

***Where is Your Rage?:
Dimensions of Anger and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power***

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Abstract

A common narrative in American political discourse suggests that anger, no matter its cause, manifestation, or degree, is inherently dangerous and should have no role in the public sphere. This research challenges the idea that anger cannot—or should not—have a legitimate role in political action, using the direct-action anti-AIDS activism of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) as a case study. Drawing on interviews of former ACT UP members collected in the *ACT UP Oral History Project*, as well as more general analyses of anger in other social movements, this paper examines the multiple dimensions of anger at work in ACT UP, and argues that, while internally focused anger can be damaging or destructive to political and social activism, anger aimed externally is often underestimated and unfairly maligned as a powerful force for change. The paper discusses how different modalities of anger shaped several different aspects of ACT UP's work, including its formation and eventual dissolution, its tactics at specific actions, and its ability to mobilize people in a context of nearly unimaginable illness, death, and grief. The paper concludes by evaluating the effectiveness of ACT UP's use of political anger and discussing the broader implications of using anger in political activism.

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Introduction: Considerable Rage

On October 9, 1994, the playwright Tony Kushner stood before a crowd of people at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City, and gave a prayer for the Episcopalian National Day of Prayer for AIDS. It was an unusual situation, and it was an unusual prayer. But by 1994, the AIDS epidemic had been raging for fourteen years, and conventional prayers, when they were offered, showed no signs of being answered. Kushner said:

I speak now, not for those assembled here but for myself, from the considerable rage that vexes my heart. So many have died this year alone: In case you were absent, God, or absent-minded, may I mention a few of them, commend their ends to your accounting?

Randy Shilts, Jeff Schmalz, Paul Walker, Mary Darling, Harry Kondoleon, Bill Anderson, Ron Vawter, Tim Melester, Paul Monette.

Let each name stand for ten thousand more, and a hundred thousand others will remain unnoted. And many more are sick and have worsened; they take flight in number, I've noticed, they travel multiply, in flocks, like birds, these critically ill: Having heard the call of a general departing, they test their wings, the thermal currents, fighting for updrafts to carry them to, or carry them from, life. Here is courage and will and imagination and tenacity. Where, God, are you? (Kushner 1995, 219-220)

In this section of Kushner's prayer, it is his decision to explicitly and publicly name his "considerable rage" that most interests me. Consider the situation: In 1995, the AIDS epidemic had been going on for well over a decade. There were precious few treatments, and nothing close to a cure. Thousands upon thousands of people had sickened and died, beset by a nightmarish constellation of symptoms, often in the prime of their lives: lesions and wasting, pneumonia and blindness, fevers and night sweats, intestinal parasites and dementia. It was a health crisis of epic proportions, a national tragedy—and yet, many people did not recognize it as such, because the vast majority of its victims were gay men. Instead of a public health emergency, the government and society at large acted as though AIDS were God's punishment for sexual deviance, and they were prepared to let it run its course.

In 1985, four years after the appearance of the first cases, Larry Kramer, one of the first and most strident AIDS activists, wrote *The Normal Heart*, a play in which the main character, a stand-in for Kramer himself, shouts “I’m trying to understand why nobody wants to hear we’re dying, why nobody wants to help, why my own brother doesn’t want to help” (1985, 62). He was right to be bewildered, and right to be angry. While people inside the gay community scrambled to save each other and themselves, no one else appeared to care. What is the proper reaction, then, of the victims of the epidemic, faced with this stunning failure of empathy borne of prejudice, fear, and hatred? Rage—directed at the baffled medical establishment, the apathetic government, the ashamed family, the uncaring society, the apparently absent God—begins to seem not only justified but inevitable.

Public anger, however, is rarely well received, no matter how righteous a cause is in the eyes of its advocates. Holloway Sparks, for example, writes that civility theorists view anger and other strong emotions in the public sphere as an inherent threat to democracy (2014). In this view, public anger is dangerous and should be avoided at all costs. While this proscription is not universal, it is a common one in the American context, especially when the people who are expressing anger are not the ones who hold political power. Marilyn Frye (1983) notes that anger is viewed with particular suspicion when it is voiced by women, and I argue that the same is true of other marginalized populations, including racial and sexual minorities. My goal in this thesis is to analyze what can happen when the idea that public anger is dangerous is flouted, particularly by oppressed people.

To explore what becomes possible when marginalized people display anger publicly, particularly in the context of the AIDS crisis, I turn to the case of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). ACT UP’s story is compelling because of its complexities and its

contradictions. It is a story of considerable rage, turned both outward and inward, but it is also a story of creativity and vibrancy and love. It is a story of people achieving the impossible and still coming up short. It is a story of illness and death and tragedy, but also, as Kushner says, of courage and will and imagination and tenacity. It is a story of lives both lost and saved. It is a story worth telling, because it was important thirty years ago, and it is important now.

To tell this story, I begin with an overview of perspectives on political anger, to lay the contextual groundwork for understanding ACT UP's activism and its external and internal conflicts. Next, I briefly discuss the early years of the AIDS crisis to delineate the environment out of which ACT UP was born, and chronicle the founding, structure, and tactics of the organization itself. Then, I describe the *ACT UP Oral History Project*, the primary source that I used to analyze ACT UP's work. The Project consists of long-form interviews of surviving members of the New York chapter of ACT UP, and I outline the method I used to analyze them as well as the prominent themes that I discovered.

From this contextual foundation, I build my analysis of the anger dynamics at work in ACT UP. I analyze three distinct aspects of ACT UP, which I argue can all be attributed to different manifestations of anger. The first of these, involving anger, religiosity and sacrilege, centers around what ACT UP did at Stop the Church, a large and well-known demonstration they held in December 1989, aimed at critiquing the anti-gay policies of the Catholic Church. I analyze both the internal anger that this action engendered within ACT UP and the external anger of the public's reaction. The external aspect aligns with the literature on political anger that I outline in the first chapter, but the anger dynamics within ACT UP around Stop the Church are less studied, and I want to highlight them as well. Ultimately, I argue that the manifestation of anger at Stop the Church, while it was poorly received by some people inside ACT UP and

virtually everyone outside of it, constituted a highly effective use of political anger, because it achieved its aim of calling attention to the hypocrisy of the Church's positions.

I then move into two more analyses of how anger functioned within ACT UP. The first of these examines the matter of gendered anger and highlights how and why the men and women of ACT UP experienced anger in different ways and for different reasons, and the effects that these differences had on ACT UP's activism. The mere notion that men and women might experience anger differently is not revolutionary, but within the context of ACT UP, the gender roles that emerge become interesting. In a time period when homosexuality was still widely considered to be deviant, anyone who was openly involved with any sort of gay organization was not likely to conform to traditional gender roles. And yet in ACT UP, which was supposedly organized in an egalitarian and non-hierarchical manner, familiar gender-related patterns begin to surface.

Men— particularly the relatively affluent, white, gay men who comprised the lion's share of ACT UP's membership—advanced an activist agenda that prioritized their own interests, in effect placing the spotlight squarely on themselves, while women were often relegated to a supportive, caretaking role as their own concerns were deemphasized. I argue that this reemergence of traditional gender roles in an unexpected space, while perhaps not surprising, was a major source of conflict within ACT UP, and that the gendered resentment that arose from these dynamics eventually led to a split in the organization in the early 1990s.

The last dimension of anger within ACT UP that I analyze is the least studied, but I think crucially important to understanding why ACT UP operated the way that it did, and why it succeeded in some areas and failed in others. Fundamentally, unlike other social movements, ACT UP was forced to contend with the fact that some (many) of its members were dying. My study indicates that there was tension between the dying and the non-dying, stemming from the

fact that the people who were about to die (or at least perceived they were about to die) claimed a moral clarity and authority that others could not. I believe that this indicates a different, and perhaps more acute, form of rage among the dying, one tinged with desperation.

This desperation meant that the most gravely ill people in ACT UP were able to use their impending deaths as a trump card when disagreements arose about the breadth of issues ACT UP should attempt to address. This resulted in a divide: on one side were the dying people (mostly white men), who wanted to focus narrowly on medical, treatment-related activism primarily centered around clinical trials, under the mantra “drugs into bodies.” Understandably, they wanted all of ACT UP’s resources to go toward finding treatments that might be able to save their lives. On the other side were most of ACT UP’s women and people of color (although it should be noted that this faction also included white men who were HIV-negative or positive but asymptomatic). Many of the women, in particular, had been politicized prior to ACT UP, active in the feminist movement or the peace movement, and therefore had the life experience to view the work they were doing with a broader lens. They advocated to move ACT UP’s agenda beyond “drugs into bodies” and address a range of issues affecting people with AIDS, including access to and affordability of drugs for indigent people, needle exchanges for injection drug users, housing issues, insurance advocacy, and changing the CDC definition of AIDS to include symptoms that were common in women, but not in men (Christensen 2010, Eigo 2004, Timour 2003, Pearl 2011, Elovitch 2007, Carlomusto 2002). They concerned themselves, in Kushner’s words, with “the injection-drug user, the baby with AIDS, the sex worker [and], the woman whose lover was infected,” as well as “the gay man whose lover was infected” and, of course, “the infected lover” (Kushner 1995, 217). I do not intend to suggest that either of these approaches is indefensible; both have their merits. However, I do contend that the conflict

between the two had a significant effect on how ACT UP functioned, and ultimately contributed to its premature decline in the mid-1990s. While my arguments about tension between dying and non-dying people and the tension between men and women are similar, I give the anger of the dying its own section because it is, to a large extent unique to ACT UP. Gendered division of labor is a common phenomenon across social movements (Jasper 2014), but working under the constant threat of a deadly virus is not.

I conclude by reassessing the appropriateness of public, political anger in light of my in-depth study of ACT UP. I also discuss the lessons that can be learned from ACT UP in the current American political environment.

I have undertaken this research for several reasons. The first and most important is that ACT UP is instructive as an example of what citizens can—must—do to save themselves when their government and society as a whole refuse to acknowledge their humanity. Understanding ACT UP—and the various ways that their justified anger shaped their activism—has arguably never been more important than it is at the present political moment in the United States. While some theorists would contend that political anger is dangerous and that civility should reign in the public sphere, I would argue that it is less important to (pretend to) be civil and more important to resist singing “Kum Ba Ya” while the rights of vulnerable people are stripped away.

This work is also important because there is a gap in the literature pertaining to ACT UP. Although ACT UP still exists today in diminished form, most members and scholars agree that, due to a combination of death, exhaustion, internal politics, and the introduction of protease inhibitors, the end of its heyday occurred sometime in the early to mid-1990s. In the nearly twenty-five years since, much has been written about ACT UP and its pivotal role in the AIDS crisis. However, the existing ACT UP literature—scholarly and otherwise—insufficiently

addresses the role that anger played in ACT UP's tactics, its internal dynamics, its agenda-setting, and its premature demise. Considering that ACT UP billed itself as "a diverse, non-partisan group of individuals, united in *anger* and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis" (Hubbard & Schulman 2012, emphasis mine), analyzing the role of anger in ACT UP specifically is a topic ripe for further study. Synthesizing the primary sources of the *ACT UP Oral History Project* interviews with both the existing literature on ACT UP and the broader body of literature on the role of emotions in social movements will allow for a deeper understanding of how political anger has effected change in the past and how it may do so in the future. There is a compelling story to be told about anger in ACT UP, a story that challenges the idea that anger is an inherently dangerous force that needs to be controlled. Ultimately, I argue for an interpretation of ACT UP which contends that, while anger can indeed be destructive, it can also, in the right circumstances, be both a necessity and a gift.

Chapter One

Perspectives on Political Anger, Social Movements, and ACT UP

The debate over the expression of anger in the public sphere is not new. However, much of the existing literature on political anger focuses on how anger is perceived, and who is allowed to express it publicly. This literature therefore only addresses the external portions of the questions about anger I am asking in this thesis. In the first section of this literature review, I will summarize important perspectives in this body of literature.

Historically, social movements have not been well-studied in the political science literature, although that has begun to change in recent years. To address this gap, in the second section, I will turn to social movement literature from various social science disciplines (principally sociology) in order to highlight the major perspectives about how anger functions internally within social movements.

Lastly, I will summarize the existing literature about ACT UP itself. Much has been written about ACT UP in the past quarter century. However, perhaps unsurprisingly given the subject matter, there has been a focus on emotionally evocative but non-scholarly forms, notably journalism, memoir, and documentary film. I will summarize these important sources as well as the limited scholarly literature on ACT UP that does exist, while arguing that the role of emotions—especially anger—within ACT UP is an understudied phenomenon.

I will conclude by situating my own project at the intersection of these three bodies of literature. I contend that, by synthesizing these literatures and using them to analyze the rich trove of primary source information found in the *ACT UP Oral History Project*, we can gain valuable knowledge about anger and political activism that can be used to both understand the past and shape the future.

I. Political Anger

Foundational Theories on Anger in Activism

In addition to the literature on ACT UP, my project draws on scholarship analyzing the role of anger in other social movements, including the Tea Party (Sparks 2015), the pro-immigration protests of 2006 (Beltrán 2009), and the black feminist liberation movement (Lorde 1984).

Holloway Sparks' article on anger in the Tea Party movement is crucial to my understanding of why political anger is often so poorly received in the American context. Sparks notes that the Tea Party movement has used anger and outrage to its advantage, even with the American tendency to keep anger out of the public sphere under the guise of civility. Sparks writes, "Civility theorists offer one of the most broad-ranging critiques of strong passions like anger in the public sphere...In this literature, anger is often a causal source of uncivil violence, including urban riots, road rage, hate crimes, and terrorism, and a causal source of destructive forms of political incivility ranging from vitriolic campaign ads to disrespect on the floor of legislatures" (2014, 29). Sparks is certainly correct that ACT UP, as well as other groups as diverse as the civil rights movement to the Tea Party, have been decried as uncivil. And clearly, there is a point when anger becomes more problematic than it is useful. However, Sparks suggests that there is much more latitude for useful anger in the public sphere without posing a danger to democracy than civility theorists—and most Americans—believe. Not unlike the Tea Party activists, ACT UPpers effectively exploited the significant gap between the type of anger that the American public is comfortable with and transgressive acts that are too deeply alienating to be politically useful.

Cristina Beltrán analyzes another example of the effective use of anger in politics: the pro-immigration protests of 2006. In an Arendtian reading of the immigration marches, Beltrán characterizes the protests as “events in which noncitizens experienced a richer and more expressive instance of citizenship than the vast majority of their legally sanctioned counterparts” (2009, 598). Beltrán returns many times to the idea that protest is informed by a performative, “festive” anger. Festive anger is complex, encompassing “indignation, determination, irony, outrage, and joy” (2009, 607). It “suggest[s] that marchers weren't simply enacting the desire to belong but, rather, were simultaneously taking pleasure in acts of defiance and public provocation” (2009, 608), a description that could easily apply to an ACT UP demonstration. Festive anger, Beltrán contends, gives rise to an apparent paradox, permitting “the citizenship of aliens” as well as the “noncitizenship of citizens” (Bosniak 2006 in Beltrán 2009, 604).

While Beltrán, writing about immigration, is more interested in the “citizenship of aliens” side of this equation, ACT UP (and indeed AIDS activism and the gay liberation movement as a whole) was more concerned with the noncitizenship of citizens. While most of the people in ACT UP were white men and the vast majority were legal citizens, they were, in their time of need, confronted with unfathomable cruelty from the society to which they ostensibly belonged. As ACT UP member Blair Fell noted, during the first years of the AIDS crisis, the gay community was “on a sinking ship that no one cared about, that the straight world was like, ‘Die already. You’re just homos.’” (2012, 13). While it is not my intention to inappropriately conflate the plight of people with AIDS and undocumented immigrants, Beltrán’s work shows that there are numerous parallels, which likely explain the similarities between the festive anger she describes and the work of ACT UP. For instance, Beltrán writes that “Latinos in the United States have a long history of being characterized as dangerous figures of excess” (2009, 614).

This is also true of gay men, and was such a pervasive attitude during the height of the AIDS crisis that it was common to hear AIDS framed, by both public figures and private citizens, as a “gay plague,” a fitting punishment for promiscuous, sinful behavior.

When Beltrán describes the connection between the plight of the undocumented immigrant and the character of the immigration marches more specifically, using the Arendtian lens, the parallel with ACT UP becomes even more obvious. She writes,

What Arendt identifies as the desire for distinction, the struggle for individuation through “action in concert” lies at the heart of the immigrant rights marches. In making themselves present en masse, marchers sought to counteract the feeling of being faceless and unknown. Sick of living in fear, the undocumented were attempting a collective response to the dehumanizing and intolerable effects of illegality (2009, 605).

With the change of a few descriptors, this passage becomes a cogent explanation of what motivated ACT UP, and why collective action, along with “festive anger,” proved to be such crucial tactics in effective AIDS activism.

Audre Lorde’s work on the uses of anger in political protest in the struggle for black feminist liberation also prove instructive when considering the case of ACT UP. Although she is careful to distinguish between anger and hatred (anger is useful for the oppressed, while hatred is destructive), Lorde takes perhaps the most radical position of the theorists discussed here as to when anger is appropriate in political action: she views it as not only permissible but crucial in the face of injustice.

In *The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism*, Lorde writes,

Any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger. This discussion must be direct and creative because it is crucial. We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty; we must be quite serious about the choice of this topic and the angers entwined within it because, rest assured, our opponents are quite serious about their hatred of us and of what we are trying to do here. (1984, 128-129)

Like Lorde and her contemporaries, ACT UPpers were constantly confronted with opponents who were quite serious about their hatred, ranging from their own families to, arguably, the President of the United States. ACT UP member Amy Bauer, for instance, describes her estrangement from her mother over her homosexuality, and contends that, “when the family and society are pathological in the same way... You create your own community, or you live your life very much alone” (Bauer 2004, 10). The fundamental human desire not to live life alone drove gay men and lesbians to ACT UP, and has, over time, motivated marginalized people of all kinds to band together and make their anger known to their oppressors. This reinforces the point that it is crucial, in the face of widespread hatred, to have a community in which to make political use of anger. A communal framework for the politically effective performance of anger aptly describes not only ACT UP but also the contexts outlined by Sparks, Beltrán, and Lorde.

Perceptions of Political Anger

A significant subset of the literature on political anger discusses how displays of political anger are received differently depending on who is making them. While public anger is often proscribed in general, it is more likely to be tolerated from people who are (or at least appear to be) privileged than by those who are marginalized. Much of this literature uses a feminist lens to dissect how women are discouraged from public anger, but I assert that the same argument applies to the members of ACT UP, many of whom were marginalized in multiple ways. One example of this literature is Marilyn Frye’s piece “A Note on Anger” (1983). Frye claims that anger is denied to women as a legitimate emotion, which in turn denies them their agency and marginalizes them. The idea of marginalized groups—particularly women but also racial minorities—having their anger dismissed or viewed as suspect is a common theme throughout

the literature. Frye argues that, in order to be justifiably angry, one has to have been wronged, and that being wronged requires having been correct in the first place.

While I am not trying to use this thesis to argue that ACT UP was unfailingly correct in everything they thought, said, and did, they certainly had a claim to having been wronged by the government and by society. In their situation, Frye argues—and I agree—that anger is both “appropriate” and “righteous” (1983, 86).

Mary Holmes (2004) also looks at political anger in the feminist movement. While noting that the role of anger in facilitating political mobilization is frequently discussed, she wonders how anger manifests itself as people continue to do politics after being mobilized. She uses a Marxist approach, reflecting on conflict as the “engine of social change” in an attempt to parse how anger functions in political life (Holmes 2004, 130). Arguing that there is a clear utility to a politics of anger, she challenges scholarly attempts to ignore emotion in the realm of politics in the name of “rationality.” This “anger as irrational” argument serves much the same function as the “anger is dangerous” argument that Sparks references from civility theory. However, Holmes rejects this argument, using debates within the feminist movement to examine how a politicized anger can lead to an understanding of conflict as constructive, rather than as a problem to be avoided.

In her conclusion, Holmes situates political anger not only as crucial for mobilizing people (in the form of resentment), but also as a “way in which the dominant might unlearn their privilege” (224). This is relevant to my study of ACT UP in two ways. First, privilege was a problem within ACT UP, as there was a tendency to prioritize the specific goals of affluent white gay men over everyone else. As the “dominant” group in ACT UP, white men were often resistant to having their privilege called out by others, especially women. Second, ACT UP’s

work can be understood as an attempt to force the straight world to unlearn its privilege in the context of the AIDS crisis. While straight people tried desperately to ignore the AIDS crisis by framing it as a “gay disease,” ACT UP let it be known that they were not going to go away quietly.

Peter Lyman makes a similar argument to Holmes’ in “The Domestication of Anger: The Use and Abuse of Anger in Politics” (2004). Lyman notes that it is common to hear that anger is dangerous—either individually, in terms of order, or to the possibility of political dialogue. By casting anger as an “indispensable political emotion,” Lyman questions if the common perception of anger as dangerous has merit. He concludes that the hypothesis of anger as danger to social order is wrong, because “order” itself is grounded in a certain type of anger practiced by a certain group of people (namely, white middle-class men who are afraid of losing their power). In this way, Lyman argues that anger is domesticated in the service of order. Lyman also concludes that the idea that anger is diametrically opposed to constructive political dialogue is misguided—rather, he states that anger must be heard with empathy (rather than ignored) to make political dialogue possible.

Lyman also writes that the roots of the word “anger” contains elements of grief, affliction, and strangling, and therefore, in its ancient form, was more associated with suffering and loss than with aggression or loss of control. Lyman’s description of this shift in the meaning of anger goes a long way toward explaining the difference between the way in which members of ACT UP viewed *themselves* as angry and the way in which they were perceived to be angry *by others*. Throughout this paper, I maintain that ACT UP’s anger, while it had problematic aspects, was fundamentally justified because it stemmed from such immense suffering. However, because ACT UP was a group of heavily marginalized individuals, their anger was not met with

empathy, but rather with blame—outsiders viewed their anger as unjustified, out of control behavior. This reaction served to make ACT UP even angrier and more desperate.

Victoria Henderson (2008) also offers a defense, albeit a qualified one, of anger in the public sphere, and argues particularly against anger being supplanted by hope. Henderson contends that anger is being displaced in the public sphere by a politics of hope, and that this development should be challenged because anger is not only the dominant reaction to injustice but also much more effective than hope at redressing it. She traces the history of anger, defending its presence in the public sphere, although not uncritically. She argues against situating anger as a “politically fragile achievement” (28), and concludes that, while an excess of anger is undeniably problematic in the political sphere, its absence is arguably more so.

In terms of my project, I am interested in Henderson’s characterization of oppression as “interpretive dismissal” (31), in which society discounts emotions from marginalized groups as “bitterness” in order to silence them. While Henderson primarily discusses anger in the context of the feminist movement, I believe her analysis is also helpful in understanding why ACT UP turned to anger in the face of the AIDS crisis, in spite of its potential negative consequences.

Patricia White offers an even stronger defense of political anger than Henderson does. She poses the question, “Does political anger have a legitimate place in a democracy?” She argues that both the feeling of political anger and the expression of it are constrained by norms, particularly if the angry people in question are women and/or of low status in society. After distinguishing between personal, social, and political anger, White analyzes arguments in favor of a society where political anger is proscribed in favor of conflict resolution. However, she concludes that suppression of political anger in a democracy, while it might be possible, is not desirable. Rather, she sees political anger as a complex but significant force in democracy that

can be integral to protecting democratic values. She advocates civic education as a way to make sure that people can wield political anger responsibly when the time comes to protect something that is important to them.

The “civic education” that White describes would help to counteract the tendency to conflate anger with violence (something which White notes happens often in anti-anger arguments). I think the failure to conceive of nonviolent political anger contributes greatly to why political anger is often so poorly received even when it is justified. ACT UP was committed to nonviolence, including not damaging property, but were often perceived by the public (or the police) as violent or about to become violent. This fear can be traced back to the civility argument, which situates all anger as dangerous.

Against Political Anger

While the majority of my sources tend to defend the merits of political anger, I did find one reasonably compelling argument that pushes back against the idea that ACT UP’s performance of anger was effective in accomplishing their goals. Marcyrose Chvasta asks whether “carnavalesque”¹ protest is effective, using ACT UP and anti-Iraq War protests as her main examples. She argues that this type of protest has real limitations in efficacy which activists may be reluctant to acknowledge, and that it is unlikely to effect actual change in social policy. Chvasta situates ACT UP’s carnivalesque techniques as a “failure,” arguing that, as ACT UP became more theatrical in their anger, their policy victories became few and far between. In the

¹ Chvasta defines “carnavalesque” tactics as those which can transform anger into “humor, irony, and celebratory glee” (2006, 5). She maintains that carnivalesque tactics were popular with ACT UP (8), an assessment with which I agree. However, I part company with Chvasta when she contends that carnivalesque protest either “does not work” or “is not working anymore” (12). I believe that the persistent appearance of ACT UP-like tactics in current protest movements shows that carnivalesque tactics have worked, and can still work.

case of ACT UP, Chvasta wonders if “performance scholars and practitioners have overstated their success in an effort to create some historical heroes and practical validation” (9).

While I disagree with the conclusion of this article (I think ACT UP had more policy-related success than Chvasta does), I value its perspective precisely because it questions some of my assumptions about ACT UP in particular and the value of different types of anger in civic activism in general.

II. Social Movements

General Social Movement Literature

To study the role of emotions in social movements, it is necessary to examine how social movements work more generally, and Sidney Tarrow’s *Power in Movement* (1994) provides a good overview. In particular, the chapter “Seizing and Making Opportunities” addresses the question, “Why do ordinary people at times pour into the streets, risking life and limb to lay claim to their rights or to attack others?” (81). Tarrow argues that, counterintuitively, social movements rarely arise purely because people are being deprived in some way, no matter how serious that deprivation is—after all, there are many instances of deprivation that do not result in social movements. Rather, he contends that the primary explanation for the birth of social movements is whether people who are seeking to change the status quo gain access to political opportunity.

While this is a prevailing view in social movement theory, and one which Tarrow defends well from a comparative perspective, the case of ACT UP presents problems for the political-opportunity model (see Gould in Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001). Arguably, ACT UP came into being precisely because people with AIDS were facing such severe privation and because anyone with political power seemed completely unmoved by their suffering.

Social Movement Dynamics in General

In order to examine how anger shaped the internal dynamics of ACT UP, it is important to understand how the dynamics of social movements tend to function in general. Jasper (2014) is exemplary on this point. In “Constructing Indignation: Anger Dynamic in Protest Movements,” he investigates five questions: Why do individuals join or drop out of social movements? Why do new movements and themes emerge? How are strategic decisions made? How do opponents, authorities, and other players react? What impacts do social movements have? (208). He claims that explanations involving the role of emotions have been given for the first question in social movement literature, but not the others. Because Jasper contends that emotional dynamics are key to most, if not all, of the processes that comprise protest, he argues that emotions should be brought to bear on the other questions, as well. Among the emotions, he sees anger and indignation (which he conceptualizes as morally grounded anger) as particularly crucial to the causal mechanisms underpinning social protest, including mobilization, solidarity, directing blame for social problems, and creating sympathy for protestors.

Jasper argues that anger creates a gendered division of labor within social movements, in which women provide the “glue” for social movements by doing emotion work, largely because women’s anger in the public sphere tends to be dismissed or censored (2014, 211). While I am not sure that I see precisely this happening in ACT UP (where there were plenty of proudly angry women), I have noticed a gender divide in my study of interviews, where the anger of men and sick people (groups that overlapped to a great extent) was more narrowly focused and seen as more important, leading to resentment among some of the women who favored an agenda that addressed a broader range of issues facing people with AIDS. I address this in more detail in Chapter 3.

Social Movement Theory Perspectives

To discuss how ACT UP may or may not fit into common perspectives in social movement theory, I turn to earlier work by two theorists: Gould (2001) and Jasper (1997). In a chapter in *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, Gould presents an earlier version of the argument she would make later in *Moving Politics*. In this work, she poses the question(s) “Why did lesbians and gay men become politically active in the face of AIDS (never an inevitable development), and why did they embrace angry and militant street activism after a generation of engagement in routine interest group politics?” (135). Drawing evidence from ACT UP events in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco, Gould argues that standard social movement theory does not account for the advent of ACT UP, and that ACT UP’s emergence is directly in contrast with the political-opportunity model. ACT UP subverts this model, Gould claims, because it came into being in spite of—or perhaps because of—drastically limited political opportunity. To understand why, she examines the interactions between external factors (such as government (non) response to the AIDS crisis, with factors internal to the gay community, principally a deep ambivalence which hampered the community’s political response to AIDS prior to the mid-1980s.

In contrast, Jasper argues (more or less contemporaneously) that ACT UP serves as an example of the cultural perspective within social movement theory. In his chapter of *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements*, Jasper, building on sociological social movement research, investigates a cultural hypothesis to answer the question of why people protest. He argues for an understanding of the motivations underlying political activism that is rooted not only in place and time but also in moments that require a sense of moral reckoning, one of which is death, or impending death.

Jasper mentions ACT UP parenthetically as an example of activists motivated by the specter of death, which is something that has stood out very clearly to me in my research as driving a very particular type of anger—an angry desperation that gave dying people significantly more ability to agenda-set within ACT UP. As Jasper notes, “Threats to our understanding and our life passages [birth, death, and sexual relations] will lead to moral outrage” (96). Therefore, Jasper sees ACT UP as a prime example of a cultural approach to social movement theory, whereas Gould argues that ACT UP formed in defiance of social movement theory. On this point, I agree with Jasper. I take up the interrelation of death and anger in ACT UP in Chapter 3.

III. ACT UP

There are a few accounts of ACT UP’s activities and accomplishments, in both written and documentary form, that chronicle the apex of ACT UP’s activism, from 1987 to about 1993 (France 2013, France 2016, Gould 2009, and Schulman and Hubbard 2012). Another subgenre of the literature is comprised of books that serve primarily or partially as memoirs of ACT UP members, cataloguing their individual experiences (Gould 2009, Schulman 2012, and Strub 2014 fall into this category). However, except for Gould’s book, which functions as a memoir, a relatively comprehensive history of ACT UP, and a scholarly work, none of these documentaries and memoirs can be considered scholarship.

There is a significant amount of scholarly literature on ACT UP, but a great deal of it is unconcerned with the emotional sphere of activism. Instead, it focuses largely on ACT UP’s tremendous success in treatment activism (Epstein 1996), ACT UP’s response to the Reagan administration (Brier 2009, Patton 1996), or attempts to situate ACT UP in broader social movement theory (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008, Gamson 1989).

The major exception to these trends in ACT UP literature is Gould's *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (2009), which is by far the most comprehensive work on how emotions drove ACT UP's activism and shaped its tactics. In the book, Gould reflects on her own experiences as a member of ACT UP/Chicago and discusses how the movement helped the activists themselves make sense of a world in which so much had been ripped away from them. Much more than any other theorist or memoirist, Gould discusses the absolute centrality and intensity of both positive and negative emotions within ACT UP.

However, while Gould certainly covers anger as one of several emotions that played a central role in ACT UP, in general she seems to privilege the role of positive emotions over negative ones. She points to the emotional work of ACT UP as crucial to its sustainability, writing that "[l]ove drove and sustained our activism" (2009, 202). She posits that while the life-and-death urgency of much of ACT UP's work did much to keep members involved, there were also other forces at work; namely, ACT UP gave its members a way to make a place for themselves in a hostile world (2009, 177).

While Gould's work on the pleasures of love-driven activism is moving and important, I am unsatisfied by the way she situates the role that anger played in ACT UP. When Gould discusses anger, she focuses more on the affective emotional state of anger, the *feeling* of it, and its presence in ACT UP, and less on the specific performances and actions through which that anger manifested itself (2009, 3). I posit that it is in the performance of anger, not merely the affect of it, that ACT UP was forced to contend with the line between useful and destructive anger.

A second ACT UP-related work that touches on anger is Robert Goss' *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (1994), which recasts the anger of AIDS activists in general, and

ACT UP in particular, as a righteous and even Christ-like response to oppression. The idea that ACT UP—referred to by countless others as “rude,” “rash,” “unreasonable,” and “sacrilegious”—was fueled by a profoundly moral and righteous anger is, to say the least, a refreshing take. Goss writes, “Gay/lesbian Christians must not avoid the power of their anger. It is the energy from which they forge...affinity groups that struggle for justice....Their collective outbursts of holy anger and justified rage are precipitated by an impatience not to accept any longer homophobic violence and oppression” (1993, 145). Goss reads ACT UP’s *collective* anger as a holy and justified struggle for justice and against oppression, a source of energy and love rather than division and alienation.

Goss’ work provides an unconventional and valuable perspective on the character of ACT UP’s anger, but its explicitly theological nature fundamentally separates it from the work I am doing here. I am less concerned with whether ACT UP’s anger was inherently holy or sacrilegious than the ways in which that anger functioned within and shaped ACT UP’s activism.

IV. Conclusion

I envision this project somewhere in the middle of these three literatures. I rely on all of them: the political anger literature explains much about when public anger is and is not seen as problematic externally while the social movement literature provides perspectives on how anger affects movements internally. Knowing the existing ACT UP literature, of course, is vital to understanding my specific case. Yet none of them alone, or even in combination, proves satisfactory in answering my main questions: How did anger manifest itself in ACT UP, and what did those specific manifestations of anger make possible in terms of activism? I use the case study of ACT UP to argue that much of the concern about anger in the public sphere is misplaced. While there is a history of problematic anger dynamics within social movements,

including ACT UP, their rage also proved crucial to what they were able to accomplish, and there is much to learn from their example.

Chapter Two

“ACT UP, Fight Back, Fight AIDS:” Studying ACT UP

Why study ACT UP? There are other social movements I could have chosen, other ways I could have gone about studying political anger. But once I came across the story of ACT UP, I found myself drawn to it for two reasons. The first is the horrifying and yet fascinating uniqueness of the situation. Most activists are fighting a political battle for their rights, to be seen and heard and listened to. Movements are, on this level, a struggle between the marginalized and the powerful. This was certainly true of ACT UP; and they were adept at calling out institutions for their poor treatment of marginalized populations with AIDS. Frequent targets were the Reagan and Bush administrations and the Catholic Church, whom ACT UP derided for their exacerbation of the crisis through inaction, fear-mongering, and misinformation.

What makes ACT UP different from other movements is that, stacked on top of this political struggle was an intense and immediate medical crisis, a struggle for physical survival. This is not to say that ACT UP was the first protest movement in which lives were directly or indirectly at stake; it was not. However, I would argue it was the first movement largely comprised of people who *knew* they would die (as opposed to fearing they *might* die) if their movement was unsuccessful. They were facing not just a plague of injustice and discrimination but also a literal one, that was killing them quickly and in large numbers. The presence of this constant threat of death had a significant impact on the way that ACT UP expressed anger, making it more explicit; someone who is infected, who might die this month or next, has no time to worry about being polite. I do not argue that this specific anger—deeply political and yet tinged with a personal, physical, desperation—was either wholly good or wholly bad for ACT UP in terms of their effectiveness, as it was almost certainly a combination of both. I do contend

that the presence of this particular type of political anger, stemming from the presence of plague, was so foundational to everything that ACT UP did that it justifies the use of ACT UP as a single case study to investigate the uses of political anger.

“I am talking about the Plague.... The years from 1981 to 1996, when there was a mass death experience of young people. Where folks my age watched in horror as our friends, their lovers, cultural heroes, influences, buddies, the people who witnessed our lives as we witnessed theirs, as these folks sickened and died consistently for fifteen years. Have you heard about it?” (Schulman 2012, 45). This quotation, from Schulman’s *The Gentrification of the Mind*, provides a perfect segue from the first reason I felt compelled to center ACT UP in this project (the fight against plague) to the second: how few people seem to remember—or even know about—that fight.

As I write this, I am thirty years old, the next generation down from Schulman’s. I was born just a few months after ACT UP, yet I did not know of its existence until I was twenty-six, when I watched *How to Survive a Plague* (2013) on Netflix, on a whim. I did not know anything about ACT UP beyond the narrative evinced by that documentary² until a year and a half ago, when I began working on this project. In that time, I have encountered among people close to my own age two levels of knowledge about ACT UP: *How to Survive a Plague*, and nothing.

I find this, to put it mildly, troubling. If we allow ACT UP to fade into oblivion, or choose to remember it only in a whitewashed, sanitized way, we will do a disservice not only to those who died—and continue to die—in the fight against the AIDS crisis, but also to ourselves, for there is much to learn from ACT UP, lessons about anger and cruelty and activism and

² *How to Survive a Plague* is a serviceable introduction to AIDS activism, but the narrative of the AIDS crisis it puts forth is narrow at best and problematically so at worst. Schulman refers to this narrative as “the five white people who saved the world” (Jung 2014), a description that I find accurate if not particularly charitable.

compassion that we forget at our peril. The first section of this chapter, I will provide necessary context about ACT UP, to set the stage for my study. In the second section, I will justify the method I used to study the different aspects of anger that characterized ACT UP—textual analysis of the interviews archived in the *ACT UP Oral History Project*.

I. Context

Dark Days: The AIDS Crisis before 1987

It is utterly uncontroversial to say that the early years of the AIDS crisis in America were marked by profound desperation. If anything, it is an understatement: in the first six years of the epidemic, AIDS killed 40,000 people in the United States and precious little had been done to stop it (Hubbard & Schulman 2012). AIDS before the days of effective treatment was a monstrous disease by any measure.

In the early days of the epidemic, AIDS affected gay and bisexual men almost exclusively—so much so that it was referred to first as “gay disease,” “gay cancer” and “gay plague.” In June 1982, the disease was coined GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency). The sexual orientation neutral term AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) was not used until September 1982, well over a year after the discovery of the first cases (Epstein 1996, 50). The usage of these terms reflects the sad reality that early victims of AIDS were not only fighting the disease itself, with its horrific symptoms and lack of effective treatments. They also faced a society that was openly hostile to them at every turn and an administration that, for years, gave no sign of caring about the crisis and treated it, incredibly, as a joke (Calonico 2015). They had ample reason for despair.

Early AIDS Activism: Tracing the Evolution of ACT UP

AIDS activism from 1981-1986 had a distinctly different character from the direct action movement that followed it. Gould acknowledges the difficulty of writing about this period of activism in its own right without merely seeing it as a precursor to ACT UP (2009, 56). She describes the “dominant, heroic” narrative of AIDS activism in the early years of the epidemic this way:

At its simplest, the narrative goes like this: from the earliest days of the AIDS epidemic, amid the incredibly hostile and budget-cutting climate of the Reagan year and in the face of almost no governmental or other outside help, lesbians and gay men—friends and lovers of people with AIDS (PWAs), community activists, sympathetic medical professionals, and PWAs themselves—worked together to provide services and care to people who were ill and dying. Facing government inaction, and out of gay pride, self-respect, and love for their sick brothers and for their beleaguered communities, they immersed themselves in emergency caretaking and formed the earliest [AIDS service organizations] (2009, 56-57).

However, Gould notes that this narrative, while broadly accurate, is incomplete because it fails to acknowledge either the desire of the gay community for recognition and respect from an intensely heteronormative society or the pervasiveness of gay shame, which, Gould argues, shaped the community’s early response to the epidemic, making it substantially less confrontational than the direct action movement that would come later.

Randy Shilts, writing prior to the formation of ACT UP, highlights the formation of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) as one of the hallmarks of early AIDS activism, which was more focused on service provision and education than on political protest (1987, 181). While the early years of the epidemic were desperate, most activists (with the notable exception of GMHC’s founder, Larry Kramer) were reluctant to become further alienated from officials and institutions that they believed might help them. Within GMHC and other organizations, there

was a sense that the need for care and service provision was too great, and there was no time to be political about the AIDS crisis.

Joe Wright describes the early years of AIDS activism as an attempt to combat a phenomenon he terms “social death,” in which a person is thought to be “as good as dead” and thus “denied roles in community life.” Wright cites the 1983 Denver Principles, which was the first document outlining strategies for self-empowerment for people with AIDS, as the first concrete step toward resisting social death in the context of the AIDS epidemic. Although Wright acknowledges the significant differences between early AIDS activism and ACT UP, he draws a direct connection between the empowering language of the Denver Principles with ACT UP’s later work around empowering people with AIDS to be in charge of their own treatment: “...although many people within ACT UP thought of it primarily as a gay and lesbian social movement...the earlier ideas of self-empowerment of people with AIDS eventually became a fundamental part of ACT UP’s politics” (2013, 1796).

The Birth of ACT UP

Formed in March 1987 in New York, ACT UP quickly became a nationwide movement largely composed of people trying to save their own lives, having realized that no one else could be counted upon to do it for them (Franke-Ruta 2007, 61). Whether their activism was rooted in self-preservation, empathy, or both, they marshaled themselves to fight the epidemic, the system, and their own despair under the motto “a diverse, non-partisan group of individuals, united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis” (Hubbard & Schulman 2012). And they were willing to do whatever it took. They stopped traffic. They disrupted Mass at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York. They became their own immunologists. They got arrested. They occupied the FDA and the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. They took on Ronald

Reagan, George Bush, Bill Clinton, Ed Koch, Cardinal O'Connor, and Jesse Helms, among others. While they were clearly not entirely successful, they won some remarkable victories—notably, permanently altering the FDA's policy on drug trials (Epstein 1996, 236-237). ACT UP's success in using direct action techniques to stand up for the rights of marginalized citizens—and to force the government into action on their behalf—makes the organization eminently relevant and worthy of study.

ACT UP's Structure

The hallmarks of ACT UP's structure were that it was coalitional (hence the name) and unwaveringly democratic, a system that allowed for a wide range of opinions to be voiced, consistent with ACT UP's mission of advocating for marginalized populations. Although these characteristics are generally regarded as strengths that allowed ACT UP to more effectively fight the AIDS crisis, it should be noted that it was a double-edged sword; coalitional fracture was a major factor in ACT UP's decline in the mid-1990s (Brier 2009, 179).

Brett Stockdill raises another important structural aspect of ACT UP: affinity groups. He praises affinity groups as promoting a vision of “radical inclusivity” within ACT UP, which, as he and others note, had a tendency to skew white, middle class, and male. Most ACT UP chapters included caucuses organized by women and people of color, which he presents as counterpoint to criticisms of racism and sexism within ACT UP (2003, 145).

Gould also discusses the affinity group structure as tremendously influential in empowering activists to do things they might not otherwise. She quotes Jim Eigo, who credits his closeness to his fellow affinity group members with giving him the courage to get arrested. Affinity groups created a feeling of trust and solidarity that allowed activists to overcome fear. Gould further notes that, according to Eigo, in the context of ACT UP's deliberately loose, non-

hierarchical structure, affinity groups became “the glue that held ACT UP together” (2009, 191-192).

ACT UP's Tactics

In *Queer Political Performance and Protest*, Benjamin Shepard highlights one of the most distinctive elements of ACT UP's tactics: art. He notes that “ACT UP had made sophisticated graphics art, and a defensive pleasure the cornerstones of their struggle for life” (2010, 13). He ties this interpretation of ACT UP's tactics to the idea of the gay liberation movement that is essential to both individual freedom and social justice (2010, 13). In his chapter on ACT UP, Shepard theorizes that many of ACT UP's techniques and actions can be classified as “playfully gay.” Rather than posit that this is incongruous with the seriousness of the crisis, Shepard interprets ACT UP's playfulness as a defiant display of resilience (2010, 75). In other words, playful tactics were a tool that ACT UP used to fight despair; an analysis that once again evokes Beltrán's concept of “festive anger.” Combined with Gould's work on the role of emotions in ACT UP, Shepard's analysis illustrates the crucial importance of meaning-making within ACT UP. While ACT UP members were committed to direct action to fight for their physical lives, the playful spirit that infused those actions was just as crucial in their fight against despair.

“The Split”

I want to introduce briefly here a moment in ACT UP history that will become important in later sections of the thesis discussing the internal anger dynamics and factional infighting that eventually started to occur in ACT UP. Beginning in 1991, a group of HIV-positive ACT UPpers who were active on the Treatment & Data Committee (T&D) became angry at what they saw as HIV-negative members trying to “hijack” ACT UP and move it away from a narrow agenda of

treatment activism. While this was a longstanding conflict, the tipping point seems to have been the controversy around a proposed clinical trial for HIV-positive pregnant women known as 076. Most T&D activists wanted to go ahead with the trial; while many women in ACT UP had ethical concerns about the trial and wanted it to be delayed, staging a “Stop 076” action. During the debate over 076, someone on the ACT UP floor commented that “six months is not a lifetime.” This led to acrimonious accusations on both sides: T&D put out a statement that “a lot of people [at the “Stop 076”] action hold people with HIV in utter contempt,” while the women’s camp accused T&D of “not caring about all people with AIDS” (Gould 2009, 367-369). Eventually, this dispute led many of the T&D activists to split off from ACT UP and form a separate treatment advocacy organization called Treatment Action Group (TAG). The formation of TAG, and the bitterness leading up to it, are colloquially referred to in ACT UP history as “the split.”

II. Methods

The ACT UP Oral History Project

My first entrée into serious study of ACT UP was reading *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Schulman 2012). To set the scene, I include this passage, in which Schulman describes the experience which led her and her friend Jim Hubbard to launch the project. While driving in Los Angeles in 2001, on “the twentieth anniversary of AIDS,” Schulman happened to hear a radio announcement on NPR:

“At first America had trouble with people with AIDS,” the announcer says in that false conversational tone, intended to be reassuring about apocalyptic things. “But then, they came around.”

I almost crash the car.

Oh no, I think, *Now this*. Now after all this death and all this pain and all this unbearable truth about persecution, suffering, and the indifference of the protected, *Now*, they're going to pretend that *naturally, normally*, things just *happened* to get better.

We [Schulman and Hubbard] cannot let the committed battle of thousands of people, many to their deaths, be falsely naturalized into America “coming around.” No one with power in America “comes around.” They always have to be forced into positive change. But in this case, many of the people who forced them are dead. The ones who have survived are in a kind of hell of confusion and chaos that feels personal but is actually political, whether they have “moved on” and “are living their lives” or are confused, displaced, lost. (Schulman 2012, 2-3)

In an effort to correct this false narrative, Schulman and Hubbard interviewed 186 surviving members of ACT UP/New York, each for between two and four hours, and made the transcripts freely available on the internet (Schulman 2012, 4). This passage is instructive in two ways: it not only describes the genesis of the interviews which are the primary source material for this project, but also outlines some of the particular difficulties of studying ACT UP. Principal among these is the simple but tragic fact that most of the people who were in ACT UP are dead. This is an uncommon state of affairs for an organization that was both largely comprised of young people and functioning at its peak only twenty-five to thirty years ago, and it is an unimaginable loss. Furthermore, life has not been easy for many of the survivors since ACT UP declined in the mid-1990s; several former ACT UPpers who survived AIDS, for instance, struggled with or died from addiction to crystal meth or other drugs. They found it impossible to “transition from total crisis and [an] abnormal way of living into something that [could] be integrated with a daunting loss” (Carrasco 2014). This situation underscores the importance, which Schulman and Hubbard clearly recognized, of recording the oral history of ACT UP while such an undertaking was still possible.

The Project is a crucial resource for studying ACT UP—I could not have completed this thesis without it—but it has its limits. Schulman and Hubbard conducted the interviews between

2002 and 2015, between ten and twenty-five years after most of the interviewees left ACT UP; even though most of them describe ACT UP as a transformational experience, many details—names, chronologies—have been lost to time. While I would describe the accounts in the interviews as broadly consistent, there is no getting around that these are the accounts of 186 different people, and they do not always fit together as neatly as one might wish.

Adding to this effect is the constant presence of Schulman herself, who conducts nearly all of the interviews. Schulman is not an objective interviewer; she was a participant in ACT UP, and brings her own memories, narrative, and perspective to the interview process, sometimes leading her to directly challenge the statements of her interviewees, as in this interview of David Barr³:

DB: [T]here was a lot of concern as to whether or not it was really appropriate for us to do a demonstration at the church. And the people who were most vociferous about doing it were primarily Catholic. And there was a lot of their personal stuff going on.

SS: Okay, just for the record –

DB: Yeah.

SS: – who are you talking about, so that I can actually think about whether that’s true.

(Barr 2007, 57)

Representativeness of the Interviews

It is also important to note the extent to which the interviewees are—or are not—representative of ACT UP’s membership. Although I will argue in later chapters of this thesis that ACT UP was in some ways more diverse than the dominant cultural image would suggest, the fact remains that ACT UP had a tendency to skew white, middle class, and male (Stockdill

³ Whenever I quote from interviews at length, the interviewee’s comments will appear in plain type, marked with his or her initials; Schulman’s questions and comments, marked with “SS,” will appear in bold.

2003). While there are no official membership records of ACT UP to compare against, I believe that the pool of interviewees is substantially more female and more HIV-negative than ACT UP's membership in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This is almost certainly a byproduct of what subgroups of ACT UP members were most likely to still be alive during the interview period, rather than anything intentional, but it is a useful trend to keep in mind when considering the major themes that appear in the interviews, and how they comport with the (white, male) cultural narrative that has been built around ACT UP in the years since it has ceased to be a driving force in AIDS activism.

Anatomy of an Interview

The interviews are not heavily structured, and they vary widely in terms of length and specific topics covered, but they do follow a basic pattern. Each begins with Schulman asking the interviewee to state their name and age, the date, and where the interview is taking place. Following this are questions about the interviewee's childhood and youth, such as where they grew up, whether their family was politically active, and, if applicable, whether they were out as gay. Once this groundwork is laid, Schulman generally asks when and under what circumstances the interviewee first heard about AIDS, which then leads in to a roughly chronological account of the person's activities in ACT UP. In most cases, the closing question of each interview is some variation of, "Looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you say is its "biggest disappointment?" Answers to the "greatest achievement" question varied, depending on what aspects of ACT UP the interviewee was heavily involved in. However, by far the most common disappointment was some variation of, "ACT UP couldn't stay together long enough to end the AIDS crisis."

Using these interviews as primary sources will allow me to build upon the existing analyses of ACT UP, as well as synthesize them with the literatures on political anger and social movements. This project is an interpretive case study that relies on analysis of a large amount of open-ended text that is not easily quantifiable. Because of the attributes of the primary source material, I use the textual or content analysis method to conduct my research. Specifically, I used word- and phrase-based textual analysis to examine transcripts of the interviews. Following my analysis of the individual interviews in the sample, I interpret and synthesize meaning from these texts to examine how different modalities of anger helped or hindered ACT UP in their fight against AIDS.

Because the focus of my project is different manifestations of anger, my initial method was to note the use of emotion words in the interviews. I took particular note of these words (and variations thereof): anger, rage, outrage, grief, sadness, fear, shame, indignation, hopelessness, despair, lashing out, and desperation. On the positive side, I noted joy, excitement, spirited, love, and energy—words that suggest Beltrán’s concept of “festive anger” (2009). Although Beltrán used the term in the context of immigrant rights protests in 2006, the term is equally useful in describing the character of ACT UP actions in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Looking for these words and the contexts in which they were used allowed me to analyze the different ways that anger functioned within ACT UP and shaped its work.

My original goal was to include all 186 interviews in the *ACT UP Oral History Project* in my analysis. However, over time, it became clear that this was not feasible. To reduce the size of my sample, I spent approximately two hours searching each interview document for the words “anger” and “angry.” If neither word appeared, or if they appeared only in a context that was not relevant to my project (e.g. an interviewee noted “My mother was angry when she divorced my

father”), I eliminated that interview from the sample. This practice resulted in the elimination of sixty-one interviews from the sample (about one-third of the total). While I would have preferred to analyze every word of every interview, this technique allowed me to more quickly find the material most relevant to my specific areas of inquiry about how anger worked in ACT UP.

Conclusion

The beginning of the AIDS crisis was a shameful chapter in American history. The early years of the epidemic were characterized by desperation, met with a shocking lack of response from those in power. Eventually, this gave rise to ACT UP, which was made up of people who, forced to fight for their physical and political lives simultaneously, were justifiably angry about their situation. While political anger has appeared in any number of social movements before and since, the specific manifestations of anger in ACT UP were different. The constant specter of death from AIDS drove ACT UPpers to adopt a very explicit public anger, at once political and personal, that foundationally altered their activism.

In addition to being a social movement replete with rich and varied anger dynamics, ACT UP is also in danger of being forgotten, especially by younger people. This threat of being forgotten is dangerous because ACT UP has a great deal to teach about the uses of anger to effect change. These two characteristics of ACT UP combine to make it an ideal case study to examine what political anger can make possible.

The interviews of the *ACT UP Oral History Project* are an invaluable and underutilized resource for studying ACT UP. The existence of the interviews serves to combat the societal impulse to deny, forget, or sanitize the work of the ACT UP and the crisis out of which it arose. Textual analysis of these interviews, combined with existing literature, allows for a deeper understanding of how anger functioned in ACT UP. A nuanced understanding of these anger

dynamics is not only desirable, but crucial in the times we live in. For one thing, the AIDS crisis is not nearly over. Even if AIDS were to disappear tomorrow, though, understanding ACT UP would still be important. Why? Because other epidemics will come, if they are not already here. Other crises will come, viral and political and environmental and existential crises. ACT UP shows us that, when the crises come, no matter how apocalyptic they may seem, we will not be able to depend on anyone else. If we want to survive our plagues, in whatever forms they take, we will have to depend on each other, our creativity, and our anger.

Chapter Three

United(?) in Anger: Lessons from ACT UP

While interviewing Sam Avrett in 2014, Sarah Schulman made the following observation about the group of people she had interviewed for the *ACT UP Oral History Project*:

I mean, having talked to all of these people — and I would say Jim [Hubbard] and I probably have more cumulative knowledge about ACT UP than anybody, at this point — it's a very interesting group of people[...] Almost no — people do not say the same things. You know, we still have not reached a critical mass. They don't repeat each other; they don't use the same phrases. With very few exceptions, it's overwhelmingly individual thinkers...Because I think the — the way I understand what all these people have in common is that it's characterological. It's a certain kind of person, regardless of what their experience was, or class background, anything; they could not sit still in the middle of a historic cataclysm, and do nothing. And that's what links them. But nothing else links them. (Avrett 2014, 43).

I have no argument with Schulman's analysis that what drove people to participate in ACT UP was a personality type rather than a common background; the evidence from the interviews proves out that ACT UP brought together people from many different walks of life. I do, however, take issue with her claim that "people do not say the same things." While it is true that there is no frequent repetition of exact phrases, in my textual analysis of these interviews, I noted several recurring themes. Three of these themes were both prominent and highly relevant to my study of anger in ACT UP.

Stop the Church: Anger, Religiosity, and Sacrilege

Stop the Church, which took place on December 10, 1989, at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, was ACT UP's most famous and well-known action. As such, it is not surprising that it was a very frequent subject in the interviews. However, I noticed that much of the material about Stop the Church included discussions of anger and angst, which were far less frequent with other actions. I attribute this to the fact that Stop the Church, by its nature, evoked deeply

emotional issues of religion and sacrilege that were fundamentally absent from protests that took place at, for example, the FDA, Wall Street, or pharmaceutical companies.

Stop the Church is an especially interesting moment in the life of ACT UP because the discussion of it contains both anger dynamics external to the movement, such as those heavily studied in the literature about political anger, and the less-studied internal anger dynamics taking place inside of ACT UP. In no other situation discussed in the literature or the interviews were both external and internal anger so clearly present.

I am interested here in three questions: How, specifically, did anger manifest itself at Stop the Church? How did anger shape the public's reaction to this action? Did Stop the Church cross the line into destructive or damaging anger? It is tempting, given the intense negative reaction that Stop the Church engendered in 1989, to conclude that the action is a prime example of anger that crossed a line, becoming dangerous or destructive. This narrative was certainly prevalent in the public reaction to Stop the Church immediately after the action, and a significant number of people in ACT UP also felt that Stop the Church went too far. However, I maintain that much of the public outrage around Stop the Church was localized around one specific provocative gesture, performed by one specific person, that was blown wildly out of proportion. Further, I contend that, in the long run, the display of anger at this action was a net positive for ACT UP because its provocative nature made the injustices perpetrated against people with AIDS impossible to ignore. Lastly, I argue that, while many accusations of sacrilege were leveled at ACT UP in the aftermath of Stop the Church, those accusations were fundamentally misplaced.

Gendered anger: Men, Women, and Privilege

A majority of the members of ACT UP were middle-class, white, gay men, who were either already HIV positive, or worried that they would become infected in the near future. However, while this cohort gets most of the attention in the literature about ACT UP, the actual story is more complicated. In particular, many chapters of ACT UP around the country had sizable Women's Caucuses (Gould 2009, 350). While there were a small number of women with AIDS in ACT UP, most of the women active in ACT UP were, unlike the men, not there to save their own lives *per se*. As Schulman writes, "At the same time a number of experienced lesbian and straight women activists were moved by their own relationships with gay men, by compassion, and by political understanding of the anti-gay, anti-sex rhetoric that was mushrooming around the epidemic to join the newly formed ACT UP" (1994, 11).

This asymmetry of danger created a divide within ACT UP, in which men's concerns were prioritized over women's because they were in greater danger, and therefore the things about which they expressed anger were treated as more valid. This created a feeling of resentment among the women of ACT UP, a sense that while they had "shown up" to help the men, the men did not reciprocate when it came to "women's issues," such as the campaign to expand the CDC definition of AIDS to include symptoms common in women (Dorow 2007, 34).

Much of this gendered anger dynamic is wrapped up with the loss of privilege that the white men in ACT UP were forced to deal with as they confronted the AIDS crisis. In many cases, white men were driven to participate in ACT UP in the first place because they found themselves, in the midst of the AIDS crisis, suddenly unable to exercise the white privilege to which they were accustomed. Women were not situated the same way. For them, sex had always been dangerous, they had never wielded power, and they were used to being dismissed (Bauer

2004, 16). This led to, at times, a very self-centered rage on the part of the men, while the women felt familiar pangs of disappointment at being pushed aside or relegated to supportive roles. Because a large majority of the women in ACT UP identified as lesbians, their dismissal by men evoked traditionally gendered structures that they had spent much of their lives trying to escape.

Anger and Authority: The Rage of the Dying

A similar but distinct phenomenon to the divide between men and women in ACT UP existed between those who were dying and those who were not. As already discussed, the presence of a large number of people on the precipice of death was integral to the way that ACT UP functioned, and makes ACT UP an unusual—but instructive—case among social movements. The constant threat of death functioned as a double-edged sword. On one hand, the specter of death had an intense mobilizing and galvanizing effect among ACT UPpers. The motivation of knowing that people's lives were on the line allowed ACT UP to accomplish things that they wouldn't have been able to do otherwise.

However, the anger of the dying also worked to divide ACT UP. People who were dying (or appeared to be dying) within ACT UP were hardly in an enviable position. Sometimes, though, they were able to leverage their impending deaths into a perverse kind of privilege; namely, the ability to shut down opposing arguments with the phrase "I'm dying" (Aurigemma 2014, 31). Dying imbued them with moral authority. Thus, the critically ill were able to steer ACT UP toward a narrow agenda aimed entirely at treatment activism, because they were concerned solely with last-ditch attempts to save their own lives. In Barr's words, their position was "Fuck it. We're dying; we need the drugs" (2007, 83). This is a defensible position; they *were* dying, and they *did* need the drugs. But at the same time, taking a hard line on a "drugs into

bodies” agenda effectively froze out activists who grasped the fact that, while drugs were crucial, there were also myriad other issues facing people with AIDS, including, for example, housing discrimination, insurance discrimination, lack of clean needles, ignorance of women’s symptoms, and treatment affordability.

These internal tensions, and the anger they caused, are much harder to see from the outside than a big, flashy display of anger like Stop the Church. That is probably why Stop the Church is chronicled in some way in almost every work about ACT UP, while mentions of internal anger dynamics between men and women, or the dying and the not-dying, are fewer and farther between. That does not mean, however, that these cleavages were any less important to ACT UP than Stop the Church and the other large, public actions were. In fact, I argue that, despite the external and internal brouhaha over Stop the Church, the less studied, subtler angers found in the interactions between subgroups in ACT UP were far more damaging to the movement than Stop the Church was. Most of the time, one gesture cannot bring down a movement. Resentments that build over a long period of time can. I argue that the strained relationships between factions (men and women, dying and not-dying) contributed to a split in ACT UP in the early 1990s that dramatically reduced its ability to fight the AIDS crisis.

In this chapter, I analyze three manifestations of anger in ACT UP. The first involves issues of religiosity and sacrilege surrounding Stop the Church. In this case, conventional wisdom tells us that the anger on display at Stop the Church was dangerous, sacrilegious, offensive, and that therefore Stop the Church was damaging to ACT UP. I argue against this interpretation, positing instead that Stop the Church was a highly effective use of political anger, if the aim of the action is understood as exposing the hypocrisy of the Church rather than changing it.

In the second and third sections of the chapter, I focus on the little-studied internal anger dynamics of ACT UP, as manifested by the tense relationships between men and women, and between those who are dying and those who are not. While these forms of anger, being internal to ACT UP, receive comparatively little attention, I argue that, in leading to the split between ACT UP and TAG, they were much more destructive to ACT UP than the public “sacrilege” of Stop the Church.

I. Anger, Religiosity, and Sacrilege

HANNAH: It's not polite to call other people's beliefs ridiculous.

I believe this. He had great need of understanding. Our Prophet. His desire made prayer. His prayer made an angel. The angel was real. I believe that.

PRIOR: I don't. And I'm sorry but it's repellent to me. So much of what you believe.

Angels in America: Perestroika, Act 5, Scene 8

In the heat of the AIDS crisis, many members of ACT UP experienced indifference, ignorance, and hatred nearly everywhere they turned, including from those in the highest echelons of power. President Reagan, who did virtually nothing to address the AIDS epidemic until it had already been raging for six years, remarked in 1987, “When it comes to preventing AIDS, don’t medicine and morality teach the same lessons?” (“The AIDS Crisis in America” 2017). Faced with reactions ranging from indifference to malice from all sides, it is no wonder that the members of ACT UP sought a collective context in which they could leverage their entirely justifiable anger into political power and social change.

In my analysis of the interviews, it became clear that ACT UP’s central challenge was to tap into that anger effectively, without resorting to hatred themselves, and that one of their most difficult adversaries in this regard was the Catholic Church.

Thus, this section of my analysis centers around the performance of anger in one specific political action: ACT UP’s 1989 Stop the Church action at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York, which was the organization’s largest protest and looms large in the ACT UP literature and lore. While perspectives about the action varied across interviews, I argue that, while Stop the Church was widely understood outside (and, to a certain extent, inside) ACT UP as a display of anger “gone too far,” it is better understood as a controversial but effective instance of public, political anger. Interpreting Stop the Church this way requires an understanding of what the action’s aim

actually was. Many of the negative reactions to Stop the Church are predicated on the assumption that Stop the Church was meant to win Catholics over to ACT UP's cause. However, this does not fit with my understanding of what ACT UP was trying to do: rather than win people over, I believe ACT UP was trying to call attention to the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church as an institution, by highlighting the gap between "pro-life" rhetoric and lack of care for people with AIDS. In this regard, ACT UP's provocative tactics succeeded brilliantly.

Events of the Demonstration

On December 10, 1989, ACT UP held the (previously announced) Stop the Church demonstration to protest what they saw as the Catholic Church's unfair, dangerous, and ineffective demonization of safe sex, abortion, and condom use ("ACT UP Accomplishments" 2009). That ACT UP would stage a demonstration against the Catholic Church is not surprising. The New York Archdiocese, led by Cardinal John O'Connor, was a tremendously powerful institution, and used that power to advocate for policies that, in ACT UP's view, were harmful to women and gays and served only to exacerbate the AIDS crisis. Ironically, Cardinal O'Connor was one of thirteen people named to the Presidential Commission on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus in 1987. Although the Commission was designed as a vehicle to allow President Reagan to "show leadership on AIDS," (Brier 2009, 93-94) Reagan saw fit to include the Cardinal, who "frequently called homosexual acts a sin and...opposed the use of condoms, counseling abstinence instead" (DeParle 1989). In Reagan's America, O'Connor's stances against homosexuality, condom use, and abortion frequently went unchallenged. Peter Cramer recalls that, in advance of the protest, ACT UP reached a boiling point:

"[We were] just fed up, just sick and tired of being used as scapegoats. The gay community was going to be the whipping boy for this disease and we would be flogged from here to eternity for our sins, for our abominations. It was like enough is enough. We are going to come into your place of worship and say that you have no right to treat

us this way. You are supposed to be Christians. You are supposed to have some sort of sense of mercy...” (2002, 13).

ACT UP decided that the Church’s attitude toward AIDS and its victims could no longer be tolerated.

On the bitterly cold morning of Sunday, December 10, at least 4,500 (possibly as many as 7,000) protesters gathered outside St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York. The demonstration, ACT UP’s largest, was a joint effort between ACT UP and WHAM (Women’s Health Action Mobilization). ACT UP member Ray Navarro, dressed in white robes and a crown of thorns, “reported the news” of the protest on behalf of the “Fire and Brimstone Network:”

This is Jesus Christ, in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Sunday. We’re here reporting on a major AIDS activist and abortion rights activist demonstration, which will be taking place here all morning. Inside, Cardinal O’Connor is busy spreading his lies and rumors about the position of lesbians and gays. We’re here to say, ‘We want to go to heaven, too!’ (*How to Survive a Plague* 2013).

Navarro’s guerrilla theater at Stop the Church was provocative but typical for ACT UP, which frequently used “playfully gay” tactics to telegraph resilience in the face of AIDS and “made sophisticated graphics, art, and a defensive pleasure the cornerstones of their struggle for life” (Shepard 2010, 13). Another prominent example of this was a protest sign which read, “Know Your Scumbags” and featured side-by-side photos of Cardinal O’Connor in his miter and a similarly shaped unwrapped condom.

Inside the church, however, was a different story. Although ACT UP had voted prior to the protest not to enter the church (Barr 2007, 58), numerous ACT UP affinity groups planned their own actions within the context of the demonstration, with some choosing to infiltrate the cathedral and disrupt the mass (Strub 2015, 228). While O’Connor gave a homily that had been prepared in anticipation of the protest, dozens of protesters who had been in the pews simultaneously and silently fell to the floor in a “die-in.” While this captured the attention of the

parishioners, O'Connor continued with his sermon. However, Michael Petrelis, a member of ACT UP, soon broke the silence, shouting, "Why are you killing us? You're killing us! Stop it! Stop it!" More voices joined the chorus and someone began blowing a whistle. While these disruptors were quickly removed by police, there proved to be more ACT UPpers scattered throughout the cathedral, ready to carry out their protests in waves. Some handcuffed themselves to the pews to make their removal more difficult. Another protester, Spencer Cox, shouted, "Prayers won't save the one-point-two-five million people infected with the human immunodeficiency virus!" Eventually, in what would become the most controversial and memorable act of the demonstration, Tom Keane, a former Catholic, took communion, only to say "Opposing safe-sex education is murder," crumble the wafer and let it fall to the floor, an act he referred to as "snapping the cracker" (France 2016, 392-393; Strub 2014, 230). In the chaos, 111 people were arrested (forty-three inside the church) and the next day's papers carried pictures of O'Connor alone in the cathedral attempting to "cleanse" the space after the desecration of the protestors (DeParle 1989; France 2016, 393).

Before Stop the Church: Controversy within ACT UP

During the planning stages in the summer of 1989, what tactics should and should not be used during Stop the Church, and whether the protest should even occur, were matters of intense debate within ACT UP, with the possibility of alienating the Latina/o community by protesting inside the church being of particular concern (France 2016, 393; Barr 2007, 58-59). In his ACT UP memoir *Body Counts*, Strub writes,

Some ACT UP members thought interrupting a Catholic Mass was deeply disrespectful. They feared it would jeopardize our credibility and fund-raising; I predicted it would do the reverse by raising our profile dramatically and tapping into anger at the Church. Catholics in ACT UP—both the faithful and those who had fallen away from the Church—were split, some from each camp vehemently opposed and others as strongly in favor (2014, 228).

In his interview with Sarah Schulman, David Barr characterizes the internal debate around Stop the Church slightly differently. He recalls,

But there was a lot of debate in ACT UP about the Church action; whether to do it. There was no debate about whether or not the Church's policies around condom use and how the Church was dealing with vast amounts of city money in providing services; there was no debate that the agenda was correct. But there was a lot of concern as to whether or not it was really appropriate for us to do a demonstration at the church. And the people who were most vociferous about doing it were primarily Catholic. And there was a lot of their personal stuff going on (2007, 57).

These two accounts, while not entirely consistent, both suggest that ACT UP as an organization was not rash in planning Stop the Church, although they would be accused of rashness and worse by the media in the aftermath of the demonstration. Instead, it appears that ACT UP realized it was walking a rather delicate line and hoped to call as much attention as possible to the danger posed by O'Connor's positions (via the street protests and silent die-in inside the church) without truly disrupting the mass and alienating the public. However, in the heat of the demonstration, several of the protesters decided, perhaps impulsively, to vent their *individual* anger at the Church, thereby jeopardizing ACT UP's ability to express their *collective* anger at the suffering and death caused—or at least worsened—by the policy positions the Church promoted.

After Stop the Church: Reactions

The public and media reaction to Stop the Church was immediate, widespread, and overwhelmingly negative, with essentially every New York politician and media outlets around the country condemning the action and the protesters who had carried it out, calling them “irrational, unreasonable, and immature” (Gould 2009, 286). Peter Cohen contends that ACT UP's undisciplined structure opened the door to so-called “renegade” activism and did not allow the organization as a whole to distance itself from its most extreme members, who ended up attracting more than their share of media attention (1998, 27). Cohen cites Stop the Church as a

primary example of this phenomenon, noting that “despite the presence of 5,000 people at ‘Stop the Church,’ most of whom were protesting peacefully outside the cathedral, the crumbling of a communion wafer by just one member came to represent the entire demonstration in the eyes of the media and the public” (1998, 27).

However, just as ACT UP was internally split prior to the demonstration, it was not entirely united in its reaction. While many people in ACT UP regretted the negative nature of the press coverage and seemed to think that, at a minimum, Tom Keane had crossed a line in crumbling the wafer, there were some who welcomed the attention. One of these was Larry Kramer, the divisive erstwhile “founder” of ACT UP. “‘It’s the best thing we ever did,’ he said. ‘They’re all afraid of the sissies now’” (France 2016, 393). For Kramer (who, it is worth noting, would probably proudly accept the labels of “angry” and “extreme”), the beating that ACT UP took in the press was worthwhile to strike what in his mind was a dramatic blow to the Catholic Church. And while Kramer’s view of the protest may not have been the prevailing one, it is not without its merits. His elation in the aftermath of Stop the Church evokes Sonali Chakravarti’s work on anger in the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Chakravarti writes,

As audience members listen...to the expression of anger, even if they do not agree with or understand its antecedents, it is in Sartrean terms a powerful impulse to transform the world...To witness anger is to experience how the energy of anger circulates, permeates, and electrifies all who encounter it. Anger is not death; it is the opposite of death and has an impact on those who listen to that is not dependent on being able to respond but rather come from its expression of the visceral human desire to survive and be heard (2014, 153).

This is not to posit that any of the parishioners in St. Patrick’s that day consciously felt transformed when they watched Tom Keane throw the communion wafer on the floor. But it is worth considering that the events of Stop the Church affected the people who witnessed it in

other ways beyond the shock and horror they felt in the moment. At the very least, the possibility exists that, once time passed and the accusations of sacrilege faded, that some of the people sitting in the pews understood the demonstration not as a desecration or a personal attack on them, but rather as a manifestation of the desperate struggle in which AIDS activists were engaged during the epidemic—to be heard and to survive.

The idea that ACT UP members' reactions after Stop the Church were mixed is reflected in the interview. David Barr refers to Stop the Church as “the beginning of the end” because, he says, “[T]hat, to me, was this crucial moment, where a decision, group decision got made, somehow, that the personal expression of one’s anger was more important than strategy to change policy and to make people’s lives better” (Barr 2007, 59). To Barr, Keane’s moment of catharsis, however angry he may have been, was a poor trade-off for the loss of effectiveness that ACT UP suffered as a result of the degradation of its public image.

For her part, Amy Bauer recalls that, as a Jew, she felt deep reservation about the wisdom of protesting inside the church and disrupting the service, and so opted to be arrested outside in the street. She states in her interview, “I never dreamed that someone would, like, spit out the communion host. I really thought that people would take it as an attack on the institution of the Church rather than as an attack on the Cardinal” (2004, 47). Here, Bauer expresses a common and valid concern that the radical actions of a few ACT UP members would cause the message of the entire demonstration to be misperceived. Bauer also expresses empathy for what the devout parishioners must have felt while the protest was happening, which I found to be relatively unusual in the interviews. She admits that she would be upset if a similar event happened at a synagogue. Eventually, though, she reveals that time has softened her view of what the people inside the cathedral did. She says, “I think I might have been wrong on that. I

think it was okay for them to go in as long as they understood what they were doing” (2004, 47).

This change of heart again suggests that the immediate responses to Stop the Church—both inside and outside of ACT UP—might not tell the full story of the action or its effects.

While weighing the issue of Stop the Church, I kept thinking of ACT UP’s oft-repeated mantra, “Silence=Death.” I considered how I would feel if I were facing death, only to be met with silence, or indifference, or cruelty, at every turn. If silence truly equals death, which I believe it did for tens of thousands of men and women with AIDS, why should ACT UP have remained silent inside the church? On one side of the scale, there is a religious institution, a government, a society, ignoring the needs of thousands of desperately sick people to maintain an illusion of moral purity. On the other side, there is a communion wafer on the floor. In the end, I think that most of the people who reacted negatively to Stop the Church—including those in ACT UP—became, perhaps unwittingly, some of Sparks’ hand-wringers, privileging civility over survival.

However, I understand David Barr’s analysis that individual expressions of anger such as Keane’s potentially tempered the effectiveness of ACT UP’s collective displays of “festive anger.” Stop the Church would have still been an effective demonstration—perhaps even more so—had Tom Keane put the wafer in his mouth. In the final analysis, though, I don’t think Stop the Church—a single event in 1989—can reasonably be blamed for ACT UP’s premature decline in the mid-1990s. Rather, I assert that unrelenting death, activist exhaustion, infighting and a political changing of the guard were the major contributors to the demise of ACT UP. To bolster the pro-Stop the Church side of the argument, I present another interview passage, this one from ACT UP attorney Lori Cohen. Cohen asks, “—listen, what did they do? They went into a church service and they sat down, they spoke up. So what? What’s the real harm in that? It’s hard, when

you're dealing with a system that deals with people who kill people or other pretty heinous things, it's hard to argue that what these people do is so horrific that they should be punished" (2014, 13-14).

While the actions taken during Stop the Church may have been shocking for onlookers, Cohen's argument here frames Stop the Church as something that ultimately harmed no one, further advancing the notion that ACT UP's actions inside the church were ultimately justifiable, even necessary, because of the ferocity of their opposition. In the final analysis, their situation was so dire that they needed to be shocking to be effective in forcing society to pay attention to the AIDS crisis. Shying away from anger to avoid offending people would have only resulted in even greater death and suffering.

Snapping the Cracker: In the Words of Tom Keane

The argument from within ACT UP that Stop the Church was beyond the pale relies heavily on the narrative that Tom Keane, in a fit of highly personal rage, spontaneously decided to snap the cracker, thereby destroying, or at least jeopardizing, the carefully calibrated message that ACT UP hoped to collectively communicate about the dangerous positions of the Church. However, analysis of Keane's interview calls this narrative into question.⁴ In this section, I will draw extensively from the Keane interview (2015, 17-22), in an effort to draw out what he was actually thinking when he snapped the cracker. The first excerpt discusses Keane's Catholic upbringing and loss of faith, and the plan that his affinity group, Speaking in Tongues, made for Stop the Church:

TK: A lot of [planning for Stop the Church] happened on the floor. So I was certainly there for all of that. Again, so there were affinity groups. [Ours] was going to be called

⁴ In general, I am uncomfortable using the content of a single interview to undercut others. However, in the context of this event, where so much interpretation rides on a gesture by a single person, I find Keane's perspective invaluable and feel that his account of what happened and why should carry more weight than that of people who were less directly involved.

Speaking in Tongues, a reference to the old-fashioned way of taking Communion on your tongue, and the premise was we would go up to receive Communion, and instead of receiving Communion, say something, whatever we were inclined, whatever message we personally wanted to deliver. Again, mine was sort of still consistent with the City Hall demo. Mine was, “Opposing safe-sex education is murder.”

SS: Now, were you all Catholic in that group?

TK: I don’t know if everybody was.
[...]

SS: When was the last time you had taken Communion before that day?

TK: Would have been ’85 when I was still at home with family, unless there was like a wedding or a funeral in between or something like that.

SS: All right. So it was still part of your life.

TK: Because, yeah, I had stopped going to church when I went to college. It was kind of like, “Okay. Let’s—.” You know, I didn’t identify with that and didn’t feel any kind of a, I don’t know, religious faith or whatever that made it seem appropriate to go, and, of course, then I had become more politically aware and more openly gay. It was sort of like, well, this organization, the church is a problem for us. So I had stopped. But certainly I’d been brought up in it.
[...]

With this groundwork laid, Keane and Schulman move into discussing what Speaking in Tongues did on the day of Stop the Church, up through Keane snapping the cracker:

TK:...I didn’t end up feeling like, oh, this is a big issue or a crisis in terms of my upbringing. So with all that, we had our affinity group at the demonstration, and when Communion came, we went up.

SS: So you went into the Mass like you were just a normal parishioner?

TK: Like we were—yeah, exactly. In fact, I think there were some discussion of we weren’t going to be, like, wearing “Silence Equals Death” t-shirts and stuff. We were going to dress like we were going to church. [...]

So Communion time comes. Well, so—let’s see. I’m trying to remember. I don’t even remember now the order of a Mass, which tells you how long it’s been. Because during the homily, which I feel like was before, I don’t remember, there was all—it must have come before, because I wouldn’t have seen it otherwise, because I was arrested. So there had been a plan that a lot of people would do a die-in for that. So I’d seen that, everyone lying in the main aisle and being taken out.

Then Communion. So our group went up, and I think if I hadn't sort of habitually kind of done this, I mean, I hadn't premeditated like I was going to take the host or toss it or whatever, but eighteen years of going to church, I'm there, I put my hands out, and suddenly I have the Communion wafer in my hands, and the priest says, "This is the body of Christ," and I say, "Opposing safe-sex education is murder." Then I sort of—I didn't really know what to do, and I think in some sense, some part of me was sort of saying, "Well, fine. You guys think you can tell us that you reject us, that we don't belong, so I'm going to reject you." So I took it and I crushed it and dropped it. Didn't spit it out. That was all over the papers that—I think afterward, like six or seven people they said had, like, spit the Communion wafer out or whatever, which I remember being sort of amused by that, and thinking if I was an artist, I was going to do, like, a self- portrait with, like, eight heads spitting Communion wafers or something.

Finally, Schulman and Keane discuss the aftermath of snapping the cracker, both at the demonstration and at ACT UP afterward:

SS: Well, how many people actually saw you do that?

TK: Very few.

SS: It's a small gesture, right?

TK: Yeah.

SS: So how did it become this huge emblematic event?

TK: You know, I think almost by virtue of us having chosen to go into the church—I think if we had protested outside the church, it would have been local news and it would not have been a major story. I think once we chose to go into the church, it was going to be seen very differently. [...]

SS: That's interesting. I mean, who saw you do that?

TK: So obviously the priest, and, I mean, there were—

SS: There was so much going on.

TK: —police and whatever around. Actually, I don't remember now uniformed police. And this is also – I was, I guess, in a lot of ways kind of illiterate about, like, religion. I mean, I got that there was a lot of importance attached to the Communion wafer, but not like to the extent—I mean, they came scurrying, a bunch of them, to kind of sweep up the little bits, and I'm not sure what they're supposed to do with them after something like that, but they were definitely going to collect them and preserve them.

SS: Did the priest say anything?

TK: No.

SS: Then what did you do?

TK: Well, I think the plan had been we would—I don't remember if there was a plan about what we would do after we said our thing, whether we were planning to get arrested or not, but I lay down and was arrested.
[...]

SS: Were you criticized on the floor of ACT UP?

TK: Yes. There was a meeting where the issue came up within, like, the next week or whatever, and I got up and I said, you know, I wasn't going to apologize or something, and that actually mostly got a cheer, because I think, by and large, while there were people who—whatever reservations they had, I don't think people were—I think the bulk of the people were sort of supportive, as far as I could tell.

SS: Do you remember who criticized you in ACT UP?

TK: Well, I know Peter Staley was unhappy. He had been opposed to people going into the church at all, and the whole silent die-in during the homily was, I think, sort of guided into being as a plan by him, and because he – he's not Catholic – but apparently, he sort of discussed with people that, well, the homily is the sort of secular part of the liturgy. It's the priest talking to the people in the church as a person, not doing this sort of sacramental whatever, and so that would be the least sort of contrary or least sort of disruptive to the religious ceremony to do that. So I knew he was not happy about that.

The most important takeaway from Keane's version of events is that “snapping the cracker” was blown significantly out of proportion to the rest of the demonstration. What was reported and remembered by many as multiple people spitting out the communion wafer was, in reality, just one man letting it fall to the floor. There is still, of course, the matter of Keane's sacrilege; if communion wafers are not supposed to touch the floor, does it really matter if he dropped it or spit it out? In my interpretation, though, Keane's action, even if it was sacrilegious, even if it was impulsive, even if it ticked off Peter Staley, encapsulated in a single, small gesture the brilliance of ACT UP. So much of ACT UP was about getting in people's faces and forcing them to confront the cruel absurdity of their actions (or lack thereof). In dropping the

wafer, Keane, along with the rest of ACT UP, exposed the Catholic Church for what it was: an institution more interested in self-preservation than helping people. A Church that cares more about preserving pieces of communion wafer than millions of people dying is, I would argue, not living out its creed. There may have been sacrilege that day in St. Patrick's, but Keane was not necessarily the one committing it.

Conclusion

The use of anger in the context of political activism is deeply powerful, and inherently risky. Anger motivates the oppressed, and, when wielded carefully, it can transform the oppressor. However, with a strong cultural bias in place against public displays of anger, showing the “wrong” type or degree of anger can alienate witnesses instead of winning them to the cause. This can occur when any marginalized group stands up against any institution of power, but an especially clear example can be found in the struggle between ACT UP and the Catholic Church. The main objection to Keane's expression of anger at St. Patrick's is that it was unholy, sacrilegious, and therefore crossed a line. And yet, while this act of protest took place in a house of worship, it was political, not religious, in nature. On that frigid morning in December, ACT UP didn't go to the cathedral to worship. They came to highlight the hypocrisy of the Church, an institution that was supposed to be the epitome of mercy, but dispensed only malice. In outlining that hypocrisy, Stop the Church was supremely effective, no matter how many parishioners looked on with dismay as Keane snapped the cracker. While Keane's act was widely derided as immature and disrespectful at best and sacrilegious at worst, with the passage of time it begins to look like righteous anger. Meanwhile, all the horror and hand-wringing that it engendered bear a striking resemblance to crocodile tears.

At the peak of the AIDS epidemic, Robert Goss wrote that “As in Jesus’ day, sacred space has become oppressive space—oppressive to people living with HIV infection, to lesbians and straight women, and to gay men. Where is the real sacrilege?” (1994, 150).

Where is the real sacrilege, indeed?

II. Anger, Gender, and the Loss of Privilege

HANNAH: I don't think you have a clue. You can afford not to. You're a man, you botch up, it's not a big deal.

JOE: It's still a big deal, Ma. Botching up. I've got nothing, now, my whole life, all I've done is make...botches.

HANNAH: Being a woman's harder.

Angels in America: Perestroika, Act 4, Scene 6

From its earliest days, the AIDS epidemic has been gendered. ACT UP was no exception to the rule, even though, on the surface, ACT UP does not seem to be a place where traditional gender roles would have flourished. After all, anyone who was “out and proud” enough to be involved with ACT UP in the late 1980s was probably not a strict adherent to society’s idea of gender-appropriate behavior. And yet, when examining the internal dynamics of ACT UP, familiar patterns begin to appear. In this section, I will examine anger within ACT UP using a gendered lens, examining the tension between men’s and women’s interests that developed in ACT UP, the anger that tension caused, and how that gendered anger contributed to the split that presaged ACT UP’s premature decline.

Gendering the AIDS Epidemic: Before ACT UP

Numerous theorists have highlighted the position of women in the AIDS epidemic. Although AIDS has been and, to some extent, continues to be considered both a gay disease and a man’s disease, women have been present, if overshadowed, in the epidemic since the early years. In fact, the severity of the AIDS epidemic served to temporarily bridge the gender divide between the gay and lesbian communities, which had been extremely evident during the liberation movements of the 1970s (Gamson 1995).

In 1983, Cindy Patton used an explicitly feminist argument when she called for the gay community to view the AIDS crisis as a political rather than a medical problem:

What we are experiencing in the gay community right now is "It's not political until it's personal." ... In dealing with the government agencies and the health industry regarding AIDS, we can channel our anger outside of our community. Turning our anger inward and toward others in our community divides us unnecessarily. Gays are worn down by our oppression. We worry about our jobs, our lovers, about coming out. Straight society has said to us, "You lead this terrible lifestyle and your punishment is to be sick all of the time," and on some level we've accepted that. We have to turn that around now, and say: This society is not going to kill us any more [sic]. (Andrews and Patton 1983, 6-7, quoted in Brier 2007, 234).

Brier further notes that Patton having made this argument in 1983 flies in the face of the claim that women were absent in the early days of AIDS (235). Patton also wrote extensively about how gender has shaped AIDS policy both in the United States and globally (Patton 1994). Of the persistent lack of attention paid to women in the epidemic, "It is important to be alive to recycled incarnations of gender, identity, and cultural authority in commentary on the AIDS epidemic and to challenge and disrupt them through research, caretaking, and activism focused on women" (Treichler 1999). The obscured presence of women in the early AIDS movement and the persistent deemphasizing of the needs of women with AIDS help explain why a subset of ACT UP members, primarily women themselves, were determined to pursue AIDS activism that went beyond "drugs into [men's] bodies."

The Women of ACT UP

Fundamentally, the women of ACT UP probably ran up against the axiom that anger, political or otherwise, is more acceptable among men than women (Gould 106). ACT UP was composed predominately of men, but there were vocal and active Women's Caucuses in many chapters of ACT UP across the country, including ACT UP/New York (Gould 2009, 350). The

internal disagreements between men and women in ACT UP stemmed from two separate issues: different backgrounds and different sources of anger.

First, the women in ACT UP tended to have more political backgrounds than the men; ACT UP was generally not their first experience with activism. Women came to ACT UP with experience in a number of different movements and organizations, including Women's Pentagon Action, the Seneca Women's Peace Encampment, Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA), Students for a Democratic Society, the women's health movement, and the lesbian separatist movement, as well as feminism and leftist politics more generally (Bauer 2007, Banzhaf 2007, Craig 2008, Christensen 2010).

Male Rage and the Loss of Privilege

In contrast, many of the men were not necessarily interested in politics prior to the AIDS crisis, and joined ACT UP to save their own lives. While both are valid reasons to join ACT UP, they led to different priorities that sometimes conflicted, leading to anger on both sides: the women resented the men for not respecting their prior experience with activism and for treating as secondary the concerns of women with AIDS. The men resented the women for bringing attention to anything that they felt distracted from the goal of getting "drugs into bodies" to save lives.

It is worth noting that the resentment of gay men in ACT UP was aimed at more than just the women of ACT UP. Of gay male resentment, Schulman writes,

Although I have spent thirty years of my life writing about the heroism of gay men, I have also come to understand their particular brand of cowardice. There is a destructive impulse inside many white gay men, where they become cruel or childlike or spineless out of a rage about not having the privileges that straight men of our race take for granted. They have grief about not being able to subjugate everyone else at will. (2012, 41)

The rage of the men in ACT UP, then, took two forms. One of them, the nobler one, was rooted in the deeply human desire not to die. But the other was a reaction to loss of white male privilege, and it is this selfish rage that caused most of the gendered tension within ACT UP.

The Rage and Grief of Women

None of this is to say that women of ACT UP did not have their own wellsprings of grief and anger; they just came from different sources. Schulman argues that “[ACT UP’s] creation was a direct manifestation of gay men becoming increasingly fed up with government inaction and the hesitancy of their leaders,” but notes that “At the same time, a number of experienced lesbian and straight women activists were moved by their own relationships with gay men, by compassion, and by political understanding of the anti-gay, anti-sex rhetoric that was mushrooming around the epidemic to join the newly formed ACT UP...” (1994, 11). In this way, at least in the early days of ACT UP, women’s rage was politically motivated and largely deployed on behalf of men with AIDS, rather than themselves.

As the epidemic progressed, however, the character of women’s anger began to change. It became clear that at least some women were at risk for AIDS, yet initially no one seemed willing to acknowledge this fact. This led the Women’s Caucus to adopt the slogan, “Women don’t get AIDS, they just die from it;” it also ignited the campaign to include women’s symptoms in the CDC definition of AIDS (Shotwell 2014). This change in the conception of who could be directly affected by AIDS gave rise to the second source of tension between the men and women of ACT UP: Even years into the epidemic, the specific concerns of women with AIDS were ignored. The work done to get the CDC definition of AIDS to include women’s symptoms largely fell to the women in ACT UP, creating resentment around how, while the women showed up to fight for the men in ACT UP, the men didn’t reciprocate (Bauer 2004). Rather, men

continued to expect women to support their agendas, show up at their demonstrations, and take care of them when they got sick. Even in the supposedly egalitarian, democratic, activist environment of ACT UP, women found themselves stuck in a caretaking role, forced to put their own priorities—even the saving of their own lives—on hold.

This dynamic suggests, unsurprisingly, that anger within ACT UP functioned differently than the anger that they directed, collectively, toward the outside world. Recall Holmes' claim that anger is a "way in which the dominant might unlearn their privilege" (2004, 24). When ACT UP as a whole was working to make the dominant, straight world unlearn their privilege (as at Stop the Church and other large, public demonstrations), their anger was an effective tool, and they usually achieved at least part of what they wanted. However, the women of ACT UP were also tasked with trying to disabuse the dominant group *within* ACT UP (white men) of their relative privilege. In this, they were less successful, because the men of ACT UP were so aggrieved by their loss of privilege in the world at large that they could not acknowledge their privilege within ACT UP. This manifestation of anger, far from being effective, turned toxic, as men and women became locked in disputes over what ACT UP was supposed to be about, whose demands were most important, and why. As they often are, the women were generally left holding the short end of the stick in these debates.

Katie Hogan posits a possible explanation for why women and their concerns were consistently treated as secondary within ACT UP. She bases her analysis on the pervasive notion of men and women existing in "separate spheres." She writes, "Separate spheres ideology continues to structure gender relations in such a way that the language of AIDS itself is a gendered language, minimizing women's HIV infections on the one hand, and contributing to historically entrenched sentimental images of women as nurturers and ministering angels on the

other” (Hogan 2001, 19). This trend, however, is not confined to the AIDS crisis; social movements, even ostensibly radical ones, are often reliant on a gendered division of labor which requires women to take on a disproportionate share of nurturing “emotion work” and become the “glue” holding the movement together behind the scenes, rather than expressing their anger publicly, as men can (Jasper 2014, 211). In Jasper’s analysis, in other words, it is not coincidental that there were no women snapping the cracker at Stop the Church.

In the interviews, the women of ACT UP confirm the presence of the gendered dynamics outlined by Hogan, and Jasper, often framing them as a “lack of respect” for women. Samuel Lurie,⁵ for example, recounts a general refusal by men to acknowledge women’s extensive organizing backgrounds, and also remembers instances of overt sexism, such as a man interrupting woman who was running a meeting to do it “his way” (2015, 15-16).

Interestingly, when Schulman brings up the idea of men being at risk from AIDS while women were not in her interview of Monica Pearl, Pearl is reluctant to accept the idea that she herself was not at risk, claiming that her lack of risky behavior was an accident of circumstance. In spite of this, Schulman returns to the idea that men were at much greater personal risk than women:

SS: But there also is this interesting dynamic, because you have these guys who are, themselves, at risk, and so all of their advocacy is for themselves and the people that they know, and then there’s a kind of substitutionalism because most of the women who are working on the *Women and AIDS Handbook* are not, themselves, really at risk.

MP: I always felt that I was not doing it for anyone else, and I always felt that any of the things that put you at risk for HIV were the things that I did or could do. I felt that very much. That I didn’t use intravenous drugs was just a matter of the circumstances that I was in, that I didn’t go to those drugs, and the kind of sex I had didn’t particularly put me in danger, coincidentally and circumstantially and luckily. But had it been something that what I did was at risk, that I was at risk in those situations,

⁵ Lurie is a trans man who, during his involvement with ACT UP, presented as female and went by his birth name, Rachel.

then I think I wouldn't – I don't know how to put it. I'm putting it badly. But I felt that it was about me.

SS: But there's also a kind of accessing of class privilege for women who don't have that access, and also ACT UP itself accessing resources.

MP: Well, ACT UP was this amazing confluence of privilege and resources on one hand, and wisdom and knowledge and experience of activism and radical politics on the other hand, and that combination was so powerful. So privilege was something that was not worth denying; it was worth exploiting. And it's true that the reason that I did some of the things I did, when I got arrested, for example, and when I was on trial for needle exchange, that it was an outcome of my privilege. I thought that's what I ought to be doing because I can afford that, I can risk that.

SS: But it's such a different experience in the men, because they are at personal risk the whole time and we weren't. So actually we were in a really different position, yet we were dependent on their resources to get our agenda forward.

(Pearl 2011, 17-19)

It is worth noting again here that Schulman insists on her own narrative rather than accepting what her interviewee says. In this instance, I agree in a factual sense with Schulman—I accept the premise that, by and large, the men in ACT UP were at significantly greater risk for HIV infection than the women. Yet I find Pearl's insistence that her activism was about her, and not anyone else, fascinating. Pearl almost seems to want to exaggerate her own level of risk, which is bizarre on its face, but in the context of ACT UP's gendered politics around risk and infection, also makes perfect sense. In ACT UP, to be at risk (and therefore, almost always, male) essentially meant to be viewed as more important. Given this well-established dynamic, I read Pearl's insistence on her own at-risk status as a way to avoid, at least in her own mind, being cast as without risk, therefore female, and therefore secondary. Pearl's efforts to avoid being painted into the not-at-risk corner indicate that being perceived as low-risk was a problematic status in ACT UP. The fact that ideas of who was at risk and who was not were so heavily gendered meant that ACT UP was, at least at times, a very difficult place to be a woman. It is no wonder that resentment started to grow.

Before leaving the topic of how anger and gender functioned in ACT UP, I want to complicate the matter by pointing out that the gendered nature of the conflict in ACT UP was not necessarily inevitable. Schulman and BC Craig explicitly discuss the tension between people who came into ACT UP already politicized (presumably women) and those who had been largely apolitical before the threat of AIDS (presumably men), but unlike previous interviews, Craig frames the debate without initially referencing gender.

SS: What was the tension between those two trajectories?

BCC: Oh, I think it's significant, that tension. I think it has to do with the disputes over what issues we would take up. If you see AIDS as — and the treatment of AIDS, really, more — as a manifestation of racism and classism and homophobia, and those as they are connected together by a majority who's seeking to dominate over all other people; and as a parallel to lots of other things that are going on in the world; then it's easy to see this movement over here as connected to you, or this action as inevitably connected to the work that we're doing in AIDS. If you were first largely apolitical to start out with, so that you weren't necessarily making all those connections; and second, more personally affected by what the outcome was; you're looking for a much more direct line to what you see as the end goal that you're looking for; a cure, certainly treatment. [You concentrate on] AIDS the disease, as opposed to AIDS, the social and political effect. And so I think that that, that's what plays out, and I think what eventually becomes the TAG/women's split, I think.
(Craig 2008, 32-33)

Two things are notable about Craig's analysis here. The first is that she delineates the difference between the two camps without passing judgment on either one, which neither Schulman nor I manage to do. I admit my own bias on this issue; I am predisposed to side with the women, and I have more sympathy with the agenda they championed, an agenda that focuses on the wider web of issues affecting people with AIDS. But I also recognize how easy it becomes, using the "men vs. women" framing, to fall into the trap of painting ACT UP with a broad brush. I do not want to insist that all the men of ACT UP were self-centered and dismissive of women, or that all the women were resentful caretakers of men. This narrative is not true, and does not do justice to the work of anyone in ACT UP.

For this reason, I find Craig's use of the terms "AIDS the disease" and "AIDS the social and political effect" eminently useful for discussing the tension between these two camps. Using this terminology does not change the fact that there was tension, and it does not change the fact that problematic gendered—even sexist—patterns of behavior existed in ACT UP. It does, however, help to show both groups in their best light, to position them as complementary rather than purely conflictual. After all, someone who has a long history of working in a variety of social and political movements can hardly be blamed for perceiving—and wanting to address—the connections between those movements and AIDS. By the same token, someone who is terrified of dying of AIDS the disease might not be able to spare a thought for AIDS the social and political effect, that that is not necessarily worthy of blame, either. Even Craig ultimately acknowledges the role of gender in the schism between people who saw AIDS as a sociopolitical issue and those who saw it as a disease, as she refers to the "TAG/women's split," a term that shows just how deep the gender divide in ACT UP really was.

That the two sides of this debate in ACT UP broke so neatly along gender lines, is I think, unfortunate. The fact that one side happened to be mostly men and the other happened to be mostly women exacerbated the sense that men and women in ACT UP were in conflict with each other, leading to anger and recriminations on both sides. This was a poisonous development in the context of an epidemic that was already heavily gendered to devalue women's contributions and interests. Unquestionably, men's anger over their loss of privilege and women's anger over being dismissed and/or relegated to the role of caretaker hastened the split between ACT UP and TAG in 1991. This split, and the acrimony that resulted, were extremely damaging to ACT UP, and led to its decline long before the AIDS crisis was over.

The truth is, neither the men nor the women of ACT UP were wrong. AIDS is both a disease and a sociopolitical problem. ACT UP, at its peak, made great strides against both. Who knows what they could have accomplished if they had hung on together just a little longer?

III. Anger of the Dying: Desperation and Moral Authority

PRIOR: But one so seldom gets what one wants, does one? No. One does not. One gets fucked. Over. One dies at thirty, robbed of decades of majesty. Fuck this shit. Fuck this shit.

Angels in America: Millennium Approaches, Act 1, Scene 7

“You and I, one day we’ll die from the same thing. We’ll call it different names: cancer, diabetes, heart failure, stroke. One organ will fail, then another. Or maybe all at once. We’ll become more similar to each other than to people who continue living with your original diagnosis or mine” (Peskin 2017). One day in the summer of 2017, I stumbled across “The Symptoms of Dying,” the *New York Times* piece from which this quote is taken. The article continued, “Dying has its own biology and symptoms. It’s a diagnosis in itself. While the weeks and days leading up to death can vary from person to person, the hours before death are similar across the vast majority of human afflictions” (Peskin 2017). While the article does not mention AIDS by name, I thought immediately of a passage I had read days before in an interview:

Well, I think that a bunch of us came into ACT UP with a pretty narrow—a narrow agenda, right? We’re getting screwed because we’re gay, and nobody cares about us, and we hate the for-profit pharmaceutical development model, and we’re going to shine a light on this injustice and change it.

Then I think a lot of very intelligent people who were more experienced in social justice than we, than I, came in and started saying, “Well, you can’t look at this without looking at that, and you can’t address this small piece of the problem without looking at much, much larger concentric circles of issues that affect people who are marginalized and at risk for HIV.” And I think there was a lot of fighting about that. I saw people get up and scream about how this was all becoming too diffuse, and those rants would always end with, “And I’m dying.” (Aurigemma 2014, 31)

The existence of tension within ACT UP about what constituted an appropriate agenda was not new to me. In fact, the dynamic that Aurigemma describes bears a striking resemblance to the gendered patterns of behavior analyzed in the previous section. What captivated me about Aurigemma’s account, though, was the persistence of the phrase “And I’m dying” at the end of

the “rants,” as if impending death—rather than maleness and the associated HIV risk—was the trump card used to shut down debate. This pattern suggests that there was something connecting the people in ACT UP who were dying, or at least believed they were about to die. Just as there are physical symptoms common to those who are near death, perhaps there are also emotional and psychological commonalities among the dying. In particular, I posit that within ACT UP, people who were dying displayed a distinct type of anger which they used to steer ACT UP’s agenda exclusively toward “drugs into bodies” treatment activism. In this section, I argue that the anger of dying people differs from that of other people in two ways: it is heavily tinged with desperation, and it also imbues the dying person with an aura of moral authority—they are *dying*, after all; they know what is really important.

In the previous two sections, I have argued that the effect of externally directed anger, such as in the situation at Stop the Church, had a positive effect on ACT UP, while internally directed anger, such as the persistent conflict between men and women, had a negative effect. The differences in anger between those who are dying and those who are not is an internal dynamic, similar in many ways to the gender conflict; however, in this case, I argue that the effect of this particular anger was mixed. The constant presence of death in ACT UP was a double-edged sword.

Desperation and Mobilization

On the positive side, the fact that so many people in ACT UP were facing death was an extremely powerful motivator. James Jasper, building on social movement research, investigates a cultural hypothesis to answer the question of why people protest. He argues for an understanding of the motivations underlying political activism that is rooted not only in place and time but also in moments that require a sense of moral reckoning, one of which is death, or

impending death. Few things will evoke a sense of moral reckoning like dying at thirty, and being told that you deserve it.

Indeed, Jasper mentions ACT UP parenthetically as an example of activists motivated by the specter of death. He writes, “Threats to our understanding and our life passages [birth, death, and sexual relations] will lead to moral outrage” (96). In ACT UP’s case, where both sexual relations and death had become threatening, moral outrage took hold with a vengeance. Activists were outraged not only by the fact that they were dying, but also by the cruel and hypocritical indifference of a “moral” society’s reaction to their deaths. The combination of these two things, while tragic, was extremely effective at mobilizing ACT UP. Of course, not everyone could be saved. As the epidemic wore on and more and more ACT UPpers started to die, activist exhaustion and despair crept in (Gould 2009, 395). In this way, death was demobilizing as well. Some ACT UP members, such as Kim Christensen, began to doubt the efficacy of ACT UP’s anger in the face of so much death:

I think it’s good to, when somebody dies, to stand up in front of the room and go, ACT UP, Fight Back, Fight AIDS. But that’s not enough. I’m sorry. When somebody died, and took my insides with him, ACT UP, Fight Back, Fight AIDS, fist in the air, is not sufficient. (Christensen 2010, 23)

What Christensen says is true. Anger alone was not enough to sustain ACT UP, a fact that became increasingly clear as the AIDS crisis wore on. However, in the years from 1987 to 1991, when ACT UP was most active and most effective, I contend that the threat of impending death—and the deep sense of rage and injustice that accompanied it—were absolutely crucial to ACT UP’s accomplishments. The anger of dying people—desperate, all-consuming, morally grounded anger—allowed a group of marginalized, desperately ill people to, among other things, transform the system of clinical trials in the United States. Their anger was festive. In the face of

illness and grief and pain, their anger bred creativity and tenacity and vibrancy. It drove them to achieve more than ever seemed possible.

Impending Death and Claims of Moral Authority

In the later years of ACT UP, closer to the split, the anger of the dying increasingly took on a different, more problematic character, that described by Aurigemma in the opening to this section. As time went on in ACT UP, more (primarily HIV-negative) members advocated for an agenda that encompassed more than treatment activism, in order to better address the needs of all people with AIDS. This idea had noble intentions, but was met with hostility by those who perceived themselves as near death, who felt that treatment activism should remain the primary use of ACT UP's energy. Gould asserts that, at this point in ACT UP's history, "some were mobilizing HIV status in a manner that suggested a belief that being HIV-positive granted one greater legitimacy and authority in disputes about ACT UP's tactics and direction" (2009, 369). Aurigemma's account of using "And I'm dying" in an attempt to end debates about ACT UP's direction suggests that the tendency to exert authority in this way grew stronger as people moved from merely being HIV-positive to being critically ill.

Naturally, there are two sides to this story. While Gould highlights the heavy-handed manner in which dying ACT UP members tried to exert authority, she laments the inability of HIV-negative ACT UPpers to fully understand and acknowledge the desperation and despair of the dying. As I do, Gould attributes much of the conflict that plagued ACT UP in the 1990s to the emotional gulf that opened up between ACT UPpers who were dying and those who were not (2009, 393). Ultimately, because there is no experience more profound than facing death, it was a divide that neither side could really bridge. Gould quotes Ferd Eggan, a member of ACT UP/Chicago, as saying:

[I wish I] had been able to recognize ‘the rage that comes from having to pre-mourn your own death’ and speak it aloud, by saying to Danny Sotomayor, for example, ‘Look, your problem isn’t that the demonstration isn’t going the way you want...the problem is you have AIDS, you’re gonna die and you’re unhappy. And there’s nothing we can do about that. You know, we can’t demonstrate you out of dying....’” (Gould 2009, 393).

Eggan’s sense of regret about not being able to understand the rage of the dying further suggests that the failure of the dying and the not-dying to acknowledge each other’s points of view was a terrible blow to ACT UP. And yet, how could they? As Peskin points out, dying is a singular experience, and dying people are a breed unto themselves. No matter how badly they want to understand, a person who has never been close to death will always be on the outside looking in.

On the other hand, the dying people in this situation are not blameless, either. Gould, for example, highlights this polemic by ACT UP member Derek Link:

HIV NEGATIVES LISTEN UP. ACT UP is not a game or a contest to see who can be the most PC [politically correct]. Many of you can waste time on these meaningless discussions because as one of you said last week “six months is not a life time.” But, guess what? For those of us with low T-cells, it certainly is. Either help us fight for our lives or get the fuck out of our way. (Link 1991 in Gould 2009, 369)

This rhetoric, a sort of “And I’m dying” rant on steroids, is not helpful. For one thing, it reads as profoundly alienating to HIV-negative ACT UP members. It also begs the question what would have become of the dying ACT UPpers, many of whom were being cared for by HIV-negative friends, if the “negatives” had, indeed, gotten the fuck out of the way. Link’s rant is, however, a perfect example of how the anger of the dying, turned inward, ultimately damaged ACT UP beyond repair. Like the unfortunate fault line that emerged between men and women in ACT UP, the similar divide between those who were dying and those who were not similarly encouraged the split between ACT UP and TAG, which I argue marked the death knell for ACT UP’s time as an effective organization. In combination, the two conflicts made it impossible for ACT UP’s coalition to avoid fracture.

Kim Christensen, like many of the interviewees, laments the schism, which clearly hastened ACT UP's premature demise. Christensen says:

I think that had we not all been so traumatized by so many people dying so quickly that we might have been able to continue to do the emotional patching up and the compromising that could have kept the organization going. I think it was – so many of us were so devastated and burnt out by the number of fu-, I mean, I, I actually bought two more funeral outfits, so that I could – because I didn't have anything black. So I went out and bought a bunch of black dresses. It was a point where I couldn't get to the dry cleaner between funerals.

[...]

It, it was my heart being pulled out of me. And then to go to a meeting, and try to be emotionally present, and figure out, okay, this one and this one are screaming at each other; how can we get them to hear each other? I think a lot of us who could have helped with that did not have the emotional resources left, because we were so – it was just so hard to be in that kind of situation for so long.

(Christensen 2010, 23)

In this analysis, Christensen posits that the unrelenting deaths in ACT UP both contributed to ACT UP's internal conflict and ensured that anyone who could have mediated that conflict was too exhausted to do so. Once again, the anger wrought by death and despair, turned inward, proved too great a challenge for the exhausted, grief-stricken activists to navigate.

However, there is an important point that I do not want to be buried: Anger was crucial to ACT UP, but ACT UP was not only anger. ACT UP was people going to so many funerals that they needed multiple black outfits. ACT UP was people's hearts being pulled out of them, every day, for years. And yet, still—*still*—the people of ACT UP refused to go quietly into the night. Out of their anger, they drew playfulness and festivity, creativity and joy, hope and love. With these, they fought for justice and achieved things that no one thought were possible.

Having written this thesis, I can understand, and even celebrate, ACT UP's rage. But it is their hope I find truly remarkable.

Conclusion: In the Habit of Hoping

The AIDS crisis is far from over, both in the United States and worldwide. ACT UP is not over, either, but it is unquestionably a shadow of its former self. A great many of the original ACT UPpers are dead. Others have moved on with their lives. Some of them are just tired. Only a few are still at it. For none of this should they be blamed. Still, on the surface, these facts together paint a rather bleak picture. ACT UP is gone, mostly, and AIDS is not. Was their rage not enough?

Back in 1994, in closing his prayer for AIDS at St. John the Divine, Tony Kushner said, “I am in the habit of hoping. But it’s become wrong to draw hope from this conflagration. If holocaust alone is the only lesson we attend to, then what bat-winged butcher angel is our teacher, and towards what conceivable future, along the banks of what river of the dead, do we make our way?” (Kushner 1995, 223). Like Kushner, I find myself in the habit of hoping. Unlike him, I think it is a moral obligation to draw hope from our conflagrations. Rage alone could not save people with AIDS at the height of the epidemic, and I contend it cannot save any of us now.

What justification is there for hope? In regard to the AIDS crisis, much of it rests on what ACT UP accomplished. ACT UP had its failures and shortcomings and divisions, but the development of all the current treatments for HIV/AIDS—protease inhibitors, combination therapy, pre-exposure prophylaxis—can be traced back to activists’ demands for research and money and clinical trials, to their refusal to believe that, in the face of deadly disease, all the medical field could offer them was snake oil and poison. Today, treatment for HIV has advanced to such a degree that, while interviewing Sam Avrett, Sarah Schulman could credibly claim that being HIV-positive is nothing more than “a drag.”

SS: If we're at the dawn of the time when many, many people can be undetectable; and if we ever get a coherent healthcare system, most people can be undetectable; how bad is it to be HIV-positive, honestly?

SA: It –

SS: It's a drag. But –

SA: Yes. I mean, for me, I take pills every night. I don't have many symptoms. The treatments are working for me. I have a normal life expectancy.
(Avrett 2014, 39)

There are, of course, still major issues with this claim. Many people who need the pills that Avrett references still do not have affordable access to them, and their effectiveness varies. Even more glaring, perhaps, is Schulman's qualifier "if we [Americans] ever get a coherent healthcare system," which is, at this moment, a very big "if." However, the point stands that America has come a long way since AIDS the automatic death sentence, AIDS the plague, AIDS the "natural" punishment for sexual sin. People with AIDS are no longer being robbed, necessarily, of their decades of majesty (they may not be majestic, but they are, in many cases, living out the decades). While a cure remains elusive, HIV has become more something to live with than something to die from, and ACT UP played a foundational role in that transformation. They could not accomplish their goal of ending the AIDS crisis, but in refusing to be silent, in being public about their anger, they helped to defang it.

But what of America's other conflagrations? We are not free from epidemics; in 2018, we find ourselves, as a country, fighting a different set of "opportunistic infections." Some of them are relatively new; some have dogged us forever whether we want to admit it or not. Some have resurfaced just as we thought they were gone. Racism, sexism, and homophobia are still here, as ever. We are beset now with ICE raids and border walls, police killings and generational poverty, government dysfunction, cruelty, and neglect. There are existential threats, too: mass

shootings, climate change, and creeping fascism. There is ample reason for rage in this bitter world. We should all feel it, over some of these things if not all of them.

And yet, even amidst my rage, I am still in the habit of hoping. What justifies this hope? I see echoes of ACT UP everywhere. I see them in the Women's Marches and the die-ins in Washington, DC to protest the gutting of healthcare. I see them in the Parkland shooting survivors, who even as teenagers are now acting up themselves, unwilling to be silent or to accept empty platitudes in the face of the needless deaths of their friends.

ACT UP shows us what being brave enough to be angry can do. There is risk in unbridled rage, yes, but if it can be harnessed, there is immense power in it, too—enough to change the world in the face of unimaginable odds. Even the literature on political anger, with its frequent defenses of civility, allows for this on some level. Anger gone too far can be a danger to society, but when values—and lives—are under threat, apathy is much worse (White 2012, 1).

Theory—about anger or democracy or social movements or anything else—is crucial, but it only goes so far. So, I turned to the interviews of the *ACT UP Oral History Project*. The candor and openness of the interviewees proved invaluable to me, because here were people who were willing to speak about their rage, and their hope, and what those two things combined allowed them to accomplish, even as they lost so much.

I am grateful to ACT UP not only because they saved so many lives, but also because it helped me make sense of my own feelings in a world that feels like it is falling apart. Now, I turn to you:

Where is your hope?

Where is your rage?

What are you going to do with them?

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