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AIDS Activism and Public Feelings:

Documenting ACT UP's Lesbians

The AIDS crisis, like other traumatic encounters with death, has challenged strategies for remembering the dead, forcing the invention of new forms of mourning and commemoration. The same is true, I would argue, for AIDS activism. What is the current meaning of the slogan "the AIDS crisis is not over" in the context of treatment with protease inhibitors and an ever widening gap, of transnational proportions, between medical possibility and political and economic reality that has significantly shifted the early associations of AIDS with gay men? Like activism itself, the slogan's meaning is constantly shifting. In March 1997, ACT UP/NY marked its tenth anniversary with a return to the site of its inaugural Wall Street protest; while the event suggested an ongoing AIDS activism, it was also an occasion for looking back on a time that seemed now located in the past. What kind of memorial would be appropriate for a movement that while not exactly dead, since ACT UP/NY and other chapters, for example, continue to meet, is dramatically changed? When is it important to move on and when is it useful, if painful, to return to the past? I ask these questions about ACT UP in particular because in the process whereby AIDS activism was the catalyst for what has now become mainstream gay politics and consumer visibility, something got lost along the way, and I'm mourning that loss along with the loss of so many lives.

Another of my interests in approaching the wide range of traumas produced by AIDS through the more specific topic of activism is to explore the assumption that trauma is best addressed by public and collective formations, rather than private or therapeutic ones. Such formulations pit affective and political solutions to social problems against one another. There is often good reason to do so; my own work on sensationalism has suggested as much in examining the affective powers of melodramatic, sentimental, and sensational representations as a displaced response to social problems.¹ Lauren Berlant continues this line

of argument when she proposes that within sentimental culture, “the authenticity of overwhelming pain that can be textually performed and shared is disseminated as a prophylactic against the reproduction of a shocking and numbing mass violence.”² My goal here, though, is to challenge such paradigms by scrutinizing activism for its affective and even therapeutic dimensions, and to question the divisions between public and private, affective and political, on which such distinctions rest.³ ACT UP is a suggestive example for this project insofar as the group was forged out of the emotional crucible of anger and grief created by homophobic neglect and an escalating number of deaths. Only with a fuller sense of the affective life of politics can one avoid too easy assertions of a “political” solution to the affective consequences of trauma in which politics becomes a phantasmatic structure that effects its own forms of displacement.

I feel a particular urgency about remembering and documenting ACT UP because as someone who grew up in the shadow of the 1960s—old enough to have vivid memories of the new social movements but too young to have participated in them directly—AIDS activism represented a significant instance of post-1960s’ movement activism. It built on the models of direct action established by the civil rights, antiwar, women’s, and gay and lesbian movements, thus proving they were still viable, but it was not simply repeating the past since it also created new forms of cultural and media activism, and incorporated a distinctive flair for the visual and performative. As a member of Austin’s ACT UP group from 1989, when it started, until 1991, when it became less active, I have been trying to figure out what to make of an experience that has had a changing though persistent and indelible impact on my life. I also can’t forget ACT UP because it is entwined with the experience of death; I was drawn to it because of my relationship with two friends, one of whom was the first person I knew closely who was HIV+ and the other of whom, his lover, helped found ACT UP/Austin shortly after he tested positive. When first one and then the other got sick, I spent less time doing activism and more time taking care of them; after their deaths, I didn’t really return to ACT UP. Remembering ACT UP has become a way of keeping their memories alive.

Throughout this period and even well after it, I was fascinated with ACT UP/NY, which operated on a far grander scale than Austin’s group. I

attended meetings whenever I was in New York, and during the summer of 1990, participated in the activities of what was then the Women's Caucus. I was enormously affected by the energy, passion, and productivity of the Monday night meetings at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center. (As it turns out I was not alone; the excitement and intensity of ACT UP meetings, as much as the demonstrations, is a frequent topic in the interviews cited below.) In New York, AIDS activism was also a particularly vital site of cultural activism, which appealed to my intellectual interests; the videos produced by ACT UP's DIVA-TV collective and the Testing the Limits collective, the *Living with AIDS* series produced by Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), as well as its *Safer Sex* shorts, Video Data Bank's collection *Video against AIDS*, and an array of graphics, documented in Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston's *AIDS Demo Graphics*, extended the reach of ACT UP and fostered a public culture organized around AIDS activism.⁴ I was also intrigued by the strong presence of women and lesbians in ACT UP, some of whom were working specifically on women and AIDS issues. Cultural documents such as the book *Women, AIDS, and Activism*, a publication that grew out of the *Women and AIDS Handbook* first developed for teach-ins, and Maria Maggenti and Jean Carlomusto's video *Doctors, Liars, and Women*, about ACT UP's 1988 demonstration against *Cosmopolitan* magazine, drew attention to work that might otherwise have remained invisible except to those directly involved in ACT UP/NY.⁵

It has seemed all the more urgent to provide a history of ACT UP's lesbians when, with the passage of time, ACT UP is in danger of being remembered as a group of privileged gay white men without a strong political sensibility, and sometimes critiqued on those grounds.⁶ Once again lesbians, many of whom came to ACT UP with considerable political experience, seem to be some of the first to disappear from ACT UP's history. Also troubling is the dismissal of ACT UP as too radical, internally divided, or even a failure. Carlomusto worries about "reductive" representations that "flatten the complexities": "After a while we've seen so much footage of demonstrations and people yelling at buildings, and doing 'die-ins,' that it's almost used the way images of bra burning were used to reduce feminism to a one-note kind of deal."⁷ Watching ACT UP's history become prone to disappearance and misrepresentation has made me wonder about how other activisms have been (mis)represented. And I

have also pondered how best to document AIDS activism both in its time and for the future since its preservation makes the claim that it mattered, that it made a difference.⁸

Over time, I also kept noticing the ongoing productivity of ACT UP/NY's lesbians, especially in the context of New York's urban cultural scene; they were making films, videos, and visual art, writing novels and creating magazines, tending to the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and forming new activist groups such as the Lesbian Avengers. Sometimes the work addressed AIDS and activism explicitly, as in the case of Sarah Schulman's novels *People in Trouble* and *Rat Bohemia* or Anne D'Adesky's publication of the magazine *HIV Plus*, but even when the connections were more diffuse, as in the case of Ellen Spiro's move from safe sex videos to trailer park life or Zoe Leonard's photographs of the trees on the streets of the Lower East Side, I could see the legacy of AIDS activism and death.⁹ But even this rich archive of cultural materials couldn't answer all my questions. I wanted to know how people looked back on their experience with ACT UP, whether they missed it, and whether it continued to inspire and sustain them.

Uncertain of my own answers to these questions, I decided to consult with others, and thus embarked on an experiment in ethnography and oral history by interviewing AIDS activists and, more specifically, lesbians involved with ACT UP/NY (see appendix). I focused on ACT UP's most visible and well-documented chapter because I wanted to get a sense of the more ephemeral network of friendships and publics that accompanied its vast archive of graphics, documentaries, and papers, and to explore how those affective networks support the political, cultural, and sexual publics that are also fostered by New York's urban environment.¹⁰ Here's a compressed list of questions and concerns I brought to the task of interviewing ACT UP's lesbians: How was it that AIDS and ACT UP fostered distinctive coalitions between lesbians and gay men — coalitions that brought new understandings to the word *queer*? If the erotic and affective bonds that underlie political affiliations were heightened by ACT UP's reputation as a cruising ground as well as its proximity to death, what was the role of lesbians as friends, lovers, allies, and caretakers? From the vantage point of lesbian participation, what does the tension within ACT UP between whether to focus on AIDS and treatment issues exclusively or to tackle other related political issues look like? Examining the trauma of

AIDS as it affects not just gay men but lesbians as caretakers and activists is a way of casting a wide net for trauma's everyday effects. One outcome of AIDS activism for lesbians is that they have a legacy; they have the privilege of moving on because they have remained alive. What does this experience of survival reveal about the particular mix of death and burn-out that some people cite as reasons for ACT UP's waning? And for those lesbians involved with ACT UP's cultural projects, including graphic arts and media, what has been its impact on their subsequent work as artists?

I aim not to provide a representative picture of ACT UP but to intervene against the construction of such a thing, to capture something of the many specificities of its history and legacy. Although my use of oral history is inspired by my particular emotional needs, my most ambitious aspiration has been to use it to create a collective public sphere out of the individual stories of people who once worked collectively and are now more dispersed. Bringing the stories together serves as a reminder that the experiences they document are historically significant and shared.

AIDS and Trauma Cultures

In the wake of this book's other topics, it is something of a relief, however odd or inappropriate that feeling might be, to turn to the subject of AIDS because its status as trauma seems relatively uncontested. Even sexual abuse can be more complicated to legitimate as social trauma, fraught as it is with distinctions between private and public pain, and between emotional damage and the hard fact of death. Of course, AIDS is no different, especially as a specifically sexual trauma. Public recognition of traumatic experience has often been achieved only through cultural struggle, and one way to view AIDS activism, particularly in the 1980s, is as the demand for such recognition. That battle has involved combating, among other forms of oppression, homophobia, which has ignored the experiences of those disproportionately affected by AIDS by casting them as outside the general public.

AIDS has thus achieved the status of what I call national trauma, standing alongside the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, World War I, and other nation- and world-defining events as having a profound impact on history and politics. Surely, national attention to AIDS constitutes a considerable victory given the early association of AIDS with gay men and

hence its central place in the politics of homophobia. Moreover, AIDS has produced renewed forms of a radical politics of sexuality through its links to “vices” and “perversions” such as drug use and sex work. Through issues such as immigration, the prison system, and the national and global economics of health care, it has also required an analysis and a political strategy that connects sexuality to race, class, and nation. But it seems that only some versions of AIDS make it into the national public sphere or archive, which includes cultural artifacts such as red ribbons, *Rent*, and *Philadelphia*. Even the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt and *Angels in America*, which are complex cases worthy of the considerable critical and public scrutiny they have received, are on a different order from ACT UP and its cultural archive of *AIDS Demo Graphics*, DIVA-TV videos, and Gran Fury public art projects. And even that specialized archive does not always clearly reveal a lesbian presence.

In what form, then, does AIDS achieve its status as national trauma? While connected to the insidious and everyday forms of trauma generated by sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression, the spectacular body count of AIDS commands attention, and indeed comparisons with the body counts in wars are often used to underscore its devastating impact. More so even than the sexual trauma of incest, which occupies the ambiguous terrain of what Berlant has called the “intimate public sphere,” it seems to have made its way into the canon of national public culture.¹¹ Within the university and cultural studies approaches to trauma, the inclusion of AIDS in, for example, Cathy Caruth’s important collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* or Marita Sturken’s *Tangled Memories* can be taken as signs of the success of this effort.¹² Rooted strongly, yet not exclusively in Holocaust studies, Caruth’s collection includes an interview with AIDS activists Gregg Bordowitz and Douglas Crimp about the current state of the health crisis, thereby facilitating the production of trauma studies as an interdisciplinary field that crosses many national and cultural sites.¹³ Sturken focuses on the Vietnam War and AIDS as defining moments that generate “cultural memory,” a process of politicized history making in which the nation uses representation in order to work through trauma. Precisely because it is so consonant with my own project, Sturken’s book also provides an important point of contrast with it. Among the valuable contributions of *Tangled Memories* is its argument for the centrality of both memory and culture in the

national public sphere, and the strategic and legitimating effects of equating the AIDS crisis with the Vietnam War cannot be underestimated. In chapters that explore representations of AIDS, the AIDS Memorial Quilt (as comparable to the Vietnam War memorial), and discourses of immunology, Sturken includes consideration of ACT UP and the cultural theory that surrounds it. But while Sturken's inclusive approach accomplishes a great deal—indeed, it offers the legitimating attention sought by AIDS activism—it also mutes the critical and oppositional force of the more marginal(ized) forms of activism that are my emphasis. ACT UP's memory is not the nation's memory, and my more selective focus aims to illuminate a counterpublic memory that has a critical relation to the more prominent national representations of AIDS that threaten to overshadow it.

One of the most significant contributions of this more specifically gay and activist AIDS culture to understandings of trauma has been its insights about mourning. Still occupying a canonical position in my AIDS/trauma archive is Crimp's essay "Mourning and Militancy."¹⁴ I first heard it presented as a keynote address at the 1989 Gay and Lesbian Studies conference at Yale University, where it marked an occasion when activists and academics were in close communication and something only later named queer theory was taking off. Returning to it now, I am reminded of Carlomusto's remarks in Bordowitz's 1993 video, *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, about how the activist documentaries of an earlier period have taken on new meanings, as the footage that once offered proud testimony of a robust and angry resistance becomes a memorial because it depicts those who are now dead.

Crimp's essay can conjure feelings of mourning as well as nostalgia for a lost community and past moment of activism, but it also remains powerful and relevant for trauma studies. Grounded in activism, it offers an achingly concrete as well as novel validation of the famous Freud essay it invokes and provides a fresh approach to cultural theory's long-standing preoccupation with the tensions between psychic and political accounts of social problems. Crimp maintains that militancy cannot ease every psychic burden and that the persistence of mourning, if not also melancholy, must be reckoned with in the context of activism. Turning around a familiar opposition between private therapy and public activism (exemplified by the slogan "Don't mourn, organize!"), he reads militancy

as an emotional response and a possible mode of containment of an irremediable psychic distress. His essay is part of a range of texts and practices, including Simon Watney's observations about the politics of funerals in which gay men remain closeted and David Wojnarowicz's vision of throwing dead bodies onto the steps of the White House, that have scrambled the relations between mourning and militancy, between affect and activism.¹⁵ Adding new resonance to the term *intimate public sphere*, these practices counter the invisibility of and indifference to feelings of loss by making them extravagantly public as well as building collective cultural practices that can acknowledge and showcase them.

Crimp also notes that trauma takes many forms, that AIDS means not just the specter of death but also the loss of particular forms of sexual contact and culture, and that one might mourn the loss of unsafe sex as much as the death of one's friends or prospect of one's own death. His argument echoes Laura Brown's essay on the implications of gendered experience for definitions of trauma, in which she introduces the term *insidious* trauma to encompass the ways in which punctual events, such as rape and sexual abuse, are linked to more pervasive and everyday experiences of sexism.¹⁶ She argues that definitions of trauma as "outside the range of human experience" cannot do justice to the traumatic effects of a sexism that does its work precisely by being constructed as normal.¹⁷ Brown's argument can be bolstered and extended by queer theory's critique of "normativity" along with the myriad ways in which it is embedded in practices of sexuality and intimacy. Crimp's attention to the insidious traumas that pervade sexual practices and funerals in a time of AIDS is startlingly material. In making a claim for not being able to use Crisco or not being able to fuck without a condom as one of the losses of AIDS, he introduces the everyday life of sexual practices into the discourse of trauma in a particularly graphic way. Moreover, the claim that safe sex constitutes a loss challenges the dismissal of certain practices as decadent or perverse as well as the tendency to think that only certain forms or magnitudes of loss count as real. Trauma makes itself felt in everyday practices and nowhere more insidiously or insistently than in converting what was once pleasure into the specter of loss or in preventing the acknowledgment of such losses. It may be a necessity rather than a luxury to consider trauma's impact on sexual life or how its effects are mediated through forms of oppression such as homophobia. This insight

seems all the more relevant in the context of the shifting cultures of safe and unsafe sex; recent controversies about barebacking don't make sense without some sympathetic understanding of the attractions of unsafe sex and the significance of its loss.

Crimp emphasizes the ways in which putatively normal practices of mourning are foreclosed for gay men—because they are faced with the prospect of their own deaths, because gay identities are erased at funerals organized by families, because they have been at too many funerals—and thus suggests not only that psychic processes are profoundly affected by social circumstances but also that Freud's production of the normal in relation to mourning might be challenged from the vantage point of queer theory. Although he is suspicious of the category of melancholy because Freud constructs it as an instance of "pathological mourning," and Crimp wants to resist pathologizing accounts of homosexuality, another strategy for a queer reading of Freud might be to return to melancholy and its supposed abnormalities. David Eng and David Kazanjian propose just such a revisionist reading of Freud:

Were one to understand melancholia better, Freud implies, one would no longer insist on its pathological nature. . . . We suggest that a better understanding of melancholic attachments to loss might de-pathologize those attachments, making visible not only their social bases but also their productive, unpredictable, political aspects. . . . In this regard, we find in Freud's conception of melancholia's persistent struggle with its lost objects not simply a "grasping" and "holding" on to a fixed notion of the past but rather continuous engagement with loss and its remains.¹⁸

Like Eng and Kazanjian, I refuse the sharp distinction between mourning and melancholy that leads Dominick LaCapra, for example, to differentiate between "working through," the successful resolution of trauma, and "acting out," the repetition of trauma that does not lead to transformation.¹⁹ Not only does the distinction often seem tautological—good responses to trauma are cases of working through; bad ones are instances of acting out—but the verbal link between acting out and *ACT UP* indicates that activism's modes of acting out, especially its performative and expressive functions, are a crucial resource for responding to trauma.

Using a richer and more sympathetic sense of melancholy to revisit

Crimp's distinction between mourning and militancy not only bolsters his argument but also explains its continued relevance. Crimp ultimately argues that mourning and militancy are intertwined rather than opposed; by looking at activism as a response to psychic needs, one that emerges from a desire to project the internal externally, he is in a position to see it as open-ended and ambiguous. Such insight is crucial to understanding the emotions produced by the persistence of AIDS and social injustice amid the waning of AIDS activism.²⁰ While this current state of affairs can generate debilitating forms of melancholy, Eng and Kazanjian's approach suggests that this need not be the case. Returning to ACT UP's history in order to find what remains does not have to be a nostalgic holding on to the past but can instead be a productive resource for the present and future. In the aftermath of activism, emotional life can be more subtle and ambivalent because there is no longer the clear enemy or fixed target for activism that creates righteous indignation and anger. Just as Crimp highlights the insidious effects of AIDS on sexual practices, so too would the documentation of activism require attention to a range of everyday emotions that might otherwise fly under the radar screen of trauma studies. To remain attentive to these emotions is to ward off the sense of political failure that can add one more dull blow to the loss from death. Furthermore, the continued relevance of an essay such as "Mourning and Militancy" is another reminder that the archive of activism remains alive.

An Experiment in Queer Ethnography

My project can't really be appreciated without some sense of how unusual, and hence experimental, my choice of interviews as a research method has been. At the risk of reinventing the wheels of oral history, ethnography, and even social science research, I have approached an unfamiliar methodology from the vantage point of a cultural critic accustomed to working with an already existing archive rather than creating one. In fact, I came to oral history with a certain amount of resistance given that my theoretical background had taught me to be suspicious of what Joan Scott calls "the evidence of experience."²¹ If our identities as intellectuals are revealed by the texts we love, then you should know that one of my all-time-favorite essays is Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" a critique of the presumptions that the disempowered can

speak the conditions of their exploitation (or be known to intellectuals through their personal testimony).²² But one of the great, and often misunderstood, lessons of deconstruction is that far from undermining the grounds for inquiry, it is at its most interesting when applied to concrete decisions such as those demanded by the practice of oral history. Doing oral history, like doing activism, presents an endless array of practical challenges, including not just who to interview and what to ask but as I learned the hard way, where to do the interview and when to turn the tape recorder off. I quickly discovered that the material logistics of interviewing were not going to produce "evidence" that was in any way "transparent."

Despite my methodological hesitations, I was also intrigued by the radical potential of oral history to document lost histories and histories of loss. Both gay and lesbian as well as activist history have ephemeral, unorthodox, and frequently suppressed archives, and in both cases, oral history can be a crucial tool for the preservation of history through memory. It can help create the public culture that turns what seems like idiosyncratic feeling into historical experience. I have been inspired by the model of ethnographic works such as *Cherry Grove* and *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, in which queer scholars such as Esther Newton, Madeline Davis, and Liz Kennedy come to oral history as members of the communities they document and unabashedly acknowledge their personal investment in their material.²³ Another compelling influence has been documentary film, and in particular queer autoethnographies, including work by Carlomusto, Bordowitz, Marlon Riggs, and Ellen Spiro, in which the documentary maker's story enters the frame, and in which the process of collecting and archiving is charged with affect.²⁴ Thus, mixed in with my skepticism about oral history were curiosity and fascination. I was driven by the compulsion to document that is so frequently, I think, engendered by the ephemerality of queer communities and counterpublics; alongside the fierce conviction of how meaningful and palpable these alternative life worlds can be lies the fear that they will remain invisible or be lost. Oral history can capture something of the lived experience of participating in a counterpublic, offering, if nothing else, testimony to the fact that it existed. Often as ephemeral as the very cultures it seeks to document (since both tapes and transcripts are records of a live event that is past), oral history is loaded with emotional urgency and need.²⁵

In this respect, queer community histories share something with testimony, the genre that brings together trauma studies and oral history. Testimony has been viewed by some as an impossible genre, an attempt to represent the unrepresentable.²⁶ Trauma poses limits and challenges for oral history, forcing consideration of how the interview process itself may be traumatically invasive or marked by forms of self-censorship and the work of the unconscious. Gay and lesbian oral histories, as forms of insider ethnography, have much to contribute to this project, including a sense of the complexity of gathering information about sexual intimacy that can be applied to the study of trauma's emotional intimacies. I have wanted to see for myself how the process of testimony works by interviewing a group of people who, while they may not be trauma survivors themselves, have lived, as activists and lesbians, in close proximity to a national trauma. My goal has been to use interviews to create political history as affective history, a history that captures activism's felt and even traumatic dimensions. In forging a collective knowledge built on memory, I hope to produce not only a version of history but also an archive of the emotions, which is one of trauma's most important, but most difficult to preserve, legacies.

Freighted with methodological, theoretical, and psychic baggage, the interview process was always both humbling and revelatory. The burden of intimacy, of encouraging people to talk about their emotional experience even when I didn't know them especially well, was an ongoing challenge. The labor of sympathetic listening in order to facilitate someone else's articulation of her experience was often exhausting, and I felt myself overwhelmed by all the voices in my head. Even with the help of the protocols for gathering life histories, where the emphasis is on open-ended questions that enable interviewees to tell their stories as they see fit, I worried about being too invasive and not representing people's stories adequately, especially since I also had my own agendas and wanted the interviews to address my concerns. The actual labor and practice of interviewing has informed this project as much as the content of the interviews themselves has, giving me a healthy respect for the difficulty of gathering archives of testimony as well as a passionate conviction that they are valuable precisely because so ephemeral.

What follows is an account of my research, based on interviews with twenty-four women, almost all of them lesbians.²⁷ Most of them were

members of ACT UP/NY during its initial and most active years, from 1987 to 1992, but some of them were involved even after that. Extremely significant for my thinking has been a cluster of interviews with women who were not members of ACT UP but were involved with AIDS activism; in addition to having valuable comments about ACT UP, their stories about AIDS activism in the years prior to ACT UP's formation are a reminder not to make the mistake of equating ACT UP with AIDS activism. This is not a reconstruction of ACT UP's history, complete with chronologies and important events. Instead, it is an exploration of the ongoing uses of that history in the lives of those who participated in it. My focus is on the affective life of ACT UP, including experiences of both love and loss, and especially on relationships and political controversies that are marked by ambivalence and conflict, and thus resistant to documentation.

The Affective Public Culture of ACT UP

There was a time in my life when I didn't know anybody who wasn't queer. I didn't know anybody who wasn't involved in ACT UP. I didn't have time for you if you didn't talk about or want to hear about what was going on with AIDS. . . . We all seemed to be living and breathing the AIDS crisis. (Alexis Danzig)²⁸

I have so much fondness and respect for the people I worked with in ACT UP. I feel like there's something really special when I run into them. I don't know. It's not like going to school together. It's something else. You took a stand with this person. It's knowing that in some very, very important way you shared at least some basic values with this person. You may not have had a friendship, you may have had other, outside interests. You may like different movies, you may dress in different clothes, but at some point you shared some very important values with this person, and we built something incredible together. (Zoe Leonard)

I decided at some point early on that ACT UP was a collection of really idiosyncratic weirdos, myself included—that it is a group of fringe types who don't fit in in a lot of other places. That's one reason they're at ACT UP. It is an activist group that came into existence and survived because it attracted a particular kind of person who didn't need social approval,

who had never gotten the social approval, and therefore, was willing to step out and do civil disobedience, confront authority. I think that there are a finite number of people in the world who will act like that, and that it may be no more than 10 percent of any given population, and maybe even a lot less than that. . . . It is a great gift to find those other people, and you develop an enormous respect and love for every one of them. (Ann Northrop)

People were so angry because there really had not been a place to vent your rage about what was going on. It's so hard to remember what it was like then, with people just getting sick and dying. There were no drugs available, and there was a lot of blame—blaming gay men for having the disease, for promiscuity, for anal sex. [ACT UP] gave people a place to be with other people who were as angry as they were. In most people's lives—at work and with friends—it's not really possible to have that level of venting. People look at you like you're crazy. So [ACT UP] was a really cathartic place. (Amy Bauer)

It really did take on an urgency that made you want to do anything. I began to live in this world where you got to know people, and you got to love them, and you laughed with them and found out how beautiful they were, and they were going to die. In some cases you watched them fucking die. That just seemed immensely unfair. In sort of a naive way, it's like, "You've got to be kidding." I suddenly have this place where who I am is validated, where I can be who I am, as a lesbian, as kind of a crazy, mad person, as a very emotional person, and there are people like me there. They like me and they love me, and they're there for me. We have fun together, this is a blast, and you're telling me they're going to be fucking dead in a few months, or a year, or two years? No way. That just made you enraged. That made you want to do anything, and it made you want to break the glass in the limo as it was coming up to the demonstration. It was crazy making. (Heidi Dorow)

I think ACT UP did provide a psychic healing, or comfort, or community that was useful during a time of crisis for a lot of people, but not all the people. It's like the high school thing. You run into people and you say, "Oh, what have you been doing since high school?" . . . One thing that's become clear to me is that there were people who did find what they

needed or made what they needed, either within the leadership of ACT UP or in an affinity group. For women and people of color, there were so few of us that we found it among each other. . . . And now, talking to a lot of people who weren't part of any of those things—a lot of white guys—again, I realize women and people of color really had a different relation to ACT UP. But to talk to some of these guys—it was difficult for them too. It really did feel like high school for them too. Few of their needs were being satisfied, they felt left out, they were desperate, they didn't know where else to go, and they just felt shitty about themselves all the time because there were so many cliques, including a popular clique. (Catherine Gund)

I felt like around women's issues you really had to watch your step. I came into ACT UP with that attitude, and that definitely permeated my interaction with people, and maybe I also wondered a little bit, as I became more involved in the organization, "Who are these women who were initially in ACT UP?" They really wanted to work with men, and that was very strange to me. I couldn't really understand it, as drawn as I was to the power of the organization, the ability to get things done, its far-reaching political agenda—these were things I respected.

I wasn't so sure I wanted to work with men. So that was the rub. Yet I did develop many close friendships with men, of course. Knee-jerk reactions aside, reality takes over and you have friendships. But I think the women in ACT UP, who were there from the start, must have trusted men politically in a way that I didn't. That would be my guess. Not that they weren't feminists. I'm not saying that at all, or that they didn't have radical politics or understand the oppression and power between men and women. Maybe they just had more trust or something. (Tracy Morgan)

Every time I would come down there with my two dark-skinned little boys, and my red and orange hair from Miss Clairol, from the South Bronx, never once did I feel like I didn't belong there. Never. On the contrary. I was always made to feel so welcome. We bickered about how to put things together, or this issue was more important than that one, but I never felt that sense of "she doesn't belong here." (Marina Alvarez)

Some things that happened at these actions were lousy. Because going to prison is horrible. Socializing was great because there was a good chance

you would know someone in your prison cell if you had to sit there all day. It was scary being in there. There is always that uneasy feeling when the door slams. I'm really locked in. It's not pleasant. The social networks helped sustain me, give me the extra oomph of wanting to do these things. (Jean Carlomusto)

I think doing activism, particularly on the level that we do it, gives you a personal trust in people. We used to joke in ACT UP that we would judge people by, if you were thrown into a cell for forty-eight hours, who would you want to be with? Both who would be fun to be with, but also who would you trust not to get you killed in that time? (Amy Bauer)

So the passion with which, the emotion with which people came into this movement and this organization, which was personal—"Either I'm going to die, or someone I love is going to die"—really forces you to cut through the bullshit when it comes to friendship and relationships. You are in it. There's stuff you're dealing with that most friendships don't deal with in a lifetime. And they were all compressed. It was all compressed into this tight, extraordinary little four-year period. Every single week, every Monday night. There was a big joke: "Does the virus take a vacation?" We used to joke, "You can't take a vacation. The virus doesn't take a vacation." That was another thing. There was a great sense of humor and irony. I learned what irony was in that group, from gay men. (Maria Maggenti)

Of the whole group of people whom I was really friends with, there is definitely a feeling of incredible shared history. At the same time, there are also friendships that for me are over for natural causes. We came together at a certain moment and our lives have changed significantly, and we're no longer in each other's spheres. But the intensity was really intense. It sounds sort of lame to say that. . . . But it was simply the way we all seemed to be living at the time. It felt very normal. (Alexis Danzig)

For a lot of people, ACT UP was like a zombie from outer space that ate away at the rest of their life. . . . It got in the way of their job. It got in the way of their relationships or their other friendships, and since ACT UP couldn't meet their needs, eventually they got really mad at it and they burned out. (Amy Bauer)

Collaborative work is so important—but it's like relationships. They're so important, but you have to be so careful about who you get involved with because it can be a complete disaster. It's a relationship. It's made me think more seriously about who I choose to collaborate with. (Jean Carlomusto)

Years later it was hard to see some of the people with whom I had shared so much—jail time, tears, and sex. It was too emotional. It was extraordinary. . . . The whole thing was so intense. . . . My life now is intense but I've learned how to live it. I can get in it, understand it, enjoy it, accept it, and make something of it—and be relaxed. And I don't feel relaxed around some people from that time because it was just so crazy. Our friends started dying in our early twenties and there we were in no way prepared for that. (Catherine Gund)

We also went to one motel on that same trip, I'll never forget, where we were refused. In fact, we were refused at a number of motels because they saw that there were obviously gay men with us. And somebody asked, "Does anybody in this group have AIDS?" and we said, "Yeah, just about everybody does." And they said, "We're sorry. We don't have any rooms." We moved on and on and on until we found a place. Some gay men in one town loaned us their house. We all took a day off and went to the beach. We had a great time. I have pictures from it. It was hilarious. We went swimming. It was amazing.

That to me was the glue that kept that group together. From the outside, it looked like everyone was always yelling, "Fuck you, government, and fuck you—," but in fact, the kind of behind-the-scenes of it was a lot of parties, a lot of drinking, a lot of eating, a lot of love affairs, and extraordinary friendships. That's what kept me in it for so long. It couldn't just have been "doing the right thing," although that was obviously a motivating factor, and a significant factor. That was also the glue. But it was also a lot of fun. (Maria Maggenti)

I've started by quoting at length from the interviews in order to give as much prominence as possible to the words of the activists themselves. The interviews have a life of their own, and both here and elsewhere I include long blocks of quotations without commentary in order to convey a sense of the larger archive. I think of these sections as themselves an ar-

chive installed within the body of my text. Although the editorial process of excision and juxtaposition inserts my own agenda into this archive, the resulting montage creates many layers of meaning, and I especially like the way the quotations speak to one another not only in their agreements but their disagreements.²⁹ They have a cumulative force beyond their individual meanings.

The above montage is meant to convey the passion and excitement inspired by ACT UP, and the highs and lows of its vibrant social life. Explaining her attraction, Amy Bauer says: "It was a very queer place. It was really queer, you know, to the core, and that was very appealing. I sort of instantaneously liked a lot of the people in it, or felt at home in it." Ann Northrop describes not only her initial enthusiasm but also her ongoing commitment: "I just fell in love, my first night in the room. . . . It was stunning to me to be able to walk into a room where I agreed with everyone there. That's what has kept me there for eleven years now [fifteen years in 2002], because it's the one place I can count on going and having an honest conversation with people whose values I share." The women talk about going dancing in clubs with ACT UP men after meetings, developing beloved friendships and even romances, and building rituals and traditions such as the annual queer Jewish seder hosted by Alexis Danzig and Gregg Bordowitz; they discuss a wide array of affective networks that underpin activism. Their remarks express the sense that the bonds formed through activism, through sharing a jail cell or values, are particular and special. Jean Carlomusto offers a reminder of how friendship compensates for the unpleasant aspects of activism. Moreover, in ACT UP, the specter of death added to the stakes of friendship; as Heidi Dorow observes, it was impossible to believe that the precious community she had just found was going to be taken away from her. Thus, ACT UP's camaraderie was central to its activism, and it fostered strong bonds between gay men and lesbians that gave substance to newly emerging notions of queer identities and politics. Maxine Wolfe says, "It created a community more than simply a political group."

If friendships and affective networks were a crucial source of ACT UP's power, they were a volatile source, although no more so than the desires and investments that underpin any relationship. References (such as Catherine Gund's) to high school figure prominently in representations

of ACT UP as a social milieu in which some people were “in” and others were “out.” Says Cynthia Schneider, “I always had such mixed feelings about it, and I think I did at the time. The whole ACT UP scene was such a ‘star culture.’ It was so much like, ‘Who’s been out there and who’s performing for the whole group?’ . . . There were certain people who were so much trying to get attention.” The powerful sense of belonging that some people found is therefore matched by the ambivalence of others. Tracy Morgan, for example, was reluctant to work with men and couldn’t understand the enthusiasm of the other women she encountered in the group. Involved with a man when she came to ACT UP, she remarked that, “it felt like if you were going to be a woman in this place, you should be a lesbian.” There were identifications and disidentifications, including the shared sense of disidentification indicated by Northrop’s portrait of the “idiosyncratic weirdos” who made common cause in ACT UP. The lines of inclusion and exclusion are not predictable; for example, Marina Alvarez’s comments about her sense of belonging provide a cautionary note against generalizing about ACT UP’s racial politics. Moreover, it would appear that if friendship was ACT UP’s strength, it was also a liability. As Maggenti and others attest, their activism became so absorbing that they had no other life beyond it, and they could only be friends with those who shared their activist lives. For some people, such as Bauer and Northrop, who remained active members of ACT UP well past its prime, the key to long-term involvement was not to make ACT UP the center of their social life. Offered in hindsight, the comments in this archive convey a vivid sense of both the preciousness of activist relationships and their transitoriness; not only were they interrupted by death but they were specific to the context of activism, and in many cases their intensity could not be sustained. Yet this ephemerality does not make them any less real or important, and descriptions of relationships lost are matched by those of lasting friendships forged in ACT UP.

Although ACT UP’s formation of a queer community is distinctive, a focus on its lesbian members also reveals strong ties to histories of feminist organizing. The lesbians in ACT UP had a crucial and visible role, disproportionate to their numbers, because so many of them came to ACT UP with previous political experience and contributed organizing skills. Ranging in age from their early twenties to forties when they got involved in AIDS activism, they had experience with the civil rights and antiwar

movements, feminism and the women's reproductive health movement of the 1970s and 1980s—including the Feminist Women's Health Centers, Women's Pentagon Action, and Seneca Peace Camp—the gay rights movement, and the sex wars. Even younger women who were just out of college (a common trajectory for arriving in ACT UP and a sign of its class profile) had experience with lesbian and gay organizations, divestment protests, and other kinds of campus activism. Some women first got involved with ACT UP because their specific skills led to invitations; Bauer came to the first Wall Street protest in March 1987 because she knew how to organize a demonstration, and Carlomusto was there because she could operate a video camera. In some cases, ACT UP provided an important respite from fractures within political communities, especially feminist ones. Kim Christensen, for instance, had been ostracized by the lesbian community in Northampton, Massachusetts, in part because of her self-identification as bisexual. Wolfe and Sarah Schulman had been driven out of the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA) for homophobic reasons. And Amber Hollibaugh, one of the people outside ACT UP whom I interviewed, turned to AIDS activism in flight from the vehemence and bitterness of the feminist sex wars of the early 1980s.

Almost unanimously, these experienced women note how dramatically ACT UP differed from other kinds of activism. After many years of working within left organizations, Wolfe was impressed with how ACT UP “cut an incredibly broad stripe across the lesbian and gay community in New York,” and represented an unprecedented case of “organizing the unorganized.” She says, “I felt like I was organizing in there as well as outside of there, that it was an opportunity to open the minds of people who had their minds opened, and that anyone could stand up and say anything, and if you had a good idea, people would do it.” Coming from years of experience with Feminist Women's Health Centers and radical left groups, Marion Banzhaf had been determined not to join another group in which one person was the leader:

ACT UP, even very early on, was very exciting because this was a different kind of group. It was not a top-down group, it was a bottom-up group, even though there were hierarchies within ACT UP about who was cool and who got to cruise who and who got to do what. It was still a

very democratic group. . . . So ACT UP was thrilling. Because, also, it was about people actually fighting for their lives, so it was very immediate.

Speaking about AIDS activism more generally, Hollibaugh emphasizes how dramatically it challenged movement politics and changed the relation between insiders and outsiders:

None of our movements had done the kind of work you ended up having to do in order to guarantee the most fundamental rights for someone who was getting sick. So it was really an extraordinary thing for me. It changed the way I understood activism. There's no way that you have the privilege of just being an outsider when you're fighting an epidemic. You can always be right when you're in an outsider position. Your placard can always sound clever. Your chants can always sound correct. But when you've got to make sure that somebody gets bathed in a hospital, you've got to try to figure out how to maintain that radical position and how to get inside that hospital at the same time, so that when you're not there, that person is still getting cleaned in a way that respects their dignity.

Although Hollibaugh did not find ACT UP a compelling arena for her own AIDS activism (in the 1980s, she worked in the AIDS Discrimination Unit of the New York City Commission on Human Rights), her sentiments echo those of many of ACT UP's members who have long histories of political experience—that AIDS activism was an arena of tremendous possibility for them, and that rather than finding it wanting compared with other political causes or organizations, they are grateful for its lessons.

If political experience and cultural capital made ACT UP a “powerful and volatile” organization (in Christensen's words), another element in the mix was the urgency of illness and death. Like many of the men, a large number of women mention coming to ACT UP out of the immediacy of emotional need. Their anecdotes tell a collective story about the importance of friendships between lesbians and gay men, and between artists, both of which occur within public cultures that frequently overlap in New York. David Wojnarowicz had been telling Zoe Leonard how exciting ACT UP was, and she came with him to a meeting on the same day that he told her he was HIV+. Schneider went with Todd Haynes, who was one of her best friends from Brown University and with whom she had collaborated on the short film *Superstar*. Gund came with Ray Navarro,

who along with Ellen Spiro and others who joined ACT UP, was her fellow student in the Whitney Program. Not to be underestimated, then, is the concrete power of a specific individual relationship to serve as an entrée into ACT UP. The result, according to Leonard, was an extremely diverse mix:

I think there were some conscious efforts later to try to expand our vision and expand who felt comfortable in that room. That's something I'm sure you've heard from a lot of people. A big problem with ACT UP was its racial and economic limitations. But I do think it gained from a certain kind of mix, where someone like me came into that room because I knew people who were dying. I had friends who were dying. I didn't come into that room because I was involved in a certain college, and I didn't come into that room because I was queer. I met people in that room who were older than me, younger than me, who had different backgrounds from me, because we had this one, other thing in common: that someone we knew or loved was either dead or dying of AIDS.

I would suggest that coming to ACT UP for either political or personal reasons, to the extent they are separable, were both equally essential to the power of the organization. In the face of hostile questions, sometimes from other feminists, about why lesbians would be interested in AIDS activism, they entered a culture in which, as some assert, the distinction between being HIV+ and HIV- was often far more salient than differences in gender. Within the many stories lesbians tell about why they came to ACT UP are insights about disidentifications with feminism, the origins of queer social formations in friendships between gay men and lesbians that assumed public visibility in the AIDS crisis, and the way a diversity of motives and resources strengthened the group.

My focus on ACT UP's lesbians both confirms and disrupts the presumption that ACT UP is predominantly white, middle class, and privileged. Although all but one of the women I interviewed is white, almost half of them are also Jewish, which inflects the ways in which they live their ethnic and political identities. College education, the mark of both class and cultural capital, figures prominently in the stories that many of them tell about their activist histories, but a great number of them, including those with college degrees, also mention coming from poor or

working-class backgrounds. Also significant as a mark of cultural privilege is ACT UP's location in New York. Dorow and Polly Thistlethwaite both mention coming from small towns and being drawn to as well as overwhelmed by New York City; Dorow talks about feeling like a "hick" in ACT UP. The number of artists I interviewed is also notable since this category can mean high cultural capital but low economic status, and is thus complicated to gauge in terms of class. Ultimately, it seems reductive to describe ACT UP as white and middle class or to do so dismissively rather than as an entry point into a more detailed account of what white, middle-class politics looks like, especially when crossed with other categories such as being Jewish, an artist, or queer, or living in New York.

At the same time, the demographics of ACT UP's lesbians are relatively homogeneous when compared with the profile of Marina Alvarez, who was the only Puerto Rican and person of color, as well as the only HIV+ person I interviewed. Her story is distinctive within the interviews; she is a recovering drug addict who learned of her HIV status while in prison and later found her way to an AIDS peer-education program in the South Bronx after having been through a twelve-step program. Through her work with the peer-education program, she met members of ACT UP's Latino Caucus and began to attend ACT UP meetings in addition to becoming an outspoken person with AIDS (PWA) at conferences and government meetings, especially those pertaining to women with HIV. Alvarez has collaborated with Spiro on the video *(In)Visible Women* about women with AIDS; she has been involved with Gund's *Positive: Life With HIV* television series and has acted as a consultant to pharmaceutical companies. As her comments in the opening section suggest, she felt very much a part of ACT UP and responded passionately to its organizational power and style of direct action. But her remarks also redefine the meaning of activism, when she talks, for example, about her response to other HIV+ women in prison:

Right in the prison, something happened for me, and I know today, when I think back, that my activism started right there. First of all, as a person, I say I speak three languages. I speak Spanish, English, and compassion. From the way that my life is and my personality, I've always been a very, very compassionate person. So when women who had AIDS in 1985, in this particular institution, were ostracized — which is literally what hap-

pened to them—their food was placed in front of their cell. They were not touched. They were “skived.” Nobody wanted to be around them. People would talk about them, make comments about them. Immediately. Immediately, in my heart, I felt the compassion for them.

Alvarez proceeded to help these other women, demonstrating the activism that arises from the needs of daily life. She also strongly identifies as a mother and credits her children with giving her the motivation to get off drugs and survive. Notable, too, is the way her activism is an extension of providing the emotional support and care for people that she learned from her twelve-step support groups. As she puts it in an interview with Ginetta Candelario, “Among Latina/os, the family itself often becomes part of the care of HIV-positive family members. This is a form of activism because there is a group of people involved in care, not just the patient and a doctor. Also, there’s an implicit challenge to community denial of the existence of AIDS through caregiving activities.”³⁰

When I made the trip to the South Bronx, where I had never been before, I not only acutely felt my own whiteness but was reminded of the extent to which most of my other interviews were a form of insider ethnography where I felt comfortable with my narrators because of a range of shared experiences that often went without saying. The difference is also apparent in geographic terms; I only did one other interview outside of Manhattan (Wolfe is happily ensconced in Brooklyn just down the street from the Lesbian Herstory Archives), and within Manhattan, Chelsea was as far north as I got. While I had thought that some of the pitfalls of ethnographic research could be avoided by sticking close to home and interviewing people like me, it was absolutely invaluable to take the risk of making a mistake and hearing from someone whose experience is utterly unlike mine. Interviewing Alvarez was also a reminder that there were other women of color with HIV who were prominent activists, women like Iris de la Cruz or Katrina Haslip, whom I couldn’t interview because they have died. Moreover, Alvarez debunked any presumption that ACT UP was exclusionary by enthusiastically claiming a sense of kinship. In fact, at least as powerful as feelings of exclusion based on differences of identity such as gender or race were cases of what Freud would call a “narcissism of small differences,” feelings of not being liked, of being out and not in.

In some cases, the sense of ACT UP as an exclusive social arena was enough to keep people out of the group. Alisa Lebow, for example, mentions ACT UP's social style as one reason that it was not for her, although she also extends her observations to comment on ACT UP's political limitations:

What I was not able to swallow in the few ACT UP meetings I went to were the group dynamics and the cliquishness. It felt too much like a "scene" for me. There were a lot of cute boys and girls who thought they were being really hip, mostly upper middle class and white, and it was as much a party as it was politics. And while I don't object to partying and politicking, at the same time it just was not for me. . . . The kind of activism that was needed then and is needed now has never really been done, and that is being able to mobilize the poor and working-class communities of color in the city and around the country. I think I always felt that with ACT UP. They were never going to touch those communities in any significant way.

Hollibaugh, with whom Lebow worked at the New York City Commission on Human Rights doing AIDS education and media work, expressed similar reservations about ACT UP's failure to address issues of class and race fully.³¹ Hollibaugh and Lebow's comments are also a reminder that some people were not more involved with ACT UP because they were already intensively involved with other kinds of AIDS activism (Lebow, for example, also worked at GMHC with Gregg Bordowitz and Jean Carlo-musto) and thus didn't need ACT UP as a point of entry into the fight against AIDS.

Another example is the case of Jane Rosett, who was immersed in her work in the People with AIDS Coalition (PWAC) of which she was a founding member more than four years before ACT UP began. (Rosett was the only founder of PWAC who did not have AIDS, and the only woman.) Also a cofounder of the Community Research Initiative and People With AIDS Health Group, Rosett was already deeply involved, as both a treatment activist and a photographer, in issues pertaining to the underground AIDS treatment community. Because of her awareness of the political ramifications of her status as a non-PWA working within the PWA movement, Rosett chose to play a more invisible role.

Because of my unique access to less public—often underground—activities, I believed that the greatest contribution I had to offer was to continue my less visible activist work within the people with AIDS movement. I had already been entrenched for over four years within the PWA movement—as distinct from the broader AIDS movement—when ACT UP came along. And my early PWA movement work was a natural extension of my ongoing disability rights work.

So, while I was involved with the town meeting at which ACT UP was born and attended the first several actions, very soon after it became obvious that ACT UP was quite well saturated, specifically with documentarians. Too often people mark the beginning of AIDS activism with the founding of ACT UP. But by then, generations of PWAs had died fighting for their lives.

Until ACT UP rendered AIDS activism “chic” within the dyke world, lesbians working in the early AIDies were often dismissed as confused fag hags and, far from experiencing any sense of “community,” we were quite isolated from other lesbian activists, who had specifically chosen not to do AIDS work. (Jane Rosett)³²

Rosett's remarks, like those of other non-ACT UPers, offer valuable testimony to the vital forms of AIDS activism that preceded ACT UP's formation and that also need to be part of the historical record.

Viewed from the “minority” position of its lesbian and women members, ACT UP emerges as more complex and diverse than it might otherwise appear to be, and as a group whose members are well aware of its possible limitations. For example, the reasons for tensions between men and women in ACT UP were perceptively analyzed by Christensen, who maintains that ACT UP was an interesting coalition not just across gender but also class lines, in which women with political experience collaborated with men who had access to cultural and economic resources.

I think what made ACT UP both powerful and eventually what made it fall apart was that it was the coming together of men of predominantly one class background and women of predominantly lower-class backgrounds—not low-class backgrounds, not like where some of us were coming from. But a lot of the men in ACT UP were coming from what I would call at least PMC [professional managerial class] and sometimes

higher. . . . They had access to people, to resources, to media outlets. . . . But it's also then combined—and this is what I think made it both powerful and volatile—combined with a lot of people, predominantly women and some men of color, who were not from that class background but who had the political skills that these white guys needed. They knew how to put out a press release, but they didn't know how to organize a demonstration. Peter organize a demonstration? Please. He couldn't have done it to save his damn life, literally. I think what made it work so well was that those of us from the political backgrounds brought those skills. But we could not call the New York Times the way that Larry Kramer could. But Larry could make the phone call, and we could be kicking his ass to tell him what to say. I think that's what made it actually work for as long as it did. . . . A lot of things that in retrospect were very much about class looked like they were just about gender and got fought out in terms of gender. . . . I think the intersection of class and gender in that organization was complicated, very complicated, and often kind of subterranean.

While offering a critical appraisal of the men's privilege, Christensen also appreciates their cultural access in constituting ACT UP as what she calls an "uneasy coalition." She is not alone in articulating a critique of ACT UP's class and gender politics from within—a critique, however, that can see the group's tensions and precariousness as part of its power. Not only does gender become more complicated when linked to class but class is also a nuanced category. Christensen draws distinctions within middle-class identities to articulate the differences between the men and women since even if they were of "predominantly lower-class backgrounds" than the men, many women had middle-class jobs as well as the cultural capital that comes with being college graduates, artists, and writers. Like the distinctions between being "in" and "out," these nuanced differences suggest the complexity of affinities within political groups—affinities that are as refined as personal tastes and sensibilities. These "queer" affections produced unusual forms of fierce love and bonding, but also points of conflict and distress.

Dyke Dinners

How did lesbians survive in ACT UP? Even if they had strong reasons for being there, it was not always easy. As Danzig points out, "You had to have a taste for the rough-and-tumble of democratic process. This was not, strictly speaking, a feminist organization. Experienced, activist dykes taught by example and shared skills. It helped to be quick and witty and charismatic, and if you wanted to, you could stand in front of a room." Lesbians were resilient and practical, or as Bauer says, "I don't take things personally." And they were strategic. Wolfe notes that the goal was not to monitor every instance of sexism:

And other than a couple of the younger women, everyone else had experience already in the women's movement, had experience already with people screaming at each other, and knew it didn't work. None of us were interested in making the men less sexist than they were by chastising them. We came in to work on AIDS, and we would work on any issues that there were, and we were interested if there were ways of raising issues about women, but it wasn't the only thing. We made a very conscious, collective statement to each other. We all had the same view, which was that some men in the room were misogynists—you were never going to change them. Some of them seemed to be really feminists and would be on our side. And the vast majority were badly trained. We were grown-up about it. We knew what bad training was because that's what we learned from lesbian feminism. We're all badly trained. You know? So, actually, that group of women had an incredible impact on the group because when someone would get up and say, "Let's man the tables," we would just say, "Staff," and then everybody started saying "Staff" the table. We didn't say, "You sexist pig."

Bauer also talks about using her training in nonviolence and experience with consensus-based groups to negotiate conflicts in meetings. As a facilitator, she was able to build consensus out of a majority rule voting process by calling on people strategically and requesting discussion when necessary. Drawing on both positive and negative experiences with feminist styles of processing, the women frequently mention that they appreciated ACT UP's efficient emphasis on action and concrete proposals. Explains Maggenti: "That part of me that is macho and that part of me that

is very testosterone driven was totally thrilled by it. I loved the orderliness of it. They were totally into Roberts Rules of Order, which I thought was fabulous. It didn't have that mushy-feminist-womyn/wimmin kind of thing that I'd been to before, and I rather liked that. It was very in-your-face." The meetings were thus themselves a visible public sphere of protest and activity. As Leonard observes,

I was just blown away, mostly by the level of humor and intensity, and the amount of positive energy in the room; it was funny and fast-paced, and people were busy. This was not people sitting around talking—it was busy. It was like next, next, next. The agenda moved. I didn't understand a lot of the language, but I got the picture and I just loved it.

Although difficulties ultimately arose when organizations such as the Treatment Action Group (TAG) wanted to be able to make decisions without being approved by the entire body of ACT UP, underlying the enthusiasm about the meetings is a utopian sense of the possibility of a collective.

Another mode of survival was bonding together. The pragmatic approach that Wolfe describes above emerged from another of her ideas: the hosting of "dyke dinners" for the lesbians in ACT UP to socialize. As she puts it:

I had learned long before then that the only way to exist in that kind of situation is to connect with other lesbians. So I started having these dyke dinners, and I invited lesbians who were there, and over the next couple of months we invited any lesbian who walked in the door. We ended up with a group of about . . . I guess eight or nine lesbians. And it was really important because the first thing we talked about, the very first dyke dinner we had, was why are we in this group? Why, as lesbians, are we working on AIDS?

And as Carlomusto adds,

AIDS is why I came to ACT UP, but the reason I stayed were lesbians. The reason I stayed was because the lesbians got organized. It could sustain you through the burnout of organizing, that setup—this incredible social net that was very sustaining or nurturing. . . . These dyke dinners were great because you not only socialized but talked about things that were coming up. They were really important in getting people together. . . . I

think they [the women] wanted to form an agenda, but the first step was to get to know each other.

The comments about dyke dinners indicate the powerful role of friendship in creating a political organization—activist bonds are not distinct from other kinds of relationships. Thus, although ACT UP's famous reputation as a cruising ground and social scene is sometimes cast as obscuring its political activities, I would suggest that the gay men's cruising and its counterpart in the dyke dinners serve as the foundation of the group's power. Eventually, the dyke dinners provided the organizational energy for the first demonstration to focus specifically on a women's issue—the January 1988 protest against *Cosmopolitan* magazine, in which ACT UP decried an article arguing that heterosexual women were not at risk from AIDS through vaginal penetration. This action was supported by the men in ACT UP and gave the women increased visibility as a constituency. Other key projects generated by the women in ACT UP were the *Women and AIDS Handbook*, which emerged out of teach-ins and was subsequently expanded and published as a book, *Women, AIDS, and Activism*, and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Working Group, whose goal was to change the CDC definition of AIDS to include the opportunistic infections more common in women.

The Appeal of Direct Action

I was about whatever was going to get us arrested, whatever was going to get us yelling and screaming at people, whatever was going to cause a fracas—that's where I would be. I wasn't wedded to any particular issue. I wasn't one of those people who gravitated toward housing or the insurance or the drug stuff, or even the women's issues stuff. I was like if they needed a body to stand up in the middle of a thing and start screaming, I'm there. (Heidi Dorow)

First of all, to me it [direct action] always feels very good. I like being out on the street. I like being open about it. I like the challenge it presents to people in the community about whether they join it or ignore it, about how they make that decision. So I like it as a sort of outreach to people in the community, to get them to think about, well, if Pat Robertson is

saying what he's saying, are you just going to let him say it, or are you going to object? Do you condone it? Do you dismiss it as not having anything to do with your life because you live in New York and you're not oppressed? So that aspect of it I really like. . . . Also, I have to confess that I really like planning logistics. (Amy Bauer)

She [Amy Bauer] is just a very thoughtful, ethical, caring person, and I loved that, and I thought, "This is the way we're going to get new people to participate in ACT UP and to stay; we'll really take care of them when they're doing things that are scary." It was really gratifying. It was a lot of fun to teach people that they could break the rules, that they could break the rules safely, and that they could challenge authority. A lot of people got thrown together—nice, white, middle-class kids—who didn't know why they should or how they could do something like civil disobedience or risk arrest. So it was a lot of great fun, very talented fun. (Alexis Danzig)

I'm a very enraged person, and for the first time that was getting me rewards. I could be counted on—"Oh, Heidi'll do it." Other people would do it, too; it's not like I was so unique. There were a core group of mad people, who would go anywhere and do anything. It was like suddenly you get praise or acknowledged, or it's just okay to be enraged about everything. That felt great. And as a person who grew up in an emotionally repressed and anxiety-ridden family life, this was the greatest thing in the world. You were supposed to express your feelings. (Heidi Dorow)

I was never interested in electoral politics. I was really always interested in changing—not to sound like an academic—but, really, in changing discourse, in shifting the way we talk about things. Because when you shift discourse you shift consciousness, and when you shift consciousness it just happens. Things just get done differently. I always knew that, but I never knew how to make an impact. And I knew that ACT UP had changed discourse for families. . . . Suddenly I knew, through direct action, that there was a greater chance of really puncturing the scene. So I was into that, once I could figure out how to make it happen. There seemed to be a big space between political thoughts and feelings and actually knowing how to make it happen. Then when that cavern was sort of bridged, there was no turning back for me. . . . It's like I couldn't imagine how to make a demonstration happen or how to shift the terms of discussion in

the public sphere until one day that was something I just knew how to do really well. (Tracy Morgan)

Demonstrations—first of all, it was great exercise. I got to tell you. We walked blocks and blocks and blocks and blocks. I've never felt energy like the energy that we had in those marches. There was an energy that was exhilarating. When I would come back from a demonstration, I would be on a natural high. Cocaine and heroin could never compare to what I felt. I'm serious about this. I'm serious. There was such a feeling of—my God, we were all fighting for this cause. People were dying, and we were fighting for people who were dying. We were from all kinds of backgrounds, all kinds of cultures. Who had red hair? I dyed my hair whatever—Spanish orange. Who had purple hair? Who was black? Who was poor? We were all together. Do you know the power I would feel when I would come back? I tell you, I was on a natural high for about a week. (Marina Alvarez)

I would say that I felt a responsibility to be there as a witness to the epidemic, an active witness, because it felt like, to me, to do nothing was wrong. I'm not a good service provider. I could not be a GMHC buddy. . . . So again, it's a question of do you stand by and do nothing? Or do you do something? And ACT UP was a place where I could feel very clear that I was saying I'm not going to let this epidemic go on and lead my life as if nothing was happening. (Amy Bauer)

The famed theatricality of ACT UP's actions offered a particularly visible way of taking a stand. As the above comments show, those drawn to ACT UP were compelled by the power of demonstrations and civil disobedience—a power that is significantly emotional. In the last quotation, Bauer, the organizer of logistics for many actions, provides a thoughtful legitimation of forms of public protest that are sometimes dismissed as too unruly or merely symbolic. Her invocation of witnessing implies a connection to Jewish history and the Holocaust; at one point, she refers to herself as the equivalent of a “good German” by virtue of taking a stand on AIDS as an HIV— person. Schneider also comments on how her Jewish identity informs her convictions about the importance of AIDS activism; there's a link between the Holocaust and AIDS because of “that sense of vast numbers of people who have died of this disease, and how could it

happen? How could people stand by? The need to cry out against it is important.” As a form of witnessing, direct action consists of taking a visible stand on an issue, itself a crucial contribution to a cause.

Dorow’s remarks capture the affective urgency of direct action, which offers a way of “acting out” not just verbally but physically, a performance of dissent that provides a forum for emotional expression as well as resistance to cultural injunctions to remain quiet or reserved. Countering the tendency to pathologize protest as a mode of acting out rather than working through, Dorow is unapologetic about its emotional extremity. She is not the only one to contrast activism’s affects with cultural styles of affect variously associated with femininity, whiteness, and middle-class identities. For example, Alvarez also describes speaking out as breaking the rules within Catholic and Latino/a cultures that demand silence and obedience, especially for women. Morgan, one of the organizers of the controversial St. Patrick’s Cathedral action in which ACT UP entered the church during mass, remains unapologetic about the demonstration, suggesting that the men in ACT UP who spoke against the action on the grounds that it would create enemies didn’t understand the oppression women experience in the Catholic Church: “I felt like the church was, and remains, an enemy of sex and an enemy of women’s comfort with their bodies, sexually, and that brings up a lot of rage.”

Alvarez’s mention of direct action as a drug or “natural high” is a vivid and provocative image, one that she uses in an unexpectedly positive comparison. Dorow echoes this sentiment when she talks about getting arrested: “It’s a fifteen-minute sensation of righteousness and glory and beauty and power, followed by hours and hours and hours of discomfort and ickiness. . . . That fifteen minutes, it’s like crack. It feels so good when it works that you want to keep getting it, even though it’s like the preparation before, the shit after. It sucks. Anybody who tells you it’s great all the time is a fucking liar.” (And despite her enthusiasm for demonstrations, Alvarez also mentions that as an ex-prisoner, it was not an option for her to be arrested at actions, offering a reminder that civil disobedience is as much a privilege as a right.) Dorow describes herself as a student of civil disobedience, looking for ways of keeping this form of protest alive. (Both she and Morgan went on from their experience with ACT UP’s CDC Working Group to plan a series of direct actions, including the block-

ing of the Holland Tunnel after the Supreme Court's Webster decision threatened access to abortion.) Whether represented as a strategic form of public intervention or a display of emotion, direct action is characterized in these comments not only as a significant form of protest but one whose value is highly emotional.

Intimacies of Activism

Even as they offer vivid records of activism, the interviews often document the affective networks that underlie the political process only in ephemeral ways. What Carlomusto depicts as "the two major issues we dealt with in the AIDS activist movement—sex and death," have proven to be somewhat elusive in these documents, talked of less than I would have liked or expected. Even when I explicitly asked about friendships, romances, and affective relationships, the remarks were frequently quite general. Carlomusto said, "You want to know who was hot for who and how that brought them into the group?" and we laughed. It's a delicate issue, but a historical record of, for one, relationships between lesbians and gay men is crucial for understanding issues such as queer identity formations and the debates about lesbian transmission of HIV.

It's not just that people were reticent to share information that might seem too personal or gossipy, especially if critical of others; despite my declared desire to blur the boundaries between the political and personal, I found myself reluctant to ask questions that might seem invasive. This was another case in which practice complicates the best of theoretical intentions. Sometimes the best moments are off the record, popping up in the more casual observations that people make when the tape recorder is not on. I become the bearer of information that I'm not sure I can pass on without violating the trust of those I've interviewed.³³ This sense of propriety is a subtle thing, not always the result of an explicit request not to be quoted publicly; it also comes from my own qualms about how to translate nuance into a more public context in a responsible and accurate way. The intimacy of the interview as a live transaction doesn't always emerge in the transcript, especially when excised for quotation. I've been using intimacy to track intimacy, but the results don't always appear in the document; they're preserved impressionistically in the densely over-

determined encounter of the interview. In the end, the interviews sometimes serve as documents of emotion not because of what they do say but because of what they don't say.

When women did talk about sex and romance, their comments offer provocative glimpses of how activism is mediated and propelled by erotic energies (and vice versa). As an example of the kinds of romances that activism inspired, here is what Dorow and Maggenti each said about their relationship, which began when they found themselves partners at a kiss-in that was part of an ACT UP demonstration about gay marriage at New York's City Hall.

I end up getting involved with Maria. . . . We become lovers in very short order, and suddenly I know people in ACT UP. I mean, I knew people but I didn't really have a lot of friends in ACT UP, and suddenly I got friends. People would talk to me. I got to go with Maria places, and everybody knew her. She was adored, and she was the center of attention—from the men, from the women, from everybody, or so it seemed at the time. So suddenly . . . I was in the in-crowd. . . . I was a hick from the Midwest and still felt like one, and I didn't know what to say. And it was New York City, and I didn't know anything about New York City. It took me a month to figure out the difference between uptown and downtown. And I didn't feel like I could ask anyone because I was full of so much shame about that. So it was very painful. It was like being in high school. And I'm not saying the whole organization was like that, or that was everyone's experience, but that was certainly mine. So to suddenly get attached to this person, who at least by all appearances to me, has the room eating out of her hand, that was quite a high. And it did, very tangibly and practically, give me access to people and places and things. Also, I got shown around New York. I got to see New York, and see that New York was exciting and interesting, and everything I wanted it to be when I came here. . . . I was in love with someone, and I was in love with New York, and I was in love with what I was doing in ACT UP. (Heidi Dorow)

It was very, very good to have been with Heidi. Because she was young, she was pretty, she was fun, she was totally into it. I didn't have to go outside to explain what we were doing and why. But, again, I look back on it and I wonder if so much of that was because of the circumstances,

and not because we were really right for each other in any way, shape, or form, because we really weren't. We had nothing in common. We fought constantly. I always wanted her to be different than she was. It was not healthy. It was not good. . . . We came from totally different class backgrounds. We were just totally different. But it was nice to have a girlfriend in that group. Very, very good. I needed it bad. I was happy that I had her. The next woman I fell in love with had nothing to do with ACT UP, and I was very excited about that. By the time that happened I was happy. I was thrilled. I thought, "Finally, I can get out of this group." Because, again, it started to close in. The feeling of closing in. Everyone knowing everything about every part of you, and it began to be limiting. (Maria Maggenti)

The comments suggest that activist relationships can be "site specific" (a term that Maggenti used later in the interview to characterize friendships in ACT UP). For both women, their relationship was an extension of activism, a way of negotiating what might otherwise be difficult socially. Both of them felt more included in the group by being together, with Dorow in particular talking about how Maggenti's popularity gave her an entrée not just to ACT UP but to New York. That she was in love not just with Maria but with the larger group and the city, eloquently shows that romance goes beyond couples. And Maggenti's emphasis on the insularity of ACT UP echoes statements made by others about how it wasn't possible to be friends with people outside of ACT UP, who couldn't understand their activist experiences. Dorow and Maggenti's honesty about their relationship reveals the integral role of intimacy in activism.

This point is further underscored by the stories of those who got involved with men in ACT UP, but their accounts of how difficult it was to be open about such relationships adds further complications to the task of documenting intimacy:

Well, I was having an affair with one of the men in ACT UP. . . . We fucked a couple of times but we never told anyone. It was very verboten . . . because we were both big dyke and gay man on campus. Look what happened to me after I did end up having a real affair with a man. I lost every single one of those friends. So there were very good reasons not to let people know. And there wasn't a lot of room for a fluid sexuality

because everything was predicated on a somewhat Manichaeian view of the world. It was limited, when I look back on it. In the moment it didn't feel limited. It felt like "the truth." But I look back on it and I realize we actually really only saw the world one way. Us, we were right, and everyone else, they were wrong. So when you see the world that way, it doesn't allow for a lot of room for something like, "Oh, I'm a lesbian but, you know what? I actually find some men really attractive and I want to have sex with them." There just wasn't room for that. You were either straight or you were gay. That's it. And that was part of the "you're either part of the problem or part of the solution" mentality that existed. I think it was a siege mentality, too, and that's what created some of the excitement of it, and the closeness. And that's what created, also, a lot of claustrophobia, incestuousness, and insularity problems. Implosion. To me, ACT UP didn't end just because the nature of the crisis changed, though that is significant. It also changed because how long can a group survive in that state of agitation and not be insular? And we were; I don't care what anyone says. We were everything to each other. There was no outside life, very, very little—at least from my perspective as a young lesbian in that group. (Maria Maggenti)

I got involved with Monica Pearl, who was also part of the book group. Before I got involved with Monica, I was also having a relationship with a man in ACT UP, a bisexual man, that I didn't think I could talk about or make public, either. Part of the reason I had this relationship was because I was talking about safer sex a lot. . . . I had never done it, so Adam Hassuk and I started fucking partly so I could learn how to do safer sex and practice; make my theory real in practice. Also, I liked him. He was a nice guy, and I didn't think it made me not a lesbian anymore because I was having sex with this man. It was the first man I'd had sex with in about twenty years. . . . But we were pretty clandestine about it. It was very awkward, and it was my own shit. I remember once—he lived around the corner from Moondance, the diner, and Richard Elovich was in having breakfast, and Adam and I were going to go there to have breakfast, and I turned around on my heels and walked the other way. Because I thought my lesbian authority would be challenged. In fact, it would have been. But I did talk about it in Outweek a little later. I guess we had our little affair for about six months. It wasn't exclusive with him

or anything since I was still having sex with Risa and other women. There was a woman from Philadelphia I was having a little affair with, too. I felt very polysexual. (Marion Banzhaf)

I fell in love with ACT UP, and part of what I loved about it was it was so queer. I don't think we used the word queer back then, but it just felt so good to be open about being gay and to feel so affirmed by everyone and to feel—oh I really belong here. Over the course of the time I was involved in ACT UP, I had several different relationships. And although my relationship with Gregg [Bordowitz] was very on-again, off-again, it probably spanned the longest period of time and was a very deep relationship. When I first found myself feeling attracted to him, it was surprising and confusing, and I think it troubled me and made me sad because I thought, oh here's a place I finally belong, I finally identify with a group of people and feel like I belong, and now this set of feelings that doesn't belong here is rearing its head.

At the time, it was curious to me that so many people seemed invested in what I was doing, that people had opinions, that people were either "supportive" (quote/unquote) or angry and unsupportive of our relationship. In retrospect I can understand that. We had created a safe queer space and now there were people having heterosexual sex within that space, occupying that space. I can understand now why that was threatening. At the time it felt small-minded and painful. But I stayed in ACT UP and I still felt good there most of the time, and I still felt I could be a contributing member. There was still room for me to explore my lesbianism, I had relationships with other women while I was in ACT UP, and a queer space is still a space I feel really comfortable in.

Coming out as gay—it gave me a container for my feelings. I had this word, and it could contain my feelings and describe them, and that was such a relief. I think the discomfort I experienced in ACT UP made me learn all over again that the trigger has to come from inside, from your initial desire. And I think now I'm more committed to finding a language that describes my experience rather than finding a definition that works for other people. I think identity politics can be a double-edged sword that way in that this definition and this container you seek for your feelings or for your culture is so helpful, but it can also be restrictive. (Zoe Leonard)

There is a significant discrepancy between ACT UP's professed reputation as a model for queer intimacies, including relationships between lesbians and gay men, and the actual practice, which involves a lot of secrecy. Banzhaf mentions her contributions to the article published in *Outweek* on "Lesbians Who Sleep with Men," which created a public culture around such relationships, representing them as part of a queer culture rather than as idiosyncratic (or heterosexual).³⁴ Leonard also wrote about safe sex between women and HIV+ men in *Women, AIDS, and Activism*, offering a public articulation of a practice that Banzhaf as well suggests was part of her motivation for a sexual relationship with a man.³⁵ This public culture emerged, however, out of lived experience that was considerably messier than its more utopian representation. Reflecting on what made lesbians who slept with men feel so vulnerable to criticism, Banzhaf suggests that it challenged the hard-won and ultimately fragile sense of authority that was part of their sense of what it meant to be a lesbian, especially one with a strong commitment to sexual politics.

Why and how to tell these stories has been a considerable challenge for me. I had lengthy discussions with Leonard about including this material here because she wasn't convinced of its significance for an account of ACT UP's history and didn't want her activism to be defined by her relationship with Bordowitz. We worked to clarify my implication in an early draft of the chapter that she was uncomfortable discussing her relationship with Bordowitz since she insisted that she had no reservations about talking about it, and that her concerns were less about publicity and more about historical relevance. She made a distinction between oral history as witnessing and oral history as confessional, suggesting that the narrative of one's sexual life in ACT UP might be an important story of personal growth, but not necessarily one with public or collective significance. In contrast, Leonard argued,

testimony or being a witness is about understanding that your story is part of a larger story that is vital to pass on to other people, that you hold a piece of a puzzle that's part of a picture that other people need to see. What's vital here is that there was this larger picture of AIDS, that there was a criminally negligent response on the part of the government, the medical community, the pharmaceutical companies, and the educators of this country. And there was a social response in this country of fear

and punishment and ostracizing people. That landscape is important, that we preserve that and we understand that, that we honor the idea that a very small group of people can change that terrain irrevocably.

Leonard's questions have challenged and sharpened my thinking. In fact, I would invoke her conception of witnessing to make a case for the value of sexual histories for an investigation of ACT UP as an affective public sphere in which emotional investments are entangled with political ones. Public testimony about sexual practices has been crucial to feminist sexual politics where the willingness of women to go on record about experiences of abortion, rape, and sexual pleasure has provided the foundation for a political public culture. Moreover, the public representation of ACT UP's sexual life in a range of writing by ACT UP members confirms the importance of these relationships even if, ironically, it was not always easy to maintain the same kind of openness in a less public context. But as the testimony of these activists with strong and conscious commitments to sexual politics indicate, real life is more complicated.

For example, in addition to discussing her sexual history in ACT UP, Banzhaf also spoke frankly about her early sexual history, including her experience trying to get an illegal abortion in 1971 during her first year of college when she was very sexually active. At a collaborative public presentation in which we both discussed her interview, she admitted to feeling some embarrassment about how the audience might receive her remarks.³⁶ Testimony about sexual intimacy is context sensitive, and there is no simple form of openness that constitutes a radical politics. Indeed, one of the most significant implications of these stories about queer relationships between men and women in ACT UP is that desire, with all its unpredictability, perversity, and contradictions, cannot be prescribed by politics. As Leonard suggests, for example, the categories of identity politics can be as constraining as they are liberating, and "the only truth you can live is by working from the inside out."

Maggenti talks in similar ways about the contradictions of her relationship with Bordowitz:

Were you to have spoken to me even five years ago, I couldn't speak to you openly about the things I can talk about now. Not only did I not have perspective, but the consequences were really great for me, personally, to say, "Well, I was in this really weird situation. We went to the March on

Washington in 1987, and Gregg Bordowitz and I—we had sex, and, oh, my God.” You know. And meanwhile, we would say, “Go, lesbians and gays. We hate straights!” Isn’t that weird? How do you make sense of that, except that human desire is so weirdly uncontrollable. It’s like water. It just is. And I have a lot of respect for that now. I thought I had the most respect for it when I was in a very rigid, didactic phase, but in fact I didn’t. I have more respect for it now, the mystery of it, and much more of a casual, happy approach.

Maggenti contrasts her current thinking that “human desire is so weirdly uncontrollable” with what she describes as the more “rigid, didactic” thinking of her activist years, when she was more invested in strict categories of sexual identity. Maggenti’s comments on how her perspective has changed suggest that the passage of time is also one of the shifting contexts that affects how willing people might be to speak openly about their sexual histories.³⁷ These shifting contexts present an interesting challenge for the oral historian and for the archive of sexuality.

Nowhere has the “uncontrollable” nature of “human desire” been more obvious than in the AIDS activist movement, which has made a concerted effort to incorporate sexual danger into political organizing and to acknowledge the realities of unsafe sex, drug use, promiscuity, and queer sexual partnerships without pathologizing them. Writing about the tendency to blame those who have seroconverted more recently with the judgment that it is their fault, Douglas Crimp asserts that “I seroconverted because I, too, am human. And no, no one is safe, not you, your boyfriend, or any of your negative friends. Because you and they are human too. My only disappointment in all this is that I should have to protest my humanity to a friend. Still, I understand it, for to accept my humanity is to accept my frailty.”³⁸ I think it neither too utopian nor impossible to imagine a political life that would be able to do some justice to the unpredictability of desire. That sentiment is certainly present in Leonard’s call for political movements that can accommodate desire rather than the other way around:

You figure out who you are by paying attention to your own heart, by paying attention to your own body, and living accordingly. Social movements or trends or whatever, they can catch up with you or not, it really doesn’t matter. . . . You don’t put the cart before the horse. Accept who

you are, and try to build a world and a society that accommodates that, rather than saying okay, gay identity is where it's at, so I'm not going to do this thing with Gregg. Try to create a social fabric that's true to what you honestly feel.

Political Conflict

As difficult to document as activist friendships and romances are the conflicts generated by political differences. One especially volatile issue was lesbian HIV transmission, which sometimes found lesbians pitted against one another rather than collectively galvanized by an issue that spoke directly to their concerns. While some members of ACT UP felt that the risk of HIV transmission between lesbians (through sexual contact) was negligible and focusing on this issue was a waste of energy, others believed that it was an important way to address lesbian invisibility within the AIDS crisis. One of the most vociferous opponents of the latter strategy, Sarah Schulman, argues that attention to lesbian HIV transmission was a cover for the AIDS hysteria within ACT UP generated by the "queer" sexual relationships between lesbians and gay men. Despite such skepticism, lobbying around the issue of lesbians and HIV led to the creation of the Lesbian AIDS Project at GMHC in 1991, with Hollibaugh as the first director. Yet this "success" was also fraught with dissent about whether GMHC, which had been an ongoing target of activist suspicion, was the appropriate home for such an organization. Writing about this history is difficult because much of it is fraught with personal differences and battles; expectations and disappointments run high when lesbians are working on issues close to home or there is internal dissent.

An equally contentious flash point within ACT UP was the 076 clinical trial that tested pregnant women for the effects of azidothymidine (AZT) on perinatal transmission of HIV; it came up in several interviews as a tense moment in which the status of women's issues within ACT UP was at stake. Some were opposed to the trials on the grounds that they treated pregnant women as vectors. There were also objections to the use of a control group on the grounds that it was unfair to women who wanted access through the trials to what might be life-saving treatment. Other women felt that opposition to the trials was ill-advised and that it might be possible to lobby for improvements without rejecting them

out of hand.³⁹ This debate reflected already existing tensions within ACT UP between working on the inside and working on the outside, between negotiating with government officials and engaging in direct action. During this period, ACT UP's Treatment and Data Committee was acquiring the increasing power and independence that eventually led it to split off to become TAG. Meanwhile, the call for greater attention to women and HIV had coalesced by 1990 and 1991 into a push to change the CDC definition of AIDS to include opportunistic infections that affect women. (There was a major demonstration at the CDC in Atlanta in December 1990.) One of the critical moments in ACT UP's history occurred when the CDC Working Group proposed a moratorium on all negotiation with government officials for six months until the definition was changed. The 076 trial and call for a moratorium were both issues that did not produce a unified front among ACT UP women, who had differences of opinion about strategy, and especially about how far to go in pressuring other ACT UP members and groups.

The interviews show a range of attempts to explain a contentious moment in ACT UP's history, particularly around women's issues and participation:

A lot of the women who came in then would literally do what the men were doing then, which was to get up on the floor and say to you, "If you don't support this action, you're a sexist. How dare you question our point of view? We can't have a dialogue about this; you just have to follow it." At the same time, the people on Treatment and Data were doing the same thing. So the two weren't unconnected in terms of where the organization was at that moment. But I can remember Larry Kramer and I both sitting down and trying to get those two sides together. Because we still had the view that that was the way things got done in ACT UP, which was to figure out what was the common ground between people, that was not below its common denominator. . . . But the women who came in then were women who had, really, an "us or nothing" kind of attitude. (Maxine Wolfe)

I have to say I had very mixed feelings about the whole thing. Because I totally agreed with Maxine and Heidi and Tracy that these trials were horrendous, that they should be stopped. I also had—I guess just from many years of political experience—I had a sense in my gut that the guys

were not going to give on this one, and that if the women were persisting in this demand, it was going to split the group because . . . it was the class/gender thing again. . . . I remember feeling horrible during that meeting because it was like watching a train come at you and knowing that this is going to split the group. And the women were right. But on the other hand, I was very reluctant to watch this train because I knew that when we lost those guys, we were going to lose access and we were going to lose the privileges that class had given them. And I thought that was a dangerous move. And I think I was right. (Kim Christensen)

I thought it was an ultraleft position, actually, because it meant a moratorium on any meetings with government officials. Then it didn't deconstruct the quality or the character of the meetings that were happening, or that could happen, or who was at the meetings, or whom did we want to send to the meetings, or how did you get access to the meetings? So I didn't agree with it, and I spoke against it. I was in government meetings. I was part of the Governor's Advisory Council in New Jersey. I was arguing with the Department of Health all the time, and I was trying to get government to do the right thing. I felt like I was doing a good job when the head of the AIDS division of the Department of Health would say, "Uh oh, here comes Marion." Then I knew I was doing a good job, right? When he would start out a meeting saying, "OK, Marion's here. I guess we're going to have to hear about blah, blah, blah," then, OK, I'm doing a good job. So I had a slightly different perspective on it. I didn't think that you automatically had to get co-opted. I thought you could have a struggle about that, and fight co-optation, instead of just succumb. I also thought it was an incredibly classist position to write off all these workers, in AIDS, rather than try to recruit them to be AIDS activists in their place of work. Not everybody had the luxury to be an AIDS activist and have another job, so if we wanted to try to fight co-optation, it was in our own interests to organize workers in AIDS. So that's what my position was on it. (Marion Banzhaf)

I would say that the moratorium didn't splinter the organization, but that rather, it represented a preexisting schism within it. I think I was like, "Here, let's put a label on it." But by the time the vote came to the floor of ACT UP, I remember thinking that it was beside the point—the damage was so done, the divisions so clear. I remember thinking, "Even I don't

want to vote on this.” . . . I had been observing the group, where it was going, and I thought, “This is never going to fly. People don’t want this. Some people do, but most people don’t. And I just have to decide, do I want to stick around in an organization that I think is really shooting itself in the foot?” And the answer was no. No way.

After the vote, it was really no longer safe for me to be in that organization—talk about traumatic. I loved working in that organization. I had gotten so much out of it. I definitely had different ideas about things than some people, but once I knew I had allowed myself to become a lightning rod, I knew I just had to shut the fuck up. There was no way for me to speak there anymore. I became somebody who you couldn’t really—like an untouchable. (Tracy Morgan)

Tracy became a real lightning rod for people’s suspicions about that idea [the moratorium]. . . . Tracy, because she’s the person who put it forward, became the focus of a lot of animosity. That animosity, in part, and all of this tension, really was, for me, like a loss of innocence about the organization and about my relationship to it, and my relationship to other people. I felt like this was my home, and it was suddenly becoming a dysfunctional family. It was becoming the thing I ran away from when I came to ACT UP, and I was really devastated.

It was really painful. The disintegration of ACT UP—I feel like I was depressed for a lot of years. I’m kind of a depressive person, but I would argue that I was really depressed. Because I lost . . . a lot. I’m not saying I lost more than anyone else lost, but I personally lost a lot. I lost a home. . . . It was my intimacy. That’s where I had all of my friends. . . . It was my identity. (Heidi Dorow)

I’m inclined to let these quotations speak for themselves because it seems risky to comment on their convergences and tensions without getting caught up in adjudicating between who’s right and wrong. If as Christensen puts it, the call for a moratorium was “a morally right move,” but one that would have “grave political and personal consequences,” such assessments are bound to be simplistic. Sorting through these recollections is complicated because of reactions to Morgan’s style, which was seen by some as combative; she was personally targeted, scapegoated even, as a troublemaker in the context of conflicts within ACT UP that actually exceeded individual personalities and differences. The disagreement with

Morgan was pronounced enough that people specifically named her, as well as Dorow. This was unusual in the interviews, where personal disagreements were more frequently described in vague or veiled terms. I felt it was essential to seek out both Morgan and Dorow because I didn't feel comfortable telling the story of the moratorium without their input.

If anything, the stories are quite consistent despite the political differences. Wolfe's depiction of the women who came into ACT UP at a later stage is corroborated by Morgan's account of herself as a feminist who didn't understand how the lesbians in ACT UP could be interested in working with men. Although she was opposed to it, Wolfe presented Morgan's moratorium plan on the ACT UP meeting floor because she wanted the tensions created by rumors about it to be confronted directly. Wolfe hoped that it would be quickly defeated (as it was), but as she notes, the deeper conflicts remained: "The damage had already been done in that the Treatment and Data people became more and more nasty re any of the women's stuff. I think it's possible that would have happened anyway sooner or later because they were moving more and more to the 'inside' and the women's stuff was still on the 'outside.'"⁴⁰ Banzhaf's opposition to the moratorium is particularly pronounced because by then she had largely left ACT UP for her work as director of the New Jersey Women's and AIDS Network (NJWAN), and she had also been angered by ACT UP's disruption of a meeting to discuss the 076 clinical trial since it made it impossible to argue for the improvements to the trial that she had worked so hard to get. Her comments from outside ACT UP, however, echo the sentiments of many women inside the group. But more than sorting out the details of who was on which side of the issue, I tell the story of the moratorium as evidence of how difficult it can be to document political conflict. Although I was often encouraged to be a tougher or more aggressive interviewer, it was ultimately important to me not to have an adversarial relationship with my interviewees and to listen for the stories they wanted to tell. For both Morgan and Dorow, the pain of losing ACT UP and their attempts to understand why their actions were seen as divisive are key parts of their stories. In pursuing the history of the moratorium, I gained an appreciation for why the interpersonal and affective dynamics that accompany political conflicts might not emerge in an interview. The interviews and my own account of them contain silences or evasions that mark these difficult histories.

Activist Shame

My decision to write about conflicts within ACT UP has been a difficult one, pervaded by the fear of “airing dirty laundry” and creating a picture of ACT UP that detracts from its many accomplishments. I take inspiration, however, from Amber Hollibaugh, who recognizes the powerful dynamics of shame within political movements, and I’d like to close this chapter by considering not only her comments in my interviews but her recent work on the concept of “dangerous desires.”⁴¹ Why is it that the same woman whose writing is central to this book’s chapter on butch-femme sexualities would also play a crucial role in accounts of AIDS activism? I was eager to interview Hollibaugh not only to get a sense of her work with two projects outside ACT UP—the AIDS Discrimination Unit of the New York City Commission on Human Rights in the 1980s and the Lesbian AIDS Project at GMHC in the 1990s—but also because I was curious about the connection between her earlier history with the sex wars and her subsequent move to AIDS activism. Hollibaugh is no stranger to the feeling of being “uncomfortable” in political organizations that is described by some of the other AIDS activists. She cites many experiences—as a lesbian within leftist and antiwar politics, as a high femme in gay and lesbian movements of the 1970s, as a working-class sex radical in feminist movements of the early 1980s—of being an outsider within her own movement. She describes how the sex wars brought her to AIDS activism, as “the one place I could figure out where my activism, my sexual politics, and my understanding of class and gender and race would be valued contributions rather than making me ‘other,’ and to be isolated and stayed away from.”

Hollibaugh speaks passionately about the terrible consequences of movements that ostracize and shame people, and when I asked her about whether sexual desires and identities are particularly prone to such dynamics, she responded by making links between sexual desire and activism:

Around sexuality, I think people believe very quickly that they’re deviant, and that they’re not part of a collective experience that they can use to buffer some of the impact of criticism. So when you say to somebody, “There’s something wrong with you. There’s something deviant or perverse about your desires,” it’s the loneliest, most dangerous, and most vul-

nerable place, and the place I think people are least able to resist and come to terms with themselves and still be open about their own issues. . . . I think the loneliness of that early sex radical politics was exactly—I think we were brave there in a way that was different than other kinds of slights and humiliations that come in political movements, which I think aren't good. But around sexuality I think people are more vulnerable, more isolatable, and more prone to believe that they are in the wrong. Being a sexual minority in your own movement is a very uncomfortable position. I've been out now as a high femme for twenty years almost, and this is not a point of pleasure for me. It's given me great pleasure, but it's an extraordinarily difficult place to defend. . . . It's very hard to hold out for the right to be profoundly sexual; to hold out for your own desires; to figure out what they mean and claim them, when they even seem a little dicey to you. It's not gay pride.

Closely connected to sexuality are feelings of belonging and vulnerability that are fundamental to political organizing. Hollibaugh's remarks name humiliation and shame as problems for political movements, which can purport to embrace freedom while making people fearful of articulating their most deeply held desires and feelings. They help explain why my interviews might contain only fleeting hints of personal experiences of both love and death, and especially those experiences where one has felt most isolated or alone. Included in this category are political conflicts that can also leave people feeling isolated by the convictions that are most dear to them.

As Hollibaugh contends, "Our refusal to take on sex is one of the fundamental reasons we have not created a larger movement. Because we refuse to incorporate the dynamic of danger and vulnerability and sexuality into our organizing, and that is what sex represents in most people's eyes. It's the thing that they either never have or that they lose everything in order to have." In both her interview with me and *Dangerous Desires*, Hollibaugh dramatizes this point by telling the story of how she attempted suicide after a Gay Pride march in San Francisco in 1978 that was a show of force against Anita Bryant's antigay campaigns in Florida.

I was proud to be part of it that year, angry and defiant about all the homophobia surrounding us. I was also full of inarticulate grief. The fundamental importance of gay liberation was unequivocally clear to

me. But my desires, the way I felt and expressed my own queer femme sexuality, now positioned me outside the rights I was marching to defend. My internal erotic identity made me an alien to the politics of my own movement—a movement I had helped start, a movement whose growth and survival I was committed to.⁴²

Hollibaugh's willingness to make her own story public underscores the persistence of vulnerability and isolation even for an experienced activist dedicated to sexual liberation. "When individual desire rides that fiercely through a person's intrinsic, intimate set of principles, there can be no resolution of the crisis without an extraordinary self-confrontation, a coming to terms. Because of that, this story is important to tell and remember."⁴³ Her testimony and use of it offer legitimation of what might seem like painfully personal stories as a crucial part of the archive of activism.

Hollibaugh's comments suggest that one of the contributions of sexual politics can be models of organizing that are more attentive to the dynamics of shame and isolation that complicate activism. My use of oral history to investigate the affective complexity of activism complements Hollibaugh's call for new forms of political organizing that can do justice to sexuality, and by implication, emotion. Even when the interviews point to places where things cannot be said or articulated, they are a way into an understanding of activism that can accommodate the full range of its affects, including not just its camaraderie and righteous indignation but also its ambivalences and disagreements. While an oral history of ACT UP constitutes a record of its accomplishments, it is a tool for exploring political difficulties and challenges as well. As such, oral history is itself a complex tool, sometimes revealing these issues only through gaps and silences within the interviews and conflicts between them. But this material, too, is part of the archive of activism, particularly an archive that focuses on feelings.