

Identity, Activism and Queer Representation in the Age of AIDS, 1985-1995

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“The hardest thing to learn with this sickness shit was where one person’s life ends and another begins.”

--Stan Henry
cofounder, Seattle AIDS Support Group

Introduction

In the spring of 1980, residents of Portland, Oregon looked on it horror as a mammoth plume of smoke billowed from one of the city's most recognizable landmarks. Located just fifty miles away, Mount Saint Helens was a fixture of the Portland skyline, looming high above the iconic bridges and modest downtown skyscrapers. The eruption sent tremors throughout the region as ash rained down upon nearby cities. When the smoke cleared days later, Portlanders looked to the sky only to find their beloved mountain decapitated, its entire side blown to pieces in a mere matter of minutes.

While the rumbles subsided and people across the region slowly began to regain some semblance of normalcy, the tectonic social and cultural plates of the Pacific Northwest continued to shift beneath the surface. Just over a year later, the city of Portland would experience the warning signs of another impending eruption, similar in some ways to its predecessor, Mount Saint Helens, but vastly different in most others. Like the first, the blast would be for the most part silent, the slow result of denial and unheeded warning signs. Though the steam would soon rise for all to see, it would still take years before anyone was fully prepared to acknowledge the impending doom. Untold numbers would die before anyone was willing to admit, that the city, the country, the world was in the midst of an inescapable crisis. AIDS had arrived in the Pacific Northwest. And by the end of the decade, panic would once again wreak havoc throughout Portland's streets, prompting many to once again don the masks and gloves that became common in post-eruption Portland's ashy, post-eruption streets, thriving on the fear that through the simple act of breathing they would be susceptible to the disease's devastating effects. In its aftermath, the city would be irreversibly changed, forced to confront a radically different landscape and a way of life that would never be the same.

Over the course of the following decade, Mount Saint Helens served as a symbol for Portland's AIDS community (fig. 1). HIV-positive men and women and their friends, families, and allies would look to the event as an eerie precursor to the fatal disease sweeping through America's cities. In 1987, ACT UP/Portland, the local chapter of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, used the eruption as inspiration for its logo. Designed by coalition member Reed Darmon, the emblem depicted the shattering of a mountain-like, inverted V figure, a long-held symbol within the gay community. If the triangle served as a marker of gay liberation, Darmon's clever reappropriation was a fitting testament to the cultural atmosphere of the late 1980s. While the reality of AIDS manifested itself in the mass death of America's queer population, the



Figure 1

exploding triangle mountain skillfully arbitrated the crisis of identity that marked a new era of being gay in America. No longer could the legacy of the gay rights movement be encapsulated within the sharp and cleanly defined parameters of a pink, neon triangle. In the wake of AIDS, the gay community was an entirely fractured, wounded, confused group of men and women frantically searching for a tragically lost sense of self. Queer activists sought to put the pieces back together through the construction of a homogenized identity centered on the presentation of the idealized gay male. In light of AIDS-era queer theory, however, the pervasive images and themes of safe sex campaigns, street protests, and AIDS-related obituaries give insight into the wave of identity politics that accompanied the disease's tragic trajectory.

By 1995, nearly 3,000 people in the state of Oregon were infected with HIV.¹ Most of these early cases were among gay men, giving rise to the notion that AIDS was a “gay plague”, a disease sent by God to enact punishment for “the dirty little story of gay male promiscuity and irresponsibility.”² The country responded with widespread panic, charging that the sexual habits of gay men needed to be reform before the disease broke free and entered into their homes, infecting their children and the rest of “mainstream” America. In the wake of such irrationality AIDS became “not only a medical crisis on an unparalleled scale, it also involve[d] a crisis of representation itself, a crisis over the entire framing of knowledge.”³ Moderate politicians pushed for mandatory HIV screenings. Extremists suggested quarantine camps. While these petty, homophobic debates raged within the intellectual and political circles of the American Right, thousands of young men and women continued to waste away to nothing, ripped apart by the physical and emotional brutality of AIDS.

As cities across the country found themselves confronting a similar reality, combating the inefficacy of local, state, federal governments, activist campaigns took to the streets as they

sought to draw attention to the plague that was destroying their communities. Quickly, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) became an outlet of power, bringing attention to what had for too long gone unnoticed by the Federal Government. ACT UP Protestors in nearly every major American city hit the streets encouraging people to, in the face of grave stigma and adversity, “fight back” and “fight AIDS”. Other campaigns would follow suit, developing from the need to disseminate accurate information and counterbalance the supposed lies and misinformation of government health officials. Operating from the notion that AIDS was a gay disease, these official campaigns sought to “desexualize” gay men and shape their sexual habits in a way that conformed to mainstream American understandings of pleasure, intimacy, and sexuality.

Even those within the queer community pushed for a change in behavior, vehemently fighting for the immediate shuttering of gay bathhouses and an end to the promiscuity that had come to define gay men across the country. In his groundbreaking account of the early days of AIDS, *San Francisco Chronicle* writer Randy Shilts explores the conflict that erupted within the gay community, documenting the vehement infighting that threatened to fracture the gay community during its time of greatest vulnerability. When seemingly the entire nation fought against the excesses of queer life, gay America became embroiled within an identity civil war, seeking desperately to protect its sexuality liberation within the grave face of AIDS. How, asked queer theorist Douglas Crimp, does one continue to have sex in an epidemic fueled by unsafe sexual practice?

Even as activist groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation fought militantly along the front lines, seeking greater visibility amongst the Government and American media, other campaigns took a quieter role in the fight against AIDS. For these groups, education became the most

important weapon. In the frenetic rush to save the gay community from possible extinction, organizations like Seattle's Northwest AIDS Foundation and Portland's Cascade AIDS Project crafted projects geared at disseminating information regarding sex, health care, and social services accessible to at-risk individuals. As gay men sought to better understand what they could do to avoid contracting AIDS, these services proved invaluable, suggesting simple changes that could have a profound impact in the fight against the disease.

These organizations, however, faced a steep challenge. In America's post-Stonewall queer landscape, sexual liberation and freedom became a central component of gay identity. After spending decades hiding shamefully within the closet, gay Americans were no longer willing to remain silent. Many felt they had earned the right to unfettered and unregulated sexual exploration.⁴ AIDS, however, threatened these patterns of behavior. As more and more gay men became stricken with the illness and public health experts discovered a correlation between transmission and the exchange of bodily fluids brought about most frequently through sexual encounters, a growing consensus within the scientific community was that sex was, in fact, what was destroying the gay community. Slow to accept this knowledge, the gay community was hesitant to believe that unregulated sex was behind the rapid spread of AIDS. In the midst of the disease, the queer community found ways to rationalize their behavior, showing few signs that they were willing to stop having sex, let alone stop having as much sex. This ultimately challenged the efficacy of AIDS education campaigns and led to contentious debates regarding what it really meant to be gay in America.

In queer-constructed safe-sex campaigns developed by early AIDS activists, sex became the main selling point of gay behavior. The posters and pamphlets advertised for not only more sex, but also for more kinds of sex: safe sex, new sex, creative sex. Condoms and other safe-sex

tools became a mere accessory, a tangential component to what otherwise was an endless possibility for pleasure. Safe sex campaigns worked within the given system of queer identity, not questioning the systemic causes of the disease but, rather, reifying their notions of liberation within the graphics and design of each campaign. The AID-conscious movement predicated its response upon the idea that “gay male promiscuity should be seen...as a positive model.”⁵ Though it remains uncertain just how many lives these campaigns helped to save and how many cases of HIV and AIDS may have prevented, it is clear that these campaigns had a profound impact upon queer identity. Through the imagery of safe-sex initiatives, AIDS activists ultimately crafted the idealized representation of the gay male, creating the “fantasy of an undifferentiated ‘general public’” to which the rest of the gay community was dutifully expected to conform.⁶

As presented through the activist campaigns of organizations like the Northwest AIDS Foundation and the Cascade AIDS project, the gay male became reduced to just a few central identifying factors. Regardless of the immense diversity that had long stood as a hallmark of queer identity, this sense of individuality became replaced by a carefully constructed set of cultural standards. With the advent of the AIDS crisis, “*homo* now [stood] for homogenous than any type of sexuality.”⁷ In light of the works of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, AIDS campaigns in the 1980s didn’t merely reflect existing norms and principles, they instead engaged in “the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of already existing meaning, but the more active labour of *making things mean*.”⁸ Regardless of their own personal perception of self, gay men from across the country were forced to conform to the perceptions of an intellectual queer elite, who had “hijacked queer struggle and positioned their desires as everyone’s needs.”⁹ To be gay in the age of AIDS was to be dictated by the

conventions set in place by angry queer theorists and internalized and made tangible through visual and performative initiatives of activist campaigns.

In these campaigns, the gay male becomes a highly-sexualized and hyper-masculine agent of power and domination. These posters suggest that to be fully gay, it was not enough to just have sex. The prerequisites for queerness that one must choose to engage in lots of sex and lots of different type of sex, while maintaining a sexualized and athletic physical appearance. Gay men were not fat or skinny. They were not effeminate. Gay men were rigid and stern. They wore chains, leather, or nothing at all. They engaged in a number of different sexual practices, and they may just happened to wear a condom while they did so.

In her examination of “Sweatshop-Produced Rainbow Flags and participatory Patriarchy,” queer activist Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore posits that “the Gay Rights Movement Is a Sham.” For all of its talk of equity and access, Sycamore argues that the creation of a “gaysbian elite” enabled select queers to “use their newfound power to oppress less privileged queers in order to secure their status within the status quo.”¹⁰ As AIDS raged across urban America the need to present a unified front of queer thought created an urge for conformity, the widespread subscription to a particularly gay worldview. Along these lines, this thesis explores the ways in which the queer movement of the late Twentieth Century used AIDS to reestablish and legitimize a viable sense of self. While the widespread activism of the era was certainly rooted within anger, it was not so much about the dead and dying as it was about the living. AIDS activism, as embodied through protest, civil disobedience, and informational initiatives crafted a narrative of queerness that would set the stage for the new millennium and the pervasive representation of what it meant to be gay in America.

The organizational trajectory of this project intentionally follows the epidemiological patterns of HIV/AIDS, drawing attention to the many ways in which activism and identity interacted throughout the crisis. Beginning with preventative measures that would enable at-risk populations to stay safe from ultimate infection the thesis next moves to the kinds of activism that addressed the needs of those populations who had already undergone transmission. Finally, the project ends with an examination of the kinds of activism that emerged within the impending reality of AIDS: death. Though this mapping of the disease may seem overly simplified or naïve, it is meant to provide a sense of logical cohesion to the thesis, guiding readers as they themselves confront the different stages of AIDS. Chapter One begins by examining the safe sex campaigns of AIDS organizations. Looking specifically at the visual representations of the male body, the chapter discusses how the pervasive emphasis on molded physiques consistently engaged in suggestive actions roots queer identity in the perfection of the male body and the pursuit of sexual pleasure rather than an identity built upon the creative capacities of queerness that stressed individuality and the challenging of societal convention. Chapter Two moves to an exploration of the militant street protests of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation. Specifically focusing on the Northwest chapters like ACT UP/Portland and ACT UP/Golden Gate, the chapter analyzes the divisive ideological schisms that shaped the development of these groups. By examining the exclusionist practices of many of these groups, the chapter critiques the homonormative practices of gay men and the movement to more rigid, regulated understanding of queer identity. Beginning with a discussion of the origins of the word queer and how it has developed over time, Chapter Two uses queer theory to more fully illustrate the ways in which activist responses to AIDS led to yet another shift in queer identity. Finally, Chapter Three looks at the post-mortem initiatives of AIDS activists. By investigating the common links shared

amongst AIDS-related obituaries, the chapter continues to explore the ways in which queer identity was shaped by the presence of AIDS.

It ought to be noted here in the introduction that this project admittedly takes a narrow focus in the choice to focus almost exclusive on the development of gay male identity and the subsequent effect that this narrowing had upon larger understandings of queer. Though thousands of lesbian women and heterosexual Americans lost their lives to AIDS, early scrutiny was largely directed upon gay men leading to the development of campaigns seemingly targeted exclusively at a very tightly defined demographic. As this thesis will discuss, these parameters would ultimately contribute to the fracturing of the AIDS activist movement and direct the focus away from some of the underlying causes of AIDS towards more topical concerns. Though some may argue this project simply reifies the well-documented divisions between gay men, lesbian women, and the bisexual community, the work that follows argues that this kind of sexualized compartmentalization was one of the dangers of early AIDS activism. The gendered divisions of this discussion, though regrettable, do not dismiss the suffering and injustices that was felt amongst those women who also faced the scorn, stigma, and physical decimation of AIDS.

Although most of my research was conducting in the Pacific Northwest, this thesis crafts a national discussion regarding HIV and the ways in which AIDS activism shaped the construction of a queer identity amidst gay men. Initially, this project was conceived with the hope of exploring the regional differences that were present within early AIDS activism. After comparing the archival material that I collected from places such as Portland and Seattle with the literature from other regions like New York City, I quickly realized that while there were a few small differences, AIDS activist initiatives were created and disseminated on a shared national level through which posters produced and distributed in Tucson were reappropriated and circulated

through the streets of Portland. Likewise, the protest techniques, like phone-zaps and sit-ins, that had been perfected in New York City were quickly adopted by other groups as far away as San Francisco. Even the infighting that ultimately destroyed ACT UP chapters in the Northwest was not confined to the West Coast. Cities like Chicago and New York felt the divisive sting of factionalism. While I desperately wanted to argue that the Northwestern United States offered a space in which AIDS was contested differently than other urban locales, I came to find that in the light of a national plague, ultimate success was contingent upon the rallying together and cohesion of all affected community members. The AIDS activism was fraught with difficult, hegemonic representations of gay identity; the sheer scope of AIDS required unity and perhaps contributed to the sense of queer self that developed throughout the epidemic.

Although the gay rights movement helped millions to understand their identity, this identity was not freely chosen, but rather one that was imposed from the top down, a carefully constructed sense of personhood that all members of the “community” were expected to adopt. Even as activism is often upheld as a great, contemporary symbol of American democracy, a moniker of freedom and independence that helped historically marginalized groups to enter within the larger national ideological narrative, this thesis seeks to unpack the structures of sexual dominance and autonomy that support the seizure of power amongst a domineering, queer oligarchical elite.

Chapter One: Prevention -- Safe Sex Campaigns and the Queer Ideal

“Speak to your brothers – from the heart – we’ll help you – get involved” Haphazardly scattered across the front of one of the Cascade AIDS Project’s informative campaigns (fig. 2), the initiative’s main message fades to the background, obscured by the heavy-handed visual that immediately grabs the viewer’s attention. The focus of the poster rests firmly upon the group of young, attractive men smiling innocently at the camera. A mixture of races and ethnicities, the models provide a look into the diverse nature of the Pacific Northwest’s queer community. Among the group, a black man, an Asian man, and a Hispanic man join their white brothers to provide up to date information regarding AIDS all the while projecting a calming and nurturing a sense of family. This same sense of diversity, however, is not represented in terms of physical



△ Figure 2

appearance or the bodies that the poster places on display. The men, many of whom are shirtless, represent the “ethos of a highly athletic, toned, lean, hairless... body,” the personification of the ideals of queer masculinity that are “readily seen to indicate status and privilege in gay social and sexual settings.”¹¹

The boldness of the visual draws nearly all the attention as the intended message of the campaign is obscured being a veil of ambiguity. As eyes are drawn to the brawny chest and glittering smiles of the models, the presence of AIDS is hardly visible. The bodies presented for public consumption are clearly free from the physical maladies that AIDS hurled upon the inflicted. Gone are the purple lesions of Kaposi’s Sarcoma. Absent are the swollen glands and oral ulcers. These men, as presented by the Cascade AIDS Project, are the lucky ones. Free (for now) of the ravages of AIDS, these are the kinds of men that became the face of AIDS activism, projecting a veneer over the startling realities simmering below. To a certain degree, these kinds of advertisements denied the presence of AIDS, choosing instead to project an unthreatening utopian ideal. In the process, this and other similar campaigns built a reassuring identity that accorded appropriately with larger societal expectations regarding the expression of gender and sexuality.

Along these lines, early AIDS campaigns from the late 1980s and early 1990s utilize the queer male body as a means to transmit ideas about queer identity. Body politics have long been a part of the queer experience defining and shaping how both queers, themselves, and their “mainstream” counterparts understand what it means to be gay. “Foucault famously demonstrated how the sexual body became subject to social control and regulation during the nineteenth century,” an enduring idea that persisted throughout the age of AIDS and right up to the present.¹² For Waskul and van der Riet, “body, self, and social interaction are interrelated to

such an extent that distinctions between them are not only permeable and shifting but also actively manipulated and configured”¹³ leading Duncan to suggest that “identity and embodiment can be thought of as interrelated social practices.”¹⁴ Through the “negotiation of [these] prior and established discourses of homosexuality,” it becomes easier to understand the ways in which gay identity is not simply rooted within “aesthetic ideals” through which “particular bodies accrue more status than others by virtue of their sexual desirability.”¹⁵ Rather, the experience of AIDS constitutes a need for a reexamination of self and a critical reinterpretation of how the body became such a focus of activist discussion regarding AIDS.

As AIDS unleashed its wrath upon queer America (and soon upon others, too), activist organizers recognized that “individuals are understood to be vulnerable to ‘social forces’, unless they demonstrate rational self-control and exercise autonomous resistance to them.”¹⁶ While sex was certainly an important part of being gay, being able to have power over such urges was crucial to living AIDS-free and rising above the repressive anxiety that defined the crisis. By showcasing the chiseled physique and Hollywood smile, gay men were able to outwardly project that they were, in fact, in control. While AIDS mounted a seemingly unpredictable assault against homosexuals everywhere, gay men frantically began to search for a means of escape, an opportunity to avoid the physical and emotional ravages of the illness. Although knowledge was certainly power, with the campaigns distributing much needed knowledge regarding safe sex practices and outlets for social and psychological support, the facts could only carry the AIDS movement so far. A complete understanding was contingent upon visual representations, and the presence of the physically idealized gay man was not so much as erotic as it was empowering.

Even in their hyper-sexualized forms, the activist campaigns of the early AIDS crisis serve, to some extent, as a conformist initiative, succumbing to mainstream pressures of contemporary society. Even as some theorists argued that this invocation of masculinity creates a subversion of traditional gender roles, allowing gay men to act in a way that “threaten[s] ‘natural’ distinctions between gay and heterosexual men by revealing the ‘performativity’ of masculinity itself,” other earlier thinkers suggested this line of thinking was a subversion, itself.¹⁷ In “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, Leo Bersani suggests that these bodily displays of masculinity, explored through the phenomenon of the “leather queen” simply reflect the gay community’s desire to be accepted by the dominate, masculine social structure.¹⁸ AIDS activism in the Pacific Northwest evokes what Michelangelo Signorile calls a “cult of masculinity,” by invoking not only images of homosexuality but homosociality, as well.¹⁹ Here, the body is not a marker of queer desire, but rather a reaffirmation of masculinity. There is a particular reward structure in place that incentivizes gay men who are “conscious of the political status attending their visibility in heteronormal social life.”²⁰

The masculine, muscular, and sexualized presentation of the male body is not solely meant for the consumption of a queer audience. The intentional use of strong, well-developed men is also a ploy to the straight community, as the gay male body “also carries weight among a heterosexual audience.”²¹ As right wing politicians hurled vehement attacks against the irresponsible and promiscuous behavior of gay men, queer activists released initiatives to counterbalance these troubling accusations. Though the poster campaigns were graphic and sensual, a reminder of the hard-earned sexual liberation so passionately cherished by the queer community, the strategic positioning of the body is an attempt to project an image of control. AIDS activists engaged in a reappropriation of late nineteenth century “inversion discourse” that

“ensured other homosexually active men were less visible” and less susceptible from public resentment and scorn.²² In his analysis of the embodiment of the “gay self”, Duane Duncan argues that “gay men’s embodiment practices...cannot be understood simply to reflect the excesses of gay social life or the narcissistic concerns of gay men themselves.”²³ In this sense, the body exhibits a capacity that extends far beyond the body. Given that “dominant psychological science” posits the existence of a mind-body dualism in which the “body is constituted as in need of control,” these initiatives, though in a rather unexpected way, attempt to allay the projected fears of a heteronormative society.²⁴ Within the widespread contention of AIDS-era politics, “an athletic body ideal,” as witnessed in AIDS campaigns, “and deportment mediate the public acceptability of gay men.”²⁵

The imposition of masculine norms upon members of the queer community, stems from structural inequities that create feelings of inadequacy within the gay psyche. According to Sarah Kimmel and James Mahalik stress that factors such as “internalized homophobia, stigma, and” the fear of “antigay physical attacks” fosters a “chronic stress” that pushes gay men towards conformity to masculine norms.²⁶ In the face of real and imagined repression, gay men look for ways to “compensate for perceptions that they are less masculine” than straight men.²⁷ Without conceding their queer identity, gay activists used AIDS campaigns to exhibit a body that can be both fully gay and fully masculine, an attempt to bridge the looming paradox that conflates mainstream conceptions of gender and sexuality. Simultaneously, these kind of campaigns offered a body that fits into the norms of a “real” man, subscribing to the assertion that all men, regardless of sexuality are like the ones presented within the particular poster. The collective group standing as one offers no variation or diversity in a way that accurately depicts the

multitude of physiques shared amongst gay men. An AIDS awareness poster (fig. 3)

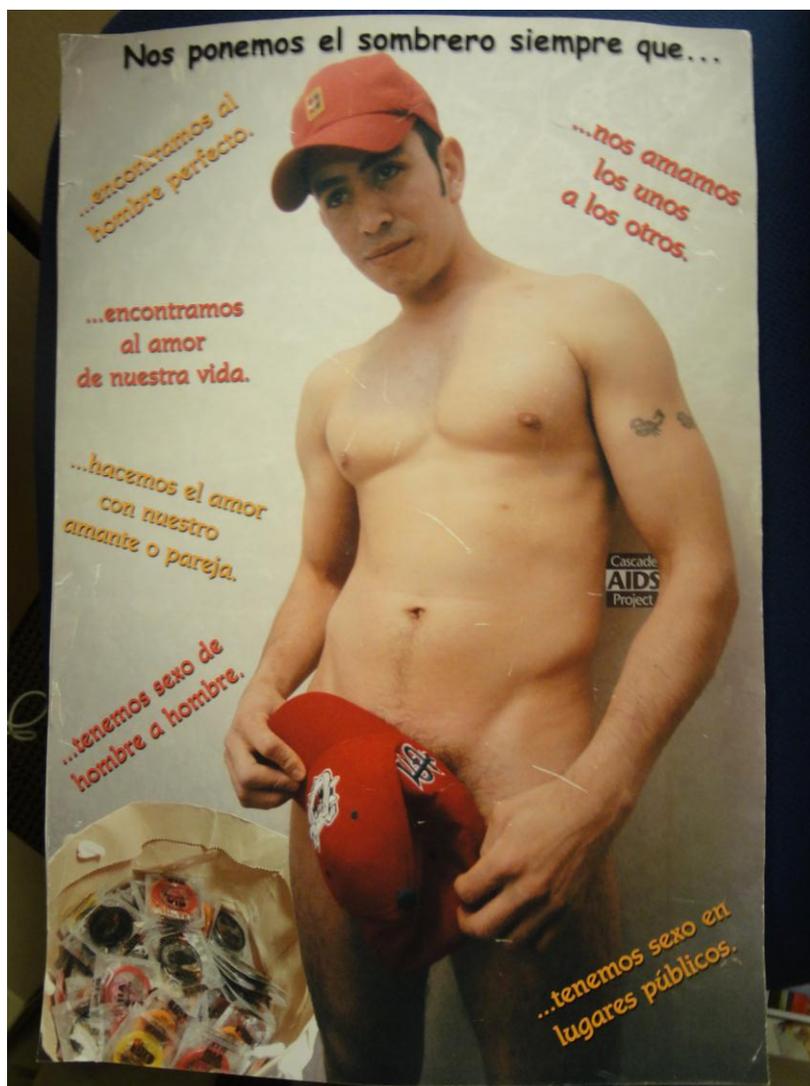


Figure 3

featuring a beefy Hispanic man illustrates these principles by depicting a man who represents the embodiment of the masculine form while also holding firm to principles widely cherished by the gay community. Sporting a red baseball cap, the man leans casually against the wall tempting

onlookers to grab a condom and join him in the pursuit of sexual exploration. Completely naked, save the second baseball cap covering his genitalia the poster maintains a simultaneous sense of mystery and power. The subject maintains complete control over his body, dictating how much can be seen by the audience. By assuming this autonomy, the man in the poster enters into a world of hegemonic masculinity, the ultimate arbitrator of sexuality. Through this and other AIDS-activist campaign photographs the gay man is able to shed a lingering sense of dependency and project a compensating sense of masculine authority. Even for non-Spanish speaking audience, the messages of the poster are quite clear: maintain power over the body, maintain control over the self.

Understandings of body identity, according to Duncan, are communally constructed on “the scene.”²⁸ Within the queer community, bodies are often put in opposition with one another through the process of comparison and the assembling of an “established body hierarchy.”²⁹ The presentation of perfected, idealized male bodies gives rise to a point of conflict between the gay rights movement, the ideals of the queer community, and the messages of AIDS campaigns. By solely representing safe sex and sharing information through a vehicle propelled by beautiful bodies, activists “overlook the diversity of gay men”, contributing to a homogenous population and a vacuous sense of queer identity.³⁰ In a nationalistic sense, the one-dimensional portrayal of gay men ultimately built a community flattened into a “deep” yet almost entirely “horizontal comradeship.”³¹ Along similar lines, the problematic nature of body-centered AIDS campaigns creates tension with fundamental understandings of what it means to be queer. For gay men and women, being queer is assumed to be the full realization of an authentic self. The emphasis on perfection, however, constructs a system in which ideal gay men must “spend so much time going to the gym, removing their hair” to the point that they “become abnormal.”³² In his

interviews with queer men, one of Duncan's subjects points to this paradoxical reality noting that "that's not the way they're meant to be."³³ Despite the assumption that being queer is about living out one's authentic self, the portrayal of gay men seems to trap the queer community within a social conundrum: aspire to physical perfection or "find their engagement with [gay] social life curtailed."³⁴

The body, however, was not the only arena in which queer activists sought to define the creation of queer identity. In the wake of the AIDS crisis, gay men, in particular, grappled to maintain control over their sexual autonomy, using safe-sex campaigns as the opportunity to expand upon existing ideas of sexual liberation. The AIDS crisis further galvanized much of the dominant gay community, who out of fear, rushed to defend their right to engage in unregulated, unabated sex. Despite the scattered cries of some gay leaders, many gay men refused to accept that they needed to modify their behavior or risk certain death. Despite increasing knowledge that AIDS was, in fact, transmitted through intercourse, AIDS campaigns continued to posit sex at the center of queer identity, treating the action as a common thread shared amongst all gay men and women.

In his hit 1975 song, "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover", Paul Simon explores the many ways to ensure the demise of a relationship. The song's speaker, a mistress encouraging her partner to leave his significant other, tells the lover that she wants to "help [him] in [his] struggle to be free."³⁵ Given the oppressive environment that pervaded AIDS-era America, it is fitting that a 1998 poster released by the Tuscon AIDS project proudly proclaimed, "There must be 50

ways to please a lover...and all of them safe.” (fig. 4)

**THERE MUST BE 50 WAYS
TO PLEASE A LOVER . . .**

**... AND ALL OF THEM
SAFE!**

JOIN US TO FIND OUT MORE

HOTLINE
(503) 223-AIDS
CP
AIDS

Figure 4

△

At a time when all eyes were focused upon the sexual behavior of gay men, the black and white images of this poster provided a strange sense of hope, a reminder to the gay community that even in the wake of widespread disease, the possibilities for sexual pleasure remained infinite. This poster suggests that AIDS was not necessarily an inconvenience, but rather, an opportunity for sexual regensis and an invigorated exploration of carnal possibilities. This sentiment was echoed in the writings of early gay activists. In their May 1992 newsletter, the staff of the Seattle Gay Clinic reminded readers that in the face of AIDS “you don’t have to become a monk.” Instead, the author encouraged gay men to “be creative and explore ways of playing that are risk-free, yet can actually enrich out experience.” Having fought for and earned sexual freedom in the streets of Greenwich Village, the gay community refused to relinquish the kinds of liberation that had come to define their community. In another article from the newsletter, John Gliessman contended that modifying sexual behavior was a personal choice, but that “you are not under a gun. You do not have to choose in fear.”³⁶ Sex was a means of exploration, an opportunity to encounter the seemingly boundless capacities of what it meant to be queer.

As more and more gay men in America succumbed to the ravages of AIDS, the nation began to debate the most effective ways to confront the disease. As the public health community examined the epidemiological patterns, the queer community also tried to accumulate and disseminate knowledge regarding the origins of the disease and why it seemed to predominantly be targeting gay men. In his analysis of the “Spectacle of AIDS,” Simon Watney suggested that “all discussions of AIDS should proceed from the known facts concerning the modes of transmissions of HIV.”³⁷ Written in 1987, Watney’s plea was released as the scientific community continued to assemble a slowly, yet gradually evolving understanding of the causes

of HIV and how it had come to manifest itself throughout America. Towards the end of the decade, this scientific evidence proved that the concentration of HIV/AIDS cases throughout queer America was a function of the unsafe behavior of gay men. Gay men, it was shown, not only had more sex, but they had more sex with a larger number of different partners. This sexual environment served as one of the most opportunistic spaces through which HIV could spread rapidly. Though researchers and specialists warned that AIDS could only be stemmed through a modification of behavior including limiting the number of sexual partners, Watney was joined by other queer theorists who argued that AIDS could “only be stopped by respecting and celebrating...pleasure in sex.”³⁸ Within this delusionary environment, more pleasure became the cure for AIDS, insisting that it is ultimately “promiscuity that will save us.”³⁹

This particular school of thought ran directly contrary to the opinion of most public officers who, in the wake of the spread of AIDS, fought vehemently to minimize the risks of transmission through the alteration of gay male behavior. In his 1987 book *And the Bad Played On*, Randy Shilts chronicled the heated debate regarding the closing of public bathhouses in San Francisco’s Castro District.⁴⁰ At the urging of city health officials, the city government began to issue warnings to the bathhouses: change the culture of anonymous and unprotected sex or risk closure. Almost immediately, the gay community fought back. Even as science continued to prove that lowering one’s number of sex partners resulted in a significantly decreased risk of AIDS transmission, many within San Francisco’s remained unconvinced and viewed this new regulatory spirit as an infringement upon hard earned queer liberation. In the midst of this conflict, San Francisco would reach a point of political and social turmoil, ultimately resulting in the recall election of the city’s once-popular mayor.⁴¹ So great was opposition towards the city’s plans that the Castro District erupted into boisterous protests, the queer community uniting to

preserve a central tenant of their sexual identity. As exhibited through most media accounts, the arrival and rapid spread of AIDS in American galvanized gay men into one united body, focusing their efforts to exert control upon the continued autonomy of one's sexuality.

This yearning for control and power was made visible through the safe sex initiatives of AIDS-era America. Similar to the "Fifty way to please a lover" poster, other campaigns used sex as a way to market preventative tactics and distribute a sex-positive message that valued passion and intimacy. Despite Simon Watney's call for discussions of AIDS that stemmed from epidemiological fact, the activist community continued to release information that turned a blind eye to the larger issue: sexual avarice was enabling the rampant spread of the deadly disease. Though Watney was highly critical of the mainstream media and their association of AIDS as a "moral panic" and a "gay plague", many of the posters distributed by gay-friendly groups like the Cascade AIDS Project also failed to accurately assess the root causes of AIDS and instead participate, to a degree, in "ignor[ing] all questions of...resistance."⁴² Even though these tactics stressed safe sex, they did not address the sheer number of sexual partners that was common practice amongst gay men. In the Tucson poster, the headline informed its audience that there must be 50 ways to please *a* lover" changing the personal "*your*" of the original song title to an impersonal "*a*", sending a message that it did not matter who one was having sex with as long as they engaged in safe, preventative practices. In the face of vicious backlash, these initiatives only took the message of sexual responsibility so far lest they risk the fervent scorn of those committed to unfettered sexual independence.

Leading the charge behind this fervent opposition was a wave of theorists using their academic stature to lend legitimacy to their argument A year before Watney issued his scathing critique of the American media, Douglas Crimp began asking similar questions, exploring "How

to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic” by condemning gay and straight leaders who were critical of gay male sexual behavior. For Crimp, these writers were subscribing to the dangerous ideas that AIDS was merely the “dirty little story of gay male promiscuity and irresponsibility.”⁴³ Instead, Crimp echoed the message of the “50 ways to please a lover,” believing, like Watney, that sexual exploration was one of the most powerful means to control AIDS. For Crimp, “gay male promiscuity should be seen instead as a positive model of how sexual pleasures might be pursued by and granted to everyone of those pleasures were not confined within the narrow limits of institutionalized sexuality.”⁴⁴ And yet in this passage, Crimp once again exploits the danger of building a cultural identity around a normative understanding of sexuality. Whereas one can argue that heterosexual America fostered a culture of repressive institutionalized sexuality, the nature of safe sex campaigns and the adherence to a liberal reimagining of institutionalized sexuality may ultimately prove to be just as confining and restricting as its counterpart. Those gay men who chose not to engage in the pressures of promiscuity risked alienation and exclusion for the inner circle of queer America.

In determining a proper course of action to a pressing issue, Watney suggested that “consent to social policy” like that constructed through safe-sex and other activist campaigns “is grafted from desire itself.”⁴⁵ In the case of AIDS, the continuing desires of gay men who continued to live despite the threat of the disease was necessary to ultimately ensure the modification of behavior. As many of these posters exhibit, the particular proclivities of gay men crafted a widely-accepted and distributed notion that sex was a queer right and would not be diminished by the ravages of AIDS. Within the heteronormative confines of straight America, Crimp laments the realization that “cultural conventions rigidly dictate what can and will be said about AIDS.”⁴⁶ As queer-focused activist campaigns revealed, however, this same line of

reasoning applies to the gay community. It was Crimp's anxiety that enabled the cultural conventions of gay men and women to be disseminated through queer-generated responses to the disease. The very conventions that defined the contours of queer identity rigidly guided the composition and character of AIDS initiatives. As a result these conventions became solidified within queer consciousness. AIDS undoubtedly presented a challenge to the existence of the queer community. The posters and initiatives that many anti-AIDS campaigns created served a two-fold purpose. While on the surface they were meant to disseminate important information to at-risk men and women, they also were capable of counteracting the pervasive anxieties of the living.

Whereas the presentation of strong, clean, sculpted bodies attempted to send a message of control and order to heterosexual America, the sexualized nature of other projects was an attempt to allay the fears of gay America. Defensive in nature, these initiatives served as a treatise, a reaffirmation of queer liberation, demarcating what the queer community would and would not be willing to sacrifice. In the case of the campaigns presented in this chapter, sex was non-negotiable, and the virulent efforts of gay leaders to silence the warnings of marginal queer voices supports the idea that AIDS activism became a means through which identity could be strengthened, even in the face of crisis.

For Crimp the graphic and suggestive nature of these campaigns was a necessary component to protecting gay men from the threat of AIDS. Crimp suggested that this kind of imagery counterbalanced the negative influence of sanitized initiatives that were "sensitive to 'community values'."⁴⁷ The most successful initiatives were those that are tailored to the experiences of the queer community, warnings like "Don't come in his ass" or Don't "pull out before you come."⁴⁸ Through Crimp's perspective this was what "we" said.⁴⁹ Crimp rose on

behalf of the entire queer community to posit a shared language that was central to the experiences of all gay men and all gay men who are vulnerable to the ravages of AIDS. Through such a process, Crimp traded one set of “community values” for another, risking the development of another “‘universal’ language that no one spoke and many did not understand.”⁵⁰ In the attempt to get away from hegemonic expressions of language and power, the queer activist community merely reinstated their own unilateral, dominant narrative of experience.

Instead of challenging the tenuous relationship between gay male sex and AIDS, theorists like Crimp doubled down, arguing that “the gay movement is responsible for virtually every positivist achievement in the struggle against AIDS during the epidemic’s early years.”⁵¹ Though it is difficult to neglect the tireless effort of the gay community and the many victories they did help to secure, the social costs of these “achievements” have yet to be tallied. By fighting for the continued operation of gay bathhouses, playgrounds of unregulated sexual pleasure, for example, one may never be able to count the number of additional men who were unknowingly infected with HIV. On a wider, more contemporary scale theorists like Crimp have failed to analyze the social costs of the gay movement’s struggle. In building a unified body of gay voices and denying the voices of dissenting queers, Crimp and others would subsequently quench the very notions of individuality and freedom of expression that had once been paramount to queer America. In the tragic spread of AIDS, the colorful, vibrant, diverse gay community became replaced by a anxious, defensive, insular club more focused on preserving promiscuity than honoring the dignity, value, and diversity of unorthodox, queer perspectives.

Despite the emphasis on place on the irresponsible behaviors of gay male sexual practices, it is important to note that these campaigns did undoubtedly save lives. The emphasis on safe sex, though largely constricted to the use of a condom, helped to a certain extent begin a

shift toward more responsible patterns. As noted by the GOVT AGENCY, condoms, when used effectively are almost PERCENT effective at preventing the transmission of HIV from an infected partner to a uninfected partner. Though the Centers for Disease Control continues to advocate against multiple sexual partners, particularly amongst men who have sex with men, an increased use of condoms has contributed to decreased rates of HIV-transmission amongst gay men. The purpose of this chapter is not to construct a picture of gay men who are incapable of making decisions that do not align with their sexual attitudes. Instead, the continued emphasis on largely unbounded sexuality coupled with a fervent backlash against the closure of longstanding sites of unregulated sex (i.e. public bathhouses) suggests that early gay activists were ignoring the systemic, structural issues that had enabled AIDS to spread so rapidly amongst the queer community. Casting AIDS in a positive light in which bodies were beautiful and the possibilities for sex were unbounded turned a blind eye and potentially diminished the suffering felt by those living with AIDS.

In counteracting the ignorant and homophobic posturing of conservative America, the gay community retreated within itself, crafting a unified sense of identity in order to persevere the turbulence of the AIDS crisis. Though gay men and their allies tended to rationalize their sexual behavior through its capacity to overcome the oppression of a moralistic elite, the problematic means through which this process occurred only continued to exploit the fractured nature of the queer community. By outwardly and vehemently challenging both gay and straight critiques of gay male sexual behavior, the queer community as a normative institution was attempting to cover the fault lines of division that had occurred in the post-Stonewall era. AIDS had in many ways led to a fundamental schism within queer understandings of self and society.

By continually reasserting sex at the center of public health discourse and safe sex education, queer activists emphatically began to express what it meant to be gay in America.

Chapter Two: Transmission – Homonormativity on the Street

As exhibited through the previous chapter, AIDS campaigns were clearly engaged within larger discussions regarding what exactly it meant to be queer in America. Adding to a litany of other voices, AIDS proved an inflection point in which the meaning of the word queer would again change to meet the needs of a particular generation. Though previous generations may have used queer with malicious intent, the activists of the AIDS era drew upon queer's malleability and repurposed its meaning to help restore power and agency to a suffering community. Understanding the meaning of the word queer is crucial to understanding the ways in which it became a moniker of identity deeply engaged within addressing the immediate concerns of those living beneath the oppressive shadow of AIDS.

In the constantly shifting and changing landscape of American identities, "queer" has emerged as an increasingly popular way through which society implicitly views individuals and structures that are perceived as "others." Although the collective momentum of political and social movements of the past two centuries has fueled a momentous shift in the definition of queer, the emergence and rapid spread of AIDS ushered in a culturally dynamic debate regarding the core tenets of queer identity. What once existed within the realm of a limited, specified interpretation has broadened and expanded alongside a widening of American awareness. And yet the activist initiatives that rose from the grips of the AIDS threatened to compromise the growing independent spirit and reintroduce queer to the box of narrowly defined parameters.

From its eighteenth century roots to its modern interpretations queer understanding has transformed from a labeling of something that is merely "strange or peculiar" to an active and conscious critique of normality and abnormality. In the process, however, many people have adopted their own classifications of queer, often times denoting the word as a synonym for

something of a homosexual nature or an association with gay culture. Given the struggles to fully understand what it means when something is queer, it is not surprising that historian Siobhan B. Somerville believes “queer causes confusion”, marked with an ability to alienate as it brings people together into a greater sense of community.⁵² While many Americans present queer as an offensive, derogatory treatise against homosexuality, for others the term has become a collective opportunity creating a connective sense of association and identity. As AIDS charted its destructive path through America’s cities, the on-the-street protests waged by militant activists, helped to illustrate just how wide this collective was willing to stretch.

Since its emergence into the English language, the definition of queer has largely existed as a descriptive term, giving societies the opportunity to categorize and identify different tenants of social behavior. Although rooted in early German etymology, the term did not garner considerable usage until the 1700s when it created a label for actions that seemed odd or out of custom.⁵³ In a time when early America was extremely concerned with order and stability, queer provided the opportunity to describe “conditions that [were] not normal” and develop a cultural understanding of proper custom.⁵⁴ Even in the early twentieth century, Americans did not necessarily consider queer as an offensive term as it became an underground way for men to express their sexual preference in other men.⁵⁵ It was not until mid-century that queer became a derogatory term, gaining association with the inclinations, desires, and actions of “sexual perverts”.⁵⁶ In post-war America, the pressure to maintain the properly structured nuclear family coupled with Cold War fears of otherness contributed to this change in understanding and shift towards a more insolent recognition of “queer”.⁵⁷ In the latter half of the twenty-first century, queer remained a volatile term, poised with the ability to create controversy and discomfort. Contemporary dictionaries, for example, emphasize this precariousness, defining queer as

“sometimes offensive” and “often disparaging”.⁵⁸ Beginning in the late 1970s, this idea spread as queer became explicitly tied into marginalized identity. In his 1992 stage play, *Angles in America*, Tony Kushner explores the struggles and hardships of the New York queer culture. Emphasizing the stigma that homosexual and other marginalized Americans faced in Regan-era landscape, Kushner illustrates the persistent troubles that accompany being “queer” in America.⁵⁹ With AIDS exercising its deadly decree upon gay men, queer became a moniker of activism and the attempt to exercise control in a hopeless and quickly deteriorating social landscape.

With the approaching millennium and a growing acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle, “queer” simultaneously developed under a positive light. Despite the word’s harsh character, the advent of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s issued a need for community amongst gay Americans. Here, “queer” became a rallying cry for gay activists seeking progress and the equal promotion of rights for marginalized Americans. “Queer” provided a sense of identity, giving a voice to a population that had long been expected to maintain transparent and silent. In the years to follow, “queer” became less about simply combating homophobia and, instead, developed into a broad movement aimed at confronting the powerful existence of “heteronormativity.” As Somerville explains, heteronormativity refers to an engrained understanding of what is normal in society and the subsequent belief that privilege and the right to exist freely, openly, and unrestrained is explicitly intertwined with this promotion of custom in America.⁶⁰ In twenty-first century America, however, “queer” seeks to refute this notion and argue that heterosexuality and normality (like homosexuality and abnormality) are societal creations, contingent upon the beliefs and understandings of a small, select group of individuals. In her 1987 essay *Towards a New Consciousness*, cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldua argues the importance of expanding

societal understanding beyond perceptions of race. As a globalized, changing world tears down borders between ethnicity, gender, religious identity, and sexual orientation, success, she argues, will become heavily contingent upon a “mestiza consciousness.”⁶¹ In a similar manner, “queer” became a term used to collectively assemble and reconceived not just notions of sexuality, but of society, in general.

As AIDS activists took to the streets in protest, advocating against the unjust practices of the Federal Government, their fervent and emotional cries reverberated with the same sense of unity and togetherness that was suggested by Anzaldua. Within the crowds, people of all races, genders, ages, and sexual orientations banded together in the effort to draw attention to what had for too long existed as an unexamined and unchallenged public health crisis.

As the 1980s faded, the 1990s brought about a wave of new scientific knowledge, allowing AIDS researchers to better understand the disease and develop new initiatives to slow its breakneck progression . This new decade brought with it a host of previously unknown challenges, changing the ways in which the activist community approached their longstanding fight for change. With the growing base of knowledge regarding patterns of HIV epidemiology and new experimental treatments bringing an abandoned sense of hope and promise to those living in the shadow of AIDS, the cracks began to emerge upon the surfaces of the activist community. The united front that had led the rallying cry against government inaction and pharmaceutical greed began a grueling philosophical conversation regarding the course of protest and change. In the process, much would be determined regarding queer identity, once again proving how AIDS and activist responses continued to dictate what it meant to be queer in America.

Understanding the shifting landscapes in the defining and understanding of the word queer illustrates broader American cultural tendencies. As an aggressive and offensive term, queer highlights a deep-seeded fear of things that are different. Queer identity is, in a sense, threatening, and a challenge to American perceptions of what is natural and acceptable in society. On the other hand, queer's popularity as a term of advocacy simultaneously illustrates Americans' need and desire for identity. In embracing their queerness, marginalized Americans (be it through race, gender, sexuality) gain a sense of power that comes with such acknowledgment and recognition. This dual representation of "queer" highlights the struggles that come with trying to interpret its whole meaning. One cannot simply analyze "queer" from a stationary perspective, but must explore shifting perspectives to see the ways in which queer becomes less about an individual action or event and more about an overall awareness of normality and society as a whole. Perhaps no one event illustrated this particular propensity to galvanize under a unitary sense of self better than the emergence of AIDS in America. As AIDS ravished the gay community, it also sparked a reawakening of the activist spirit that had in previous decades helped bring gay men and women out of the closet and into a more visible, prominent position within American society. Groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation – that took the plight of people with AIDS to the streets – simultaneously advocated on behalf of vulnerable populations, while at the same time creating normative parameters around which the gay community writ large began to understand its position in relation to the rest of the world. Street activism served as a mouthpiece through which AIDS gained notoriety and the visibility of queer America surged to a precarious new position.

Recognizing the unjust profiteering and governmental mismanagement that followed the release of early AIDS drugs, ACT UP rose to the forefront of the activist movement, giving a

much needed voice to a population that had been stripped of its ability to speak for itself. With AIDS resulting in more deaths each passing day, sickness and disease became the spokespersons for the inflicted. In March of 1987, without any formal leadership structure, a group of “concerned citizens” gathered on Wall Street to break the silence.⁶² By the end of the day, seventeen protesters had been arrested and the legacy of ACT UP was born. Over the next few years, ACT UP would stage similar protests through the city and the surrounding region. Using bright, vibrant, and jarring imagery, ACT UP served to exploit the hypocrisy of American bureaucracy while rallying for change and reform. In light of ACT UP’s numerous successes and its ability to disrupt the discriminatory policies and tactics of the federal Government, ACT UP chapters began appearing in other American cities. Though their aims were largely the same, these local groups allowed for activists to advocate for changes at a smaller, micro level and meet the particular needs of their given communities. Soon other, activist-minded groups would emerge, including Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers, and like ACT UP their geographical footprint would spread as AIDS continued to spread throughout America. Along the West Coast, queer communities within San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle all adopted the pattern that had been conceived of and implemented in New York City. In these cities, small, but powerful ACT UP chapters fought for local issues, working on their own streets to build upon the work that was being undertaken in other parts of America.

In the state of Oregon, ACT UP/Portland was a powerful organization that frequently took to the streets to combat the oppression, ignorance, and bigotry of the state and federal Government. As the state of Oregon considered passing Measure 8, a bill that would “legalize discrimination against people in state government on the basis of sexual orientation,” ACT UP sprung into action.⁶³ 600 people met in the city’s famous Pioneer Square, before marching to the

nearby Burnside Bridge where they sat in the middle of the street blocking access to motorists and other pedestrians.⁶⁴ During the half hour protest 18 of the 60 protestors at the bridge were arrested. In what became one of the most controversial aspects of the protest, police were reportedly wearing latex gloves as they removed the activists from the bridge.⁶⁵ In the wake of this protest, ACT UP's presence in the city exploded as the organization began purchasing advertising space aimed at "outing" closeted conservative politicians and staging events like "phone zaps" and "kiss-ins" to disrupt everyday business and draw attention to their cause. In February 1989, in what is considered to be one of the group's most famous protests, 150 members overwhelmed the FDA offices in Downtown Portland, angrily chanting, "Bush and Quayle ought to be in jail" and "No more delay; arrest the FDA."⁶⁶ Mirroring the anger that was rising across the country, these ACT UP Protestors were angry at the glacial pace at which AIDS drug trials were being adopted by the Government. The protest reached its climax, when a number of protestors threw red blood on the glass doors of the building, resulting in the forceful intervention by Portland police. In all 11 AIDS activists were arrested.⁶⁷

Along the Pacific Coast, these kinds of questions became commonplace as other ACT UP chapters began to wage their own assault against AIDS. In Seattle, ACT UP distributed over 500 safe sex packages to local high school students, complete with condoms and an accompanying guidebook that showered graphic renderings of sex acts.⁶⁸ The event caused an uproar within the city, and while students agreed that the distribution of condoms were a good idea, even they agreed that the pamphlets crossed a certain line.⁶⁹ But crossing the line is what made ACT UP not only a transgressive organization but also an effective organization. ACT UP protests and other events were frequently covered by local newspapers, leaving editorial boards little choice but to talk about AIDS and spread awareness amongst its readers. ACT UP/San Francisco was

also an instrumental player in the spread of AIDS Activism. In January 1989, to “celebrate” the inauguration of George H.W. Bush, San Francisco protestors marched outside the Pacific Stock Exchange where they staged a “die-in.”⁷⁰ A fixture of ACT UP’s many tactics, onlookers watched as protestors slowly abandoned their fervent cheers to “ACT UP, Fight Back, Fight AIDS” and fell to the floor in a show of solidarity of the millions of lives that were being lost on account of slow responses to AIDS. Again, ACT UP proved its power to disrupt everyday life, forcing people to take notice of a sorrowfully neglected crisis.

Despite these creative and spontaneous tactics, the ACT UP groups of the Pacific Northwest were not the only ones engaged in these kinds of protests. The initiatives undertaken in these cities were borrowed from other ACT UP chapters. Years of experience had proven that holding phone zaps and die-ins were a great way to draw attention to the realities of AIDS. And the dark, biting humor of many ACT UP demonstrations proved to be an effective means of raising awareness. ACT UP “reframe[d] the AIDS crisis in comic, realistic, humane, and pragmatic terms” while “debunk[ing] the tragic frame that would position gay men as victims of immoral acts or as sacrifices that symbolically purify society.”⁷¹ Across America, different activist groups adopted this milieu, creating a shared sensibility regarding AIDS protest in the United States. Such a normative approach to AIDS activism ultimately undercuts the notion of regionalist activism, suggesting instead that the activist culture of the Pacific Northwest is merely an “imagined geography”, inextricably linked to a larger national approach to transgression and protest.⁷² Despite its reputation for being a creative, free-thinking group of individuals, the queer community proved that it was more centralized than perhaps it is frequently portrayed.

As AIDS became more prominent, the efforts of militant activist groups helping to bring the disease to the forefront of American consciousness, the insular tendencies of the queer community began to emerge in more visible ways. With the introduction of new medical advancements and shifts in Governmental approaches to HIV and AIDS, ideological debates began to dominate the activist landscape. While some members were dedicated to exposing all forms of injustices, moving outside of a strict adherence to AIDS-related issues, others believed that the existence of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation was to give a greater voice to those who had been most affected by AIDS, gay men. These debates signaled a much deeper debate regarding what it meant to be queer. For some, being queer was related to one's sexual orientation while others sought to broaden the definition to that which questioned structures of power, inequity, and plight. For these activists, the struggles of women and people of color existed as a result of the same systemic injustices that had contributed to the trauma of AIDS. Ultimately, these discussions led to the outright fragmentation of the activist community with factionary groups breaking from the establishment and redefining their personal missions to accord with their expanded (or contracted) worldview.

Across the country, other established ACT UP Chapters witnessed this great schism within the activist community. In 1991, ACT UP/Portland fell victim to this divisive trend as heated debates regarding the direction of the organization were met by differing perspectives. Just a few weeks into the new year, after months of inside conflict, ACT UP/Portland split into two separate groups, with one side keeping the original name and the other side organizing under the acronym R.A.T.S.: the Radical Activist Truth Squad. According to officials from the restructured ACT UP, Inc., "a small group of ACT UP/Portland's members, none of whom were HIV infected, started a power struggle within the organization" and began a movement away

from confronting issues relevant to the immediate needs of those living with AIDS.⁷³ Most notably, the new ACT UP, Inc. expressed frustration that many group members refused to assist in the groundbreaking discrimination case against Trimet, Portland's public transportation system.⁷⁴ In light of these failings, ACT UP, Inc. felt that "new HIV infected members were disgraced or made to feel not welcome."⁷⁵

It was this same exclusionary attitude that led other activists to leave ACT UP and join the efforts of R.A.T.S, believing that it was critical to no longer ignore the obvious connections between AIDS, sexism, racism, and homophobia. The new group's name, itself, was intentionally created to articulate this wider approach to AIDS activism, allowing organizers to manipulate the acronym to fit their particular needs. Whether in the form of the Radical Activist Truth Squad, the Radical AIDS Truth Squad, or the Radical Activist Tongue Squad, R.A.T.S. attempted to exploit the nuances of AIDS awareness through a variety of events and protests.⁷⁶ Like its predecessor, R.A.T.S. was comprised of people of all races, genders, and sexual orientations. In this new iteration, however, those whose from traditionally low-risk groups felt they had a greater space to address the problems they felt were contributing to the epidemic. Within the existing framework ACT UP/Portland fell short in its ability to address the systemic injustices that pervaded throughout the social landscape and enabled AIDS to spread as quickly and as mercilessly as it did. Additionally, members of R.A.T.S. lamented the increasingly sexist atmosphere of ACT UP/Portland meetings in which some male members were often overheard calling for a way to "shut up those lesbian bitches."⁷⁷ According to an article in *Just Out*, Portland's most popular queer newspaper, the "misogyny and the threat of violence reared their ugly unprotected heads and put the activists of ACT UP in a position where they had no choice

but to accept and disband.”⁷⁸ In light of what the ACT UP defectors called “misogynist terrorism”, the group ultimately voted to disband on January 16.⁷⁹

The sharp division between AIDS activist groups like ACT UP and R.A.T.S. represented the institutional embodiment of victimization ownership, the principle that the pain and trauma of a particular grievance could only be addressed by those who had been directly affected. In the case of AIDS, gay men felt entitled to lead initiatives aimed at stemming the progression of the disease. In Seattle, the frustrations of male PWAs was made public in a number of editorials written for the staff notes of the Seattle Gay Clinic and for the city’s gay newspaper *The Seattle Gay News*. In “Whose Crisis Is It Anyways,” Jim Geary, director of the Shanti Project, a San Francisco organization aimed at improving the lives of those living with AIDS, reminded readers that “the AIDS bandwagon should not override the real business at hand.”⁸⁰ Filled with skepticism, Geary questioned the motivations of those activists without AIDS arguing that “some people will be getting jobs and reputations off this. But the people with AIDS and the people who are going the real work know who is doing the real work.”⁸¹ Because Geary suggested “most AIDS patients cannot indulge in the luxury of rushing off to committee meetings or forums,” those without AIDS had stepped in and inappropriately spoken on behalf of those with the disease.⁸² In closing, the editorial suggested the possibility of a future in which “people with AIDS...will be able to organize and tell the public about AIDS on their own terms” while the uninfected “helpers” would “have the good sense and grace to stand aside and listen.”⁸³ As the formation of R.A.T.S. and other ACT UP offshoots indicates, these “helpers” were not willing to be mere spectators to the cultural, social, and political injustices of AIDS.

In the months to follow, the relationship between ACT UP, Inc. and R.A.T.S. would be marked by fierce battles and the violent spewing of caustic insults, all reflecting the ideological

differences at the heart of each group's mission. Those who remained committed to ACT UP argues that the "sexist label [had] been used as a sword to silence debate and misrepresent facts, in the same manner that Hitler used a Jew label to justify the Holocaust; and as Joseph McCarthy used accusations of communism, during his communist purges."⁸⁴ Dismissive of their adversary's cries of sexism, ACT UP, Inc. argued that R.A.T.S was merely attempting to shift the focus of the debate, once again selfishly positing other issues above the pressing realities of AIDS. ACT UP wanted to spend more time focusing on issues particular to the gay community, expressing that at meetings at least sixty-percent of the discussion should be exclusively focused upon issues pertinent to the PWA community, believing that "ACT UP, Inc. must always have AIDS as it's top agenda. Deflection," they argued, "by any other -isms should come into play only as they relate to people with AIDS."⁸⁵ Embodied in the split between ACT UP/Portland and R.A.T.S, AIDS helped to further create an insular environment through which conventions of queerness were limited and tightly defined by the reactionary attitudes of gay men.

Although the Portland split was incredibly divisive, the movement towards these multiple approaches to AIDS activism was similarly waged in other cities around the country. In Chicago, ACT UP/Chicago split, resulting in ACT UP/ Windy City. As in Portland, the separation was attributed to disagreements regarding the role of PWAs within the organizational structure of the group. As chronicled in the documentary *How to Survive a Plague*, this atmosphere of factionalism was also pervasive in New York City, where activists interested in putting more pressure on Government-supported treatment initiatives stepped away from the loud, boisterous, performative street protests and engrained themselves within the bureaucratic, closed-door meetings of large pharmaceutical companies. The Northwest, also witnessed this kind of pervasive in-fighting. In 1990, San Francisco saw its ACT UP chapter split into two groups:

ACT UP/San Francisco and ACT UP/Golden Gate. The former focused on issues of politics and broader social issues, while the latter group was dedicated to issues regarding AIDS treatment. Like the schism in Portland, ACT UP/Golden Gate officials, argued that the move was motivated by an oppressive organization in which “anyone who disagreed...was shouted down, intimidated, and driven out of the group.”⁸⁶ According to an ACT UP press release, the tensions between the two groups escalated to the point of physical violence. Though ACT UP/Golden Gate argued that the other ACT UP/San Francisco had morphed into a militant organization operating from a “denialist” agenda that tried to refute the effectiveness of existing AIDS treatments, the refusal to aggressively address the systemic causes of AIDS further illustrates the tight parameters built around activist-constructed perceptions of queer identity.⁸⁷

In analyzing the tactics of activist groups like ACT UP and the divisive spirit that led to a fractured understanding of queerness, AIDS enabled the gay community to further engage in a homonormative discourse. Though ACT UP was initially a group that allowed people of all backgrounds to express their concerns and rally for social change, the increasingly exclusive practices of the group coupled with a narrowing of focus further reduced the space through which queerness could be explored. Although Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore argues that being queer involves “fighting racism, fighting classism, [and] fighting homophobia,” ACT UP established a queer identity that was rooted in advocating for greater access to drugs.⁸⁸ What is perhaps more troubling was the way in which women and people of color were excluded from participating in AIDS activism. Operating from an understanding that only those who had been infected or who shared the greatest risk of infection could confront the multifaceted challenges that AIDS presented, the voices of those on the outside were muffled and devalued by those with institutional power who had “perfect[ed] the tools of oppression and rationaliz[ed] it to its

extreme violence.”⁸⁹ Instead of reaching out and widening the scope and power of the queer community, AIDS activists, particularly gay men, adopted an isolationist framework through which they could have greater control over their identity.

Looking back on the fragmentation of AIDS activism, Larry Kramer lauds the many successes of ACT UP before bemoaning what he calls the “true climax of this chapter in our history.”⁹⁰ Just as ACT UP began to secure important victories and expose the many injustices that were leading to systemic oppression, ACT UP “self-destructed”, lapsing into a partisan, deeply conflicted, and weakened movement.⁹¹ The capacity to enact visionary, radical change was replaced by a self-consciousness and a growing need to police the borders of sexual identity.

*For a variety of reasons, men and women who had worked so lovingly and courageously hand in hand in the kind of cooperation I have never ever seen before turned upon each other and effectively put paid to the organization's usefulness. We succumbed to the very hateful tactics that we were pledged to eliminate. I've never been able to figure that one out either...I'm sure there were reasons, like going nuts from all that death around us. But the overriding result is that just as spreading the HIV virus can murder an unprotected partner, so we activists murdered this organization we'd come to love so much.*⁹²

In many ways, the attitudes of gay men in the wake of the AIDS exhibited the beginnings of what would ultimately become the gay assimilationist movement, the continued creation of an idealized gay existence grounded in the expectation of normative desires and experiences. While today’s “assimilationists” seek universal acceptance and equal rights grounded in the freedom to marry, have children, serve in the military, these desires were, to some extent, fostered in the

tenuous decades following AIDS deadly emergence in America. The free, expressive, and individualistic trademarks of earlier queer communities were replaced by the hardnosed pursuit of the queer standard, a norm imposed from the outside by a powerful cadre of elite gay men. Contrary to Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's understanding that "the radical potential of queer identity lies in remaining outside," many queer AIDS activists created an isolated club that built an identity contingent upon unquestioned conformation.⁹³ In the shadow of groups like ACT UP, there was little room to actualize Bernstein Sycamore's hope that the queer community might be able to participate in "challenging and dismantling the sickening culture that surrounds us."⁹⁴

Chapter Three: Death – Obituaries and the Sanitizing of Queer Identity

On February 5, 1987 *The New York Times* published an obituary celebrating the flamboyant life of Liberace, “whose glitzy costumes, giant candelabra, and extravagant showmanship made him almost as famous as his piano playing.”⁹⁵ Citing an elaborate mix of health complications that ultimately led to “cardiac arrest”, obituary writer James Barron would go on to recount the elaborate spectacle of Liberace’s life, delicately describing the garish outfits that defined the star’s over-the-top personality.⁹⁶ Out of his wardrobe came his “175 pound fur capes,” his “\$300,000 Norwegian blue-fox fur cape with a 16 foot train,” and a “sequined drum major’s uniform, complete with hot pants.”⁹⁷ The obituary chronicled the celebrity’s “road to riches, rhinestones, and Rolls-Royces”, all while leaving one important factor securely kept from the hands of public consumption.⁹⁸ Amidst the glamour of the 1,100-word obituary, Barron and *The New York Times* editorial board would bury any discussion of Liberace’s sexuality deep inside the closet. As the costumes and jewelry came tumbling out, the pianist’s sexual identity remained hidden from public view, left alongside the other skeletons that threatened to taint public impression of the multitalented star. Though the *Times* article was peppered with whispers suggesting that Liberace might have succumbed from the mysterious complications of acquired immune deficiency syndrome, Barron presents the deceased entertainer as the victim of a vicious smear campaign of the Las Vegas press.⁹⁹ Letting the accusations hang in the air, Barron quickly moves to chart the meteoric rise of an “unpretentious” son of a Wisconsin farm boy to a lavish performer bent on riches and excess. Though *People* magazine reported that “Liberace’s homosexuality had been one of the worst-kept secrets in show business,” The *Times*’ examination of Liberace’s death and its hesitancy to comment upon the validity of others’ AIDS claims highlights the fascinating and deeply troubling social milieu of AIDS related journalism

during the early years of the disease.¹⁰⁰ Through the careful construction of obituaries, mainstream American newspapers used death to help craft American understandings of queer identity and what it meant to be gay in the age of AIDS.

In memorializing the lives of Liberace and others who died of AIDS, *The New York Times* was not alone. Other national newspapers reserved space in their publications to comment on the life of American celebrities. Nevertheless, divergent policies regarding the necessity of reporting one's cause of death sent very different messages regarding queer identity and sexual politics. From the deaths of prominent figures like fashion designer Perry Ellis and right-wing activist Terry Dolan, divergent representations of death and disease helped to construct identity conflict among the rank and file of queer America.

For journalists like Randy Shilts of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the trends institutionalized and perfected by the *Times* and other mainstream press outlets was not a new phenomenon:

*Concealing an AIDS diagnosis in a death notice was nothing unusual in these times. In the first years of AIDS, obituaries disguised the reality...One had to read...closely to understand this, to look for the vague long illness or the odd reference to a pneumonia or skin cancer striking down someone in, say their mid thirties. People...didn't die of some homosexual disease, according to the death notices; they just wasted away after a "long illness."*¹⁰¹

In the midst of pervasive government inaction and a social crusade against the sexual exploits of gay men, many of these *New York Times* obituaries contributed to a culture of silence, forcing gay men to hide their disease and die in relative obscurity. Although *The New York*

Times would eventually report (a week later) that AIDS was, in fact, the cause behind Liberace's death and would go on to publish many obituaries listing AIDS as the cause of death, they continued to neglect the sexual identities of the deceased, failing to shine a light on the systemic problems that helped enable the rapid spread of AIDS.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, the queer-friendly *Bay Area Reporter*, seeking to counteract the injustice set forth by their journalistic counterparts, began using obituaries as a way of making AIDS visible and documenting the widespread destruction of the disease. By carefully chronicling the lives and deaths of gay men throughout the Castro and beyond, the *BAR* unwittingly began to contribute to the larger discourse surrounding the rise of a new AIDS-conscious gay identity. Within the obituary pages, a medium dominated by the interests of the living, the needs of grieving families to control public knowledge and perception, the accounts of disease, death, and loss reverberate with the wishes of community seeking to take back its ability to speak on its own behalf. In this process, however, the *Bay Area Reporter* began to create a unitary account of gay identity, devaluing, in many ways, the diversity of San Francisco's queer community. Death, as presented through the *BAR*, became the great equalizer, through which the story of one gay man became the story of all gay men. Similar to the creation and distribution of safe-sex campaigns, AIDS obituaries helped craft a stronger, yet unilateral, moniker of American queerness.

This chapter seeks to examine the ways in which gay American newspapers ultimately constructed conflicting illustrations of queer identity. Beginning with an analysis of the historical and contemporary cultural significance of obituaries in America, the paper then seeks to explore the intersection of queer theory and media studies, critically examining how obituaries aided in the construction of the idealized gay male. Though these ideals would take on different forms in

gay newspapers like the *Bay Area Reporter* and its mainstream counterparts like *The New York Times*, the chapter exhibits the role of the alternative, activist press in creating pervasive understanding of society and self.

Historically, obituaries have played a prominent and multifaceted role in the process that accompanies death. In the most traditional sense, obituaries are informative, alerting readers to the death of both prominent and everyday figures along with facts regarding the logistics of visitation and burial procedures. Before the advancement of the mass mediated, technological age, in which death notices are now shared through email and social media, concerned men and women relied upon published obituaries to keep them informed. Additionally, obituaries offer a space for grief and memorialization. Often written with the help of family and friends, the obituary gave those closest to the deceased the opportunity to reflect not only upon their loved one's death but also on their life as well. It is, as Janice Hume suggests, a communal activity through which life is celebrated and others are invited to share in and contribute to the commemoration.¹⁰²

In her investigation of *Obituaries in American Culture*, Janice Hume looks past the significance of obituaries for the individual or small, isolated collective. Instead, Hume looks at the wider cultural significance of obituaries, examining how they change and define society by offering a “fascinating glimpse into some of the cultural idiosyncrasies” that help to define American life.¹⁰³ In acting as a “record for public memory,” obituaries risk creating a picture of the world that fails to accord with their own ideas or expectations.¹⁰⁴ It is in this delicate balance that the obituary is able to “provide a glimpse into the complex relationship between individuals and their societies.”¹⁰⁵ Even though obituaries appear to be about one person, a documentation of their life's accomplishments, hobbies, and surviving family, Hume's argument suggests that the

death notice is really about society and the ways in which it imposes broader values and expectations upon the lives of individuals. “An obituary distills, publishes, and thus legitimizes” the broader cultural norms that pervade throughout one’s life.¹⁰⁶ These widely accepted conventions become internalized within the obituary and redistributed to larger society.

Within the presentation of AIDS-related deaths, Hume argues that these kind of obituaries “highlight[ed] era-ethical issues of virtue and exclusion”.¹⁰⁷ The newspaper became a place within which Americans waged a debate regarding whose death ultimately mattered and where they fit within the larger context of American citizenship. Whenever a newspaper chose to hide a particular cause of death from the deceased’s obituary, they made a value judgment regarding what was worthy of reporting to the larger community. Anything that did not confine to the strict parameters of an accepted national identity was left was susceptible to concealment. Many newspapers like *The New York Times* instituted policies regarding the publication of cause of death, asserting that the *Times* “will ask the survivors for the cause of death but won’t actively pursue it.”¹⁰⁸ These kinds of policies, according to Hume are significant in that “causes of death do more than merely chronicle: they also offer a glimpse into American attitudes about death.”¹⁰⁹ As far as AIDS is concerned, a general hesitancy to more aggressively pursue the truth is indicative of a cultural unease with difference.

For gay men in the time of AIDS, memory became an important marker of queer identity. A firm sense of the past became a means through which the gay community could make sense of the pervasive atmosphere of despair while subsequently framing a brighter more stable future. According to Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed periods of mass trauma “evoke a national propensity to forget episodes that do not accord with our self-image.”¹¹⁰ Remembering the dead became a way of strengthening queerness as a sense of self and the opportunity to

protect the community's place within the national consciousness. In the context of AIDS-related deaths "memory [was] produced from need."¹¹¹ As gay Americans continued to stumble along uncertain footing, queer obituaries began to demonstrate that "memories are not retrievals of an archived of an archived past but something more imaginative and more driven by preset needs."¹¹² During the age of AIDS, obituaries and the process of remembering the deceased was in fact imaginative, a carefully constructed and perfected formula that sought to build community, appropriate notions of queer space, and highlight a universal propensity towards activism.

As AIDS continued to make its violent spread across America, the gay community bemoaned the recasting of queer identity, suggesting that in veiling the cause of AIDS-related deaths behind euphemisms and inaccurate journalism, the mainstream press was devaluing the multifaceted experiences of their dying brothers. At the same time, the failure of these news outlets to talk about AIDS openly and freely was relegating the disease and those whose lives it had torn apart to the darkest corners of social isolation. Many journalists saw the obituaries as a means of shining light upon a too-long-neglected injustice and giving people with AIDS a chance to reclaim their identity. It was with this in mind that journalist Michelangelo Signorile praised the "small pockets of the gay community" for reporting the "full story" that was noticeably absent in newspapers and magazines across America.¹¹³ And yet, it appears as if even the newspapers of the gay community were not so much representing the full story as they were representing the story they wanted to represent – the story they *needed* to represent.

In light of widespread cultural criticism that situated AIDS as a "gay plaque" sent by God to destroy sinners and sodomites, the gay community was in danger of relinquishing control of the sexual liberation they had fought so hard for over the course of the preceding decades. Post

Stonewall, sex becomes a fixture of gay identity and promiscuity to many was not so much as the problem fueling AIDS but rather the solution and savior.¹¹⁴ Even amongst the gay community, there was great disagreement as to how gay men ought to conduct themselves. In the face of disease and certain death, some like Randy Shilts and Larry Kramer bemoaned the continued hedonism that circulated throughout the darkly lit rooms of gay bathhouses and the secluded bushes buried deep inside public parks. Bill Krause, an important gay leader in San Francisco politics, articulated these sentiments when he asked the gay community to recognize the repercussions of their behavior: “unsafe sex is – quite literally – killing us.”¹¹⁵ These kinds of ideas were not well-received within the gay community, ultimately leading to the expulsion of Kramer and other supposedly “anti-sex” activists from a number of prominent gay community organizations. Clearly the gay community was a fractured one, with a variety of perspectives threatening the united front that had helped secure an improved position with the American social landscape. These rifts went against some of the central components of gay brotherhood, and something needed to be done to prevent all-out institutional destruction. In many ways the gay press helped to temper the fire, with the obituary pages bringing people together towards a shared sense of self. Building upon the sentiments of Paul Connerton and his examination of *How Societies Remember*, “participants in any social order *must* presuppose a shared memory” in order to foster harmony and rally around common goals and ideals.¹¹⁶ The potential consequences of such policies are, nevertheless, palpable as “[one’s] uniqueness might be subsumed by the needs of values of the collective society,” in this case: queer society.¹¹⁷ By building a formulaic approach towards the reporting of death and regulating the identity of the gay male, *The Bay Area Reporter* helped to protect the social order and maintain a sense of collective identity for the whole queer movement, itself.

Without a doubt, these queer weeklies made AIDS visible, providing unprecedented coverage that helped disseminate important information regarding treatment, testing, government policy, social assistance, and emotional support. Douglas Crimp is correct when he argues that the gay press “is one of the few sources of up-to-date information on all aspects of AIDS.”¹¹⁸ Despite, however, the praise that scholars and activists frequently lauded upon gay weekly newspapers, the obituary pages of the gay press offer problematic representations of queerness, devolving into the construction of a queer utopia where difference melts away and is replaced by a normative experience shared by all gay men. The obituaries presented within the pages of the *Bay Area Reporter* go on to craft an idealized picture of queer identity, rooted within three specific principles that firmly pervade each death notice and create a common thread connecting one obituary to the next.

According to the logic represented throughout the obituaries of the *Bay Area Reporter*, the gay male was undeniably part of a larger community, fully immersed within the social network of the Castro District, while still maintaining familial relationships with parents, siblings, and cousins. No gay man died alone, but was survived by his brothers and sisters continuing to lead the seemingly endless fight for equality. Secondly, the gay male was a refugee, a transplant exiled from their hometowns and cities, seeking shelter among the blissfully gay streets of San Francisco. Death, according to the obituary, ushered in a nostalgic reconnection with one’s geographic roots. Finally, the obituaries of the *Bay Area Reporter* sought to present a universal picture of the gay advocate committed and engaged to the fight for equal rights, AIDS awareness, and a host of other justice campaigns. Pointed out by Dangerous Bedfellows, an activist collective of queer writers, just “as Cindy Patton and Douglas Crimp have observed, [AIDS] was a critical moment in which gay identity became queer activist.”¹¹⁹

One of the most common features visible throughout queer obituaries was the persistent emphasis on community. The recently deceased were frequently situated within the context of a larger group. Whether through family, friends, or social organizations, the *Bay Area Reporter* crafted the image of the gay male firmly rooted within a larger collective. Through its obituary page, the *Bay Area Reporter* was able to galvanize a community on the brink. As heated internal debates threatened to destroy to decades of progress that had led to the Stonewall riots and the ensuing sense of sexual liberation, the obituaries acted as a stimulating force, projecting the image of a united community engaged in a collective sense of mourning. The death displayed within the *BAR* death notices rarely situated death within the context of an individual. Instead, seemingly every passing sent shockwaves through the Castro, leaving a “deep and cherished impression on the hearts of all who knew him.”¹²⁰ Collectively, the *Bay Area Reporter* obituaries attempted to piece together a fragmented community. In the wake of furor over the potential closing of the city’s bathhouses or controversies regarding the ethicality and necessity of HIV screenings, obituaries were a nostalgic space that helped to rekindle the sense of unity that defined an AIDS-free San Francisco. Through the death notices, the city was able to once again be represented as an “outrageous mix of bohemian and gay radical avant garde, peppered with drug smugglers and the altogether militantly antipolitical,” a raucous place of hope, prosperity, and freedom from guilt and pain.¹²¹

In many ways the public archive of *Bay Area Reporter* obituaries is analogous in function to the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. First displayed in 1987, the quilt featured the names of nearly two thousand men who had perished from AIDS. Heralded as the “largest community art project in the world,” the quilt gave mourners and loved ones the opportunity to construct a three-foot by six-foot panel to commemorate the lives of those lost to AIDS.¹²² An incredibly

personal endeavor, the opportunity to incorporate personal items like hairbrushes, clothing and photographs transformed the quilt into a “powerful tool in absolving grief, easing regret, and facilitating redemption for those who make quilt panels.”¹²³ Likewise, the *BAR* obituaries enabled writers to purge their own guilt, a chance for disconnected families, former lovers, and long lost friends to feel a sense of acceptance and forgiveness from the dead.

Like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, The total emphasis on community offers a strong glimpse into the anxiety of an AIDS-ridden gay community and their families. Within the obituary, queer men were able to absolve the nagging fear of dying alone. Through the utopian pages of the *BAR*, no one had to face death on their own; instead, they inevitably “died peacefully in the loving presence of family and friends”¹²⁴ or “peacefully in the arms of [their] mother.”¹²⁵ Family quite frequently played a central role in the structure of AIDS-related obituaries as the death notices helped to reunite the deceased with long-absent family from cities across the nation. In 1994, the *BAR* reported that “upon hearing he was ill, [the] family,” of Jimmy Crecca, “and his childhood friend, Mario, came to San Francisco to be with him.”¹²⁶ Obituaries helped to chronicle the joyous rekindling of familial connections, presenting a touching scene of the family surrounding the deathbed, holding hands and crying, as they watched their son pass on to a place of greater peace and less suffering. Through the *Bay Area Reporter*, the story of AIDS were sanitized and made more palatable for a wider audience. The obituaries, however, failed to recognize the fractured family lives of people with AIDS. In the early years of the disease, the stigma associated with AIDS led many families to abandon their sons and daughters, hiding behind a shroud of ignorance and indifference while their children wasted to nothing sometimes thousands of miles away. Even when family were not present at the death, the obituary still serviced as a means of reconnection, valiantly proclaiming that the deceased was “survived by

his mother” or “preceded by his father.” In this sense the AIDS-related obituary attempted to become an apolitical forum for remembrance, in which the deceased and those who cared about them could pass on free from the highly political landscape of the AIDS crisis. The obituary, the last written testament of a person’s life, smoothed over the tenuous pieces of queer livelihood and created a warm and enduring bond to family, friends, and loved ones.

The queer obituaries of the *Bay Area Reporter* attempt to draw attention to the geographic diversity of San Francisco’s gay community. In nearly every obituary, the writer transports the reader back to the hometown of the deceased, making it appear as if their time in San Francisco was but a short layover in an otherwise long life. Like the issue exploited in the representation of family, friends, and community, these obituaries fail to navigate the social politics driving queer migration. Little attention is directed to the reality that many of these men left their childhood homes out of pain and fear, discouraged by a society that did not and could not accept their non-normative sexual identities. Along the utopian, rainbow-paved streets of San Francisco, unbridled pride and community consumed the loneliness and trauma of queer adolescence. In the *BAR*’s AIDS obituaries, the Castro District became Disneyland for queers: a place of temporary bliss and happiness. When the journey was over, however, patrons were quietly shuttled back to their points of origins, re-embedded within the realities that had often driven them to find an escape in the first place. It is this notion of “identity tourism” that Alyssa Cymene Howe discusses in her article “Queer Pilgrimage,” where she presents San Francisco as a mythic homeland for the gay community.¹²⁷ Howe expresses that this notion of homeland “offer[s] a symbolic refuge for believers” while “creating a sense of group identity” that helps to define practice within urban space.¹²⁸

Beginning in the 1940's San Francisco witnessed an exponential rise in the number of queer residents living within city limits. A concerted effort on behalf of the military to actively seek out and discharge homosexual service members brought a wave of gay men to the Bay Area. Of the 9,000 former soldiers discharged under the military's anti-gay campaign, many were processed out of San Francisco, leaving thousands by themselves, out of the job, and with nowhere to go.¹²⁹ In the wake of sexual liberation, a long held reputation as a center of radical, left-wing politics enticed activist-minded gay and lesbians to leave behind the repressive cities of their youth and seek out the opportunity to enact widespread social change. Since the years of the California Gold Rush, San Francisco was heralded as an alternative locale. As thousands of men left their loved ones in search of unfathomable wealth, the lack of a familial structures led to a supposed "irreverence for dominate notions of home and heteronormativity."¹³⁰ Sexual liberation seemed to spark a second Gold Rush, as men flocked to San Francisco no longer in search of wealth, but rather looking for a greater sense of self and self-worth. In the years to follow San Francisco was projected as an "imagined gay Mecca", a "crucible where identities [were] formed, transformed, and fixed."¹³¹ As portrayed within the obituaries of the *Bay Area Reporter* men traveled to San Francisco from all parts of the world. From Cuba to Johannesburg to the forests of Shiwano, Wisconsin and the ranches of Lincoln County, New Mexico, the *BAR* carefully documented the geographical trajectory of the recently deceased. While the hometown of the subject is usually mentioned in casual passing, a brief reference to a childhood home or previous residence, sometimes the obituary presses deeper, exploring the motivations pulling the individual towards the allure of San Francisco. In one of the death notices, the newspaper explained how for one young mathematics graduate student a "visit to San Francisco convinced him that coming out was more important than fractal geometry."¹³² Another obituary recounted

that even though Brett “Elvira” Lancaster “was born in Texas,” he eventually “moved to San Francisco, finding a city that could appreciate his *unique* personality.”¹³³ San Francisco helped young gay men realize a part of their identity in a way that other cities could not. These explorations of geographical space “enable[d] queer practices, identities, and subjectives” to manifest themselves within the lived experiences of the queer community.

One’s identity, however, could not solely and forever be rooted within the liberated landscape of the Bay Area. In their exploration of the migration of rural gay migrants, Alexis Annes and Meredith Renlin assert that “gay rural migration to urban spaces, which is key to identity formation, includes not only a departure to the city but also *a necessary return* to the country...to maintain...gay men’s understanding of themselves.”¹³⁴ According to these and other theorists, the fullness of queer identity was contingent upon the journey back to one’s home and the reconnection with the foundational roots of childhood. As exhibited in some obituaries, this idea became embodied within the purposeful wishes of the diseased. As the case of Stan Staggs exhibits, upon death there was often a yearning or expressed wish that “services were held [where] the dead spent the early years of [their] life.”¹³⁵ The obituaries often report that funeral and other memorial services were often held outside of San Francisco, the bodies reclaimed by the families and brought to a “proper” resting place closer to “home.” In the movement to an urban space like San Francisco early adolescent experiences would be difficult to shed, requiring a reconnection with the past, regardless of how painful the return might prove to be.

Amidst the pages of the *Bay Area Reporter* the deceased are almost always engaged members of the queer community, dedicated to a shared pursuit for equal rights and AIDS awareness. The obituary pages read like a directory for AIDS-related social service organizations, detailing the extensive involvement of the deceased and the lasting legacy they

leave behind. Upon their diagnosis, it as if those with AIDS are not allowed to die quietly. Instead, they must rise up against the illness and fight their diagnosis with fervor. The *BAR* obituaries develops a narrative in which AIDS becomes a universal rallying call. While the AIDS crisis did in fact serve as a moment of cultural and political activism, a time in which hundreds of groups around the world sprang up in anger and opposition, to assert that nearly every man who died in the late 1980s and early 1990s was in some way linked to one of these causes may inflate the reality of the situation. The notion of queer identity as an activist identity, nevertheless, is one that was projected by many during the AIDS crisis. Most notably, Douglas Crimp and Cindy Patton noted that queer activism was at the very root of queer identity.¹³⁶ One could not fully understand a sense of being gay without immersing oneself within the protest movements of the era. Likewise, the *Bay Area Reporter* seems to suggest that a “true” AIDS death was perhaps incomplete in the absence of some form of activist involvement. Whether it was through volunteering at Project Open Hand, opening an AIDS hospice for dying neighbors, or even just creating a moving service for new homeowners, the *Bay Area Reporter* struggled to distinguish between everyday happenings and profound acts of charity.¹³⁷ Everyone was an activist and everyone contributed to the larger network of hospitality and compassion.

Even as many activists like Douglas Crimp and Michelangelo Signorile praised queer newspapers for their honest and valiant role during the AIDS crisis, most AIDS obituaries within the *Bay Area Reporter* failed to accurately document cause of death. Utilizing the same strategies of mainstream press outlets, the queer newspapers also created a space in which AIDS could be blanketed behind a host of other medical complications: cancer, pneumonia, a long illness, a brief illness, lymphoma, a heart attack. Sometimes no cause

was mentioned at all. In these obituaries, the queer community contributed to what Castiglia and Reed term a “process of temporal isolation” as gay men and women began “distancing [them]selves from the supposedly excessive generational past in exchange for promises of ‘acceptance’ in mainstream institutions.”¹³⁸ In this light, queer-generated AIDS obituaries were not just about creating an identity palatable for gay readership. These obituaries were also about shaping a queer culture that could be understood and accepted by the straight community. The *Bay Area Reporter* bought into “theorizations of ‘queer space’ , which insist[ed] on the unmarked performativity of a stealthy public sexual life that leaves no traces...[and] render[s] unthinkable the idea that the spatial signs might transmit past experiences into the pleasure.”¹³⁹ It was okay to be gay, but to be gay and to overtly market one’s sexuality was still unacceptable for mainstream America. Even within the supposedly unregulated landscape of the queer newspaper, sexual liberation proved to be a lie.

It was these kinds of attitudes regarding queer AIDS-related deaths that ultimately undermined the very nature of the idea of a queer community. For all the talk regarding creativity, individuality, imagination, and non-conformity, AIDS obituaries (of all forms) led an “assault on gay memory,...offering ‘cleaned-up’ versions of the past as substitutes for more challenging memories of social struggle.”¹⁴⁰ No longer was the gay community an alternative community, it had morphed into an emblem of orthodoxy governed by the same principles that dominated the rest of the United States.

The AIDS crisis became an occasion for a powerful concentration of cultural forces that made (and continue to make) the syndrome an agent of amnesia, wiping out memories not only of

*everything that came before but of the remarkably vibrant and imaginative ways that gay communities responded to the catastrophe of illness and death and sought to memorialize our losses.*¹⁴¹

Though some may argue that the *BAR* was merely following the standard conventions of obituary writing, others suggest that circumstances surrounding the deaths warranted a greater editorial exploration. AIDS represented a point at which “just another obituary” and the “journalistic standards, confidentiality, and privacy” could no longer grasp the gravitas of the era.¹⁴²

Although the pattern does not hold for each of the thousands of *Bay Area Reporter* obituaries, the general trend that pervades throughout the newspaper suggests an effort on behalf of the publication to control the narrative of death in the age of AIDS. Within this tightly regulated space, those who have died of AIDS are reduced to a formula and repurposed for the mass consumption of a vulnerable readership. As the anxiety and confusion of AIDS, an illness that initially seemed to strike without warning and reason, consumed the minds of gay men in San Francisco and beyond, the simplicity and predictability of the obituaries may have helped to quell the uncertainty of the queer landscape. By visualizing death in such a moving and profound way, the San Francisco community could not only read and mourn over the individual stories of recently deceased friends, but they could also come to better understand themselves and their place within queer America. The mass publication of these obituaries removed a sense of randomness, constructing a much-needed aura of transparency to what had otherwise been a disease of silence and mystery. If death and AIDS were not things that could be controlled, it were at least things that could be repurposed and regulated.

Identity formation in the *Bay Area Reporter*, however, was not something that was merely performed at the individual level. At a macro level, it presented the opportunity for the queer community, as a whole, to gain a better sense of self. AIDS presented not only a public health crisis amongst gay men it also presented an identity crisis, and yet it was through projects like the *BAR* obituary page that such a crisis was allegedly resolved. While people believed they were mourning the loss of life, they were really celebrating the creation of a homogenous sense of self. “*Homo*,” writes Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, “now [stood] more for homogenous than any type of sexuality.”¹⁴³ The widespread death and the subsequent media coverage within the queer press helped to create a flattened understand of queerness as understandings of what it meant to be gay assimilated into a “deep, *horizontal* comradeship.”¹⁴⁴

In the end the failures of both the gay and mainstream press to fully explore the root causes of AIDS and instead supplant an idealized depiction of queerness suggests an unwillingness to truly understand the nature of death. The obituaries, whether in the *Bay Area Reporter* or *The New York Times*, were not meant for the dead, but rather for the living community, who must still grapple with the eminent and pervasive threat of disease. For readers of the *BAR*, obituaries helped to allay fear and give a sense of security to what otherwise proved to be a horrific assault upon personal identity. For readers of *The New York Times*, obituaries became not only a place of spectacle but also an inconsistent and inaccurate sharing of the queer experience.

The impact of AIDS-related obituaries extends far beyond the parameters of 1980s America. Today, the effects of AIDS-era social policies continue to shape the queer experiences of a new generation of gay men. This strategic structuring of the presentation of death created a simplified understanding of queerness and a glossing-over of a much-needed discourse regarding

the costs and consequences of AIDS. Instead of capitalizing upon the voices of the dead, using their experiences to fight for greater equity and autonomy within the political system, the gay community instead resorted to identity politics. In their own ways, the *Bay Area Reporter* and *The New York Times* unleashed “sweeping calls to unremember... the generation hardest hit by the onset of AIDS,” by placing the needs of the living over the needs of the deceased.¹⁴⁵ This process, according to Castiglia and Reed, succeed in “cutting that generation of younger gays and lesbians who might continue the visionary work undertaken in the late 1960s and 1970s.”¹⁴⁶ Through the invocation of this kind of “de-generation,” contemporary understanding of queer history has been forever changed by media-sponsored attitudes regarding death and dying.¹⁴⁷

Conclusion

By the end of the century, AIDS would spread to all 50 states, taking the lives of over half a million Americans. Although the disease would strike people of all genders, races, ages, and sexual orientations, the gay community and gay men, in particular, would feel a disproportionate amount of the crisis's impact. In the wake of their profound loss, the queer community would lead the charge for change, pressing the Government to adequately address the needs of the vulnerable populations that had been stricken by the reality of AIDS. Between pushing for expedited drug-trials and calling for new non-discriminatory policies within the workplace, the efforts of AIDS activists spread across America, their emotional voices reverberating on a national level. Despite a government that was unwilling to acknowledge the scope of the disease and its potential impact and groups like Act Up, Queer Nation, and other politically engaged groups waged a militant battle, ultimately raising awareness and helping to shift national conscious. What many initially perceived to be a "gay plague," the result of uncontrolled lust, slowly but surely became a source of empathy from which the gay community began to feel the support of dominant, heteronormative America.

Given its history as a locus of liberal politics and freethinking individuality, the Northwestern United States – stretching from San Francisco to the mouth of Seattle's Puget Sound – proved to embody the same spirit of activism that raged in the streets of Manhattan. Organizations like Portland's Cascade AIDS Project, Seattle's Gay Men's Health Clinic, and San Francisco's Gay weekly, the Bay Area Reporter brought new attention to the disease, advocating for the prevention of AIDS while fighting passionately for the needs of the inflicted and honoring the lives and dignities of the dead. But just like their Eastern contemporaries, these initiatives did more than raise awareness of the disease and magnify its national profile. In

crafting these very targeted campaigns, the organizations constructed a normative construction of queerness aimed at restoring a locus of control to a community caught within the cross hairs of political, social, and moral outrage. Through graphic, sensationalized imagery groups like CAP presented the idealized gay figure: beautiful, committed to his sexual identity, On the street groups such as ACT UP further narrowed the parameters of queerness focusing solely on a particular sexual orientation rooted in direct action. And buried within the pages of gay periodicals, obituaries spoke on behalf of the dead, all-too-often projecting a particular image of peace and harmony, divesting from the systemic sexual politics that helped to the disease to spread without pause.

In March of 2013, the Supreme Court of the United States began hearing arguments I two of the largest gay-rights cases to ever be debated amongst the American high court. One case challenged the constitutionality of Proposition 8, a California initiative the banned gay marriage within the United States. The other case sought to strike down the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, a law that defined a marriage as a union strictly between a man and a woman. As a result the thousands of marriages that had been executed in states where gay marriage was legal under the law were not recognized by the federal government and not eligible for the same kinds of rights bestowed upon heterosexual couples. This atmosphere was bolstered by an evolving American consciousness in which the majority of Americans began to support gay marriage and politicians from both parties began coming out in favor of same-sex marriage. With the first sitting President to suggest that gay men and women should be granted the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts in office and the earlier previous political victories like the lifting of the ban of openly gay and lesbian service members, Queer America stood at an inflection point

of change; a far cry from the rancor towards and alienation of gays that dominated national thought less than two decades earlier.

These actual and potential legislative victories are real-world illustrations of what some refer to today as “the new normal,” a new shift in conventional understandings of queer identity in which the queer community rallied together as one united bloc and rallied for change and equality. In the process, gay men and women proved themselves capable of using outside pressure to motivate internal change. Subsequently, however, these so-called successes do not exist without controversy as some scholars believe that the projection of universal values upon all gay men and women, the widespread assumption that marriage, adoption, and military service are the ultimate markers of unquestionable equality, are mere indicators of a hegemonic homonormativity. These dissenters, led by groups like Mattilada Bernstein Sycamore’s Gay Shame believe that such aspirations do little more than acquiesce to the capitalist intentions of authoritarian America. In the process, the multifaceted and expressive creativity was stifled by the continued dominance of mainstream America.

In much of the same way the pressures of AIDS led to a similar response in which the queer community sought to construct a normative experience common amongst all who identified as gay. Led primarily by gay men, the focus on the physical embodiment of masculinity, the pursuit of sexual satisfaction, and shared communal ideals helped to galvanize a community under assault. Typical of other activist movements, the fervent emotions that often dominated these kinds of initiatives were aimed at gaining previously withheld recognition and giving queer men (and sometimes women) the opportunity to be directly engaged with political and social discourse. Along the way, these activists not only created a space through which those living with AIDS could receive the necessary treatment and support, but they also created

representations of identity that carried long-standing consequences. Today's queer activists, particularly those advocating for marriage equality and "equal rights", have in many ways evolved from their AIDS-focused brothers and sisters.

This thesis was written with the gift (and curse) of hindsight. As a twenty-two year gay old college student, I live in a much different world than I would if I had been born just fifteen years earlier. The echoes of AIDS continue to linger, and yet many Americans prefer to believe that we live in a post-AIDS world. In some respects these people are right. Advancements in antiretroviral treatments have helped to extend the lives of those living with HIV. AIDS is, as many are quick to point out, no longer a death sentence. Rather, today people with AIDS can live long, successful lives, fulfilling the dreams that early AIDS activists tirelessly worked towards. And yet, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which AIDS continues to affect the lives of all people: men and women, gay and straight. This thesis is written with this knowledge in mind, recognition of the progress that came only with the fervent dedication of brave men and women willing to fight at all costs to bring attention to a brutal disease. At the same time, however, this project reacts with a critical eye, not seeking to cast judgment or scorn upon the behavior of gay men but rather to expose the multitude of ways in which the reactionary behavior of gay men repurposed queer identity to meet the needs of a particular generation. Though my writing may challenge the ardent dedication to sexual pleasure it is only to question how this behavior altered gay consciousness and guided the course of AIDS activism.

Ultimately, I am led to wonder whether or not this symbiotic collusion between activism and identity is empowering or problematic. As previously suggested, the creation of one universal representation is dangerous in the way it presupposes that all communities members subscribe to the same beliefs and are willing to participate and engage themselves within this

new dominant structure. At the same time, however, the activist initiatives that followed in the wake of AIDS ultimately proved successful. For all their talk of sex and bodily perfection, they undoubtedly contributed to the social, scientific, and political advancements that helped fight against the unrestrained cruelty of the disease. Did these successes make up for the identity politics that raged and continue to rage beneath the surface. Whatever the answer, the tension between protest and the creation of identity raises important questions of access and agency. Who ultimately benefits from these kind of initiatives and who is excluded in the process. In the case of AIDS, women and people of color were continuously pushed to the background, their voices stifled by a more dominant discussion being waged by a seemingly more powerful group choosing to speak on behalf of all.

In his 1995 collection of short stories, *Three Hand Jax and Other Spells*, prominent AIDS activist Stan Henry reflected on the nature of AIDS activism and the physical and emotional toll it took upon those involved. Exhausted after years of leading Seattle's AIDS support group, Henry lamented the idea that "we think we can make a dying person's last day better by knocking ourselves out. We drain ourselves of the very stuff that keeps us going, the stuff that gives us something to give to somebody at all." For Henry, advocating for the AIDS community was one of the greatest challenges that existed ultimately leading to a kind of neurosis where the dead began to run together, the lines of lost blurred by an atmosphere of desensitization. "The hardest thing to learn with this sickness shit," Henry wrote, "was were one person's life ends and other begins." In the process of assisting those with AIDS, everyone became lumped into one lump group. In this one quote, Henry gets to the heart of identity politics in the age of AIDS. As the disease unfurled its wrath upon the inflicted, no one was truly unaffected. The living and the

dead were linked through the creative process of identity construction and the development of self-awareness.

Activism creates identity. Ultimately this is perhaps the most pervasive theme of this thesis, an attempt to explore how the protest initiatives of engaged Americans have costs that extend far beyond a contribution to social or legislative policy. No matter the intentions of a particular campaign, as groups rally together under one banner the ways in which these people begin to conceptualize themselves, others, and their respective places within the world are undoubtedly shaped, developed, and challenged. This is not a phenomenon that is unique only to queer activists. Civil Rights protestors of the 1950s and 1960s certainly helped to begin to craft a more equitable society and expand the opportunities available for African Americans. Along the way, however, these activists contributed to a larger discussion regarding what it meant to be black in America. Throughout its many waves, feminism as an activist culture helped to elevate the position of women in the workforce while challenging long-held conventions regarding a woman's place in and out of the home. Nevertheless, the feminism translated into institutional reform created a portrait of the modern American women. And in response to AIDS, queer activism had similar consequences as one's sexuality became subjected to a normative experience. Though the intentions of these movements may have never been to narrow the capacity to develop individual identity, the nature of activism, itself, helped to ultimately solidify universal understandings of self and society.

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