a wage hike, no less. He tried to get me to bribe him to clean my room--

HOSPITAL WORKER: Qué coño estás diciendo? [What the fuck are you saying?]

RICH: He won't go near my bed, but he's not afraid to touch my money.

SAUL: You misunderstood him.

RICH: El dinero está limpio, ah? Tu madre. [Money is clean, huh, motherfucker?]

HOSPITAL WORKER: Maricón. [Faggot.]

RICH (To SAUL) They're unionizing primates now.

After the same worker from this excerpt confuses a hug between brothers as Rich cheating on Saul and warns Rich that Saul was entering the room, Rich and the worker have a conversation and Rich apologizes. Overall, this storyline functioned as a means of

humanizing the worker, after Rich sees that the worker, despite his difference, is useful and human. This in turned offered the playwright a covert means for leading the spectator to a similar opinion of queer individuals: that queer people are also useful and human. In short, the message is “we’re all the same inside” (a classic example of assimilationist rhetoric)

RICH: He came in to warn me that you were coming! (He laughs. To the WORKER) Gracias! Muchas gracias!

SAUL: He thought that you two were .. (He laughs)

HOSPITAL WORKER (To RICH) De nada. [You're welcome.] Why you laugh? (The WORKER laughs) Como hay maricones. [What a bunch of faggots.]

RICH: Es mi hermano. Perdona por lo que dije antes. Yo (He points to himself) era mucho estúpido. [He's my brother. Forgive me for what I said to you before. I was being very stupid.]

HOSPITAL WORKER: De nada. Somos todos esú tupidos, chico. [We're all stupid, my friend.] (He leaves. The giggles subside)

Another example of an assimilative tactic was framing AIDS as a death sentence, emphasizing commonalities as discussed in chapter five. *As Is* showed that the terror accompanying AIDS caused anger and that AIDS effected anyone, but the only solution provided was having loved ones nearby when the time came or committing suicide. Even the last lines of the play attempt to mourn victims in an attempt to humanize their

suffering. The mourning is articulated in the narrative of the hospice worker who is burnt out because she can do nothing to save these victims:

I don't know anymore. Sometimes I think I'm an atheist. No. Not really. It's more that I'm angry at God: how can He do this? I have a lot of denial, I am angry, and I bargain with God. I have a long way to go towards acceptance. Maybe it's time for me to resign. Maybe I'm suffering from burnout. But what would I do if I didn't go there? And it's a privilege to be with people when they are dying. Sometimes they tell you the most amazing things. The other night Jean-Jacques-- he's this real queen, there's no other word for it--he told me what he misses most in the hospital is his corset and high heels. I mean he weighs all of ninety pounds and he's half-dead. But I admire his spirit. The way they treat him. Sometimes they won't even bring the food to his bed. And I'm afraid to complain for fear they take it out on him! Damn them!...I've lost some of my idealism, as I said. Last night I painted his nails for him (She shows the audience her vividly painted fingernails) Flaming red. He loved it.

As Is portrays a story where dominant group members, like the nurse in this last scene, open their hearts and minds to dying gay men – even rising to their defense by lifting their names in prayer. Considering that most vitriolic hatred spoken against gay individuals came (and continues to come) from religious bigotry, a scene where a Christian prays for a queen that she obviously cares about shows the end goal of assimilation: true acceptance.

## Rage and Opacity Analysis

In analyzing both the tactics seen in ACT UP and the differing portrayals within the undercommons of theater, there is a definitive connection to rage and opacity. The aggressive strategies of confrontation, attacking and sabotaging worked to create a fissure in societal power dynamics—the very essence of rage strategies as discussed in Chapter 2. Expectations during this time were that queer groups were passive, timid, and did not organize to fight for themselves. ACT UP's tactics of forcefully pushing AIDS issues to the forefront of dominant discussion flipped this script.

At the same time, tactics such as humanizing queer individuals by focusing on their death to garner public sympathy, strategically distancing queer identity away from erotic conceptions of sexuality and using liaisons such as the police to make protests more effective were opaque tactics that attempted to work within the system through more assimilative measures to achieve success. The word assimilation here, in the sense that the opacity and rage literature uses it, also includes tactics within Orbe's accommodation outcome, arguing that the end result of accommodation ultimately props up normative societal configuration through making the deviant queer a productive member of that society. However, there are also some interesting communication strategies classified under Orbe's accommodation outcome that embody a rage approach, such as confrontation, as it still operates to make visible inherent structural problems in society to rupture dominant scripts.

Finally, while the art world functioned as an opaque undercommons, the depiction of Kramer's rage in *The Normal Heart* shows that opacity can also be used to advocate,



within an intra-group conversation, the pursuit of rage strategies. In this case, within the undercommons of the Off-Broadway theater world, Kramer called for queer groups to fight power structures that fueled queer oppression, including especially the silence concerning AIDS.

An important lesson to learn from ACT-UP is that a binaried understanding of rage versus opacity does not fully capture the complexities of social movements, the strategies that they pursue, or the tactics that they use. In fact, what is shown is that ACT-UP – perhaps the most successful “rage” movement of the last thirty years – pursued a variety of communication strategies vis-à-vis dominant ideologies and institutions, some of which could be classified as “opaque,” or at least assimilationist. In my concluding section, I will discuss how Co-cultural and Muted Group Theory can apply within social movements, as well as between social movements and dominant structures.

## CONCLUSION

In a world constrained by heteronormativity, understanding tactics of historical queer groups is paramount to navigating modern structures that prop up oppression of queerness. Particularly, remembering events that have constructed the subject position of queer identity is crucial. While positing AIDS as the definition of queerness is obviously problematic, analyzing the effects that the AIDS epidemic has had in the transformation of modern queer positionality and voice is necessary for contemporary queer social movements to formulate tactics for contemporary struggles. We must know our history to see where we have come, and to see what now must be done.

The first questions we must come to grips with concern the intra-movement debate over the “rage” strategy and confrontational tactics of ACT UP. More directly, how did that argument play out, and with what political and cultural consequences? The most pointed answer was that the dominant view within ACT UP, particularly among veterans of GMHC frustrated with that organization’s community-building and defensive strategy was that rage and confrontation were necessary actions to counter the lack of investment by power structures. Making the system nervous about its inaction was critical, according to most activists, in order to force societal opinion from apathy to action.

However, something important to note was that this dominant view created a co-culture of its own *within* ACT UP, which was made up of those who did not bandwagon around rage tactics, and believed more opaque options were necessary such as the Women's Caucus and their educational initiatives. These groups were almost always individuals within ACT UP who identified with more than one co-cultural group, making them a co-culture within ACT UP, given that the leadership and original constituency of ACT UP was white, gay, professional men. Thus, in many ways, despite the fact that most individuals, particularly those seen as leaders within ACT UP, were themselves a part of a co-cultural group vis-à-vis dominant culture, ACT UP as an organization still operated in ways that muted the voices of those deemed different. An important lesson that can thus be applied to co-cultural theory writ large is that these power relationships—and related co-cultural communication strategies—can exist within co-cultural groups as well as between co-cultural and dominant groups.

On the other hand, while there did exist a prioritization of rage tactics within ACT UP that often pushed co-cultural individuals to the side in decision making and focus, one must ask if this movement would have had as much political sway and power if rage had not been the fore-fronted strategy? The most obvious answer to this question is no.

Looking at the progress made by ACT UP during the late eighties and early nineties, most of the large scale change dealt with getting drugs into bodies, increasing governmental funding for different AIDS initiatives, and confronting heteronormative conceptions by conservatives and religious groups that allowed for the demonization of PWAs. The fundamental reason that ACT UP achieved success in these areas was

because their aggressive, direct approaches created greater awareness and challenged dominant notions of control, which then paved the way for more reformist and opaque measures to be successful.

Considering the potential for rage, opacity, or a combination of the two tactics leads us to our final question: what can we learn about the strategic choices facing current struggles for queer liberation from analyzing this historical case?

It is important to remember the actions of ACT UP. While the organization does not exist in the extent that they did in the 80s and 90s, the progress (and mistakes) that they made are critical parts of queer history that can frame our understanding of tactics for modern events. As the years passed, more people left ACT UP, citing burn out from all of the death. Other individuals lost their connection to the AIDS struggle, because a new generation had arrived within the queer community that never experienced the death knell of AIDS, as AIDS became a treatable disease. (Schulman & Moore, 2003) However, by the time ACT UP had arguably achieved their goal of ending the death sentence that was AIDS in the United States, over 400,000 people had died from AIDS in the United States. (A Brief Timeline of AIDS, 2002) While some may say that a remembering of ACT UP is counterproductive nostalgia, Gingrich-Philbrook (2012) argues that the price was too high to forget:

This makes me remember the footfalls of the dead. I hear that music loud in my head. I do what it takes to keep the memory alive of each slaughtered queer poet on each battlefield or immune suppression ward. I remember every dyke and

every faggot erased by this culture. I spend hours looking at the photos of my dead lovers on my altar at home. I touch my first SILENCE = DEATH button with a nostalgia I can't help but feel for 1988, my first tour of duty with ACT UP. I jab that SILENCE = DEATH pin into the palm of my hand. I hope for blood. I hope that the blood might actually mean something (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2012)

In short, following Gingrich-Philbrook, just as ACT UP rallied around the cry to act rather than mourn and do nothing, we need to act when it comes to ensuring that the steps the queer community made, the deaths that occurred, did not happen in vain. (West, 2012) The queer community of today faces new struggles and obstacles, and it would be foolish not to learn from the past to apply those strategies to the present and the future of queer activism.

Ultimately, a critical lesson to garner from this example is that rage alone can generate change, but is often more successful when combined with opaque tactics. However, opaque tactics are often only successful when rage creates the optimal political and cultural climate for its initiatives to be introduced. Specifically, in the current political and social climate, we must also ask ourselves where passive strategies have gotten queer groups. We are now in a time where progress in one area of queer life, like AIDS research, or gay marriage, or repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell have justified society making the argument that "things have changed," when at the same time more legislation is being introduced to justify queer discrimination around the United States. How much more assimilation must we work towards before we realize that the result of that is not truly acceptance, but continued exclusion?

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