

LIFE DURING WARTIME: EMOTIONS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACT UP¹

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One member of the confrontational, street AIDS activist movement, ACT UP,² told me when I interviewed him that he could hardly wait for each week's ACT UP/New York meeting (Barr 2002). Another ACT UP/New York member recalled that at one point, he eagerly went to an ACT UP meeting every night of the week (Bordowitz 2002). Their comments jolted me into remembering that for years, I too had looked forward to the many ACT UP/Chicago meetings that I attended weekly, even though I also remember them as long and exhausting, and sometimes quite contentious. I note this eagerness about going to *meetings*—perhaps a surprising sentiment for those of us who constantly feel overextended—because it might provide us with some understanding of how social movements sustain themselves for a time. Movement sustainability is seldom discussed in the social movement literature, but it's a question that should intrigue scholars, particularly those who employ an assumption of rational actors, since they might want to investigate why people continue to participate when they could easily take that proverbial “free ride” and reap the benefits of others' work. The few scholars who have explored the question of sustainability (Rupp and Taylor 1987; Taylor 1989; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Whittier 1995) dispute the assumptions that underlie the free-rider problem—that people are highly autonomous and individualized utility maximizers—and emphasize the importance of such factors as collective identity formation and activist culture and communities. Their findings provide a good base for what I want to do in this article which is to argue for the vital role that emotions and emotional processes play in sustaining social movements over time. Factors like a collective identity or an activist community help to sustain movements only because of the strong emotions that imbue and that are evoked by that collective identity or activist community. To enhance our understanding of movement sustainability, then, requires an exploration of processes like the generation of emotions and emotion cultures (Gordon 1989) within movements, and an analysis of how those processes affect participants' attitudes about themselves and one another, about society, and about what is politically desirable, possible, and necessary.

In this article, I draw from my research on ACT UP—a movement that grew out of lesbian and gay communities in the United States³—to explore this question of movement

¹ I feel a deep gratitude towards all of my co-conspirators—dead and alive—in ACT UP/Chicago. Jeff Edwards and Laurie Palmer gave me particularly useful comments. I would also like to thank the Fellows from the Mellon/CASBS Seminar on Contentious Politics. All errors, of course, are mine.

² I use the name ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) to refer to the national street AIDS activist movement even though it was neither the first nor the only AIDS activist group to take to the streets. Some earlier street AIDS activist organizations such as Citizens for Medical Justice (in San Francisco), Lavender Hill Mob (in New York) and DAGMAR (in Chicago) eventually joined with other individuals and renamed themselves ACT UP; some street AIDS activist groups, like OUT in Washington, D.C., affiliated with ACT UP on a national level but never adopted the name.

³ Naming the members of a social group is always troublesome. When ACT UP emerged, the dominant term used to describe those involved and the communities out of which the movement emerged—“lesbian and gay”—was exclusionary, obscuring the participation of bisexuals, transgender folks, and other sexual and gender minorities; I reluctantly continue to use that phrase here, because of its historical usage and the anachronism of more inclusive

sustainability. Emotions figure centrally in my account in two ways. First, I argue that the *emotion work* of social movements—largely ignored by movement scholars—is vital to movement development and persistence over time. After exploring the political and emotional environment that street AIDS activists faced, I investigate the ways they worked—sometimes consciously but often less purposively—to nourish and extend an *emotional common sense* that was both amenable to their brand of confrontational activism and responsive to the psychic conflicts that lesbians and gay men were experiencing.⁴ I argue that ACT UP's success in bolstering this emotional common sense and its concomitant politics helped the movement flourish into the 1990s. Second, I explore the strong emotions that participants felt amidst the action, toward one another as well as about the significance of their activism, showing how these also contributed to ACT UP's sustainability.⁵

ACT UP'S CONTEXT

Gay men, lesbians, and other sexual and gender outlaws began to engage in confrontational street AIDS activism in mid-1986. After the October 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, the street AIDS activist movement took off. Dozens of ACT UP chapters sprouted up across the United States.⁶ Thousands of lesbians, gay men, and other sexual and gender outlaws embraced the new militance and joined the movement. Many other lesbian and gay individuals and institutions, even those that were more establishment-oriented, articulated support for ACT UP and its brand of confrontational street activism; lesbian and gay politicians, directors of AIDS service organizations (ASOs), traditional lesbian and gay activists, newspaper editors praised the new militance, and many even joined in the action (Gould 2000: ch. 5). ACT UP was of course sometimes challenged by other lesbians and gay men, even in its early years; still, the national street AIDS activist movement flourished from 1987 through the early 1990s.

The question of movement sustainability is particularly pertinent in the case of ACT UP. The turn to angry, confrontational street activism was in striking contrast to earlier AIDS activism that had focused primarily on care taking and service provision along with lobbying. ACT UP greatly extended the repertoire by engaging in angry protests, disruptions, civil disobedience, die-ins, and other confrontational actions designed to force the government, scientific-medical establishment, pharmaceutical corporations, media, and society at large to address the AIDS epidemic. This new embrace of angry, oppositional, street activism was

terms. In 1990 the potentially more inclusive “queer” arose as a political challenge to “lesbian and gay.” I discuss ACT UP's role in the birth of “queer” below.

⁴ I use the term “emotional common sense” (Reddy 2000) to indicate the emotions that have become commonplace and axiomatic among a specific social group in a given context. That is not to say, however, that an emotional common sense is undisputed and uniformly held or experienced by members of that group; to the contrary, it is likely to be contested by some members of the group even as it is the taken-for-granted for many or most.

⁵ The last few years have witnessed what might be called an “emotional turn” in the study of social movements. See Aminzade and McAdam (2001), Goodwin (1997), Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2000; 2001), Gould (2000), Groves (1995), Jasper (1997, 1998), Morgen (1983, 1995), Taylor (1995, 1996), and Taylor and Whittier (1995). This literature, a challenge to the prevailing models in the field that employ a soft rational actor model, counters many misperceptions about emotions. Drawing from evidence that shows emotions and reason to be inseparably intertwined, each necessary to the other, this literature disputes the equation of emotionality with irrationality as well as the idea that emotions interfere with reason. It also argues against biological and psychological reductionist views of emotions by pointing to their social and cultural components.

⁶ There were more than eighty ACT UP chapters in the U.S. (Halcli 1999; ACT UP/New York n.d.).

remarkable for a number of reasons. As is true for other U.S. social movements, ACT UP confronted a mainstream emotion culture that typically disparages angry people, seeing anger as chaotic, impulsive, and irrational, and thus “something which a mature person ideally can or should transcend” (Lutz 1986: 180). Anger takes on an especially negative cast when expressed by people marked as “other” by mainstream society, particularly when large numbers of such people are purposefully taking to the streets and breaking the law in order to disrupt “business as usual.” ACT UP also confronted an American ideology of democracy that locates legitimate political activity in the voting booth and in the halls of legislatures and maligns street activism as unnecessary and extreme, a threat to social order. As well, ACT UP existed in a moment when other progressive oppositional movements had disappeared or were in quick decline. Given this context, ACT UP had to make angry street activism a normative and legitimate route for lesbians and gay men.

ACT UP’s task was complicated even further by the existence of what I call *ambivalence* among lesbians and gay men about their homosexuality and about dominant U.S. society.⁷ This contradictory constellation of emotions—simultaneous self-love and self-doubt, along with attraction toward and repulsion from dominant society—affects lesbian and gay politics. How do you confront a society when you want to be part of it but you simultaneously reject it? How do you make demands of state and society when you simultaneously feel proud *and* ashamed of your homosexual identity and practices?

Let me pause here to say something about how emotional language can help people navigate such intense ambivalence. William Reddy (1997) argues that emotional utterances, what he calls emotives, *alter* the feelings to which they always imperfectly refer. Language cannot adequately represent or characterize a subjective feeling state; when an emotive is articulated (e.g., “I’m angry”), it is an attempt to name and categorize a subjective feeling state, making legible and verbal what was previously nonverbal, but it does so by necessarily eliding the gap between language and feelings. In the process, some components of one’s feelings fail to be brought into the verbal realm; they might be repressed, or displaced, or simply never made meaningful through language. That which goes unnamed, that excess, in a sense drops out, and a feeling is thereby made understandable by being named. The emotive, purporting to *describe* a feeling, enacts that slippage and thereby actually *alters* the feeling to which it refers (Reddy 2000: 117). Emotives, then, affect how people feel. A community’s emotional rules produce normative emotives that, repeated over time, can affect an intense ambivalence by magnifying one of the contradictory feelings and submerging the other.

I have argued elsewhere that a pervasive ambivalence among lesbians and gay men about self and society, and attempts to resolve it, affected lesbian and gay responses to AIDS in the early and mid-1980s. In those early years, uncertainty, confusion, and fear reigned, and lesbian and gay communities were utterly overwhelmed by AIDS; there was little time for anything more than care-taking. In the face of government inaction and with the hope of preserving their besieged communities, early AIDS activists engaged in the vital work of creating the earliest

⁷ This ambivalence about self and society derives from, and is reinforced by, lesbians’ and gay men’s marginalized positions in a heterosexist society. The composition and extent of ambivalent feelings shift through time and likely vary given individuals’ different positions in hierarchies of race, class, and gender as well as their different personal experiences. Even so, I contend that the marginalized status of all lesbians and gay men in a heterosexist society structures a constellation of contradictory emotions that is hard to avoid. See Gould (2000) for a theorization of ambivalence and its role in lesbian and gay politics.

ASOs to care for their loved ones. Their actions were driven by necessity and were underpinned by feelings of love, self-respect, and gay pride.

But AIDS greatly magnified the stigma of homosexuality, intensifying lesbians' and gay men's shame about their sexual practices and anxieties about social rejection, and those emotions also helped to shape lesbian and gay responses to AIDS in the first years of the epidemic. A close reading of hundreds of news articles, op-eds, and letters-to-the-editor about AIDS in local and national lesbian and gay newspapers during the early and mid-1980s shows that lesbian and gay public discourses about AIDS and about how gay communities and the government should respond to AIDS were typically saturated with mixed emotions about lesbian and gay selves in relation to dominant society.⁸ There was anxiety about "owning" AIDS, about the potential political ramifications of the perception that AIDS was a gay disease, about the role of gay male sexual practices and the "fast gay lifestyle" in the epidemic. There were widespread articulations and evocations of emotions like shame about gay male sexual practices, fear of social rejection, and desire for social acceptance. Simultaneously there were expressions of pride about lesbian and gay communities' responsible efforts to address the AIDS crisis through care-taking and service provision. Expressions of anger toward the government were infrequent and when they did occur, they were often submerged, dismissed, or papered over. Analysis of this evidence, sometimes requiring reading between the lines or against the grain, can give us a sense of the emotional tenor of the times. But these normative emotives, repeatedly articulated or evoked in public forums like the pages of newspapers, are more than evidence of what people were feeling; they actually played a role in shaping those feelings by magnifying those emotions that were named or evoked and effectively suppressing those that remained unspoken. The pervasive emotives in this period affected how lesbians and gay men felt about AIDS by bolstering feelings of shame, fear of rejection, desire for social acceptance, and pride in their efforts to fight AIDS, and suppressing feelings of anger toward the government. These normative emotives encouraged AIDS activists to respond to the epidemic with activism that was sometimes oppositional but more often accommodating, that pointed toward the government's failings but also squelched a growing anger. By helping to redirect growing anger and defiance, the normative emotives reinforced lesbian and gay commitment to community service provision and lobbying and discouraged activism that could potentially threaten lesbians' and gay men's social standing.

Strengthening this particular resolution to lesbian and gay ambivalence and its concomitant politics was the fact that most lesbian and gay rights activists had spurned militance by the mid-1970s. As occurred with other radical movements in the increasingly conservative 1970s, gay rights activists decisively shifted the movement's agenda away from liberation, which encompassed a vision of broad social transformation, and instead sought "gay inclusion into the system as it stood, with only the adjustments necessary to ensure equal treatment" for gay men and lesbians (D'Emilio 1992: 247). ACT UP, then, marked a return to and extension of gay liberation tactics and politics that had been rejected by gay rights activists in the mid-1970s. Given the unfavorable emotional and political norms that prevailed both within mainstream U.S. society and in lesbian and gay communities, how was ACT UP able to attract so many

⁸ For the period 1981-1987, the newspapers I looked at included: every issue of the two gay publications with the largest national circulation at the time, the *New York Native* and the *Advocate*; every issue of the Chicago gay papers (*Gay Life* until it ceased publishing in 1986 and *Windy City Times* from its first issue in 1985); every issue from 1983-1987 in the *Bay Area Reporter* and *The Sentinel* in San Francisco; and selected issues of the nationally-circulated *Gay Community News*. See Gould (2000: Ch. 3; 2001) for a detailed account of how lesbian and gay ambivalence, and efforts to resolve it, shaped lesbian and gay responses to AIDS during this period.

participants and to garner wide support within lesbian and gay communities for its angry, confrontational street activism?

I have argued elsewhere that confrontational AIDS activism emerged in mid-1986 in large part as a result of a conjuncture of events and phenomena that provoked a profound shift in the prevailing constellation of emotions and its concomitant politics in lesbian and gay communities, arousing and bolstering anger, indignation, and pride about both gay difference and defiant street activism, while suppressing shame and fear of social rejection (Gould 2000; 2001). This emergent emotional and political common sense—a new resolution to lesbian and gay ambivalence—provided fertile ground for confrontational AIDS activists. But given the contradictory nature of ambivalent feelings, any resolution is necessarily precarious, always at risk of displacement by the ostracized emotions. Street AIDS activists' bolstering of gay pride, anger, and the desire to confront society's homophobic response to AIDS could have been challenged and supplanted by rhetoric that elicited gay shame, self-doubt, fear of rejection, and a desire for social acceptance. A great deal of ACT UP's work, then, was to explicate, embody, augment, and extend the newly emerging emotional common sense and explicitly link it to confrontational street activism.

ACT UP AND A NEW EMOTIONAL COMMON SENSE

What was this emotion work like and how did it work? How did ACT UP respond to the emotion culture that had until recently prevailed in lesbian and gay communities and to the one that still prevailed in larger society? How did ACT UP augment and amplify the emergent emotional common sense with its concomitant politics? I will begin to answer these questions with an analysis of an early ACT UP/New York leaflet.

The first national AIDS protest occurred on June 1, 1987 in Washington, D.C. ACT UP and other lesbian and gay groups and individuals (including elected officials and directors of community organizations) targeted the Reagan administration for its failure to address the AIDS crisis. ACT UP/NY's flier advertising the protest action buttressed the newly emerging emotional common sense, expressing emotions that differed markedly from those that had previously prevailed in lesbian and gay communities. Text in bold declared,

WE ARE ANGRY:

- At the Government's policy of malignant neglect
- At the irresponsible inaction of this president
- At the shameful indifference of our elected representatives
- At the criminal hoarding of appropriated funds by government agencies

They Waste Our Money, Our Time, Our Lives!

TAKE ONE DAY OFF FROM WORK...TURN RAGE INTO ACTION!

—ACT UP/New York 1987, emphases in original

Facts and demands on the leaflet laid bare the realities of the AIDS crisis and explicated what ACT UP saw as the government's role in the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Overall, the

leaflet was an angry condemnation of the government and an invitation to lesbians and gay men to turn what was deemed to be their understandable and appropriate “rage” into “action.”

The emotions expressed and evoked in this leaflet and the way they were explicitly linked to confrontational AIDS activism are striking if we consider the emotions and AIDS politics that prevailed in lesbian and gay communities in the early 1980s.⁹ At that time, lesbians and gay men frequently submerged expressions of anger toward the government or delinked angry criticism from confrontational action. In contrast, ACT UP’s leaflet boldly asserted anger and explicitly joined that emotion to a call for confrontational protest. With the phrases “we are angry” and “turn rage into action” in all caps and bold type, ACT UP acknowledged and elicited anger, while offering its brand of street activism as the appropriate and necessary response. Earlier, leaders in lesbian and gay communities often articulated and elicited faith in the government’s goodwill; the ACT UP leaflet condemned the government’s inaction and encouraged others to do so as well. In the earliest years of the epidemic, lesbians and gay men frequently expressed and evoked shame about gay male sexuality and its alleged role in the epidemic; ACT UP now placed the shame at the doorstep of government indifference and negligence. Lesbians and gay men previously invoked the trope of responsibility as a proud acknowledgement of the community’s efforts to address the crisis in the face of no outside help; ACT UP’s leaflet resignified the term, pointing to government *ir*responsibility as a central cause of the AIDS crisis and suggesting that activism targeting the government was the new site of lesbian and gay responsibility.

As this (and almost every other) ACT UP leaflet reveals, part of the work of a social movement is emotional. To attract and retain participants and to pursue the movement’s agenda, activists continually need to mobilize emotions that readily articulate with the movement’s political tactics and objectives, and suppress those that counter the movement’s emotional and political common sense. Although terms like “mobilize,” “counter,” and “emotion work” might suggest conscious, purposive behavior, I want to emphasize that much of a movement’s emotion work is non-strategic and unpremeditated. Where other tasks of a movement like mobilizing resources and organizing actions are deliberate and consciously undertaken, emotion work is often a less-than-fully conscious component of a movement’s various activities. That is, the mobilization of emotions is often an *effect* of a movement’s activities, but not necessarily the *intention* lying behind them.

Grief into Anger

ACT UP’s response to the enormous grief pervading lesbian and gay communities affords an opportunity to analyze how people’s emotions, and their expression of them, can affect movement sustainability. It also provides a useful entry point for exploring in greater depth the question of ACT UP’s ability to buttress and extend the emerging emotional common sense and its concomitant politics among lesbians, gay men, and other sexual and gender outlaws.

Grief has been a constant presence throughout the AIDS epidemic. Beginning in 1983, lesbians and gay men began to hold candlelight memorial vigils to honor those who had died from AIDS-related complications. The vigils were typically somber affairs that provided a space for public expression of the intense grief that was wracking lesbian and gay communities across the country as the death toll continued to mount. The Names Project Memorial Quilt—containing

⁹ Evidence supporting these claims about earlier responses to AIDS is in Gould (2000: Chapter 3).

thousands of three feet by six feet patches that commemorate people who have died from AIDS-related complications—has provided lesbians and gay men a similar opportunity. ACT UP offered an alternative route for grief: confrontational AIDS activism.¹⁰

Consider the following example. Street AIDS activists from across the country converged in Washington, D.C. the weekend of October 10-11, 1988 for an action targeting the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). That same weekend, the Names Project Quilt was displayed on the Mall. As part of its mobilization for the FDA action, ACT UP passed out a leaflet at the Quilt showing. One side blared: “SHOW YOUR *ANGER* TO THE PEOPLE WHO HELPED MAKE THE QUILT POSSIBLE: OUR *GOVERNMENT*.” Text on the reverse read:

The Quilt helps us remember our lovers, relatives, and friends who have died during the past eight years. These people have died from a virus. But they have been killed by our government’s neglect and inaction....More than 40,000 people have died from AIDS....Before this Quilt grows any larger, turn your grief into anger. Turn anger into action. TURN THE POWER OF THE QUILT INTO ACTION. (ACT UP/NY 1988, emphases theirs).

A number of things are evident in this leaflet. ACT UP was acknowledging lesbian and gay grief about the unceasing deaths of people with AIDS. The leaflet met lesbians and gay men where they were and then attempted to transport them to another place, from the Quilt and the deeply felt grief manifest there, to a demonstration at the FDA where that grief could be expressed in angry, confrontational activism. The ACT UP leaflet located the source of lesbian and gay grief at the government’s murderous doorstep, and then suggested the appropriate response: activism targeting the government. ACT UP’s logic was clear: if you feel grief, as we all do, then you should also feel anger towards those who have caused you to feel grief; and if you feel anger, you should join us in confrontational activism to fight those who are responsible for turning a public health issue into the AIDS crisis. Rather than regarding the Quilt as a memorial to gay men and others who had died, ACT UP suggested it be viewed as a chronicle of *murder* that necessitated a forceful activist response. In beginning with an uncontested and prevalent emotion—grief—and then linking that grief to anger—a more disreputable emotion—ACT UP legitimized anger. ACT UP’s logic both acknowledged, and offered a resolution to, lesbian and gay ambivalence about self and society: given our grief and under these dire circumstances where we and our loved ones are being murdered by our government, anger and confrontational activism targeting state and society are legitimate, justifiable, rational, righteous, and necessary. ACT UP offered an emotional and political sensibility that simultaneously acknowledged, evoked, endorsed, and bolstered lesbians’ and gay men’s anger.

But, why and how did this emotion work effectively mobilize lesbians’ and gay men’s anger and inspire participation in street AIDS activism? Notwithstanding my earlier caution about ascribing intent to a movement’s emotion work, this ACT UP leaflet, and others like it, involved a strategic mobilization of emotions. Street AIDS activists seemed intent on deploying grief in a manner that established a necessary link between that devastating emotion and angry, confrontational activism. Activists appear to have appreciated an emotional imperative: to generate support for their street activism, they had to challenge how lesbians and gay men were understanding and feeling about the epidemic. One way they did so was by evoking and authorizing emotions like anger. But again, how and why did it work? People do not become

¹⁰ Crimp (1989) has written an exquisite analysis of the place of mourning in ACT UP’s militancy.

angry and take to the streets because they are told to. ACT UP's mobilization of anger and tethering of anger to street activism might have fallen flat, unable to mobilize individuals, not to mention sustain a movement. To understand its success requires that we move beyond a strategic view of emotions and focus as well on the force of emotions.

Following Reddy's argument about emotives, I would posit that ACT UP's emotion work succeeded because it effectively altered how lesbians, gay men, and other queers were actually feeling. Like other feelings, grief is a complicated constellation of emotions that includes sadness, loss, depression, fear, anger, and probably a host of other emotions. ACT UP's repeated emotional expressions elevated one of these emotions—anger—and submerged the others; reiterated over time and in the context of the growing AIDS crisis and government inaction, ACT UP's grief/anger/action nexus became commonsensical to many lesbians and gay men. The evidence also demonstrates that a movement's emotion work is not always linguistic, suggesting the need for an extension of Reddy. Sometimes people experience feelings that, rather than becoming legible by being named, become legible, and motivating, through a more bodily experience, such as engaging in a ritual or a protest action, for example. ACT UP/NY member Avram Finkelstein credited his engagement in activism with producing that type of emotional transformation in himself:

Eleven years ago, I met my soulmate and fell madly in love.... Four years later, he was dead.... My landscape was flattened by loss. When the dust finally cleared, two things were apparent to me: I was not alone, and something—besides support work—had to be done about AIDS. Fear and grief faded away when I discovered action (Finkelstein 1992: 48).

In the early 1990s, ACT UP/Chicago initiated a ritual that elevated anger over sadness and loss. Rejecting one member's proposal that ACT UP start its meetings with a moment of silence to commemorate its dead, the group voted instead to remember its dead by beginning meetings with a "moment of rage" in the form of a loud chant. My interviews and other data suggest that an important effect of ACT UP's emotion work that repeatedly urged and allowed lesbians and gay men to "turn grief into anger" was the generation and intensification of an outward-directed, action-oriented anger and the suppression of other emotions that commonly accompany feelings of intense grief. ACT UP/Chicago member Frank Sieple recalled that ACT UP did not really grieve the deaths of its members, but instead turned that grief into angry activism.

It's almost like we didn't have time to grieve, you know, turning that grieving into the energy to move on.... One way of...grieving was taking that energy that I would use on grieving and putting it into action to...make their deaths not seem in vain.... I think a lot of people did that (Sieple 1999).

Member Carol Hayse described the emotional transformation this way:

I don't recall that we did a lot of mourning. I mean, I think we turned our mourning to anger. And I think that was both what we felt and also an important message to the world, that you can turn mourning to anger (Hayse 2000).

Crimp (1989) has similarly noted that for many in ACT UP, mourning became militancy. ACT UP effectively altered the meaning of grief by renaming and enacting as “anger” that complicated constellation of emotions. Through this emotion work, sadness, despondency, and loss were suppressed, temporarily eclipsed by the now-elevated anger. Lesbians and gay men could then re-experience a potentially paralyzing grief as an outward-directed, action-oriented anger.

ACT UP and the Generation of Anger

ACT UP tapped into and bolstered an anger that already was felt by many lesbians and gay men, but the movement also generated anger. As well, its emotion work linked feelings of anger to political action, effectively animating engagement in confrontational street activism. Consider the following story. In his memoir, *Queer in America*, Michelangelo Signorile talks about becoming increasingly scared about AIDS in 1987. He and a friend were invited to go to an ACT UP/New York meeting and they decided to go even though they’d been told that ACT UP was a protest group “and we weren’t sure how we felt about that” (Signorile 1993: 53). Signorile notes that the politics being articulated at that first ACT UP meeting were unfamiliar to him, but the anger being expressed with “passion and fervor” was exhilarating. “The meeting went on for hours. I’d never experienced anything like this, and hadn’t felt as stimulated by anything I’d done before....When the meeting was over,...[I was] filled with energy” (54-55). Those feelings prompted him to go to a demonstration against a Catholic Church official that had been discussed at the meeting and that was being held later that night. “I didn’t know the first thing about protesting and I still wasn’t sure about it. I certainly didn’t like the idea of getting arrested” (56). But as he watched other protesters disrupt the official’s speech and get arrested, his own anger began to swell; he jumped up on a platform and began to shout, and was soon arrested. Afterwards, Signorile quit his previous life and joined ACT UP. The comments of another member of ACT UP/New York, G’dali Braverman, might help to explain why Signorile suddenly felt enough anger to engage in an action that would likely result in arrest. “We helped perpetuate...anger in the discussions that we had around the actions so that you [became] a bottle of emotions with a great sense of purpose” (quoted in Shepard 1997:114).

Although ACT UP’s emotion work was sometimes conscious and calculated, it frequently was simply the unintended byproduct of ACT UP’s other activities, as the following story illustrates. When Terry Riley happened upon an ACT UP/New York demonstration in April 1987, he stopped to watch, struck by participants’ unquenchable anger, “the kind of anger not seen on white American faces since Vietnam” (Green 1989: 21). After fifteen minutes, he found himself walking toward the protesters and joining them. He began to chant, loudly and angrily, and did so for forty-five minutes, not knowing who he was with but feeling their anger, and now his anger, about the AIDS crisis. Although probably unintended, ACT UP was engaging in emotion work through its action; in effect, its angry, chanting bodies acted as encouragement for the public expression of anger about AIDS. And it seems to have worked. Riley was simply going about his routine, happened upon the demonstration, and became enthralled, evidently overtaken by the anger on the protesters’ chanting faces. Their bodily expression seems to have generated in him feelings of anger that he hadn’t been feeling just minutes before, animating him to join in. He joined ACT UP soon thereafter.¹¹

¹¹ This story comes from Green (1989).

ACT UP's Transmutations of Pride, Responsibility, and Shame

To attract and retain participants, ACT UP had to authorize anger and confrontational activism, and another way it did so was by making angry, street activism the object of lesbian and gay pride. Since the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 that launched the modern lesbian and gay movement, gay pride has been a dominant trope, a response both to attempts by mainstream society to shame queers for their sexual difference and to lesbians' and gay men's internalization of those homophobic discourses. During the mid-1980s, lesbian and gay leaders and institutions repeatedly articulated and elicited pride about the community's commendable and responsible efforts to fight the AIDS epidemic in the face of little outside help (Gould 2000). Often the articulations of pride seemed linked to a drive for respectability. A *New York Native* column from 1985 about AIDS volunteer work being done by gay men in San Francisco was typical. "Not surprisingly, the AIDS struggle has given San Franciscans new cause for civic pride, pride of a deeper sort than the pride we felt when we were the gay party capital of the world." The writer approvingly quoted a friend: "'We have a chance to prove something now, to show the world that we aren't the giddy, irresponsible queens it often takes us to be. Sure, AIDS has changed things here, but not necessarily for the worse'" (Hippler 1985: 31). Lesbians and gay men were encouraged to feel proud that their responsible efforts to address the crisis had earned them new respect from a society that previously had either misunderstood them, or perhaps had been correct in its negative assessment.

Without denying that lesbian and gay communities had much to be proud of, the evidence suggests that the articulations of gay pride in that moment also often drew from, and were implicated within, dominant value systems. This pride often dealt with shame about gay difference by attempting to negate that difference, or those components of difference viewed as most abject. Pride instead pointed toward gay similarities with dominant society—gays as responsible, mature, care-takers—and in that sense it was a pride that was sometimes premised on an agreement with dominant homophobic views about what is shameful. Such articulations of pride often encompassed more than the feeling of pride: they included an unspoken but palpable sense of *relief* that gays could be construed by others as close to normal.

ACT UP dramatically altered the object of pride, dislodging it from its place within a politics of respectability and linking it instead to confrontational AIDS activism. An ACT UP button that said "I was arrested fighting AIDS"—pinned by activists onto other activists as they were released from jail—indicated militant AIDS activists' pride in their activism and also encouraged the button-wearer and those who might read it to feel that pride about militant activism and (re)commit to the fight. Similarly, a C-FAR leaflet announcing a meeting blared, "FIGHT BACK, FIGHT AIDS!" followed by smaller text that read,

We MUST keep the pressure on in order to bring about the government and institutional responses necessary to combat the AIDS crisis. PLEASE JOIN WITH US and experience the satisfaction and pride of helping your brothers and sisters.... LET'S FEEL RIGHTFULLY PROUD BY FIGHTING FOR OUR RIGHTS TOGETHER! (C-FAR, n.d., emphasis in original).¹²

¹² C-FAR, Chicago For AIDS Rights, later changed its name to ACT UP/Chicago.

C-FAR's use of the qualifier "rightfully" before the word pride may have been an implicit questioning of previous objects of lesbian and gay pride; it certainly offered a new orientation: pride about street activism.

Repeated articulations and evocations of this new pride valorized confrontational AIDS activism, fortified ACT UP members' commitment to the group, and encouraged others to support, and even join, ACT UP. Tim Miller recalled the pride he felt after joining C-FAR: "I think there was an incredible sense...of being, you know, proud that I'm doing something" (Miller 1999). Similarly, after an action targeting the drug company Burroughs-Wellcome, one member of San Francisco's AIDS Action Pledge (precursor to ACT UP/San Francisco) expressed pride when he described how it felt to participate in the action and be arrested: "I may die, but I feel proud that...we stood up, and said, 'No!'...I am proud we went on record to say that this passive form of genocide is wrong" (quoted in McCourt and Strubbe 1988: 8). ACT UP's pride was echoed by those not directly involved in the movement. Consider, for example, the following *New York Native* column on New York's upcoming Pride Parade, written by R. J. Markson.¹³

I've decided not to [march]...in the Gay Pride Day parade this year, and I wouldn't mind if you all joined me in boycotting this event, which has become...dangerous to the health and lives of all gays and lesbians.... I also wouldn't mind if the 100,000 or so people...would instead gather at City Hall for some good, old-fashioned screaming and yelling, chanting and sign waving.... It is no longer sufficient for us to be "proud" of being gay.... I am not suggesting that we shouldn't feel proud. I am suggesting that it's time we channel this prideful energy from [a] self-congratulation...attitude, to one that says, "This is our city/state/country, and we're not going to be ignored any more while you let us die" (Markson 1987: 19).

Markson's views on lesbian and gay pride and on the necessity of AIDS activism mirror, and may have been inspired by, those articulated by street AIDS activists. In an open letter of support for ACT UP/Chicago, the executive director of Chicago's AIDS Legal Council, James Smith, similarly echoed AIDS activists' pride and suggested that his own pride about ACT UP inspired his support:

I want you all to know how proud I am...to see that you have the guts to stand up and shout the truth.... I am proud that you are able to get angry at the injustice inherent in this epidemic—at the injustice of politicians who either do not know or do not care (Smith 1992: 13).

The emotional effects of the frequent articulations of pride about confrontational AIDS activism are worth noting here. Repeated expressions of pride helped to authorize that activism, in part by displacing the previous object of pride from its preeminent position. Articulations of pride about confrontational, "in-your-face," angry activism also counteracted lesbian and gay shame, whether about sexual difference or about noisy activism that threatened to shake up the status quo.

¹³ Markson described her/himself as not belonging to any organization.

Intimately related to their emotion work on pride, street AIDS activists also resignified the terms “responsible” and “responsibility.” Where earlier lesbian and gay invocations of responsibility revolved around the community’s efforts to take care of its own amidst the AIDS crisis, street AIDS activists tied the term to confrontational activism.

The following example shows how responsibility was invoked during the early and mid-1980s. At an early Gay Men’s Health Crisis benefit, GMHC board president Paul Popham stressed the importance of showing “each other and the unfriendly world” that “we *can* get things done, that we *can* act responsibly, and that we *do* care about each other” (Popham 1982: 13, emphasizes his). In emphasizing the importance of showing “each other” *and* “the world” that lesbians and gay men can act “responsibly,” Popham indicated his awareness of ambivalence among lesbians and gay men about homosexuality and about dominant society, while at the same time offering a resolution to such ambivalence—an embrace of responsibility. The recurrence of the trope of responsibility in lesbian and gay rhetoric in the early years of the epidemic needs to be understood in the context of dominant society’s homophobic rhetoric about AIDS.¹⁴ The earliest reports about the epidemic constructed gay sexual practices, gay culture, and the gay community as a whole as hedonistic and irresponsible. By placing lesbians and gay men far outside of “respectable” and “normal” citizenship, this rhetoric heightened gay shame and an already pervasive fear of social rejection. Popham’s and many others’ invocations of gay responsibility countered that shame by eliciting pride about the community’s efforts against AIDS, thereby encouraging more volunteerism and support for ASOs. But they also played on lesbian and gay fears of social rejection; by holding out the prospect of social acceptance of a *responsible* community, such rhetoric constructed two images: one of gay irresponsibility and one of the ideal, and respectable, gay citizen, the latter, of course, the image that lesbians and gay men should strive to fulfill as they responded to AIDS. In the mid-1980s, the responsible gay man or lesbian took care of dying friends and lovers, supported the work of ASOs, and advocated and practiced safe sex.

ACT UP activists declared that the responsible queer now took to the streets, and s/he was the new source of pride.¹⁵ In a speech/rant at the annual Gay and Lesbian Town Meeting in Boston in June 1987 (re-printed in the *New York Native*), Larry Kramer drew a connection between responsibility and activism:

Twenty-four million gay men and lesbians in this country, and who is fighting back? ... How many dead brothers have to be piled up in a heap in front of your faces before you learn to fight back and scream and yell and demand and take some responsibility for your own lives? (Kramer 1987: 40).

Directly responding to Kramer’s equation of responsibility with confrontational activism, a man wrote the following letter-to-the-editor:

I was so impressed by Larry Kramer’s article ‘Taking Responsibility For Our Lives’ that I could no longer sit by as others did something. I went to my first meeting of...ACT UP last Monday (Franeitic 1987: 6).

¹⁴ Gay discourses of responsibility should also be understood as deriving in part from the opinions of gay men who blamed AIDS on the “irresponsible promiscuity” of the 1970s. See Gould (2000: Chapter 3).

¹⁵ Responsible queers might still take care of people with AIDS (PWAs), volunteer at an ASO, and so on, but militant AIDS activists shifted the emphasis, privileging street activism over those other activities.

Responsibility was a theme in the rhetoric of San Francisco activists in the group Stop AIDS Now or Else when they blocked traffic and shut down the Golden Gate Bridge. Terry Sutton, a PWA, explained his participation in terms of moral responsibility, and he extended that responsibility to the entire lesbian and gay community:

Genocide is what is happening to my people.... When people are being systematically allowed to die, it justifies almost anything. 40,000 of our people have already died. How many more must die? ...[The entire lesbian and gay community has a] moral responsibility not to be silent around the issue (Linebarger 1989, 2).¹⁶

Articulations of the righteousness and necessity of street activism (and thus of the *responsibility* to participate) invigorated those already involved. In an address to a national meeting of AIDS activists in 1988, C-FAR member Ferd Eggan declared,

The fact, dear friends, is that AIDS has taught us how to live and how to be well—by fighting for what’s right. It is our society that is truly sick—sick with oppression and exploitation. The government is not interested in helping us—they would prefer that we curl up and die. In the face of cruelty and injustice, it’s right to rebel. We all have to act and act now. There is hope for this sick society—the healing power of our anger and love. Love does not mean being nice, it means seeing what’s wrong and trying to change it (Eggan 1988, 2).

The crowd cheered loudly, “giving Eggan a standing ovation and chanting, ‘ACT UP, fight back, fight AIDS’” (Olson 1988, 6). Eggan’s statement knit together many components of ACT UP’s emotional common sense and its concomitant politics. Acceptance by an oppressive and exploitative society should not be the desired goal; instead, the course of action should be to reject and fight to change that “sick” society. Lesbian and gay anger and love must inspire a rebellious activism to fight for what is right. Never mind dominant society’s emotional and political norms: angry, confrontational activism is the responsible thing to do given the injustices and cruelty of the AIDS crisis. Gay love, rather than being an unthreatening love that avoids social conflict, instead must be a love committed to social change and righteous rebellion.

Where earlier invocations about the responsibility of the community in handling the AIDS crisis were in part about demonstrating gay respectability, the new discourse about the responsibility of activism was little concerned with social acceptance. To the contrary, in valorizing activism that was designed to shake up the status quo, the new trope of responsibility was directly antagonistic toward state and society. Moreover, confrontational AIDS activists also resignified a previously used meaning of responsibility by laying the blame for the AIDS crisis at the doorstep of the government. Rather than claiming community responsibility as an indirect way to counter dominant discourses that blamed gays as “responsible” for AIDS, street AIDS activists directly countered the accusations against gay men: gays were not responsible for the

¹⁶ Sutton seems to be referring to gay men when he uses the phrases “my people” and “our people.” If so, his choice of words might indicate an erroneous, but widespread, belief that only gay men were dying of AIDS. But his choice of words might also be a rhetorical strategy to inspire civil disobedience among gay men (and lesbians as well) by making a link between the genocide of one’s “own” people and a moral responsibility to fight back.

AIDS crisis; rather, the government's negligence and *irresponsibility* were to blame, and the government should be held *responsible* for resolving that crisis.

Related to street AIDS activists' alterations in both the object of pride and in the connotations of the term "responsibility," ACT UP also transformed the subject and object of shame. Earlier mainstream and lesbian/gay discourses that blamed gay men for AIDS elicited shame among many gay men about their sexual practices, on top of an already-existing shame among lesbians and gay men about their homosexuality (Gould 2000). ACT UP inverted gay shame by asserting that the (in)actions of the government and other institutions responsible for the AIDS crisis were shameful. A frequent mantra at ACT UP demonstrations was "shame, shame, shame," chanted while pointing to a specific target. The alteration of shame was connected to ACT UP's other emotions: lesbians and gay men angrily fighting back were righteous and, rather than feeling ashamed, they should feel proud of both their sexual practices and their confrontational activism.

As with activists' articulations of anger and pride, their articulations of shame seem to have had an effect on their own and other's feelings about themselves and about society. Activists' articulations and evocations of shame redirected the emotion away from self-doubt and self-hatred. Jon-Henri Damski recorded the shifting subject of shame in a column he wrote in the gay newspaper *Windy City Times* about an eruption of sentiment against Chicago's Mayor Daley who made a surprise appearance at a lesbian/gay anti-violence march. "I found myself with the crowd around me, automatically pointing my finger at the mayor, and echoing 'Shame, Shame, Shame!'" (Damski 1992: 15). Damski noted the queer transformation of shame:

In the old days, we felt shame for our queer sexuality. And if a politician even came to talk to us...we would be silent with respect. But today queers are standing up and demanding more of their public servants. We know the shame is not on us, we who have led the fight against this pandemic plague. But the shame is on them...who run a health department that still offers us nothing but timid avoidance. The shame is on their neglect, not our sexuality. That's why we have the courage to stand up and put the shame where it belongs (Damski 1992: 15).

In sum, ACT UP's emotion work, sometimes strategic and premeditated but at other times the unintended byproduct of its various activities, provided thousands of lesbians and gay men with a new set of feelings that authorized angry, confrontational street activism. Activists' repeated articulations and bodily enactments of this new emotional common sense helped to animate and sustain their own engagement in, and others' support for, confrontational AIDS activism.

The Intertwining of Interpretive and Emotion Work

Thus far I've argued that ACT UP's emotion work helped the movement sustain itself by actually altering how people felt, successfully transforming grief into anger and transforming feelings of shame into a proud embrace of gay difference and gay defiance, for example. There is another important reason for the success of ACT UP's emotion work. That work was inseparable from its interpretive work, and the two working in tandem were vital factors in ACT UP's ability to sustain itself. That is to say, activists' framings of the hostile political environment that queers faced during the late 1980s and early 1990s (the Reagan/Bush years) were important components

affecting lesbians' and gay men's positive responses to AIDS activists' mobilizations of anger and call to confrontational action. ACT UP activists repeatedly pointed to the government's failure to address the crisis. From their perspective, little positive was being done, and even more ominously, calls for quarantine and other repressive measures were being seriously considered. They repeatedly labeled the government's actions "genocidal," and such an extreme characterization consistently made sense to lesbians and gay men who were paying close attention to the government's negligent and punitive response to the epidemic.¹⁷ The perception that potential political opportunities—access to power or to influential elites for example—were tightly closed to them, made recourse to routine political channels an unacceptable option and made street activism, particularly amidst a holocaust, seem imperative.¹⁸

But in acknowledging the importance of such interpretive and framing processes to movement sustainability, we should take care not to lose sight of emotions, as most who've embraced the very important cultural turn in the study of social movements have unfortunately done. Instead, we should attend to the fact that the emotional and interpretive work of social movements are thickly intertwined. Emotions were a necessary ingredient in, as well as generated by, ACT UP's interpretive practices: the mobilization of anger about government negligence enabled ACT UP's radical framings of the AIDS crisis, and also flowed from them.

A good example of this intertwining of interpretive and emotion work is apparent in ACT UP's resignification of AIDS deaths from, as Josh Gamson (1989) has noted, death caused by deviance or virus, to murder by government neglect. Whereas earlier gay rhetoric had frequently blamed a virus, and even gay male sexuality, for AIDS, street AIDS activists laid the blame for the epidemic squarely on the homophobic government and other institutions of society. In their rhetoric, agit-prop, and street theater, ACT UP activists repeatedly offered an interpretation of AIDS that shifted attention from death by virus or deviance to murder by government neglect. For example, a 1988 Gran Fury graphic sandwiched a bloody handprint between blocks of text, which read "The government has blood on its hands. One AIDS death every half hour" (Crimp with Rolston 1990: 80).¹⁹ The graphic suggested that AIDS deaths should be viewed as less about infected blood than about government negligence and genocidal complicity in the murder of thousands.²⁰ At the 1988 national demonstration targeting the Food and Drug Administration, members of ACT UP's national PISD caucus (People with Immune System Disorders) carried a banner that foregrounded the government's role in the epidemic by offering a more appropriate name for the FDA: "Federal Death Administration" (Wockner 1988: 13). Similarly, posters at ACT UP demonstrations often were in the shape of gravestones with the names of people who had died and the epitaph, "Killed by Government Neglect."

These shifts in the meaning of death had an emotional component to them. Where an understanding of death as the result of deviant sexual practices typically evoked shame and an understanding of death as the result of a virus evoked terror and despair, an understanding of death as produced by government neglect—that is, of AIDS deaths as *murder*—evoked anger. ACT UP's alterations in the meaning of death nourished and justified already existing feelings

¹⁷ See Gould (2000: Chapter 4) where I discuss activists' use of holocaust rhetoric.

¹⁸ I am arguing that the evidence supports an *inversion* of the prevailing model in the social movement literature, the political-opportunity model; rather than impeding the street AIDS activist movement, constricted opportunities helped to launch and sustain it.

¹⁹ Gran Fury was an autonomous artist/activist collaborative within ACT UP/NY. The text of their bloody hand graphic was changed over the years to reflect the accelerated pace of AIDS deaths.

²⁰ See Gamson (1989) for a discussion of ACT UP's resignification of blood. Below, I extend his analysis with an investigation of the *emotional* components of ACT UP's resignification work.

and inspired a renewed anger. They also helped to counter mainstream society's emotional and political norms: angry, confrontational street activism was certainly rational and reasonable in the face of murder and the wholesale slaughter of one's community.

In short, ACT UP's interpretive and emotion work mutually reinforced one another: ACT UP's framings of the AIDS crisis supported and evoked its emotional common sense, and the reverse was true as well. This interrelationship had a prescriptive element that helped to seal this already tightly knit system: If you shared ACT UP's interpretation of the AIDS epidemic, you were encouraged to feel angry about the crisis and to embrace confrontational AIDS activism as the appropriate response; if you were feeling angry about AIDS, then you were encouraged to interpret the AIDS epidemic in the way that ACT UP had, and to embrace the movement. As an ACT UP/Los Angeles banner put it: "Angry? ACT UP!" (Sprecher 1990).

THE (RE-)BIRTH OF QUEER²¹

As an oppositional, anger-driven, confrontational AIDS activist organization, ACT UP not only inaugurated a new era in AIDS and lesbian and gay politics, it also gave birth to a new queer identity that was embraced by lesbians, gay men, and other sexual and gender outlaws across the country. This new identity—weaving together the new emotional common sense, oppositional politics, and sex-radicalism—offered a powerful response to lesbian and gay ambivalence about self and society, helping to generate broad appeal for street AIDS activism. Largely as a result of its emotional effects, it was a vital force sustaining ACT UP into the early 1990s.

Queer: Anger, Political Oppositionality, Sex-Radicalism

By 1990, to be queer was to be righteously angry about homophobia and the AIDS crisis, politically defiant, free of shame about non-normative sexualities, and unconcerned about social acceptance. Apparently stirred by ACT UP's emotion work around anger, pride, and shame, the new queer generation²² proudly and joyously embraced both sexual non-conformity and an angry politics of confrontation, shaking up social norms (including emotional norms) in straight and gay society.

ACT UP queers re-eroticized sex and catapulted their proud sexual difference into the public realm, challenging the tendency of the gay establishment to downplay gay difference in a bid for mainstream social acceptance. "Queerness connoted a provocative politics of difference—an assertion that those who embraced the identity did not 'fit in' to the dominant culture *or* the mainstream gay and lesbian culture and had no interest in doing so" (Epstein 1999: 61, emphasis his). ACT UP's queer stance also fought the AIDS-era equation of sex with death and made a clear link between confrontational AIDS politics and liberatory sexual politics. ACT UP/Chicago's speech at the 1992 Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade drew the connection in these terms:

Fighting the AIDS epidemic must go hand-in-hand with fighting for queer liberation.... We need to celebrate our sexuality, our erotic innovations created out

²¹ I say "re-birth" to indicate that the term "queer" had been embraced by some sexual and gender outlaws in earlier historical moments; I focus here only on its recent adoption.

²² I use the term "generation" not as a marker of age, but rather as a way to indicate the ascendance at this time of this queer identity and its widespread adoption by sexual and gender outlaws of many ages.

of this epidemic, our fantasies and fetishes, our particular ways of fucking, sucking, and licking. It is our queer love that has made us capable of fighting the insurance industry, the drug companies, the government, the bureaucracies, the gay-bashers, the right-wing zealots, the AIDS crisis (ACT UP/Chicago 1992: 5).²³

ACT UP/Chicago member Mary Patten extolled ACT UP's conjoining of sex and politics:

ACT UP combined the red fists of radical 1970s feminism and the New Left with the flaming lips of neo-punk, postmodern, pro-sex queer politics...[R]ed now stood for lips, bodies, and lust as well as anger and rebellion; fists connoted not only street militancy, but sex acts (Patten 1998: 389).²⁴

Challenging the recent attacks on queer sexuality, gay men brought their highly developed (and much maligned) sexual cultures to the movement while lesbians brought their expertise from the feminist sex wars and the recent renaissance in lesbian sexual experimentation. United, at least temporarily, by their confrontational street activism, emotions and emotional sensibility, and sex radicalism, lesbians and gay men in ACT UP turned to each other as political allies and friends, embracing and even trying on each other's identities. Men in ACT UP/Chicago wore the Women's Caucus "Power Breakfast" t-shirt which pictured two women engaged in oral sex. Across the country, dykes wore "Big Fag" t-shirts and fags wore "Big Dyke" t-shirts. Queers embraced gender and sexual fluidity; some queer dykes and fags started having sex with one another (Black 1996). "Queer" enveloped sexual and gender outlaws of all stripes, particularly those who were outcasts in the mainstream lesbian and gay community—leather dykes, drag queens and kings, trannies, S&M practitioners, butches and femmes, bisexuals, public sex lovers, sluts, dykes donning dildos.

While the new queer attitudes about sexuality, society, and politics took shape in the intense, emotional atmosphere of ACT UP meetings and actions, they quickly spread to people not directly involved in the movement. And to be sure, as a provocation to both gay and straight establishments, ACT UP was often challenged by lesbians and gay men who disputed ACT UP's representation (in both senses of the word) of the lesbian and gay movement and community. Still, ACT UP's queer stance, with its political, sexual, and emotional components, momentarily overturned the gay status quo, effecting sweeping changes in many lesbians' and gay men's, in many queers', subjectivities and practices.

The Emotions of "Queer"

The emotional effects of reclaiming "queer" were perhaps what most attracted lesbians, gay men, and other sexual and gender outlaws to embrace the term as well as the movement from which it grew. The AIDS epidemic had ravaged lesbians', and more strongly gay men's, already conflicted psyches. "Queer"—a kind of identity emotive—offered a potent and alluring response to lesbian and gay ambivalence, a new attitude that allowed, and indeed encouraged, a changed orientation both to self and to dominant society. ACT UP/NY member Gregg Bordowitz suspects that his embrace of ACT UP's queer fashion was primarily about repudiating the shame he had

²³ Full disclosure: I co-wrote this ACT UP/Chicago speech.

²⁴ Patten (1998: 405) credits lesbian pornography editrix Susie Bright with popularizing the red fists/red lips metaphor as a way to signal the transformation in lesbian identities in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

previously felt about his sexuality (Bordowitz 2002). ACT UP's queerness, in connection with the feelings of solidarity generated in the movement, encouraged Michelangelo Signorile to embrace his sexuality. "I'd never felt so close to people I worked with. . . . We were putting our bodies on the line for each other, going to jail for each other. I loved these people—and was loved back—in a way I had never known. I was feeling powerful about being gay. Feelings from when I was a child came back. I had longed for people to tell me that being gay was great. My closet was opening. These people were the most out-of-the-closet, in-your-face people in the world" (1993: 63). The new queer attitude valorized anger, defiant politics, and sexual non-conformity, and displaced gay shame, self-doubt, fear of rejection, and the desire for social acceptance. As Judith Butler has noted,

The increasing theatricalization of political rage [e.g., in disruptions of politicians' speeches, die-ins, etc.] in response to the killing inattention of public policy-makers on the issue of AIDS is allegorized in the recontextualization of 'queer' from its place within a homophobic strategy of abjection and annihilation to an insistent and public severing of that interpellation from the effect of shame. To the extent that shame is produced as the stigma not only of AIDS, but also of queerness, where the latter is understood through homophobic causalities as the 'cause' and 'manifestation' of the illness, theatrical rage is part of the public resistance to that interpellation of shame. (Butler 1993: 23).

With outrageous, in-your-face, sexy, and angry activism, queers reappropriated "queer," expurgating it of its shame-inducing power and, in the process, suppressing whatever residual feelings of shame they themselves might have had. Where mainstream discourses and some prominent lesbian and gay discourses had earlier blamed gay sexuality for AIDS, the birth of "queer" valorized queer, non-normative sexuality and suggested the *positive* role played by gay male sexual culture in the AIDS epidemic. C-FAR member Ferd Eggan challenged criticisms that depicted the 1970s as "a death trip of ruttish sexuality and alienation" and urged queers to remember that "gay men's sexual networks in particular were the foundation to build the communities that care for each other now" (Eggan 1988).²⁵ Those characteristics about which queers were supposed to be ashamed now became sources of pride.

The embrace of a queer, anti-assimilationist, and oppositional identity also addressed lesbians' and gay men's fears of social rejection: as they themselves were rejecting society, they were little concerned with society's rejection of queers. The queer embrace of angry, confrontational activism valorized as rational and indispensable that which mainstream society typically disparaged as irrational, dangerous, and unnecessary.

In sum, the new queer identity—born within ACT UP and championed by the movement—offered an emotionally compelling response to lesbian and gay ambivalence about self and society. Additionally, as a collective identity category that embraced oppositionality and an outsider status, "queer" appealed to those who historically had been marginalized by the mainstream lesbian and gay movement and community. It validated those who held radical politics, those who refused assimilation, and those who celebrated sexual difference. Eliciting and fortifying a fierce pride in sexual difference and in angry, defiant politics, "queer" commanded a strong emotional pull that enticed thousands to adopt the label and to support the

²⁵ See also Crimp (1987).

movement out of which “queer” emerged. For all these reasons, the birth of “queer” helped to generate and maintain support for ACT UP.

THE INTENSITY AND PLEASURES OF ACTIVISM

Thus far I have focused on ACT UP’s emotion work that generated changes in lesbians’, gay men’s, queers’ attitudes about self and society. I turn now to an exploration of the ways in which ACT UP was fortified as well through the generation of powerful feelings that blossomed amid the action.²⁶

ACT UP’s Intensity

I began this article by noting that many people, myself included, attended multiple ACT UP meetings a week, for years on end. ACT UP members also attended numerous demonstrations and actions. A sense of urgency about the AIDS epidemic and about the need to save lives motivated that frenetic pace, but there were other reasons why we all put in so many hours and kept coming back—weeks, months, and years later. ACT UP/Chicago member Mary Patten has written about the intensity of that time period:

A friend remembers: “Those were the days when we would go into Suzie B’s (a since-closed dyke bar) and we knew everybody (and everyone knew us).” The connective tissue between our “private” and our “public” lives—between the ways we did political work and organizing, had sex, played, theorized, and mourned—was strong, elastic, sometimes barely noticeable (Patten 1998: 389).

Patten’s friend is *me*, and I recall the loss I was feeling when I said that to her after ACT UP’s decline. For many of us, our social, sexual, intellectual, and political lives were tightly interwoven. ACT UP meetings were a place to fight AIDS, but they also were cruising grounds, a chance to channel one’s grief and frustration and to revitalize feelings of anger and pride, an opportunity to enact the new queer identity, and a place to reimagine the world. Sexual liaisons were a chance to have sex, but also to elaborate queer theory. Parties were a chance to dream up our next action and to mourn the most recent deaths. Creative demonstrations provided fodder for theorizing while study groups reinvigorated our street activism. We felt exuberant, engaged, connected to one another, sexy, and consequential. To be sure, there were racial and gender conflicts in ACT UP that eventually became quite intense, and feelings of solidarity and exhilaration unraveled, contributing to the decline of the movement. But for a number of years those conflicts were addressed in a manner that maintained strong positive feelings and identification with the movement and with one another. ACT UP/NY’s Maxine Wolfe described the emotions of the early years in this way:

²⁶ The evidence I use in this section raises the question of how to deal with the possibility of nostalgia, with the possibility that the people I quote here have the need to recall their/our pasts as better than now, as more meaningful, etc. Given the decline of ACT UP, that yearning may at times be in play here. However, interviews as well as activists’ memoirs and other recorded comments reveal a remarkable consistency in people’s attitudes and views, whether recorded or written during the moment, just weeks later, or many years later.

[In] the beginning [there] was an incredible sense...of collectivity.... People's entire friendship networks were based in ACT UP....It was like finally having a group to do something about this epidemic, to be lesbian and gay in, to connect with....People hadn't felt that connected since the early 70s. And that is a very special moment in an activist history (Wolfe 1993).

ACT UP/Chicago member Carol Hayse recalled the feelings of solidarity that developed between gay men and lesbians. "I felt like I was reconnecting with gay men....And there was wonderful camaraderie and kind of joy in rediscovering each other" (Hayse 2000). Although ACT UP/NY member Allan Robinson had a strong critique of ACT UP's racism, he found that "an energy in the room" made him go back, "again and again" (Hunter 1993: 59). He writes,

Outside of all my criticism, I found an energy in the organization that was frankly exciting. That energy helped me deal with the loss, anger, and the frustration with societal indifference I was encountering. I think that, in retrospect, ACT UP has satisfied that need for many people. So many people need that kind of conduit to deal with those feelings (60).

Protest actions themselves often generated feelings of solidarity and purposefulness that intensified identification with the movement. Carol Hayse experienced a huge adrenaline rush during demonstrations:

It's a very existential feeling of freedom and joy and liberation...when you know that what you're doing is righteous and correct and historic, and what you're doing matters, and that people can impact policy.... [Demonstrations felt] fabulous, exhilarating,... [I felt] proud to be doing it (Hayse 2000).

One HIV-positive man who had never before participated in any activism described the feelings he experienced in a 1988 C-FAR demonstration against the pharmaceutical company LyphoMed.

As a group we walked three miles to reach LyphoMed's headquarters.... We talked, we chanted protests, we laughed,...and we met other people who marched....The time spent getting to LyphoMed was real significant for me. I felt affirmed, being part of this group. Then it was time for the civil disobedience action.... This moment felt spiritual...real powerful...[A friend] and I looked at one another and he asked, "Bill, do you want to do it?" I replied, "Yes." (Members of C-FAR 1988: 10).

The emotions that generated a sense of community helped bolster those participants who might have been hesitant or fearful about engaging in confrontational activism. The feeling of connecting to other people, particularly when all are engaged in pursuit of a common cause, can be a strong motivator for activism. Comments of ACT UP/NY member Mark Harrington suggest the compelling nature of feelings of elation and collectivity that are generated through collective action:

My favorite part [of ACT UP/NY's 1989 "Stop the Church" action] was afterwards, when we got away from the church, started marching around the city and sat down in Times Square. Because it seemed like we were free, we were happy, we were all together, and nobody could stop us. It was just one of those nice moments that happens when you do things in activism, where there isn't any reason for what you're doing, it's just an expression of collective joy or power (Handelman 1990: 117).

Also suggestive of the intense emotions of joy and solidarity generated through protest are the comments of ACT UP/Chicago member Sharyl Holtzman about the aftermath of a national ACT UP demonstration in San Francisco against Secretary of Health and Human Services, Louis Sullivan in 1990.

[The members of ACT UP who had participated in the demonstration] marched out of Moscone Center, feeling absolutely ebullient, and walked down Fourth Street to join the [Lesbian and Gay Pride] Parade. As we neared Market [Street] we saw the ACT UP colors, the Silence=Death signs and for a split second we froze in amazement. Out of over 200 entries in the Parade, ACT UP was crossing the intersection just as we were arriving.... Like lovers who had been kept apart in a battlefield, we ran toward them—our friends, our fellow warriors, our family. It was exuberant and unbelievable. People were jumping in the air, they were hugging, they were crying, they were laughing through their tears (ACT UP/Chicago 1990: 4).

These stories evoke Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence." Demonstrations generate "transports of enthusiasm" and "a sort of electricity" that comes from people amassing and being physically close to one another in a manner that "launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation" (Durkheim 1995: 217). In describing the emotions he experienced during an affinity group action, ACT UP/NY member Jon Greenberg provided a glimpse into such ecstatic feeling states. Prior to the risky action, everyone was afraid, but, Greenberg states,

[We] knew that it was only fear and rather than let that stop us, we used it to propel us into further action, to confront and push through the barrier of our fear and be liberated even as our bodies were being arrested and jailed. There was an otherness about those moments. We all felt it. We all knew that we had, if only for a moment, an hour, a day, become larger than we had been the day before. We each became part of the other and as a unit our collective spirit crossed an illusory boundary which we only knew was an illusion after we had crossed it.... Through collective empowerment we declared who we were and how we felt and made a place for ourselves in the universe (Greenberg 1992).

In the exciting swirl of ACT UP's protest actions and meetings, we reinvented ourselves, carving out a place where together we could be angry, militant, defiant, sexual, and happy. Our lives were thoroughly absorbed in ACT UP and were filled with intensity and a sense of meaning and purpose. In the first few years, prior to the heated internal conflicts of the early 1990s, members of ACT UP felt a deep connection to one another.

The feelings of connection and unity sometimes extended to the larger lesbian and gay community, producing a sense that masses of people were engaging in the same struggle together. ACT UP/Chicago's Jeff Edwards recalled the "emotional high" he felt when ACT UP marched in Chicago's annual Pride Parade in 1989 and 1990.

People were so excited about us.... The sidelines were...pushing in on us, just going crazy.... We clearly were tapping into something that was really deep.... It was just incredibly powerful.... There was a real sense of unity.... It was the biggest, greatest sense of that that I'd ever had (Edwards 2000).

The intense emotional energy that is generated when people join together in pursuit of a common end—the joy, the solidarity, the feeling of being part of something that is larger than yourself—helps to explain why people engage in collective action even when they could easily take a "free ride."

The emotions generated in ACT UP's meetings and actions were not a natural result of people joining together in common cause. Those feelings of exhilaration, love, camaraderie derived in large part from the narratives we had constructed about ourselves as angry, proud, and defiant, and from each individual's growing identification with those feelings and with other participants who also felt them. The extraordinary feeling of being part of something larger than yourself derived in part from our constructions of our political work as important and world-changing. But my point is that those intense bodily feelings that occur amidst the action, read and shaped through culture, help to sustain movements over time. In this case, the emotions generated in ACT UP's meetings and actions also helped to secure the movement's emotional common sense and its potentially unstable resolution to lesbians' and gay men's psychic conflicts about self and society. It is hard to dispute the righteousness of angry, queer, defiant AIDS activism when through such engagement, participants also experience feelings of camaraderie, of making history, and of living meaningful lives.

Street AIDS activists faced both a society where confrontational activism was frequently disparaged and a community that had a history of hesitancy about angry, confrontational activism. Street AIDS activists were bucking both systems, and they took some heat for that. The intensities and joys of activism helped to fortify their involvement.

ACT UP's Pleasures

ACT UP's vibrant sexual and social culture also played a powerful role in attracting people to, and sustaining their participation in, the movement.²⁷ Ferd Eggan is one among many who has asserted that there was "a lot of sexual feeling and validation" at ACT UP meetings. "[I] suspect that it was...an opening for a lot of people, of possibilities, and a lot of people took advantage of them" (Eggan 1999). ACT UP/NY member Marion Banzhaf recalled "It was a time that I was exploring non-monogamy for myself in a different way than I had ever done....I had more sex in ACT UP than I had had in my whole life" (Banzhaf 2002). ACT UP/Chicago member Michael Thompson was particularly taken with the sexual expressiveness of lesbians in ACT UP: "to be around lesbians who were also being sexy was really cool. Because that

²⁷ In terms of movement sustainability, it is important that ACT UP itself was a sexualized space. See Goodwin (1997) for an account that illustrates how sexual ties led to the *disintegration* of the Huk movement in the Philippines.

[intermixing of men and women] is not something that generally happens...in the queer world. It was generally segregated” (Thompson 2000). Jeanne Kracher recalled that gay men’s openness about their sexuality had a strong influence on her own sexuality.

There was a way that these guys were so expressive about their sexuality....There was something about being in that crowd that was very freeing, about being a lesbian, about being gay, that this was about sex on a very deep level. These guys...would take their shirts off at the first possible moment at a demonstration and [they] would have like, a million nipple rings, and [they] were making out whenever they could possibly incorporate that into anything. And there was a way that that was very freeing (Kracher 2000).

Polly Thistlethwaite (1993) remembered with fondness ACT UP/NY’s meetings; people sat in each other’s laps, brushed up against one another, and cruised each other. Jeff Edwards of ACT UP/Chicago noted the effect that the sexually charged atmosphere of meetings had in countering earlier discourses that had made gay men ashamed of their sexual desires and practices, and afraid to have sex:

[T]hat was great, I think especially because...I was listening to people having discussions in the mid-80s saying, “You can’t kiss anybody.” ... There was an opening up...of a greater sexual freedom again (Edwards 2000).

Jeanne Kracher also saw ACT UP’s sexual culture as a form of resistance to dominant society’s efforts to “shut us down sexually” (Kracher 2000). ACT UP’s sexual climate offered a powerful response to state and society’s homophobic and erotophobic responses to the AIDS epidemic.

Summary

When interviewed, former ACT UP participants invariably comment on the important role the movement played in their lives. Our memories of ACT UP are typically a mixture of many things: the actions, the deaths, the sex, the fights. And invariably, we recall the intensity of the feelings we had while in the movement. Jeff Edwards recalled that participation in the movement “felt really powerful. I really felt like we were making history.” Moreover, “being an AIDS activist was just central to my identity” (Edwards 2000). Ferd Eggan stated that ACT UP changed his life (Eggan 1999). Michael Thompson noted how intense it was to be involved in a movement where people who were part of the movement were dying:

It was a very special time to be with people who you knew may not live through their lives.... To be in a political movement where the movement was dying. There’s nothing quite like that, I think (Thompson 2000).

Carol Hayse recalled that the deaths, while sobering and saddening, reinvigorated her activism: “it helped keep me going to know that you have to fight this thing that’s killing people” (Hayse 2000). Those very intense experiences—of self-affirmation, of purposefulness, of connection to other people, of shared commitments, of love, of death— fortified a commitment to ACT UP, helping the movement to flourish into the early 1990s.

CONCLUSION

As a national movement, ACT UP had largely declined by the mid-1990s, raising an important question about the argument I have made here.²⁸ If the emotional dynamics I have described were so important and effective in helping ACT UP to sustain itself, why did ACT UP decline? The answer lies, at least in part, in the fact that ACT UP, like all movements, was operating in an ever-changing context, and the emotion work that was so powerful and successful in the late 1980s and early 1990s encountered a different terrain by the mid-1990s. For example, ACT UP had achieved a number of victories by the mid-1990s; as the system increasingly responded to some demands, it became difficult to justify anger and oppositional activism, even as the crisis continued largely unabated.²⁹ Other factors, like increased access by some activists, mainly white and male, to the scientific establishment, and consequent racial and gender conflicts within ACT UP, destroyed feelings of solidarity, as I suggested earlier. Increasing devastation due to the accumulated losses; despair about saving PWAs; the election of ostensibly gay-friendly President Clinton; the “mainstreaming” of the gay movement (Vaid 1995)—similarly altered ACT UP’s context in a manner that challenged its message about the necessity and efficacy of angry confrontational activism. As I noted above, there was no necessary or inevitable reason why ACT UP’s emotion work succeeded into the early 1990s. An understanding of its success required an exploration of the context in which that work occurred, and the same is necessary to understand why similar emotion work later was unable to sustain the movement. Changes in ACT UP’s context during the mid-1990s began to puncture its emotional and political common sense, and participation in and support for the movement waned.

Social movement scholars have developed analyses of why movements come and go, but we rarely investigate why and how they persevere for a time. Although other factors like resources and political opportunities contribute to movement sustainability, I have focused on the role of emotions in order to highlight an important ingredient that has been understudied and underappreciated in the movement literature. Movement participants, animated by a tangled mixture of feelings and calculations, are much *more* than rational actors, and our analyses must recognize that reality. ACT UP’s meteoric rise in the late 1980s and sustained growth into the early 1990s was contingent on the generation of intense emotions among thousands of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender folks, and other queers. Similar emotional imperatives obtain for other movements, and with that in mind, we need to investigate how movements respond to such emotional exigencies and how those responses affect their sustainability.

²⁸ Although individual chapters of ACT UP still exist and do important activist work, the national movement had disappeared by 1994-95. Recent developments suggest a possible revival, with a more global perspective. ACT UP/Philadelphia, for example, has been spearheading activism that targets the profiteering of transnational pharmaceutical companies.

²⁹ ACT UP declined *before* the advent of protease inhibitors, drugs that have helped people who have access to them live longer.

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