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*Queer Kinship and Culture Industry:
Affinity and Dissent in Sarah Schulman's AIDS novels*

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*Queerowe więzi a przemysł kulturowy:
wspólnota i bunt w powieściach Sary Schulman o epidemii AIDS*

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Introduction

In the stormy fifty years of gay liberation history, the initial stage of AIDS epidemic¹ is remembered as the moment of utmost crisis. While the preceding decade brought substantial victories for gay people in battle against oppression, *inter alia* American Psychiatric Association's removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973, the 1980s began with mysterious cases of Kaposi's Sarcoma, a rare skin cancer, among gay citizens of New York and San Francisco. The usually benign disease soon proved to be lethal, and merely a symptom of an underlying fatal immunodeficiency caused by a previously unknown agent. The two were later named, respectively, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

Kaposi's Sarcoma lesions quickly became the image through which the new syndrome was represented in the media and the visual arts. It was not a rule, however, that any visible signs appeared on the bodies of People With AIDS.² This was due to the ephemeral nature of the syndrome itself. One of the reasons AIDS took modern-day medicine by surprise was because it did not manifest as a limited set of clearly observable symptoms. Instead, some demographics at a certain point began to suffer from a range of medical illnesses caused by microorganisms often considered benign. Among the most common were not only Kaposi's

¹ As AIDS continues to wreak havoc among many nations, especially in African countries, the epidemic is far from over. It must be acknowledged, though, that with the introduction of highly-active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) in 1995, and with the advent of PrEP in the last decade, AIDS is becoming increasingly a disease that is lethal for those who do not have access to modern healthcare, for economic or political reasons. The focus of this study is, however, the historical situation before HAART was introduced, when AIDS was an extremely lethal disease regardless of economic circumstances along with social and epistemological challenges it constituted then; this is the period I refer to as the "initial stage of epidemic," roughly understood as years 1980-1995.

² The term "People With AIDS" (or PWAs) emerged in response to pathologization of the disease by the media and the developing social understanding of those who struggled with the disease as modern-day lepers. The activists who engaged in a social struggle to improve the conditions of People With AIDS (henceforth called "AIDS activists") established the term in opposition to the popular etiquette of "AIDS victim," which was thought to demobilize the people who might otherwise engage in that struggle.

Sarcoma, but also cytomegalovirus (which normally causes a mild flu), and infection with *Pneumocystis* fungus (which is often found in lungs of healthy people and typically is not detrimental in any way to host's health). However, in PWAs cytomegalovirus caused a wide variety of dangerous effects, among which perhaps the most infamous is retinitis leading to blindness. *Pneumocystis* pneumonia, on the other hand, causes serious damage to the respiratory system of PWAs and their overall physical weakness. In the context of the syndrome, these three illnesses, along with a plethora of others, are called opportunistic diseases.

The "opportunism" of these diseases pertains to their taking advantage of the fact that the ability to defend itself is weakened in the body of a PWA. The retrovirus attacks the human immune system by means of infecting T-helper cells, which are crucial for the ability to fight off illnesses. Health deterioration and development of the illness can be thus tracked while measuring the number of these cells in blood.

Importantly, while PWAs were watching in despair as their T-helper counts were dropping lethally low, the American government still took years to respond to the emerging crisis. In the end, it took a decade and a half for the medical establishment to introduce an effective therapy. Throughout this period the number of afflicted cases mounted, and gay people were one of the demographics most stricken with the disease.

This is not to say that AIDS is a "gay disease," as it was initially constructed and repeatedly represented throughout the initial stage of the epidemic. HIV spreads through an exchange of bodily fluids; as a result, the syndrome afflicted some other social groups, among which practices enabling the viral transmission were more common. These were seen by the medical establishment as "risk groups,"³ and popularly referred to as 4-Hs (heroin users,

³ For the salient criticism of the term, see *AIDS: Keywords* by Jan Zita Grover.

homosexuals, hemophiliacs and Haitians). Even then, there were cases that did not fit into the “risk group” framework, although stigmatization of both drug use and homosexuality allowed to explain them as a result of withholding information from the medical services in fear of being punished. Nevertheless, of the four groups publicly acknowledged as vulnerable to the syndrome, gay people were the most mobilized, politically active, and they had the greatest cultural access, thus largely shaping the narratives of activism and self-description created by People With AIDS. Furthermore, in the beginning of the epidemic, the signified for the word “gay” was not a very stable one, as the identity was still developing and the changes in narratives of homosexuality were happening very quickly. As Edmund White once aptly put it, “to have been oppressed in the 1950s, freed in the 1960s, exalted in the 1970s, and wiped out in the 1980s is a quick itinerary for a whole culture to follow” (*Burning Library* 215). As AIDS caused a major change in sexual practices, communal rites, and political goals of gay people, it inscribed itself into their identity. Finally, the media narratives and popular representations of AIDS very often equated the disease with homosexuality. Even the previous names for AIDS encouraged doing so, as it first entered popular imagination as “gay cancer,” and the scientific milieu soon corroborated the link by christening the syndrome as “Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID).” For all these reasons, the syndrome was firmly fused with homosexuality in the 1980s, and even now both the crisis as a whole and the response to it inform the contemporary gay identity, as well as the debates over gay rights. Thus, the initial stage of the epidemic occupies a very much paradoxical position in the history of gay liberation, as its experience is a major constituent of the gay experience of the times, even though the texts on the subject are marked with interpellations that AIDS ought not to be constructed as a gay disease, as well as with attempts to challenge the conflation.

The events of the AIDS epidemic constitute also a primary example of the work performed by the institutions of power in the modern neoliberal Western democracies. In his

analysis of power relations, Michel Foucault introduced the idea of biopower, i.e. the power whose operation focuses on preserving and managing life within populations. The AIDS crisis and the way Republican governments of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush responded to it, may be conceived in terms of biopolitics (the politics of biopower). Thus, the first chapter of this dissertation begins with a discussion of Foucault's theory of power. However, my take on Foucault's construal of power sees it in conjunction with the critical theory of Theodor Adorno. Specifically, the approach I am going to employ in order to discuss the popular representations of AIDS is to a large extent inspired by Adorno's idea of the culture industry, a mode of cultural production which aims to make subjects the same under capitalism through constant reconfirmation of what they already know. In the course of the chapter, I will discuss to what extent I intend to use the works of these two philosophers together, in which areas their theories connect, and where lies a discord in between them. This part ends with a contention that the culture industry can be understood as an instrument of biopower.

Sex plays a crucial role within the order of biopower, as it is closely connected to the problems of reproduction and population control. Thus, the next section of the first chapter considers the relationship between the two. It shows, based on Gayle Rubin's idea of sex hierarchy, how centuries-old presuppositions about sex, gender, sexuality, health, sickness, and vice were still very powerful agents shaping political reality during the initial stage of the epidemic. The conceptual schemes laid bare by Rubin were influential in shaping the biopolitical narratives surrounding the epidemic. Thus, in the next section I turn to AIDS activists and their criticism of the narratives surrounding the epidemic, and the cultural works which reinforce them. Perceived collectively (although not analyzed in an identitarian way), these works are what I understand as the culture industry of AIDS.

Finally, the last section of the first chapter focuses on the aftermath of the epidemic. It begins with a short look at the legacy of gay liberation and its significance for community

organizing and gay politics at the time of AIDS epidemic. This is juxtaposed with dominant, moralistic views of the epidemic, which resulted in state-controlled anti-sex “education.” The latter served as the impetus for the neoliberal takeover of the gay movement, as I argue in congruence with Lisa Duggan’s analysis situated within the larger discussion on the demise of American welfare state and New Deal politics. This takeover is best exemplified with the rise to prominence of Andrew Sullivan and his writers’ group called Independent Gay Forum (IGF), who called upon gay people to renounce the liberation period⁴ along with its ideals and politics. IGF situated itself between what they saw as radically left gay politics and radically right homophobic conservatism; their “third way” was to be a middle ground, one which would embrace the traditional values without renouncing gay identity. Among other things, I argue that the culture industry of AIDS paved the way for this kind of political project.

The second chapter deals with the specifics of the culture industry of AIDS. It analyzes some literary, theatrical and cinematographic texts about AIDS that made a powerful impact, and the ways in which the epidemic was represented there. First, it considers the figure of Patient Zero in Randy Shilts’ pseudo-documentary *And The Band Played On* as the Typhoid Mary of AIDS, along with its implicit condemnation of gay sexual culture in the liberation period. Then, I look at *An Early Frost*, an early direct-to-television drama on the subject of AIDS, which fits the story of a gay PWA into the framework of a problem play, and which reinforces the traditional notion of a family as the institution through which care for the dying

⁴ For the purpose of this thesis, I intend to use a provisional division of modern gay history into four periods. First, anything that preceded the formation of modern gay identity as defined through the Stonewall riot, i.e. occurring before 1969, shall be called “pre-liberation.” By “the liberation period” in gay history I mean the decade which followed Stonewall, up until the advent of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980. Basically, this amounts to the 1970s, but the 1970s in specifically gay context, with the emergence of positive gay identity and the openly sexual gay culture. I shall also refer to the gay people who came out and came of age at that time, and/or identified with the values widespread among gay people in that decade, as “liberation generation.”

The third period useful in discussing the timeline will be what I already called “the initial stage of the epidemic,” i.e. the time starting with the first AIDS cases, and ending with the introduction of combination therapy; the time period when there was no cure available and when AIDS largely defined gay politics. Finally, by “the later stage of the epidemic” I mean the turn of the millennium and the first two decades of the 21st century, as the time when the politics established in the aftermath of the epidemic came to fruition, as the virus stopped disproportionately affecting gay people while still wreaking havoc among millions worldwide.

is administered within the society. Another case is Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and its primary conceit of superiority of monogamy, which, I argue, made little logical sense even within the reality of the play itself, but was a symptom of mentality useful in reforming and aligning gay sociality with goals and principles of neoliberalism. Finally, I look at Jonathan Larson's musical *RENT*, which, through a "utopian" vision of "bohemians" managed to market itself as groundbreakingly progressive while obscuring the actual experiences of exclusion and mishandling of AIDS cases for the comfort of its neoliberal audiences. These analyses are supplemented by the additional discussion of political and social issues related to the epidemic, wherever it is necessary and insofar as they are relevant to the discussed texts. While by no means exhaustive, this chapter intends to signal some specific areas in which stories about AIDS that were heard, seen and read by millions of Americans were congruent with, rather than challenging to the order of biopower.

The next two chapters juxtapose the aims of the culture industry of AIDS with strategies chosen by a lesbian writer Sarah Schulman, whom Edmund White once touted as "bard of the AIDS burnout" ("Witness" 31). I have already published some of the findings from these chapters in the 2018 issue of *Analyses/Rereadings/Theories* journal as an article titled "'The Symbol of My Condition': Dynamics of Alignment with Power in Sarah Schulman's *Rat Bohemia*" and in the Spring 2019 issue of *Polish Journal for American Studies* as an article titled "Privilege, Access, Shunning: Familial Homophobia and Its Representations in the Works of Sarah Schulman." The points articulated in these have been thoroughly revised and expanded upon.

The third chapter focuses on Schulman's 1990 novel *People in Trouble*. It considers her choice to use the realist convention within the larger context of the post-postmodern shift to realism in the American literature of the last decades of the 20th century. Then, it analyzes Schulman's representation of the middle-class heteronormative artists who perceive themselves

as dissenting, a point which invites a comparison with *RENT*'s "bohemians." Next, the chapter discusses how the novel represents queer communities,⁵ which are shown as the social space for growth of meaningful relationships. This is in direct contrast to the culture industry of AIDS, which tends to belittle the significance of queer kinship, and stress the importance of blood kinship. Finally, the discussion centers on the novel's representation of activism. *People in Trouble* shows grassroots action as granting regular people the power to cause social change, and the ability to question the letter of the unjust law. This kind of depiction may be interpreted as a call to action rooted in anger, in direct opposition to the works of the culture industry of AIDS which tend to advocate acceptance of the crisis.

The fourth and final chapter discusses Schulman's 1995 novel *Rat Bohemia*. It begins with the discussion of Schulman's representation of familial homophobia, the ways in which heteronormative blood families fail to give help and support to their gay kin. Then, it analyzes the ways in which the novel represents the impact of this traumatizing failure on gay individuals, especially in the time of the AIDS epidemic. Next, it turns to the practice of bearing witness to the epidemic, especially as experienced by Rita, the novel's protagonist, who, as a Jewish lesbian, perceives certain resemblance between her own experience of the epidemic and her "inherited memory" of the Holocaust. Lastly, the chapter focuses on the novel's central symbol, rats, which are interpreted as representing the excluded and the unwelcome. Rita's complex relationship to the rats makes visible the instability of her loyalties and the difficulty of following non-normative values in the late capitalist state.

Overall, this dissertation aims to prove that in her work, Schulman challenges dominant depictions of the epidemic, and articulates her criticism of the disciplinary institutions and

⁵ Since I do not wish to suggest that gay people, as a whole, form some kind of unity—or that the kind of collectivity organized around homosexuality is exclusively gay—I do not use the oft-criticized term "gay community." Whenever I want to refer to this collectivity, I use the term "queer communities" in order to stress their diversity, plurality and discontinuity.

techniques permeating the social body. By resisting dominant ideologies of kinship, presuppositions about sexual hierarchies, universalizing gestures that render queer experience invisible, and crude victimization of People With AIDS, she represents a different kind of community, one based on the idea of volition, with a power to subvert status quo which the culture industry of AIDS aims to secure.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

The politics of biopower, or biopolitics, showed their lethal implications in the Western societies during the initial stage of AIDS epidemic. These were visible in various practices varying from introduction of the binary opposition between “risk groups” and “general population” into the political discourse to the glaring misrepresentations of PWAs in the cultural products marketed to the wide audiences. This chapter discusses exactly how biopolitics shaped discourses and representations of the epidemic. I intend to analyze novels by Sarah Schulman against the backdrop of the works which belong in the realm of popular art, and it is exactly in this area that Foucault’s theory of power should be complemented, if not extended, through recourse to Adorno’s critique of culture. Hence, my subject here is how representations of the epidemic were shaped by the underlying processes which can be understood through Foucauldian power/knowledge nexus in conjunction with Adornian notion of the culture industry.

Biopolitics, Identity Thinking and The Culture Industry

To understand the practices of representation that served heteronormative politics and gained widespread acclaim at the times of AIDS epidemic, I intend to use Theodor Adorno’s idea of the culture industry in connection with Michel Foucault’s ideas of disciplinary power and biopower. For that purpose, I will discuss aims and operation of these powers, as theorized by Foucault; I will relate Foucauldian framework to Adorno’s concept of the culture industry; and finally, I will discuss the tensions between the works of these two thinkers which need to inform an attempt to use them together.

In Foucault’s theory, disciplinary power and biopower emerged over the course of the last three centuries. They circumscribed (although did not replace) the power of a sovereign,

which was constructed around the master's ultimate ability to administer death. Thousands of years ago, that sovereign power was absolute; in Ancient Rome, a father could take away the life of his children and his slaves. Over time, it transformed so that it “no longer . . . could be exercised in an absolute and unconditional way, but only in cases where the sovereign’s very existence was in jeopardy: a sort of right of rejoinder” (*History of Sexuality* 135). This included both direct capital punishment to those who would dare to threaten the sovereign, as well as his subjects’ obligation to partake in a war with other powers that might pose a danger to him, and thus the sovereign’s right to “expose their life” (135). Nevertheless, in each case the power over life meant “right to *take* life or *let* live” (136). All power was focused on the moment of death, and its potentiality.

Since the eighteenth century, this particular axis of power (force to die—let live) has been gradually more and more complemented with a power which has taken as its subject the substance of life itself, one which operates along the opposite axis. In Foucault’s words, it is a power to “‘make’ live and ‘let’ die” (*Society* 241). As he explains, “what I mean is the acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being, that the biological came under State control, that there was at least a certain tendency that leads to what might be termed State control of the biological” (239-240). This hold over life first emerged as disciplinary power, which shapes individual bodies according to the normative prescriptions in order to produce docile subjects. Foucault traces the emergence of disciplinary power back to the 18th century and to the establishment and the rise in importance of various social institutions, such as schools, mental asylums or prisons, as well as their grounding in multiple fields of knowledge, such as psychology, medicine and sociology. He claims that they took the human body as their object: “The classical age discovered the body as an object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body—to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces” (*Discipline and*

Punish 136). While he acknowledges that discipline was not an entirely new invention at the time, Foucault argues that it was precisely then that three phenomena came into play: application of coercive mechanisms to specific parts of bodies to develop, shape and control particular mechanisms, instead of treating body as a whole; focus on exercise rather than “the signifying elements of behaviour or the language of the body” (137); and finally, uninterrupted supervision that focuses on practice, not on result. All these, applied in the disciplinary institutions, no longer had defense of the ruler as their aim, but rather a defense of the whole society’s well-being. Thus, it was most often not the killing that was the ultimate way of subordinating individuals, but a reformation of an abnormal living human being so that it would be more adjusted to the social conditions they live in. Disciplinary power “centered on the body as the machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls” (*History of Sexuality* 139). Through pressure exerted on bodies, mental faculties and desires, disciplinary power ensures that an individual adheres to the norm and, thus molded, they can be a productive member of society. Foucault shows the change in the technology of governing through the example of a soldier. Under sovereign power, a subject who is fit to become an excellent soldier would be recognized through the natural aptitude of their movements. Under disciplinary power, however, an excellent soldier can be *made*: through exercise, coercion, and internalized supervision they can become apt in performing specific, normative movements that are considered correct in the military. Thus, the preoccupation with preserving life caused development of technologies that maximize the potential of individual bodies, and the main requirements for success in any given field became docility and obedience.

From the start, this process was informed by the problem of collective survival and population control. The third type of governing which focused on these was still developing in the 1970s, when Foucault took to studying it:

The legal system is the archaic form of the penal order, the system we are familiar with from the Middle Ages until the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The second we could call the modern system, which was established from the eighteenth century, and then the third is the, let's say, contemporary system, the problematic of which began to appear fairly early on, but which is currently being organized around new penal forms and the calculation of the cost of penalties. (*Security* 6)

This is the system Foucault calls "biopower" or "security." He defines the concept in the following manner:

[Biopower] is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being; ultimately, if you like, to man-as-species. To be more specific, I would say that discipline tries to rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and, if need be, punished. And that the new technology that is being established is addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on. (*Society* 242-43)

It is a kind of macro-discipline, whose techniques are not applied on the level of the individual body, but of the whole population. It exerts its control over "the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population, and so on" (243); overall, the processes related to the number of lives within a population, and the longevity of life. From interest in techniques

of birth control to natalist policies, the problem of reproduction is among the main preoccupations of biopower, along with correlated issues of illnesses endemic in the population, and its rates of infertility and morbidity. Biopower is also interested in economic and political issues that are related to the subject of population, “phenomena that are aleatory and unpredictable when taken in themselves or individually, but which, at the collective level, display constants that are easy, or at least possible, to establish” (246). As a result, biopower operates on the level of statistics, rather than conditioning specific bodies:

The mechanisms introduced by biopolitics include forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures. And their purpose is not to modify any given phenomenon as such, or to modify a given individual insofar as he is an individual, but, essentially, to intervene at the level at which these general phenomena are determined . . . The mortality rate has to be modified or lowered; life expectancy has to be increased; the birth rate has to be stimulated. And most important of all, regulatory mechanisms must be established to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within this general population and its aleatory field. (246)

These goals are achieved through the practices of normalization, which have less to do with direct coercion than disciplines do. While both operate through constant surveillance of their subjects, they differ in application. Disciplinary power sets a norm, observes its subject (body) and should that subject fail to adhere to the norm, discipline enforces conformity. Biopower observes its subject (population) and should it fail to meet the desired state of equilibrium, the state rearranges social conditions at the source of these social phenomena so that this equilibrium is achieved on the level of the whole species, while allowing for certain divergence among individuals.

Although the two orders of power are distinct, both depend on the application of norm:

There is one element that will circulate between the disciplinary and the regulatory, which will also be applied to body and population alike, which will make it possible to control both the disciplinary order of the body and the aleatory events that occur in the biological multiplicity. The element that circulates between the two is the norm. The norm is something that can be applied to both a body one wishes to discipline and a population one wishes to regularize. (252-53)

In Foucault's framework, the norm is established through constant supervision. Observation of a healthy individual by the order of science can result in establishment of normative prescriptions as thorough and specific as the density of elements in the bloodstream. Next, these norms divide the population into the normal and the abnormal; those whose bodies adhere to the prescription and those whose do not. Finally, the bodies of the abnormal are institutionalized and coerced to follow the prescription. Should they fail to do so, they can be either given means to negotiate the differences between their bodies and the norms (as in many cases of disability), or completely isolated (as in case of institutionalized mental illness). In either case, the abnormality is constructed in terms of an obstacle, which impedes the operation of an individual, and thus it is prevented and medicalized.

It is at this juncture, with the foregrounding of the concept of the norm in Foucault's critique of power, that we can notice a connection with Adorno's critique of culture. It is worth noticing that Adorno's idea of the culture industry contains and subsumes access to physical means of cultural production, and discursive practices formative to the products and their audiences. Deborah Cook, a scholar who discussed thoroughly the link between the theories of these two philosophers, describes the culture industry in the following manner: "Selling standardized, pseudo-individuated products, the culture industry encourages individuals to think in schematic and stereotypical ways, while promoting conformity to prevailing standards or norms" (*Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West* 41). Through this standardized

production, the culture industry is one of the driving forces behind what Adorno calls identity thinking: “Like the exchange relations on which it is modelled, identity thinking relates ‘all phenomena, everything we encounter, to a unified reference point’; it subsumes them ‘under a self-identical, rigid unity,’ thereby removing them from their ‘dynamic context’” (89). The assumption is that heterogeneous objects can be ontologically understood as if they were the same if they fall under the same concept, read merely as instances of a more general idea.

It is through identity thinking that the norm itself operates, as it introduces identitarian categories; by and large, the norm *is* the tool of identitarian thinking. Depending on an arbitrary epistemological judgement, often with specific threshold points, the diverse objects become “normal” or “abnormal.” In its application to a human body, it is through a specific lens of a concrete, isolated biomedical object of knowledge (e.g. the level of a specific enzyme or hormone) that the assignment to one of these categories is performed. Identity thinking rests its case at this point, treating each of the diverse bodies deemed “normal” (or, alternatively, “abnormal”) as the same, an instance of a larger principle. The very existence of norms depends thus on the prevalence of identity thinking, rendering the culture industry a crucial tool in upholding the order of disciplinary power and biopower.

The way the culture industry operates is, too, congruent with Foucauldian framework, especially with regard to his concept of the biopolitical state. The culture industry does not necessarily influence its audiences directly. Although their thinking is often molded by the way the culture industry spreads false ideologies or obscures the facts that might be subversive towards the status quo, it is not the condition of its success. Instead, as J. M. Bernstein argues in the introduction to a collection of Adorno’s writings about the culture industry, “the effectiveness of the culture industry depends not on its parading an ideology, on disguising the true nature of things, but in removing the thought that there is any alternative to the status quo” (10-11). The ineradicably identitarian nature of the culture industry is not necessarily

transparent to its audiences, and neither are these audiences passive recipients devoid of free will. Nevertheless, they see a certain type of identity between the works it produces as unavoidable. Thus, the culture industry rearranges the social conditions at its source, in this case the source being the assumptions and beliefs about what a culture can do and how it can represent reality, so that the norm-oriented identity thinking is not to be contested or seen as subject to change, but rather, perceived as the necessary form of reality an individual needs to make peace with.

As Cook argues, Adorno and Foucault share similarities in their response to the Kantian idea of political maturity, understood as one's ability to think and decide for themselves. Cook draws the parallels in between their two understandings of the roles of critique:

To foster political maturity, Adorno wants to make individuals aware of the extent to which they have been subordinated to a society that neither accommodates nor tolerates difference, non-identity. The goal of his critical social theory is 'undiminished insight into society's laws of motion' because, as Adorno puts it, "[s]omething would already be achieved if philosophy at least sought to bring people's consciousness of themselves to the same state of knowledge that they have of nature." On this point as well, Foucault concurs: to counteract our subjection to the normative constraints of disciplinary power and biopower, one must first reveal how power operates . . . with the aim of making individuals aware of how they have been moulded and shaped by power relations and forms of knowledge. ("Adorno, Foucault and Critique" 974-975)

Both philosophers consider critique to be of utmost importance in acquiring political maturity, and necessary for the democratic societies to allow their citizens to be free. Freedom is, however, neither the purpose of the upper classes in Adorno's account, nor the aim with which biopower operates in Foucault's view. Much of Adorno's critique is pointed at the cultural power of identification, eradication of difference, which, in his account, is comparable to

genocide, and leads directly to totalitarianism. As Cook argues, this analysis of identification is similar to Foucault's critique of Western societies which are "demonic" because "...they have coercively shaped individuals and populations to such an extent that it is now extremely difficult to envisage any alternatives to existing form of individuality and sociality" (970). It is exactly with this goal in view that the culture industry operates. As Adorno states, its purpose is to "intentionally integrate consumers from above" (98); "to duplicate, reinforce and strengthen their mentality, which [the culture industry] presumes is given and unchangeable" (99). Understood as such, the culture industry is an important technology of power deployed to secure the social equilibrium and enforce integration of the consumers that stabilizes power relations. Its purpose is to foster political *immaturity*, which, as defined by Kant, is "the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another" (58). As both philosophers look at subjects as historically constructed (even though they differ in their account of the innate ontology of being), it is, among other influences, through the works of culture that the coercion and identity thinking are spread.

As we have seen so far, there are indubitable common links between the two theories. Both Foucault and Adorno observe the crucial role of the norm in the way social reality is structured, and consider contemporary social structure deeply invested in the operation of that norm. The two philosophers focus their thinking on the notion of struggle, and what it says about the reality. Both of them also perceive that the legacy of reason left to its own devices manifests, at its worst, as "pursuit of ever more finely tuned, insidious and coercive mechanisms of social control" (Cook 159). However, when attempting to incorporate achievements of two unique philosophers into a consistent framework, one needs to be careful to do them justice in their separateness. Even though Foucault acknowledged in interviews that his work is to a great extent congruent with achievements of Frankfurt School, by no means can one be reduced to the other.

It needs to be stressed that the main tool serving to discern relationships through which social control takes place is different in the two theories. While Foucault describes political reality in broader terms of power relations, Adorno focuses exclusively on exchange relations, thus perceiving the struggle in economic terms. Another point of contention was whether instincts are fully constructed socially (Foucault) or based on innate elements (Adorno). This had implications on their view of history: Adorno saw it as governed by survival instinct, a history from “the slingshot to the megaton bomb” (Cook, “Adorno, Foucault and Critique” 967), while Foucault analyzed it as a sequence of discontinuous periods. The two disagreed also on the impact of Christianity on Western modes of individuation and control, as well as on the efficacy of political action. This list is by no means exhaustive, either. Nevertheless, Cook concludes in her comparative study that, “the aims of their critiques and their analyses of the problems that afflict the West are remarkably similar” (*Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West* 152). Importantly, Adorno’s account of exchange relations and Foucault’s concept of power relations are not mutually exclusive; indeed, Foucault recognized the economic as oftentimes the basis of and the reason for power struggles which he thought permeated all human sociality. His idea of power relations can thus be seen as an extension of exchange relations, circumscribing them and acknowledging other possible ways a struggle can take place, and this is the approach assumed in this work. Similarly, Adorno’s understanding of history being governed by the survival instinct is not a far cry from biopower, at one point also called “security,” being the supreme 20th-century mode of power in Foucault’s theory. While Foucault and Adorno have differing opinions regarding when self-preservation became the supreme goal of the government, they both saw security as the *modus operandi* of the contemporary state. These two bridges between distinctive concepts show that, while the differences between the theories shall be respected so as to avoid collapsing one into another,

the tension between them can often be resolved and the ideas belonging to these theories can be used in harmony for a cogent analysis.

It is my contention that the culture industry can be understood as one of the instruments in which biopower manifests itself in social and cultural life. As discussed, this connection cannot be assumed unproblematically, but the common links between the two theories are a source of a useful vocabulary to describe the link between biopolitics and cultural production. One of such areas in which operation of biopower is highly visible and which had especially pernicious effects on the way AIDS epidemic was handled in the West, is the issue of sexuality.

Sex in a Biopolitical State

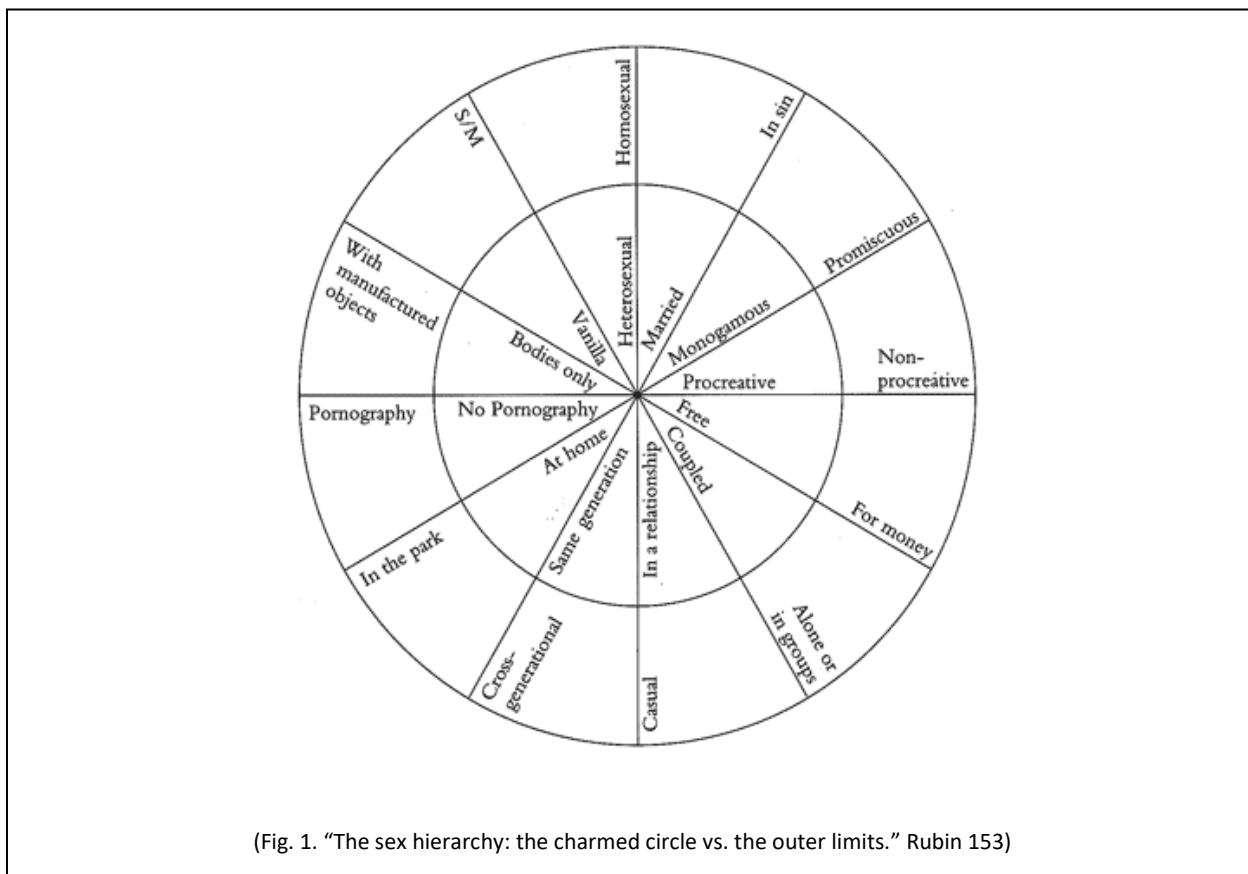
It is clear from how biopower focuses on reproduction that sexuality is a site of its especially stringent control. As he discusses the political importance of sex, Foucault remarks that “it was at the pivot of the two axes along which developed the entire political technology of life” (*History of Sexuality* 145). Speaking of “the two axes,” Foucault means that the interest in control of sexuality which precedes development of biopower. It’s been of avid interest to disciplinary institutions since the 19th century at least, and they were analyzing particular individuals and developing whole science of sex to use its normative forces for the purpose of control: “it was tracked down in behavior, pursued in dreams; it was suspected of underlying the least follies, it was traced back into the earliest years of childhood; it became the stamp of individuality—at the same time what enabled one to analyze the latter and what made it possible to master it” (146). It is at that time when sexuality became a certain “truth” of an individual, endlessly analyzed and never fully understood. It is also at that time that the concept of stable “perverted” sexual identities emerged, giving birth to the modern binary construction of homosexuality/heterosexuality axis.

The status of “perverts,” which I shall return to shortly, gave impetus to the rise in social campaigns for sexual purity. It is of our interest to note parallels between those normative developments in the area of the sociology or politics of sex and concurrent developments in the field of bacteriology. The latter introduced new metaphors into the social discourse, fit for the task of putting social reality in a new light. Central among them was the metaphor of bacteria as individual miniscule organisms within a body causing this body’s overall demise through dangerous multiplication. Society, which had been represented in terms of a single unified body already in the Middle Ages, was now understood to be polluted with bacteria-like menacing agents. Such metaphors were utilized widely in the period of McCarthyism, for instance when “Alfred Kinsey and his Institute for Sex Research were attacked for weakening the moral fibre of Americans and rendering them more vulnerable to communist influence” (Rubin 154). At the same time, with the rise of industrialized capitalism, the social and economic progress was understood to be dependent on the rise in labor force directly related to birth and death rates. As a result, various programs inciting or banning particular kinds of procreation were put in place, ensuring control over both acceleration and deceleration of population numbers growth, as well as attempting to control in some places its ethnic and racial composition. The politics of reproduction took diverse shapes, from welfare benefits in many modern states to racist prohibitions in Nazi Germany. Just like extensive analysis of individuals’ sexualities constituted a disciplinary control over this field, the reformative projects upholding sexual purity and manipulating birth rates formed biopower’s hold.

It is here that I want to turn to the work of Gayle Rubin, and, specifically, her analysis of sexuality. She is a cultural anthropologist whose perhaps most famous article, *Thinking Sex*, is one of the founding texts of queer theory and modern gender studies. She argues there that various mechanisms of control over the field of sexuality result in a strictly hierarchical structure. She represents it as two circles (fig. 1), the inner and the outer, where the former

comprises features of a sexual encounter deemed acceptable and the latter includes their binary opposites, which mark transgressions from acceptability. She discusses the structure of this hierarchy in the following way:

According to this system, sexuality that is “good,” “normal,” and “natural” should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is “bad,” “abnormal,” or “unnatural.” Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in “public,” or at least in the bushes or the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys, or unusual roles. (159-60)



(Fig. 1. “The sex hierarchy: the charmed circle vs. the outer limits.” Rubin 153)

The system of sex hierarchy is based on the assumption that one type of sexual practice can, or should, satisfy all individuals, and anything beyond that practice is treated as “perversion.” It functions as a very narrow norm with respect to abundant perversions encompassing almost any variation in human experience of sexuality.

This idea functions effectively as a norm within the modern order of power due to its roots lying in the scientific discourse. There is, for instance, a very well-documented history of pathologizing homosexuality. Although American Psychiatric Association stopped considering it a mental disease in 1973, many popular discourses (both in the 1980s and now, almost half a century after removing homosexuality from the list) seeking to subjugate “perverts” are still rooted in psychological arguments formulated as early as in the 19th century. Among the most influential works for this type of discourse is *Psychopathia Sexualis* by Richard Krafft-Ebbing, which defined homosexuality as a paraphilia caused by a hereditary mental disease. Many psychological studies in the first half of the 20th century continued this inquiry, conceiving of homosexuality resulting from, among others, pathological narcissism, overbearing mothers, absent fathers or arrested development. In addition, quite often homosexuality was not distinguished from other phenomena outside of normative sexuality; for instance, for many years it was maliciously conflated with pedophilia. Even though the second half of the 20th century brought about a decisive change of consensus among the psychologists, who became largely more accepting of sexual diversity, those older discourses (often sustained by fringe researchers claiming to resist “political correctness”) still inform struggles over gay rights, as the prejudice builds upon them and brings those ideas back to life with incredible tenacity.

“The charmed circle” within Rubin’s system of sexual hierarchy constitutes norm in its most powerful, hegemonic state. It is so ubiquitous that it is invisible and that the alternatives seem inconceivable. That these concepts permeate Western societies is of a great political importance. Michael Warner argues in *The Trouble with Normal* that there is a whole field of

politics, the politics of shame, which has their basis in deep phobia of thinking about citizens as sexual beings. While discussing Clinton's impeachment, he notes that "although sex is public in this mass-mediatized culture to a degree that is probably without parallel in world history, it is also true that anyone who is associated with actual sex can be spectacularly demonized" (23). To be rendered a sexual being in a public sphere is to breach decorum. For a heterosexual individual, their sexuality is hidden in plain sight through the institution of marriage; a socially acceptable institution for its private release. In the countries where same-sex marriage laws were passed, gays and lesbians can acquire resemblance of that respectability. However, since they are identified through their sexuality, i.e. their socially readable identity has a clear relation to non-normative sex, it is never really as invisible as heterosexuality. For that reason coming out is always a breach of decorum, even if now ritualized and with its own institutions and cultural narratives. Needless to say, other types of bodies and sexual acts, which cannot translate and adapt the marital structure as faithfully as same-sex couples can, are even more in peril.

This invisibility of sex in the public sphere is the direct effect of sexual invariance secured by the charmed circle. Its rules go without saying; there is no need to aver one's heterosexuality, preference for coupled sex, monogamy, or the same generation. They are not only *imposed* as universal, but also *assumed* to be universal, allowing for their invisibility and thus respectability. What any departure from the charmed circle requires is, on the other hand, an avowal (if not of an identity, as in the case of coming out, than at least of intention, as in the case of homosexual sex) which brings into sharp visibility the heretofore hidden hierarchies of sex. It follows, then, that it is that very invisibility of sex, achieved through subjectification (in a Foucauldian sense) of beings-as-ashamed-of-sex that makes this sexual hierarchy so powerful, and constitutes its very first line of defense. Any attempt to contest it already is a perverted transgression, which immediately marks the subject as sexual, thus making them susceptible to be demonized by the outraged respectable people.

The concept of sexual hierarchy is not the only impediment to acceptability of diverse sexual practices. Rubin lists several interrelated concepts that lie at the root of this stratification. The first of them is sex essentialism, i.e. the assumption that sex is a natural force independent of its social and historical construction, and thus seen as unchangeable and forming a certain stable “truth.” Then there is sex negativity, the idea deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian morality of looking at sex as something inherently sinful, lest it is redeemed by necessary procreation. Rubin discusses also “the fallacy of misplaced scale” (158) which is a tendency to exaggerate harm done through benign sexual acts and even spreading information about sexuality. And finally, there is the domino theory of sexual peril, which is an assumption that relenting on one issue related to sexuality might cause failure of all standards, i.e. that there is a straight line from legalizing homosexual intercourse to legalizing, for instance, pedophilia.⁶

As Rubin argues, all these ideas, the borders they create, and interdictions they imply construct transgressive sex as a vice. Vice, as opposed to crime, is a modality of behavior conceived of as morally deplorable even though the action stemming from it does not hurt anyone except the doer. The discourse of vices was especially active with the rise of the temperance movement in the early 20th century, with alcohol use being targeted as a vice that needs to be legislated against. It is clearly present to this day in the context of the war on drugs or prohibitions against sexual commerce. Arguments against vice frame it in three ways, each clearly rooted in “make live/let die” power axis of biopower. First, as a cause of crime, presenting reality as a kind of slippery slope, congruent with the idea of domino theory of sexual peril. In this view, those who commit vices are criminals in the making, already transgressing the “natural” boundaries of morality. More transgressions are, purportedly, bound to follow,

⁶ Rubin actually lists one more separate impediment: lack of concept of benign sexual variation. This one, however, can be easily seen as a result of the other ones, with the idea of benign sexual variation being a negative image to the present sexual law, a kind of positive project to build (or to nourish and protect within the sexual counterpublics) rather than an analytical tool to understand that system itself. For that reason, I decided to omit it in the main discussion, as it follows a circular logic and obscures the argument rather than clarifies it.

and they will be harmful to the others. Fighting vice becomes thus an attempt to prevent crime, i.e. an attempt to influence social conditions so as to minimize the undesired phenomenon at its root, which is how biopower operates. Second, the discourses against vice present the doer as an infantile individual that must be protected from themselves. In the order of biopower, the state, through certain institutions, has a right and a moral obligation to “make live,” i.e. prevent one from seriously harming themselves or endangering their life. By a strategic use of pathologized images and linguistic slips as well as through arguments built on common-sense quality of the hegemonic, invisible norms, the agent who engages in practices understood as vices becomes constructed as a victim of one’s self in a manner that must provoke the society to act. Such action, within the current legal order, must require conflation of vice with either crime or illness (usually mental illness), which are the situations widely agreed to require social control and revoking the right to one’s self-determination. Finally, this discourse focuses on children, arguing that they need to be protected from the information about vices so as not to fall for them. Presupposing both the harmfulness of any vice and the advantage of dominant, “moral” values, it uses the widespread protective instincts regarding children to mobilize people into action. Any and all outer limits of sexual experience are, to some extent, associated with crime and seen as harm done to oneself. They are also believed to be unfit for children as they might impede their development and participation in the ongoing process of reproduction, which is of crucial biopolitical interest, and which is secured by the institutions of nuclear family, marital sex and monogamy. Furthermore, as we shall see in the next section, any kind of narrative that attests to the harmfulness of sexual vices and their inferiority to the accepted standards of sexuality proliferates extremely easily and, as such, can be seen as of vital importance to the upkeep of the system of sexual law.

Even though Rubin wrote her essay in the 1980s, her ideas remain salient to this day. The system of sexual law, made up of elements such as hierarchy of sexual acts, essentialism,

sex negativity, the fallacy of misplaced scale and the domino theory of sexual peril form a powerful discourse that underlies politics of shame. Where this discourse did not manage to subdue, it coopted the heretofore dissidents: ever since the 1990s, the neoliberally transformed gay activism focused on conservative demands such as right to marry, and the emergence of gay conservatism and homonationalism in the beginning of the 21st century has shown that ostensible concession of power may result in actual assimilation of dissidents into the power structure, turning them into yet another social group subject participating in dominant identity thinking.

Ontologically, the system of sexual law functions as a norm in Foucauldian sense, marking clear the distinction between the normal and the abnormal. This system fosters identity thinking through the concept of sexual practice that is, or ought to be, applicable to all, and it privileges reproduction, thus refining the hold of biopower over sexual dimension. The disciplinary practices, however, do not rely heavily on institutions as such: “Although the legal apparatus of sex is staggering, most everyday social control is extra-legal” (Rubin 167). They are mostly exercised, reinforced and implemented through diffuse networks of relationships of power within society. Among these relationships, Rubin lists familial ties, employment opportunities, and strain on the living conditions (e.g. homophobic landlords or nosy neighbors calling the police). It is, thus, not necessarily the law-as-written, but rather the law-as-learned; the law permeating the social body not through a simple interdiction from the above, but rather through a complex strategy of representations that are constantly deployed and reproduced. It is being exercised both through discipline, by singular interventions on subject bodies (especially before they reach adulthood), and through discourses and representations that work to minimize the deviation. Seeing how the American media conceptualized the AIDS epidemic throughout the 1980s on the basis of the system of sexual law and through the politics of shame,

we shall see the crucial role the culture industry plays in both upholding the system of sexual law and in the initial response to the epidemic.

Guarding Sexual Borders

One of the most entrenched myths about the AIDS epidemic is its construction as the disease of the other. Associating the disease with the underprivileged identities was intended to assert the impermeability of the dominant groups. It was rooted in the fact that a majority of early reported AIDS cases were gay men or IV drug users, groups constructed as distinct from the WASP America. The myth of good citizen's impenetrability was overtly and covertly repeated and reinforced in the media, in political debates, and in the works created by the culture industry of AIDS. Douglas Crimp, an important queer theorist and AIDS activist, discusses the subject in the following manner:

“AIDS is not my problem.” This simple statement (or thought) is without question the most widespread, the most tenacious, and the most dangerous formulation in this pandemic . . .

Most people don't say, outright, “AIDS is not my problem.” Rather they translate that statement into some version of “AIDS is the problem of others.” In the United States, the statement translates as “AIDS is a gay disease” or “AIDS is a junkie's disease.” In other places, it translates as “AIDS is a disease of prostitutes.” In still others, “AIDS is a Western disease,” “AIDS is an African disease,” or “AIDS is a Southeast Asian disease.” (259-260)

This divisive logic showed a stupendous tenacity for many years. It would not become obsolete throughout the 1980s and beyond, even when blood banks were contaminated, when children were born HIV positive, or when many women and heterosexual men were infected with the

virus. In 1988 senator Jesse Helms still infamously claimed that “there is not one single case of AIDS in this country that cannot be traced in origin to sodomy” (qtd. in Staley).

Foucault’s analysis may illuminate the crucial importance of this narrative for the order of biopower. If, as has been stated, biopower is the power to make live and let die—whose overt goal is preservation of life—the mandate to govern is challenged by the inability to make live. This tension is mediated by what Foucault calls racism, which has little to do with older understandings of race, but instead “it is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die” (*Society* 254). Through division of population into “races,” biopower establishes not only which sections of society need to have their lives preserved, but also which need not. In the context of the AIDS epidemic, these “races” were constructed at odd angles; as biologically different (hemophiliacs), as plighted by vice (IV drug users), or through a complex interplay of the two (gay people). Tenacious “othering” of PWAs was necessary to construct them as subjects unworthy of help, coming from “risk groups” outside of “general population,” which, in turn, allowed biopower to ignore the fact their lives were not being preserved.

The assumption that PWAs were made up only of “risk groups” was self-explanatory and resistant to subversion by facts: since the social groups constructed as “risky” had been socially ostracized even before the epidemic, quite often the cases of infection outside of these “risk groups” were explained as an attempt of Person With AIDS to hide their homosexuality or IV drug use. As late as in 1992, when Magic Johnson, a famous basketball player, publicly acknowledged his seropositive status, he was soon forced to retire from Los Angeles Lakers, because “some of his fellow players had revived rumors that Magic was gay” (Crimp 259). In his analysis of the event, Crimp argues that the players probably did not earnestly believe in the homosexuality of Magic, who had been known as a womanizer in the earlier stages of his career, and by then happily married and very open about the impact of his seropositive status on his

marriage. Rather, they preferred to perpetuate the rumors as a way of distancing themselves from their PWA teammate. The assumption that Magic got infected because he was gay was comforting to them, as it allowed them to disidentify with their teammate and keep seeing their heterosexuality as a barrier preventing HIV transmission.

Conflation of homosexuality and AIDS relied heavily on many elements of sexual law articulated by Rubin. HIV was seen as an obvious consequence of the naturalized idea that sex without reproduction is sinful and destructive. The domino theory of sexual peril was promptly mobilized through the specter of bisexual men, as various media outlets showed stories of their infected wives. For instance, a New York Times article claimed that “bisexuals who are exposed during sexual relations with other men are one bridge on which the AIDS virus can cross from the high-risk homosexual population to infect heterosexual women” (Nordheimer). These men appeared as a surprising point of entry, a weak spot on the border between sexualities, which only further underscored that gay men were conceived of as the origin of the disease, but also called for stricter surveillance and made any sexual dissidence all the more dangerous to those with acceptable sexuality. Finally, the fallacy of misplaced scale turned every homosexual person into a potential Typhoid Mary, as hysteria over routes of infection persisted long after the real means of transmission, requiring contact with blood or semen, were established.

The ease with which this reading of AIDS circulated among the public, feeding off older biases, was only one side of the relationship between the presuppositions about sexuality and the disease. The obverse was the persistence of the conflation, as AIDS came to be understood as an irrefutable proof for legitimization of the system of sexual law. As Simon Watney states in *Policing Desire*: “The presence of Aids in these groups is generally perceived not as accidental but as a symbolic extension of some imagined inner essence of being, manifesting itself as disease” (8). That the disease was constructed as a feature of specific identity groups, and pinned to them, became an evidence of the moral inferiority of these groups. Soon the

conflation of homosexuality and AIDS became an important tool in upkeep of the prior sexual system. Given the meanings superimposed on the disease, to observe HIV transmission in heterosexual intercourse would mean to undermine the sexual law, and the superiority of heterosexual sex. Surely if AIDS was sent by a wrathful God as a punishment for the sins of gay people, it could not affect the heterosexual marital bed.

The most visible of the meanings resulting from the conflation was a resurgence of moralistic readings of sexuality, with a clear and self-explanatory hierarchy of sexual acts. This moralism was not limited only to the heterosexuals; it was widespread among gay men, too. Rubin's "outer limits" of sexuality were again and again implicitly understood as linked to the origin of disease. While for the mainstream discussion conflation of homosexuality and AIDS often sufficed to read the disease through the lens of sexual deviation, early panics *among* gays provide a more nuanced, even though similar in its content, set of examples. When in need to differentiate themselves from the sick, gay men readily linked any transgression described by Rubin (and some that were not, but which can be conceived as other aspects of the same phenomenon) to the emergence of HIV. Crimp reminisces:

As it became more and more evident that an epidemic disproportionately affecting sexually active gay men was spreading, I reacted, as did many of my gay friends, with my own version of the us/them mechanism: "It's only happening to those guys who go to sex clubs." "It's only happening to those guys who take lots of drugs." "It's only happening to those guys who've had lots of sexually transmitted diseases." (260)

Reading AIDS through a moralistic lens was a sort of knee-jerk reaction, as described by Crimp, even among sexual dissidents.⁷ The assumption was that the disease *had to* be caused by some transgression of the system of sexual morality with which the gay people had been experimenting. Few wanted to disavow homosexuality altogether, provoking a more nuanced

⁷ By "sexual dissidents" I mean those whose sexual practices are not limited to Rubin's "charmed circle."

inquiry and trying to deduce which specific transgression was fatal, while for the straight population, those who had upheld all standards of sexual morality (or at least conceived of themselves as such), any transgression was. Nevertheless, both lines of thinking were rooted in the system of sexual law outlined and criticized by Rubin, and, clearly, encouraged thinking of AIDS as a result of a self-destructive sexual behavior. From that assumption it followed that resignation from some sexual behavior would be the key to stopping the epidemic.

This line of reasoning relied on the dominant assumptions about sexual hierarchy and the politics of shame they induced, thus running counter to what Warner describes as “queer ethic” of the liberation period. According to him, gay districts and communities before AIDS had been counterpublics that created spaces for overcoming the politics of shame through embracing subjects as sexual subjects in public, as well as accepting the ubiquity of sex and ubiquity of shame conjoined with it. He depicts those communities in the following manner:

In those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn't pretend to be *above* the indignity of sex. And although this usually isn't announced as an ethical vision, that's what it perversely is . . . Sex is understood to be as various as the people who have it. It is not required to be tidy, normal, uniform, or authorized by the government. This kind of culture is often denounced as relativist, self-indulgent, or merely libertine . . . I call its way of life an ethic not only because it is understood as a better kind of self-relation, but because it is the premise of the special kind of sociability that holds queer culture together. A relation to others, in these contexts, begins in an acknowledgment of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself. Shame is bedrock . . . The rule is: Get over yourself. Put a wig on before you judge. And the corollary is that you stand to learn most from the people you think are beneath you. At its best, this ethic cuts against every form of hierarchy you could bring into the room. Queer scenes are the true *salons des refuses*, where the most

heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy by their common experience of being despised and rejected in a world of norms that they now recognize as false morality. (35-36)

The welcoming approach to one's shame allowed for transgression of its politics; it was no longer a tool that could prevent one from claiming their right to be, not even in the public space. With the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, however, shame resurfaced among gays, opposed by some due to the old ideals of sexual freedom, and supported by others who recognized their responsibility for their own and everyone else's health. Since epidemiology was not, at first, clear and the reasons were speculated about rather than proven, no specific logical course of action could have been applied, thus leading some gay people to a general repudiation of sex. Later, even though it emerged as a scientifically proven fact that safer sex practices were the best, and most effective way to prevent spread of the epidemic, governments kept spending millions on anti-sexual crusades such as Thatcher's "Don't Die Of Ignorance" campaign or American "abstinence education" programs, thus linking sex itself with infection, and reaffirming its shameful status. Many gays were influenced by these assumptions, thus leading to the erosion of Warner's "queer ethic" in the 1990s.

Another relevant issue seen in Crimp's account of immediate disidentification from the sick is its immunity to the factual analysis:

I reassured myself that I was not one of "those guys," the ones who get AIDS. And I did so even though I went to sex clubs, I took drugs, and I'd had my share of sexually transmitted diseases. But somehow, by some form of magical thinking—this is the force of the unconscious—I exempted myself from the category of "those guys," the others, the ones who get AIDS. (260)

Crimp describes that kind of thinking as an effect of the unconscious defense mechanism. This particular mechanism of disidentification seems to erect, through an arbitrary selection of a

socially stigmatized trait, an artificial discursive barrier that separates the subject from the virus, and its discursive extension, the infected other, the “carrier.” The construct worked just as well for gay men who early on refused to recognize the similarity between themselves and the already infected, as for the teammates of Magic Johnson, who did not wish to believe they could get infected with HIV from a woman. Visibly, in both cases the mental defenses utilized the politics of shame, constructing PWAs as shamefully sexual. The selection of socially stigmatized traits was immune to critical thinking; whether the traits were in fact shared by the analyzing self (as in the case of Crimp), or they were conjured out of thin air in the Person With AIDS (as in the case of Magic), their spectre sufficed to mobilize the defensive power of disidentification.

The same set of assumptions that governed defense mechanisms among individuals and rendered them immune to critical analysis was also the source of pathologizing media narratives about the epidemic. The way AIDS was understood and represented by the media utilized older narratives, often in a manner that was pernicious to the wellbeing of PWAs. Sander L. Gilman shows in “AIDS and Syphilis: The Iconography of Disease” how the iconography of AIDS was constructed out of “free floating” signifiers of a strongly pathologizing kind, associated previously with syphilis, a cultural legacy in need of a stable referent since the discovery of penicillin. Syphilis, along with the whole associated category of STDs, has been historically read as “moral” disease that develops as a punishment for sexual transgression. This mode of transmission is believed to be a proof that “outer limits” of sexuality are dangerous and destructive.

Gilman lists several analogies in representations of syphilis and AIDS. First, they tend to include visible signs of the disease imprinted on the body, a rash in case of syphilis, and Kaposi’s Sarcoma lesions in the case of AIDS. Next, the ill are often represented as melancholiac, and isolated in their sadness, blurring the distinction between bodily and mental

illness. The implicit implication here is that the two might be interconnected, and that perhaps it was a kind of madness that propelled an individual to cross the boundaries of acceptable sex in the first place. Gilman lists among representations also the promise of the cure, or its possibility. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly in the context of homosexual men's subversive status in the heteronormative system, representations of STDs have been gendered for a long time. According to Gilman, syphilis, as represented in the 16th century, was typically shown through the figure of a male victim. Over time, however, they became represented more and more often as women, and at the same time they transformed from a victim to a source. The women most vulnerable to these associations became, of course, prostitutes. Richard McKay gives examples of such understandings present in the 16th century already:

According to Pietro Rostinio, a sixteenth-century Italian medical writer, the prostitute had a putrefying sore at the opening of her womb and was blamed not only for spreading the disease but also for creating it within her own body. The friction and warmth of intercourse combined with the humidity of her vagina led to the contamination of the penetrating male member. (67)

Uterus, normally associated with giving birth, a reproductive function that sanctifies marital sex, is here seen as giving birth to a progeny more appropriate for the prostitute's "sinful" profession—the disease. Though poisonous, she is not actively looking for her victims; rather, she becomes a human trap for those who veer from sexual straight and narrow. When AIDS became an area of interest to the media, it followed the track of dehumanizing the sick, reading them as "carriers" of disease rather than ill human beings. What facilitated this reading was the fact that while the first visible victims were men, they were mostly homosexual men, already read as feminine in a culture that understands sexuality through the myth of attracting opposites.

What helped the belief in impossibility of heterosexual transmission (at least from a woman to a man) was also another ages-old narrative, a misogynist belief in woman's sexual

passivity. In early constructions of the epidemiology, women were thought to be unable to pass the HIV virus; the corollary was that any man who was infected had to get it either from drugs or gay sex. This belief acted as yet another safeguard for superiority and/or safety of heterosexual intercourse, and it became, once again, impervious to factual analysis. This is visible in the theory regarding the by-then proven infections of men who picked up the virus from female sex workers, as described by Paula A. Treichler:

A study of German prostitutes that appeared to demonstrate female-to-male transmission of AIDS, reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association, was interpreted by one reader as actually representing “quasi-homosexual” transmission: Man A, infected with HIV, has vaginal intercourse with Prostitute; she, “[performing] no more than perfunctory external cleansing between customers,” then has intercourse with Man B; Man B is infected with the virus via the semen of Man A.

(49)

The German prostitute engages in unmarried, non-monogamous and commercial sex, in multiple ways transgressing to the “outer limits” of sexual experience.⁸ All these transgressions situate the intercourse in the vicinity of homosexuality. Semen, outside of reproductive context, becomes in the time of the AIDS epidemic a toxic waste that is left by a male carrier in the vagina. Dehumanizing the prostitute through denying her personal hygiene, the author conceives of her almost literally as *a container for semen* in the transmission route. The second man, perhaps *really* heterosexual, comes into contact with another man’s sperm (thus breaking a strong heteronormative taboo) and risks an infection “intended” only for gay men. This image is vividly reminiscent of the 16th-century Italian prostitute described by Rostinio, with one

⁸ It is worth stating at this point that, although historically sex workers were sometimes constructed as one of “risk groups,” the studies showed that the high rate of infections occurring within this group was rooted in the number of sex workers who were also IV drug users. Among those sex workers who did not use IV drugs the infection rates were, if anything, *lower*, because they practiced safe sex. See Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification.”

caveat: while both women function as traps waiting for men who transgress the acceptable sexuality, the 20th century one is set by a man with AIDS, a label that in a popular imagination is conflated with a gay man (perhaps invoking in this case once again the anxiety-inducing bisexual). While the woman becomes even more passive than she used to be, gays, in a circuitous way, become the culprits even in cases of heterosexual transmission. This theory should, of course, be read as an extreme and rather delusional case, but it does exemplify vividly a pernicious tendency of reinforcing scapegoating through associations that shaped the narratives of this epidemic.

These borders and transgressions were not only marked as a defensive mechanism; they were also used by conservative politicians to incite a moral panic. This important political tool has been defined by Stanley Cohen as a situation where some element of reality, such as a condition or a group, becomes widely constructed as a danger to communal value. Rubin discusses the way moral panics are deployed in the context of sexual politics:

Because sexuality in Western societies is so mystified, the wars over it are often fought at oblique angles, aimed at phony targets, conducted with misplaced passions, and are highly, intensely symbolic. Sexual activities often function as signifiers for personal and social apprehensions to which they have no intrinsic connection. During a moral panic such fears attach to some unfortunate sexual activity or population. The media become ablaze with indignation, the public behaves like a rabid mob, the police are activated, and the state enacts new laws and regulations. When the furor has passed, some innocent erotic group has been decimated, and the state has extended its power into new areas of erotic behaviour. (171)

Within the stratified system of sex, the groups identified with the outer limits of sexual law constitute very easy targets for this spectacle. Even if the liberalized vocabulary cannot bear outright discrimination, “intensely symbolic” layers of discourse allow for linguistic

displacement of sexual anxieties onto other concepts. According to Simon Watney, that is exactly what happened to the word “promiscuity” used widely in the debates about the epidemic.

The entrance of the term into the discourse about the epidemic can be traced back to early epidemiological data established by the doctors who studied sudden appearance of Kaposi’s Sarcoma and PCP cases among gay men in the early 1980s. These doctors were dumbfounded when gay men, questioned about their sexual lives, reported hundreds or thousands of sexual partners. For those who operated within the hegemonic framework, where monogamy and marital intercourse are prescribed modes of intercourse and any deviance from that law is a source of tension, facing the sexual world constructed by gay men in the 1970s, which praised and elevated liberation and freedom (and which did not feel the need to worry about health, as antibiotics were believed to be the ultimate cure for all sexually transmitted infections) was a shock. It was precisely that behavior that was, then, labeled as “promiscuous.”

The word “promiscuous” is a pejorative term for having sex with multiple partners, and as such it is deeply involved in the moralistic hierarchy of sexual acts. Since the assumption of superiority of monogamy over polygamy (or promiscuity, since Rubin herself used the term as a binary opposition for monogamy) is hegemonic, the term is, however, assumed to be a representation of a neutral fact. What the word denotes is both the situation of multiplicity of partners, and the assessment that this multiplicity is a bad thing; the latter taken to be an intrinsic feature of the former, and thus both seemingly constituting an objective term, rather than a subjective judgement. Both the neutral facade of the term, as well as its presupposition and immediate confirmation of moralistic hierarchy of sexual acts provoked its wide use by the media and the whole culture industry of AIDS.

The use of this term had multiple pernicious effects. First of all, it immediately pinned the blame on the ill, e.g. gay people. Since it used moralistic assessment of polygamy, implicit

in it was rejection of the legacy of gay liberation, and sexual freedoms it granted. While there were some theoretical attempts to take over the word and change the values attached to it, such as Douglas Crimp's famous essay "How To Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," which extolled sexual liberation and credited its legacy with development of safe sex practices, in popular use, even among gay people, it maintained its negative association. Next, it reconfirmed the biases related to sexual transgression. Promiscuity, located in the outer limits of sexuality, confirmed its provenance as a vice in the form of a virus. Finally, the term allowed for further displacement of anxiety and conflation of disease with identity. Since it was gay men who behaved "promiscuously" (and some of them kept on doing so even during the epidemic), the two became code one for the other. And the displacement of meanings went even further: as Watney states on the subject of such strategic deployments of the term, "clearly journalists know that their readers are unlikely to be effortlessly monogamous or celibate, so we must conclude that the term 'promiscuity' is being employed to other purposes—as a sign of homosexuality itself, of forbidden pleasures, of *threat*" (12). Promiscuity becomes, through association with homosexuality, an umbrella term for all outer limits of sexual experience, malleable for practical use of any recipient so as to exempt their own practices. That politicians wanted to combat promiscuity or that media condemned promiscuity implied that the actual object of their action was homosexuality, or any other deviation from what is deemed socially acceptable in the realm of sex. That kind of phrasing was merely more acceptable in the contemporary discursive framework; through this code the no-longer-acceptable still could be said. Should such an utterance become an object of critique, it could be easily defended by ignoring the displacement and focusing on the precise meaning of the term.⁹

⁹ Importantly, in the context of increasing acceptability of homosexuality as such, that kind of discursive practice has been used by right wing opponents of subverting sexual order ever since. In the context of Polish debates over gay rights, umbrella terms such as "gender ideology" and "LGBT ideology" are deployed in a similar manner in order to dehumanize the oppressed and keep the homophobic discourse alive despite the facade of tolerance. Visibly, the discursive practices of today are descendants of techniques applied in the time of the AIDS epidemic and the moral panic that followed it.

The discourse of guarding sexual borders between the “general population” and the HIV-positive Other was a complicated process. It utilized unconscious defense mechanisms, complex discursive tactics and strategically constructed modes of representation. It was rooted in narratives and iconographies that were hundreds of years old. It inserted itself in the middle of discussions about vice and crime, and the lively debate over gay and sexual liberation. It was a discourse of the heteronormative, dominant group. It utilized normative and identity thinking, and through its privileging of the reproductive heterosexual couple it was congruent with the aims of biopower. This congruence was also visible in the way the discourse deployed and combined the medical, the biological, and the linguistic. Its heavy reliance on the moralistic narratives and interpretations of the epidemic had significant impact on the gay movement and the way it developed at the turn of the millennium.

Neoliberalism and the Takeover of Gay Movement

The criticisms of “promiscuity” and polygamous sexual life were often deployed with an overt intention of deterring HIV transmission. However, as many AIDS activists noted, such anti-sexual exhortations are useless in actually preventing the spread of the epidemic. For instance, Crimp argues (echoing Cindy Patton, to whom he ascribes this conclusion): “gay people invented safe sex. We knew that the alternatives—monogamy and abstinence—were unsafe, unsafe in the latter case because most people do not abstain from sex, and if you only tell them to ‘just say no,’ they will have unsafe sex” (64). As practice has shown, people do *not* stop having sex in the direst and most dangerous situations. What they *can* do is change their sexual behavior to prevent spread of the lethal virus, but they do so only if properly educated.

In the 1980s, this education ought to be attributed to gay people and their local communities themselves; they received very little help from the government or the media. Safer sex practices became widespread among gay men at the time due to efficacy of education

through unofficial channels and community press. The guidelines worked out by the community proved effective, significantly lowering the infection rates among gays and stopping the epidemic from exponential growth:

The spread of the virus dramatically slowed in 1983, when public health education programmes directed at gay men began. The year before, 21 percent of the unexposed gay population had developed antibodies to HIV, indicating that they had been exposed to the virus over the previous three months. But in 1983, that figure plummeted to 2 percent. In 1986 it was 0.8 percent, and researchers expect that it will continue to fall. (Rutherford, qtd. in Crimp, 74)

Granted, abandoning sex altogether would probably stop sexually-based transmission of the virus, but this kind of expectation is unrealistic; it is a general scientific consensus among health professionals that, while abstinence might be an option for some individuals, it is not viable as a tool for STI prevention in the population as a whole. In a recent review of Abstinence-Only Until Marriage (AOUM) sex education programs, the team of researchers found that arguing for withholding sex does not have any effect whatsoever on the young:

The meta-analysis of risk avoidance (AOUM) programs found insufficient evidence of a change in adolescent abstinence, other sexual behaviours, or other sexual outcomes . . . youth in AOUM programs were no more likely than participants in control groups to abstain from sex, and if they were sexually active, the two groups had similar sexual behaviors including the number of partners and the age of initiation. (The Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine 402)

In contrast, the groups which were taught safer sex practices showed better results. Among many others, the 2012 review of 66 studies on outcomes of comprehensive sexual education school programs were found effective in reducing sexual activity, sexual risk behaviors, and biologic outcomes (STIs and pregnancy), all of which were statistically significant except for

pregnancies (Chin et al. 277). The same study found statistical evidence on the efficacy of AOUM programs inconclusive in these metrics. It is thus visible that attempting to scare people away from having sex or hoping they will limit their options to lifelong monogamy has little utility in STI prevention, whereas giving them tools to explore their sexuality in a safer manner actually helps to stop the spread of the epidemic.

There are numerous reasons why trying to discourage people from having sex, or focusing HIV prevention on having sex only in monogamous relationships, may be actually pernicious. Among them, there is the simple fact that people do not always uphold this standard; or that the promise of monogamy results in greater (and potentially lethal) secrecy regarding transgressions; or that, specifically in the context of the early 1980s, there were no decisive tools for establishing one's seropositive status, thus making any single partner, monogamous or not, a potential source of infection; or that maintaining monogamy with an untreated HIV-positive partner is more dangerous than non-monogamous sex if safer sex practices are not followed; or, finally, that this kind of discourse focuses energies around a false moralistic panacea and diverts them from what has been proven to work. It seems clear, thus, that the actual purpose of the anti-sexual, anti-promiscuity narratives is not culling the epidemic, but maintenance of the system of sexual hierarchy. Both reduction of mortality rate and control of reproduction are aims of biopower; that the former is conflated with the latter regardless of medical advice proves how deeply invested biopower was in promotion of sexual restraint and increase in control over the field of sexuality which this narrative enabled.

This kind of moralism, disconnected from any sustainable model of HIV prevention, was not only an impediment to the attempts to stop the epidemic. It also damaged the queer ethos as defined by Warner, recreating the link between sex and shame for gay people. The queer ethos, which advocated a public sexual culture and sexual freedom, was at odds with the increasingly moralistic turn that USA witnessed towards the end of the 20th century. The fate

this queer ethos and the gay movement as a whole faced due to reemergence of the politics of shame needs to be understood in the larger context of the neoliberal turn in American politics. Using Lisa Duggan's and Michael Warner's critiques of neoliberal takeover in gay politics, I intend to show now how the exaltation of monogamy indicated appearance of a major discourse, aligned with corporate interests, which would play a dominant part in the gay movement in the 1990s, and how it moved gay people further from queer kinship, and towards normative bonds.

In *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* Lisa Duggan defines neoliberalism in the following manner:

Neoliberalism, a political label retrospectively applied to the "conservative" policies of the Reagan and Thatcher regimes in the U.S. and Great Britain, rocketed to prominence as the brand name for the form of pro-corporate, "free-market," anti-"big government" rhetoric shaping Western national policy and dominating international financial institutions since the early 1980s . . . Especially since the fall of the Soviet empire by the end of the 1980s, neoliberals have argued that all alternatives to the U.S. model have failed—fascism, communism, socialism, and even the relatively mild forms of the welfare state advocated by social democrats, labor movements, and Keynesians. Not trumpeted are the sharply declining participation rates in the Western "democracies," and the rapidly expanding, vast economic inequalities that neoliberal policies have generated in the U.S., in Great Britain, and globally. (10-11)

In her book, Duggan tracks the origins and rise of neoliberalism to its dominant presence in the political debates towards the end of the millennium. She starts with the New Deal politics that embraced welfare state programs which, while imperfect, were targeted specifically at redistribution of wealth and enabling upward mobility. She demonstrates that in the second half of the twentieth century these programs were under increasing attack:

From the early 1970s, global competition and failing profit rates stirred U.S. corporate interests to mount a counter-movement. This movement expanded in many directions from its base of pro-business activism, and it took many years to build; it has never been unified or stable. Yet, it has successfully opposed proliferating visions of an expansive, more equitable redistribution of the world's resources. (ix-x)

These pro-corporate developments were inextricably linked to what Duggan calls "master terms" of liberalism: sharp division between the public and the private, and four areas of social life: "the *state*, the *economy*, *civil society* and the *family*" (4). In the liberal framework, the state belongs entirely to the public realm, and the family solely to the private, while the other two fall somewhere between them, but lean strongly towards the private. However, these ideas are not descriptive, but prescriptive: "The master terms and categories of Liberalism are rhetorical; they do not simply *describe* the 'real' world, but rather provide only one way of understanding and organizing collective life" (5). In effect, they are a way of arranging social life according to certain assumptions. The institution of marriage, which usually is the publicly acknowledged recognition of a private bond, is a very good example of the process. Through saturation with privilege, it shapes social relationships according to a set of hegemonic notions rooted in the system of sexual hierarchy, such as monogamy, coupled relationships, and, in the majority of countries around the world, heterosexuality. This privilege may be economic in nature, coming both from the private sector (which often presents itself as family-friendly through certain advantages to families) and from the public sector (as married couples are often beneficiaries of welfare legislations and tax cuts). It also forces social recognition of various public institutions, starting with healthcare benefits and ending with married people's ability to refuse testimony concerning their spouses in court. The outspoken support of a married couple is also prevalent among a variety of political stances and parties, as since the 1980s, the neoliberal discourse has covered the vast majority of the political spectrum, including both conservative

and liberal mainstream politics. As a result of all these, and many more privileges, the institution of marriage in all likelihood influences choices people make about the way they conduct their sexual lives.

Marriage, with its long history, remains one of the central institutions of social structuring in the neoliberal framework. It resolves shame and ambivalence the society feels about sex by assigning it to a thoroughly private dominion. The saturation of this institution with privilege ensures that it will be the preferred form of structuring a relationship for the majority of society. However, it was often not perceived as such by gay liberationists, who saw it as a means of state control over sexuality, and subverted its domination with a public sexual culture flourishing in gay neighborhoods of the 70s and 80s. They saw the institution as oppressive in its current shape, and criticized it for upholding the system of sexual hierarchy. In *Refugees from Amerika*, an early gay liberation manifesto, Carl Wittman scolds traditional marriage as “a rotten, oppressive institution.” As Michael Warner claims, the queer ethos upheld by many gay liberation thinkers refuted state distribution of privilege and legitimacy for sexual relationships, embraced diversity of possible relations, and refused to be measured by the standards of the straight world. Within this environment, invisibility of the concepts of monogamy and marriage, often taken as neutral facts of life by the heteronormative culture, became a highly contested field.

In practice, this translated into the fact that the traditionally understood family often did not play such an important role for gay people as it did for their straight counterparts. The chief reason for this situation was familial homophobia, i.e. mistreatment of gay members of families. At that time, most gay people they were often not accepted in their family homes after coming out, and many of them moved from rural areas to bigger cities. In these cities, queer homeless youth often organized into “houses,” while others formed same-sex relationships which were not recognized legally in any way. All of this led to dissonance between what the legal system

did recognize as their relationships, and what their real day-to-day bonds actually were. This eventually led to the emergence of the idea of a “chosen family,” or “gay family.” It was an alternative way of understanding kinship which gained popularity especially in the early 1980s. Such families, as defined by Kath Weston, “might incorporate friends, lovers, or children, in any combination. Organized through ideologies of love, choice, and creation, gay families have been defined through a contrast with what many gay men and lesbians in the Bay Area called ‘straight,’ ‘biological,’ or ‘blood’ family” (27). While biological families are organized by the principle of consanguinity, gay families, understood as networks of close relationships, are organized by a principle of choice.

Weston links this development to the emergence of the practice of coming out to families after the Stonewall Inn riots. Since the riot, gay liberation movement has been arguing that gay people should openly embrace their identity. According to Weston, it was “a period when coming out to relatives witnessed a kind of institutionalization” (41), i.e. the idea of coming out to one’s blood family became thinkable. Relatives’ responses to such revelation were often unpredictable and gay people were anxious that their families might disown them. Interestingly, the very idea that one can lose one’s family made the way kinship is constructed more visible. Since the act of disowning became a real possibility in the lives of many gay people and since such action can sever the ties of kinship, it follows that it is more than blood ties that makes a family. If one can have a relationship of consanguinity with someone who is no longer family (for instance, a disowning parent), then perhaps, conversely, one can also consider people with whom one has no blood ties to be their relative. Equipped with this experience, gay people began to notice how volition plays part in the notion of kinship.

This idea and this experience run counter to the predominant Western understandings of family, which is defined through the criteria of consanguinity or marital relationship. Both of those are rooted in the central metaphor of reproduction. Such a definition of family has a

long-standing tradition within the Western culture. In an early anthropological study of the ways in which kinship is understood in the American context, David Schneider states: “The blood relationship, as it is defined in American kinship, is formulated in concrete, biogenetic terms. Conception follows a single act of sexual intercourse between a man, as genitor, and a woman, as genetrix” (23). It is the figure of intercourse within the heterosexual dyad, where one half complements the other, which results in the birth of a child, that underscores the dominant understandings of kinship. One belongs to a family either through shared genetic material, a testament to the biological apparatus of reproduction, or through marriage, the culturally prescript reproductive institution. This constitutes the heterosexual script of how a life is supposed to develop.

Since this immediately excludes any non-reproductive couple from full participation in kinship networks, such an assumption is inherently heterosexist. For gay people, it is coming out to one’s relatives, and the following implied failure to fulfill one's expected reproductive role, that used to mark the departure from the heteronormative role within the infinitely reproducing family. Unsurprisingly, then, the institutions of family and marriage have been subject to analysis and criticism of liberation theorists and activists. At the same time, queer communities were experimenting with alternative forms of kinship which could redefine the criteria of belonging. These projects came about at the time when the anthropological perspectives on kinship were also broadening. The phenomena such as transnational and transracial adoptions, advances in the field of genetics, increase in divorces and appearance of “patchwork families” (to name just as few) brought into visibility insufficiency of the purely consanguineal and reproductive account of kinship. The report from an international symposium on the subject which took place in 1998 reads as follows:

If, as has been argued, kinship has long been used to conceptualize ideas about the bounded integrity of nations, of race and caste, of species, of bodies and machines, it

has also been, and especially now, has increasingly become a medium through which both the fixing and the crossing of boundaries between these categories is signified (Franklin and McKinnon 278).

The report points to the multiple perspectives on how the notion of kinship has been utilized in forging the narratives that secure the status quo, but also notes on how the reimagining of these notions “involve explicit and self-conscious cultural innovation and negotiation” (278). It is in this broadening discourse that I want to situate the idea of queer kinship.

As chosen families demonstrate, the familial ties cannot be simply done away with; they are generally understood to be the basis of all sociality. They cannot be reduced to a purely affective relationship, either. Rather, as Elizabeth A. Povinelli argues, they function in a complex interplay of consanguinity and affection:

The genealogical imaginary did not die when the sovereign’s head tumbled. Nor was it replaced by intimacy as a new form of association and attachment. Something more—and less—interesting is happening. Both genealogy and intimacy have emerged as semiautonomous foundations for legitimating sex acts and other forms of corporeal sociality, even as both have been dispersed in and by colonial and postcolonial worlds. Sociality seems unthinkable not only without one or the other of these two grids, but without them working as twin pairs, intertwined, twisting, struggling against each other in the empty horizon of the Universal. (367-68)

As Povinelli argues, that sociality which is based in intimacy and affection did not (and possibly cannot) replace the one of consanguinity; instead, the two coexist in a “struggle” that does not seem likely to resolve. However, in the case of gay people the ties of consanguineal kinship may falter because these individuals, and their relations, are not understood to belong fully in the kinship system. Fittingly, “queer” has often been understood through the notion of that which does not belong to the dominant heterosexist culture, and that which embraces the non-

belonging. It is in the space between these two premises—that genealogical imaginary still remains alongside the affective one, and that a queer individual posits themselves outside or on the outskirts of their blood kinship network—where queer kinship emerges. It is not synonymous with queer communities although it often motivates and strengthens them. Queer kinship is that which can be understood as kinship, yet does not follow its cultural script and subverts its understanding as natural; it is also that which is constructed in absence of or in addition to consanguineal kinship, especially when the blood family fails to perform its role. Chosen families are one clear example of how it formulates; but it is also visible, for instance, in buddy systems, which organized queer people to help dying PWAs when the families would not; in AIDS funerals, and their reformulated scripts of mourning; and in each rhetorical extension of kinship through figures such as “brothers” and “sisters” towards all PWAs, all at risk of AIDS, and all that joined the fight for their rights.

This queer kinship can be understood as the mode of sociality underlying the emergence of gay villages, the rise of the gay liberation movement, and the AIDS activism. In the 1980s, when the epidemic started, it pushed the gay movement to staunch opposition of the neoliberal mainstream of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. By the middle of the 90s, however, the political climate changed. No longer was neoliberalism identified strictly with rightwing politics; with the rise of Clinton’s New Democrats in the 1990s, the neoliberal ideology became decidedly bipartisan. As Duggan states:

The culture wars were an effective game plan, but by the 1990s they had become a residual strategy for neoliberals, who could increasingly afford to drop their right wing of religious moralists—a rump formation for an ascendant mainstream neoliberalism. Neoliberalism’s emergent strategy for the new millennium: A new ‘equality’ politics compatible with a corporate world order. (42)

At that time the discourse of neoliberalism began to cover an ever larger part of the political life. Its proponents were looking for the way alliances could be made also with the left-leaning constituencies, securing hegemony of the neoliberal ideals across the spectrum. The climate also influenced the gay movement, which experienced its conservative turn, not in the least due to moralistic readings of the AIDS epidemic. This turn is best exemplified by the issue of gay marriage and its rise to prominence in the 90s. As the decade went on, it replaced AIDS activism as the forefront gay issue because the latter was broadly perceived as less and less urgent, especially after the introduction of protease inhibitors which could suppress the virus. In 1996, Andrew Sullivan infamously stated in his article “When Plagues End” that the epidemic was over. This was a decidedly classist statement; the treatment would soon indeed transform the epidemic, but due to the cost of therapy the change would affect mostly the upper middle class, making AIDS fairly livable for them, but still decidedly lethal for those who live in poverty.

The conservative turn in the gay movement is often associated with a group called Independent Gay Forum (IGF). In the mid-1990s, Sullivan joined forces with several other gay conservatives under this banner, and the group began their attempt to reshape gay politics. Even if the drugs did not stop the epidemic completely, IGF claimed that monogamy would, as it was going to be repackaged as gay marriage. Against what has been perceived as a rigidly binary opposition—with liberationist gay activists seeking to thoroughly reshape social structure on the one hand, and conservative homophobes on the other—IGF presented their “third way” politics which exalted conservative values, but argued for gay people’s place in them. Their politics, thus, did not subvert the system of sexual hierarchy, but rather argued for moving the goalposts of acceptability regarding, specifically, the issue of sexual orientation.

IGF reframed and revised the history of gay movement through the same judgmental, moralistic lens that gay liberation had protested. Gay movement after Stonewall, with its broad alliances among various sexual dissidents, was no longer in this account a necessarily radical

force of change that managed to challenge the rule of sexual law. It became a “gay ghetto,” as its ethics were infantilized by its opponents and represented as superficial and meaningless. Sullivan’s version of the gay history of the period goes as follows:

Responsibility . . . was not usually associated with homosexuality. Before AIDS, gay life—rightly or wrongly—was identified with freedom from responsibility, rather than with its opposite. Gay liberation was most commonly understood as liberation from the constraints of traditional norms, almost a dispensation that permitted homosexuals the absence of responsibility in return for an acquiescence in second-class citizenship. This was the Faustian bargain of the pre-AIDS closet: straights gave homosexuals a certain amount of freedom; in return, homosexuals gave away their self-respect. But with AIDS, responsibility became a central, imposing feature of gay life. Without it, lovers would die alone or without proper care. Without it, friends would contract a fatal disease because of lack of education. Without it, nothing would be done to stem the epidemic's wrath. In some ways, even the seemingly irresponsible outrages of Act-Up were the ultimate act of responsibility. They came from a conviction that someone had to lead, to connect the ghetto to the center of the country, because it was only by such a connection that the ghetto could be saved. (“When Plagues End” 52)

The ethos of liberation, comprising repudiation of state distribution of privilege, rejection of the politics of shame, and embrace of sexual divergence, became “acquiescence in second-class citizenship” and “giving away their self-respect” in IGF’s revisionist version of gay history. While Sullivan did not frame AIDS as a just punishment for the sinfulness of gay life as the far right did, the belief in the inferiority of the pre-epidemic gay modes of sociality permeates his argument, making the liberation culture partially culpable for the disaster which hit it. In this understanding, abandonment of the queer ethos meant “maturity” which would, conceivably, protect gay people from another disaster in the future.

In voicing their opinions, IGF writers tended to project “silent majority” of gay people, who supposedly shared their beliefs, against the loud minority of influential gay activists. As Sullivan stated:

The notion of sexuality as cultural subversion distanced it from the vast majority of gay people who not only accept the natural origin of their sexual orientation, but wish to be integrated into society as it is. For most gay people—the closet cases and barflies, the construction workers and investment bankers, the computer programmers and parents—a “queer” identity is precisely what they want to avoid. (“Politics of Homosexuality”)

This assumption is made unproblematically and expressed without any substantiation, despite the fact that where gay people did construct some communities before AIDS, they did so in a manner far outside of the scope of IGF’s moralistic narratives. Sullivan shows certain instability of conviction in the very same article. His assertion that gay people tended to be against the “queer,” dissident stance and that they favored stability of the system of sexual hierarchy over its renegotiation, wavers when the questions of monogamy and marriage are raised. Then, he claims one of the benefits of legalizing same sex marriage is the fact that, while some gay people already live in long-term monogamous relationships, for others the institution of marriage “provides a social incentive . . . to adopt socially beneficial relationships.” Suddenly, his rhetoric swerves from expression of the beliefs held by the silent majority towards a kind of social engineering project which is supposed to train gay subjects to follow the example of heterosexual couples.

This instability might be indicative of how murky were the grounds on which IGF’s majority claims were made, but it was not enough to stop them from projecting their beliefs on the gay population as a whole. Significantly, they were given a platform in the mainstream media to do so. Liberal media at the time were finding gay identity politics increasingly palatable, but resisted the subversiveness of the queer ethos. The new discourse presented by

the IGF writers was much more palatable to their audiences. That they posited themselves against not only rightwing homophobes, but also against the queer activists, who were construed as influential minority deciding what gay politics should be, was a compelling rhetorical maneuver.

Moreover, even though IGF were speaking from the position of privilege, they framed the conflict so as to represent themselves as underdogs, the defiant voice of sanity against dominant liberationists. This gave them a rhetorical advantage. The underdog, as defined by Vandello, Goldschmied and Richards in their study on the phenomenon, is the party perceived as expected to lose due to unjust disadvantage. In accordance with psychological deservingness theory, once a party is seen as an underdog, the unaffiliated observers are more willing to ascribe positive qualities to that party as a way of compensating for the perceived injustice. Since the beginning of gay movement, activists presented themselves as the underdogs against the heteronormative structure which systematically excludes them. IGF built on this narrative, positing themselves not only as the underdogs to the rightwing homophobic structure, but also to the leftwing “gay establishment,” whose power was unjust because it supposedly did not express the will of the silent majority.

While little has been presented in terms of evidence for these claims, the liberal media eagerly welcomed this story and invited IGF writers as pundits to comment on the issues from the gay perspective. This projected credibility on the IGF, although, as Warner argues, the roots of their media presence were unlikely to be grounded in the initial popularity of their views:

There always seem to be some gay men and lesbians willing to denounce gay culture from the safe perch of the straight media. They regard this as a sign of courage and nonconformity, and they think that their ability to find such a large audience is evidence of their superior reasoning, or the natural popularity of their views among gay people. But nothing could be farther from the truth. Their power derives from the stigmaphobe

context in which they speak: from mass-mediated publics, institutions of law and the state, concentrations of money in politics, the structure of national organizations, and the privatization of public space. (68-69)

In IGF's narrative, most of gay people did not want the public sexual culture they had constructed themselves. What they really wanted was exactly the same kind of social structure that heterosexuals function in. The politics of gay movement in this variant became less about constructing an alternative to the hegemonic social structure, and more about being granted entrance to the one which already exists. Implicitly, this turn confirms the superiority of marriage, monogamy and heterosexuality, telling the mass-media audiences exposed to IGF rhetoric what they already were convinced of, while masking the overt political goal (right to same-sex marriage) as progressive.

What made it easier for IGF to project their views on the majority of gay people was also dissolution of gay life and its institutions at the time. The local communities and their media, which until then had been giving voice to the activists sharing queer ethos, began to disappear, being driven out by the apolitical glossy lifestyle magazines. A similar process occurred at the organizational level, as grassroots organizations that had often voiced demands specific to the conditions of queer life, regardless of their palatability from the point of view of the heteronormative culture, gave way to the increasingly corporate (and corporate-funded) national organizations that aligned themselves around the issue of marriage. The tactics used by the gay movement also changed, from the culture of direct action, which is democratic and encourages mass participation, to that of legal proceedings, which makes popular involvement much harder. Since, in time, these issues consumed most of gay politics, they resulted in political demobilization of gay constituencies. According to Lisa Duggan, these developments were congruent with the larger cultural turn towards the family, inscribed in the anti-communal neoliberal politics that reigned supreme at that time. The result was what she called "the new

homonormativity.” She defines it in the following manner: “it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50). This claim can be exemplified by the failure of New York gays to respond to governor Giuliani’s rezoning plan which directly and overtly attacked public sexual culture such as sex businesses or cruising areas¹⁰ in the city. The gay constituency failed to protest these measures efficiently, since neither their media nor their organizations were occupied by the issue—in fact, many of them supported already the persecution of the outer limits of sex.

The appearance of the glossy gay magazines which were less interested in politics was not only a visible result of the conservative turn, but also of the changing relationship between a gay or lesbian subject and the dominant culture as such, especially insofar as a gay or lesbian *customer* was concerned. The phenomenon of niche marketing, i.e. a marketing of products for a specific minority group differentiated by some identifiable trait, and often organized around a particular identity, became a major force in the American economic life at that time. In her non-fiction book *Stagestruck*, Sarah Schulman describes the way Mulryan/Nash, a pioneering gay advertising company, paved the way for gay niche marketing. Their representation of gay people focused on the upper middle class, affluent, white male gay customers and accentuated so-called “pink money,” emphasizing the buying power of two men living together and without children, and thus having a lot of discretionary income. However, the type of gay man to whom Mulryan/Nash marketed was, in fact, a small part of the whole gay constituency. Their advertising excluded the less affluent, remaining insensitive to the intricacies of cross-exclusion along the lines of sexuality, sex and race. For instance lesbians, who due to pay gap tend to earn

¹⁰ Cruising was the practice typical among gays in the liberation period, where men in public spaces would indicate to each other in a coded manner that they were willing to have sex with each other. Whole areas, such as parks or streets, became known for the ease with which men might be picked up there. Such encounters normally were consummated either at home of one of the men, or in some public spaces, such as baths, bushes or toilets.

less money than any other coupled household (not only do they earn less than men, but, in contrast to straight women, they have no access to male income) could not be included in the “pink money” narrative. This new visibility given to gay affluency had significant political ramifications. As Alexandra Chasin notes: “Disqualified by lack of money, citizens unable to ‘vote’ in the marketplace become thoroughly disenfranchised within this model” (151). Where the former culture of direct political action was (fairly) egalitarian, empowering the economically disadvantaged to action, the same people have been disempowered by the culture which accentuates and advocates for liberty on the grounds of purchasing power and annual income. As a result, the public image of homosexuality was whitewashed and masculinized.

This was congruent with the aims of the Independent Gay Forum, which sought to tear apart issues of identity politics and intersectional exclusion. It was clearly visible in IGF’s protest against Esperanza Peace and Justice center, an organization that addressed the issue of intersectionality in its art projects:

[Esperanza] is a political organization—obsessed with victimhood and using ‘sexism, racism, classism and homophobia’ as rhetorical and political ploys to extract guilt money from individuals and organizations, including the City. Esperanza has made its battle for tax dollars a referendum on homosexuality and we resent this. But Esperanza’s greatest damage to the gay and lesbian community is the divisiveness it creates within by repeatedly injecting issues of class, race and gender for self-serving purposes. (Blanchard et al. qtd. in Duggan 55)

The neoliberal conservative gay activists do not wish to see subjects of race, class or sex “injected” into gay identity politics. Since the forces of the market project a white, middle-class gay men as the face of the movement, and since IGF conceptualize this projection as the silent majority of gay constituency, the issues of intersectional exclusion are beyond the scope of their interest. In this worldview, the struggle against racism or sexism is not gay movement’s

business; moreover, the movement cannot alienate the racists and sexists who might support gay marriage.

This sort of tactic is short-sighted. Courting possible support of gay rights among the conservatives requires adjusting gay culture to what is acceptable for those conservatives. In the process, the very impetus to call for change may be lost. Very often it is the very unacceptability to the world around them that gives people motivation to fight and functions as a catalyst for change. While in the 60s there were many influential closeted homosexuals who conceivably could use their power to provoke social change, it was a black drag queen who threw the first brick during Stonewall Riots. And it was not only gay men, but a diverse alliance of people who were “queer” in the broadest sense, that made ACT UP an effective organization. The conservative turn towards more identitarian, whitewashed and masculinized politics was not a “maturation” of the movement, but a corporate takeover; in fact, it lessened the movement’s efficacy as gay media pundits became more isolated from the communities they were supposed to represent.

Importantly, the “maturity” through which IGF defines its politics moves in its understanding of homosexuality further away from sex towards identity. According to Warner, the tension between the two has always existed in the movement, since sex as such has always been shameful in the Western culture. For that reason, even in the liberation period gays accentuated identity rather than sex as grounds for the equality. This politics is paradoxical in its nature, because sex is the very source of gay identity, and thus it is inescapable, always right beneath the surface, and ready to be rhetorically deployed by homophobes no matter how carefully the respectable image is constructed. Moreover, this approach only reinforces the power of sexual shame, and makes respectability dependent on the kind of de-sexualization that, in the heteronormative system, is secured through the institution of marriage. Another problem with this approach is the fact that sexuality cannot be catalogued into neatly ordered

identities, as exemplified by increasingly robust, yet still found insufficient, acronyms for queer alliances such as “LGBTQIA+.” The pitfalls of this framework were often limiting the efficacy of gay politics, but in the liberation period it was at least widely disputed. The conservative turn in the movement, however, needed gay identity to become stable so that it would be able to plead for equality on the grounds of civil rights, without overcoming the politics of shame. At the same time, de-sexualization ensured that the argument would remain palatable for the mainstream media. The result of this discourse are gay and lesbian subjects disengaged from the other types of sexual dissidents, sanitized from any sexuality, and thus ready to join the social fold.

Such “matured” gay movement fits seamlessly into the consumer culture. The market force played, in fact, a significant role in demobilization of gay constituencies. According to Chasin,

the capitalist market makes possible, but also constrains, social movements whose central objective is the expansion of individual political rights. Over the course of the twentieth century, as a function of the rise of consumer culture, political rights have been increasingly recast as economic liberties. This means that social movements focused on winning rights are increasingly drawn into market-based tactics and objectives. In this way, the market promotes assimilation into a homogeneous national culture, encouraging identity difference only to the extent that it serves as a basis for niche marketing. (xvii)

The liberation movements were thus enabled by the capitalist state, but then, as civil liberties got more and more bound up with the economic liberties, these movements transformed into market niches. This development can account for both the ubiquity of tokenistic diversity politics and its failure to meaningfully impact the hierarchical social structure.

As discussed by Chasin, an identity in the consumer culture is limited to its use as a marketing niche. As a result, various minority groups are targeted in an attempt to sell goods to them. But the gay identity is more than its economic use, and so is racial identity, or trans* identity, or womanhood. Or the identity of a WASP man, for that matter. Both the identities and the identifying subjects are constituted through experiences, especially the ones in which either the identity itself or its basis (bodily, sexual, or other) becomes clearly visible. For the groups which are discriminated against, that experience of discrimination is thus an important part of identity. Yet, as these experiences are usually unpleasant, and upon deeper analysis they show the conflicts and the violence which permeate Western culture, the marketing strategies which seek to establish warm feelings towards corporate entities tend to shy away from them. What remains are the hollow markers of race, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. The markers of diversity without the diversity of experience or of power struggles that shape these diverse identities create a simulacrum of minority representation which neuters the challenge that an actual representation innately poses to the power structure.

This is pertinent to the issue of the culture industry of AIDS, as through understanding that process we can observe, comprehend and analyze the tactic of erasing the particularity of the queer experience of the disease, especially inasmuch as that experience was constituted and formed by homophobia. With the rise of niche marketing, as representations of gay men were more and more likely to show them in a way that did not threaten the rest of the public, the painful experience of homophobia had to be separated from gay identity.¹¹

¹¹ I do not mean to say by this that the culture industry never represents homophobia. Contrarily, quite often these works focus on its devastating effects, especially inasmuch as they can be mined for drama. Rather, I want to say that it fails to account for the experience of homophobia as a daily-basis and lifelong reality of queer subjects, regardless of whether homophobia is or is not the focus of the story. One is much more likely to see an episode of a TV series about a gay child being bullied at school (where the conflict is typically caused by an identifiable agent, a bully, and resolved through a cathartic conclusion) than one about having to come to terms with their status as second-class citizens in a heteronormative society (this status being caused by a systematic social superstructure and impossible to resolve clearly).

Why is the dominant culture so unwilling to recognize the particularity of minority experience, however? This can be illuminated by Alexandra Chasin's idea of the interplay between sameness and difference in capitalism:

Identity politics and identity-based consumption hinge on both sameness (imagined within an identity group, as in "unity") and difference (from the majority culture, though "the new," however deviant originally, itself comes to define majority culture more and more quickly). Because market culture increasingly reduces the distance between sameness and difference, identity politics increasingly serves capital. (53)

As she argues, the capitalist economy accentuates, for any given identity, that identity's difference from the majority. This process delegates bearers of that identity to a specific market niche—for instance, the consumers of rainbow-themed goods. At the same time, this identity assumes internal coherence, thus occluding intersectionality and particularity of experience. Once the difference (from the majority) is reinforced through identity (internal sameness), that identity is universalized through consumption. As Chasin repeatedly shows in *Selling Out*, marketing in the US context tends to underline the national identity in consumerist terms, and it has been a very proliferate mode of representation in advertisements targeted at gay people. Over time, the particularity of a given identity and its culture erodes in favor of a palatable, mass-marketed, universalized image.

For instance, models that make up gay couples in advertising images are almost never effeminate, i.e. they adhere to the dominant culture image of a man. The explicit reason for that is to prevent reinforcement of what might be perceived as an old, retrograde stereotype of gay effeminacy. The "sissy queer" imagery, the logic goes, might be read as unquestionably offensive. What is implicit in this premise is the condemnation of an actual effeminate man, seeing him as clearly deficient in comparison to a masculine one. However, that among gay men being effeminate used to be acceptable was exactly what was unique about Warner's

“*salons de refuses*” governed by queer ethos. As a result of this change, the particularity of gay culture that was the free space for male effeminacy disappeared; the negative value ascribed by the dominant culture to male effeminacy has been projected, via advertising images, onto gay identity; all the while the move away from the particularity of that subculture was being masked as breaking the stereotype. The possibilities of freedom within the subversive subculture are infiltrated and erased by the dominant culture values in order to allow for universalized marketing. As a result, the minority culture (gay culture), through the process of accentuating the difference (between the dominant culture and gay people) using consumerist markers of identity (rainbow-themed goods advertised by masculine men) has been brought closer to sameness (with the dominant culture) via consumption. This whole process is congruent with Adorno’s point of the role the culture industry and the exchange relations play in promoting identity thinking through sale of pseudo-individuated products.

In the story told by the IGF, the initial stage of the AIDS epidemic was a cathartic moment for the American gays and lesbians. It was necessary to teach the infantile group which had revoked their self-respect about the importance of restraint and show them what true love means. And true love means, unquestionably, monogamy and marriage. As gay people learned it, they turned away from the subversive, “queer” politics (not close to their hearts in the first place) and championed IGF writers as those who gave voice to their actual needs. As perceived by the queer activists, this story does not hold up, as it actually translates into erosion of popular participation in gay politics, dilution of gay culture, as well as corporatization of their press and the movement as a whole. They didn’t see the turn as “maturation,” but a takeover, and they interpreted the preceding crisis as coming of age in a different sense; for queer activists, extreme mobilization among gay population and communal institutions that popped up in absence of state help were the fruit of the queer ethos and modes of sociality organized around queer kinship and nurtured over the preceding decades. Thus, the memory of the AIDS epidemic and

the AIDS activism is not only a historical debate, but also a crucial point in the battle over what gay movement is and should be today.

Conclusion

Western culture, in order to keep its self-understanding as “civilized” against “animal” nature, had to guard the sexual borders between the “general population” and the HIV-positive Other. This discourse utilized unconscious defense mechanisms, complex discursive tactics and strategically constructed modes of representation. It was rooted in narratives and iconographies that were hundreds of years old. It inserted itself in the middle of discussions about vice and crime, and the lively debate over gay and sexual liberation. It was a discourse of the heteronormative, dominant group. It utilized normative and identity thinking, and through its privileging of the reproductive heterosexual couple it was congruent with the aims of biopower. This congruence was also visible in the way the discourse deployed and combined the medical, the biological, and the linguistic. Its effects were not merely a confirmation of the privilege of the heterosexual marriage; rather, it gave birth to a new kind of gay subject, disidentified from the otherness of the gay liberation counterpublic, and adapted to the new neoliberal world order. This new kind of gay subject was able to bend the rules of the system of sexual hierarchy and draw much closer to Rubin’s “charmed circle,” but solely under the condition that all other elements of this system were kept within the homosexual couple. In the following chapter I will discuss several popular works representing the initial stage of the AIDS epidemic, along with their social contexts, in order to show how the discourses guarding sexual borders and reshaping gay subjects were present within these texts. Considering both their success under capitalism and their reinforcement of identity thinking, it is through these case studies that I try to define the culture industry of AIDS.

Chapter 2: The Culture Industry of AIDS

In the previous chapter, I have delineated the theoretical grounds on which I make use of the phrase “the culture industry of AIDS,” and the ideas it is supposed to refer to. Now, I intend to analyze how the culture industry of AIDS operated as it was visible through several important texts from the 1980s and the 1990s.

This is by no means a comprehensive or exhaustive account of the culture industry of AIDS. Neither do I claim that the culture industry of AIDS works in a unified or identitarian manner. Rather, I look at this selection as specific cases, each in a different dialogue with principles of sex hierarchy and the order of biopower, as working towards their reinforcement. Their selection was mostly motivated by the clarity of examples and the impact these works made, manifest as media attention, commercial success and critical acclaim. The traces of tactics and practices discussed below can be perceived in other texts, on which I sometimes comment, but in order to give at least some due to the complex issues each of these cultural products is entangled with, I opt for almost exclusive focus on a single work in each section. The problems are, where possible, related to the means of production, economic justifications for making decisions on how to develop or promote works, and economic/political discourses they reinforce. This requires emphasis on the collaborative aspect of cultural production. In some cases, like Broadway musicals, it’s obvious and very much in the DNA of the genre to be a collective effort; but even books written by one author, before they get published, undergo editing and are marketed in a manner that sells. These junctures provide special insight into the workings of the culture industry, as they show how cultural products are adjusted in order to reinforce identity thinking, manifest as, in the case of sexuality, as sexual hierarchy. The purpose of this analysis is to determine some specific representational practices which can be

linked to the biopolitics of the times. This, in turn, shall provide a foundation for comparative analysis with Schulman's novels in the next chapters.

The Scapegoating of Patient O

Perhaps the most emblematic instance of the operation of the culture industry of AIDS is the story of Gaetan Dugas, a French Canadian flight attendant, often referred to as "Patient Zero."¹² Dugas was a participant in an early Center for Disease Control Los Angeles cluster study that tried to establish causation of the syndrome by a viral agent. He reported an extensive sexual history, with hundreds of contacts, which was not uncommon among the early cases. What distinguished Dugas from the other study subjects was "his ability to provide names" (McKay 108), as he kept a comparatively thorough record of his sexual history. With his help, CDC was able to link various disparate cases not only in LA, but also in New York, which contributed to proving that sexual encounters can be a mode of transmission.

The cluster study referred to Dugas initially as "Patient O," where the letter stood for "out-of-California." As a result of clerical error, or selection of a confusing font, the letter "O" was quite often misread as the number "0." As Richard McKay states in his historical study on the construction of the figure of Patient Zero: "The consequences of this change cannot be overemphasized, given the multitude of meanings for the word zero. Particularly noteworthy definitions include: 'a worthless thing or person,' 'an absence or lack of anything,' 'the initial point of a process or reckoning . . . the starting point, [and] the absolute beginning' (110-111). Another obvious connotation is the phrase "ground zero," which signifies the geographic area where an epidemic starts. Altogether, the phrase immediately suggests that the patient is a

¹² Since Shilts, as will be shown in this discussion, has taken many liberties in his representation of Gaetan Dugas, his name and the nickname of Patient Zero should by no means be understood as synonymous. Whenever I write "Patient Zero" I mean the loathsome specter conjured by Shilts' misrepresentation and developed further by the media; whenever Dugas's proper name appears, the text discusses the real, actual Person With AIDS victimized by this misrepresentation.

dangerous source of contagion. These effects were further exacerbated by visual representations of the cluster, which typically placed Dugas at the very center, since he was a common link among many of the included cases. As a result, Patient Zero was often incorrectly believed to be the source of AIDS in the United States.

Among those who misconstrued the findings of the cluster study was Randy Shilts, the author of *And The Band Played On*, a pseudo-documentary that covers the rise of the epidemic in the first half of the 80s. The book's multiple story threads take a novelistic approach, with accounts of its characters' thoughts and perceptions, even though the work aspires to historical accuracy. In the course of 14 chapters focusing on Gaetan, it represents him as a beautiful and cunning man driven by lust, who, having been diagnosed with Kaposi's Sarcoma, refused to acknowledge the possibility of transmission through sex. Moreover, he kept going to clubs and bathhouses, where he would have sex with men in the dark, and only later turn on the light, show his lesions (the most common signifier of AIDS at the time), and say "I'm going to die, and so are you" (165). While the account includes some historical truth—Dugas *did* refuse to stop having sex after his diagnosis—it presents an entirely biased version of the story and fails to account for nuance and historical context that explains much of his behavior.

In the first place, the early propositions that AIDS may be caused by a sexually transmitted agent fell on a very infertile ground among gay people. As Simon Watney argues, the modern gay identity was formed in opposition to the order of power imposed by the respectable institutions of the civilized society:

Gay culture in the 1970s offered the grounds for the emergence of a social identity defined not by notions of sexual "essence," but in oppositional relation to the institutions and discourses of medicine, the law, education, housing and welfare policy, and so on. As such it has been strikingly successful across the field of discourse. It has also enabled, as I have suggested, the development of a wide variety of cultural forms and

social formations, in relation to which at least two generations of young people whose sexuality is predominantly homosexual have "come out" into a previously unimaginable social identity. (18)

The memory of using biomedical discourse as a means of oppression through construction of homosexuality as a disease was still fresh, and it made gays and lesbians skeptical towards findings that seemed to condemn their sexual culture. In her historical account of political responses to the epidemic, Jennifer Brier notes that "many gay men heard the call to limit sexual partners as a message infused with moralism" (23) and quotes Edmund White, who, according to an *Advocate* piece, stated that "some moralists are using the appearance of Kaposi's Sarcoma as a pretext for preaching against gay promiscuity under the guise of giving sound medical advice" (qtd. in Brier 21). Furthermore, the medical community, aware of this resistance and of the limits of early research, often worded the early guidelines for avoiding infection in the most tentative terms, encouraging limiting the number of sexual partners. Shilts' book misrepresents this as recklessness on the part of gay people and cowardice on the part of doctors, and thus construes Dugas' refusal to stop having sex as entirely ungrounded, and with strong undertones of malice.

These two factors shine some light on Dugas' refusal to stop having sex; however, his behavior was not as systematic and consistent as the author of *And The Band Played On* would have his readers believe. When doing his research, Shilts uncovered at least one instance of Dugas' refusal to have sex, conceivably because of his infection. McKay provides an account of the chapter which was cut from the book:

Brown and Dugas had gone on a date to the Conservatory, a beautiful restaurant in Vancouver's Stanley Park. When Brown admits he is interested in Dugas sexually, Gaetan hesitates before answering: "We can't. It won't work out. I can't say any more."

This page-long section, completely written up and included in an early draft, was cut. It

is possible that this was done to tighten the pace of a long book, though its excision also removed any ambiguity from Dugas's motivations and strengthened the image of the flight attendant as a deliberate disease spreader. (McKay 183)

Considering all the above, Shilts did not merely uncover Dugas' irresponsible behavior, as he claimed to have done, but deliberately constructed it into a vividly unsympathetic image. In connection with Shilts' misreading of the cluster study, which made him believe that Dugas was not a common link, but a cause of epidemic, his story of Patient Zero (stylized in the book as a word, as if to make sure this is the one and only interpretation of the symbol) effectively renders Dugas the villain of the story and the ultimate scapegoat of the epidemic.

While it could be argued that *And The Band Played On* included a multitude of plot threads, and the story of Dugas is only a small portion of the whole text, its significance must not be downplayed. The book was a financially troubled endeavor from the start; if it had not been for the personal involvement of Michael Denny, a member of the editorial board at St. Martin's (which eventually published *Band*) and a personal friend of Shilts', the project would not have even got off the ground. Even though the editors at St. Martin's reviewed the book proposal positively, they refused to publish it at first, considering AIDS a risky subject and expecting a flop. After the proposal was rejected by twelve other publishers, Denny forced the editorial board of St. Martin's to reconsider. This was not the end to the obstacles *Band* faced, however: "Once the book was finished, the editorial board's concerns were proven correct. As the November 1987 release date for *And the Band Played On* drew near, media outlets refused to publicize it" (Tiemeyer 175). It is at this point that a convenient twist occurred—a friendly book promoter advised Shilts and Denny to use the Patient Zero story to market *Band*:

I can tell you how to get this on the front page of the *New York Post* and I can guarantee you what the headline will be.... You'll get the headline front page of the *Post*, and the

headline will read, screamingly, ‘The Man Who Brought AIDS to America’ . . . This story has everything: the beautiful young man, salacious lifestyle, and he’s not even American, he’s Canadian—the alien who brought AIDS to America! (qtd. in Tiemeyer 355)

Denneny and Shilts chose to follow the advice, although, admittedly, the latter did so reluctantly. Visibly, the prominence which the Patient Zero story was given was not merely an accident, and neither was it solely a choice of the author. The economic circumstances and the forces of market shaped the trajectory given to this particular line of book’s advertising, exemplifying a clear link between cultural means of production, which have their basis in Adorno’s exchange relations, and the prominence of Patient Zero’s story and its impact on the media narratives of AIDS in general.

The gambit worked. In “How To Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” Douglas Crimp presents a selection of media headlines in response to the book, including New York Times’ “Canadian Said to Have Had Key Role in Spread of AIDS ” and New York Post’s “The Man Who Gave Us AIDS.” These headlines visibly underline the idea of Zero’s otherness. It is especially visible in the *Post* headline that directly names the ephemeral “us” as being “given AIDS” by the other. *Times* headline uses a more circuitous way of national difference, stressing Patient Zero’s Canadian origin, which once again constructs AIDS as the possible danger coming from the outside, rather than endemic to the United States. Among the other “achievements” of Patient Zero there was a place in *People* magazine’s “25 most intriguing people of ’87,” as well as extensive coverage in Canada and across the Atlantic. As Crimp argues, media largely ignored other stories in *And The Band Played On* (incriminating the medical industry, the media, and the government), as this one “would ensure that the blame for AIDS would remain focused on gay men” (51). This media attention translated into the book’s commercial success. Even today, *Band* is often placed firmly at the top of many AIDS literature

lists as the definitive account of the early years of the epidemic.¹³ It was adapted into a movie, and the rights for adaptation had been a subject of a bidding war. At the time, the work also made Shilts a regular choice as gay media pundit for news stories on the subject of AIDS, despite heavy criticism from the activists. Considering both the fact that *Band* was unlikely to succeed before, and that it was publicizing the story of Patient Zero that attracted the media attention, it seems a plausible contention that it was this very media presence and appeal this particular subplot had to the mass audience that were behind the success of the book. The reasons why this particular report had such an intense effect might offer further insight into specific narratives which were reinforced amidst the AIDS epidemic by the culture industry.

One of the mechanisms of the culture industry is reading the developments the culture faces through the narrative lenses provided with well-established story lines. In Adorno's words, "the monopolistic hold on culture, which forbids anything that cannot be grasped, necessarily refers us back to what has already been produced in the past and institutes self-reflection" (65). Just as AIDS inherited iconography of syphilis, the story of Patient Zero has often been related, consciously or not, to older disease narratives, and Dugas played the modern counterpart to their protagonists. The Associated Press release leading up to *Band's* launch states: "An airline steward from Montreal may have been the 20th century's equivalent of Typhoid Mary, responsible for introducing AIDS in North America, according to a book to be released later this month" (Cartiere). Zero is compared to Mary Mallon, an Irish cook who in the beginning of the 20th century worked in New York City while infected asymptotically with typhoid, which was presumed to cause illness among fifty people, the allegation that was

¹³ On Amazon's "Best Sellers in AIDS & HIV" *Band* occupies 1st, 3rd and 4th place for audiobook, Kindle and paperback version respectively; on Goodreads' "Best Books about HIV/AIDS (Fiction and Non-fiction)" list *Band* is at the top; many editorial selections, such as CultureTrip's "10 Books About the AIDS Epidemic You Need to Read," too, list *Band* at the top.

reported extensively by the contemporary press. The controversy emerged especially in relation to her return to work after a diagnosis and quarantine. As McKay reports:

The stories that were told about her experience over the following decades varied. In some, she was the hapless victim of an overaggressive public health department. Others overlooked her limited financial means and viewed her as a careless transmitter. More forceful versions of the story declared that she had willfully infected and killed the unlucky consumers of the food she prepared. (72)

That last understanding of Mallon in the quote above is perhaps the closest to the way Shilts would represent Dugas, both in the book and the follow-up interviews. The author did not hesitate to state repeatedly that with his actions Dugas “became what in effect was a psychopathic killer” (qtd. in McKay 181). Construction of Mallon as a willful killer often was rooted in her age’s “increased emphasis on cleanliness and individual responsibility [that] reinforced earlier notions of moral failure and contamination which epidemics brought to light” (75). Similarly, Shilts argued that since many gay men at the time stopped having sex, Dugas was to blame for not doing the same thing, and not adhering to the new emphasis on monogamy and sexual restraint. This idea is rooted in the system of sexual law, and discredits Dugas ethically through conceptualization of his behavior as vice, thus allowing for his construction as a willfully contagious psychopath, a “carrier of disease.” It is also one of the chorus of calls, emergent at the time, for monogamization and “higher moral standard” of gay sexual lives, one which would eventually cause a lasting change in gay politics as exemplified by IGF.

Another element from the iconography of disease which resurfaced in the context of Patient Zero is the image of a polluted reservoir. McKay recounts the water-based anxieties of disease harkening back to Ancient Greece, according to which the community might be infected by a malicious agent who would intentionally pollute the water resources. These fears were gradually integrated into public perception of particular identities (prostitutes, sodomites, Jews)

as polluting agents in the social body. Over time, they also moved away from polluting the literal city well and water in it, and towards being a metaphorical source of contagion that spreads through the social body. The imagery was especially associated with sex workers, as the image of satisfying thirst at the well can be easily read as a metaphor of satisfying sexual hunger. This set of associations was clearly visible in the understanding of a prostitute as a trap, which was discussed in the previous chapter. The modern construct of a homosexual had already become a possible equivalent for sex worker even before the AIDS epidemic, in the middle of the 20th century, as medical researchers increasingly often encountered cases of STDs in men who had sex with men. Since STDs had been previously associated with prostitutes, they tended to be seen as feminine—but since gender-binary heterosexist Western culture tends to read homosexuality as lack of masculinity, this was hardly an obstacle. Thus, in the wake of the epidemic, Patient Zero was a familiar and easily readable signifier of these ages-old fears, as his body was constructed and read as a source of pollution.

Furthermore, Shilts presents Patient Zero as irresistibly sexy. The first chapter in *Band* about the steward begins in the following manner:

“I am the prettiest one.”

It had been the standing joke. Gaetan Dugas would walk into a gay bar, scan the crowd, and announce to his friends, “I am the prettiest one.” Usually, his friends had to agree, he was right.

Gaetan was the man everyone wanted, the ideal for this community, at this time and in this place. His sandy hair fell boyishly over his forehead. His mouth easily curled into an inviting smile, and his laugh could flood color into a room of black and white. He bought his clothes in the trendiest shops of Paris and London. He vacationed in Mexico and on the Caribbean beaches. Americans tumbled for his soft Québécois accent

and his sensual magnetism. There was no place that the twenty-eight-year-old airline steward would rather have the boys fall for him than in San Francisco. (21)

The image of Zero as a beautiful man and a skillful seducer remains consistent throughout the book, further focusing the blame on the steward. Following *Band's* publication, an investigative piece appeared on *60 Minutes* with a photo of Dugas, shared by one of steward's lovers, which depicted the man shirtless, muscled and lean. This kind of representation fits the style of depicting people with tuberculosis in Victorian times that Susan Sontag analyzed in her *Illness as Metaphor*: "Having TB was imagined to be an aphrodisiac, and to confer extraordinary powers of seduction" (13). The same association is visible in the title page vignette for 19th-century French translation of Francastoro's *Syphilis*, which represents Hercules "tempted by the vice of luxury, *Voluptas*, who hides her ugliness behind a mask. The difference here, of course, is that by the nineteenth-century 'vice' has become 'disease'" (Gilman 98). The mask that hides a hideous naked skull of *Voluptas* represents a beautiful woman's face. These four elements make up a constellation of interrelated signs: (apparent) beauty, (hidden/"true") ugliness, (transgressive) sex, and disease. Both Zero's appealing physique and his egoism fit into this framework, since the disease was immediately associated with sex. McKay, too, lists instances of links drawn between beauty and disease, one of which uncannily resembles the story of Patient Zero:

Beauty that masked an underlying danger of infection is another theme that can claim a long history. Medieval literature drew on mythological and biblical references for the construction of beautiful women as dangerous temptresses . . . In her examination of early modern Venetian attempts to isolate prostitutes, as well as women so beautiful they were seen to risk drawing sin to themselves, the historian Laura McGough outlines a tale of syphilis origins in which the disease could be traced to "the most beautiful prostitute." (66-67)



Fig. 2 Title page vignette for 19th-century French translation of Francastoro's *Syphilis*

With the homosexual becoming the contemporary equivalent of the prostitute in the context of STDs, the story of Patient Zero as “the prettiest one” is clearly a direct descendant of those early stories about the origin of syphilis. Moreover, the transgression of sexual law becomes constructed as especially pernicious when joined with beauty; as if, through betrayal of ages-old agreement of beauty and goodness, Zero and beautiful prostitutes of old committed a kind of treachery. All other characteristics of Gaetan Dugas become then functions of this assumption; for instance, the charm and good humor often remembered fondly by his friends, in Shilts’ account are yet another tool in the villain’s repertoire, making him even more dangerous to his unsuspecting victims, breaking down their barriers and pushing them towards risky sex. The treacherous sexuality, his being a “gay mantrap,” becomes the most important attribute of Patient Zero. Importantly, because he is also represented as “the ideal for this community,” every accusation that can be directed at Zero, can conceivably be extended to all gay people.

These three narratives: of a willing “carrier,” of a “polluted reservoir,” and of a “sexual trap” were combined into an especially pernicious image. In the words of an agent who advised Denny and Shilts, this story indeed had “everything”; the preexisting narratives of disease were easily read from the way *Band’s* author structured this story, making Patient Zero a fascinating villain: an irresistible man who would willfully spread AIDS, and whose body was both beautiful and deadly. Shilts’ reliance on the constellation of signifiers—beauty/ugliness/sex/disease—invokes heavily the system of the sexual law. These signs form easily readable associations that provoke anxiety about sexual transgressions, thus reinforcing the idea that Rubin’s “outer limits” of sexuality are dangerous. Shilts’ method also indicates his use of identity thinking, since he did not treat Dugas as an individual in a particular historical context, but showed him as an instance of a more general rule, turning Patient Zero into a new version of Typhoid Mary or syphilitic prostitutes of old. Both inducing anxiety about the outer

limits of sex and the identitarian approach to Dugas' story are mechanisms congruent with the aims of the culture industry.

There is still one more aspect of the Patient Zero story that accounts for its proliferation at the time of epidemic. As previously discussed, the culture industry might be understood to work not only to advance the domination of exchange relations under monopoly capitalism, but also as a technology of biopower, which positions it in a complex relationship with the epistemological status of medicine, as well as social trust in healthcare systems. This is not to say that the products which form the culture industry of AIDS do not challenge the healthcare system and the pharmaceutical industry—in fact, *some* criticism of the medical response to the epidemic seems to be an element present in almost *all* works about AIDS; instead, I am arguing that they do so in a manner that does not challenge the epistemological and ontological order of their particular historic moment. Western societies, as Ross Chambers argues in *Untimely Interventions*, face challenges to these basic rules of knowledge and truth production in the wake of catastrophic events, as those rules are deeply invested in the idea of “civilization”:

According to a widespread perception, human evolution has resulted in a hybrid species, neither simply animal in nature nor yet fully or genuinely cultured, if culture signifies civilized or humane, in contradistinction to animal. Culture, this perception goes, chronically fails us, therefore, as we lapse into animalistic behavior unworthy of our own best ideals. However, try as one might to write this problem of hybridity in terms of a nature-culture distinction, the evidence is always that the brutalities, atrocities, and acts of violence of which humans are so obviously capable are themselves the products, not of an animal nature, but of culture. (xviii)

Chambers calls these instances “crisis events,” traumatic moments in histories of whole societies, such as the Holocaust or the AIDS epidemic, when the vision of civilization as a “humane” construct, dominant in cultural discourses especially since the Enlightenment, might

be challenged in the public eye. As Foucault argues, social struggle and dissent in the modern age are typically rooted in belief in one's right to live and shape their own life:

Since the last century, the great struggles that have challenged the general system of power were not guided by the belief in a return to former rights, or by the age-old dream of a cycle of time or a Golden Age . . . what was demanded and what served as an objective was life, understood as the basic needs, man's concrete essence, the realization of his potential, a plenitude of the possible . . . life as a political object was in a sense taken at face value and turned back against the system that was bent on controlling it.

(History of Sexuality, 144-45)

If the objective of political struggles in the modern age is life, this means that crisis events pose a challenge to the current order of power, because they beg the question whether this power actually does preserve life. Civilization must thus attempt to deny the challenge. The gestures of denial called upon in the face of a crisis event and operating through the popular representations of this crisis would be, then, a technique applied by the culture industry to secure the belief in the "humane" civilization and thus the current order of power.

The AIDS epidemic constitutes a serious threat to the order of power and knowledge which puts a tremendous trust in healthcare systems and medical science. With the advent of antibiotics, Western societies often conceived of major epidemics as a thing of the past. That a new epidemic might have arisen at the end of the 20th century and that the authorities did not stop it was already a serious blow to this progressive view of history. The reasons *why* the authorities did not stop the epidemic in its incipient stage, even though they had resources to do so, challenge the notion of the "humane" civilization. The list of reasons that could explain the failure to address the epidemic is long: there is the bureaucratic slowness of drug approval and scientific publication processes, the fights between French and American scientists over prestige for isolating causative agent, the reluctance to assign funding to community-based

initiatives, and various types of homophobia underpinning all these issues and emptying the epidemic of the sense of urgency at the administrative level. Conceivably, in the order of biopower, which is interested in production of healthy populations adhering to the medical and reproductive orders, gay people and intravenous drug addicts were not worthy subjects to rescue. What this conclusion says about the real standards of the Western civilization, namely the fact that some of its citizens are considered expendable, strongly undermines the entire episteme's self-characteristic as progressive and enlightened.

It is precisely this blow to the official civilizational image of the West that is combated by the deployment of Patient Zero story. The malicious demon conjured by Shilts becomes not only a site of blame, but also a redeeming figure for the Western society. The tale of his foolhardy attitude and dangerous behavior exculpates the dominant culture. It is the gay man, the other, who serves as the agent of the disease, spreading it on purpose. While the shortcomings of the medical authorities are shown frequently in *Band*, the authorities are also depicted as firm and true in their attempts to stop Zero's sexual escapades. With this tableaux, Shilts stages a "strategic *but*" (Chambers xxi) in his account of the AIDS epidemic: the medical, scientific and administrative institutions worked in a flawed way, and they were not as successful as people had hoped they would be, *but* it was gay people who spread it among themselves. In this specific interaction the authorities did what they were supposed to do (called gay people to stop having sex), and they are not to blame, which releases the tension of all the remaining damning evidence, since it can be framed as an exception, not a rule. The story of Patient Zero confirms the ages-old narrative that gays get punished for their own sins, and best of all—the heterosexual world need not have blood on their hands, as Zero emerges organically, as a gay man who takes up the position of the executioner.

The story of Patient Zero is thus a prime example of a moralistic discourse that operates as constant redeployment of the sexual law. Zero was, in many ways, a signifier of what caused

the construction of AIDS as a disease of the other, and therefore allowed the lackluster response to the epidemic. Shilts, following traces of older narratives of disease, turned the facts of the life of a man into a flattened, decontextualized version of his story which made him into a villain. In addition, Shilts stated that “Geatan had been what every man wanted from gay life,” (439) thus allowing, through identity thinking, for a conceptualization of all gay people as the group to blame. Thus, he reinforced the idea that transgression of the sexual law (homosexual intercourse) will be met with the just punishment (getting infected). Moreover, it was another gay man who played the role of an executioner, which alleviated the culpability of the heterosexual world for the spread of the epidemic. In doing so, not only did Shilts reconfirm the sexual law, but also conjured a specter, haunting historical memory of the initial stage of the AIDS epidemic to this day, weakening epistemological and ontological questions about the current order of power and knowledge which the crisis posed.

Thicker Than Blood

A few years into the epidemic, the mainstream media began to adjust their initial tactics of complete silence. At that point, AIDS entered the world of television, both in the news stories, and in the cinematic forms such as direct-to-TV movies. The mass appeal of the latter makes them a fertile area for analysis of the culture industry operation in the context of the epidemic. As James W. Jones observed, most TV representations of AIDS took form of a problem play, i.e. the form in which “a character personifies the problem (e.g. rape, child abuse, alcoholism) and the solution lies in bringing out the facts surrounding the problem. The audience, according to this TV discourse, will attain an enlightened consciousness through these newly acquired facts and apply them to reevaluate and indeed reshape reality” (108). While the overt goals of problem plays may seem progressive, Jones points out an issue intrinsic to their form. First, its

construction of a character personifying the problem tacitly reconfirms the division between them and us, and the equation between AIDS and the other:

These TV dramas evoke sympathy for the plight of the gay man afflicted with a deadly disease, but their reach extends no further. In so doing, they perpetuate what problem plays throughout this century have done: they reinforce the category of homosexual (here the homosexual with AIDS) as Other. His presentation as a victim portrays him as a supplicant for sympathy. Sympathy can only be granted by someone who stands outside the victim's predicament. (109)

While liberal television depictions may attempt to present a gay Person With AIDS as a sympathetic character, they immediately reinforce disidentification from PWAs by affirming its audience's assumption that they are not in danger. One way this idea may play out is through the story of an HIV positive gay man (endangered, victim, supplicant for sympathy) returning into the family fold (which is beyond this danger, merely audience to the predicament).

Such representation not only reconfirms the othering of the PWAs, but it also secures the conservative notions of kinship, which had been questioned by the liberation generation. *An Early Frost* is an example of a family story which adheres to the genre of problem play and privileges conservative notions of kinship over the queer ones. This direct-to-television drama made for NBC gained wide recognition, including 4 Emmy Awards in 1986. The movie tells the story of Michael, a gay lawyer, who, having been diagnosed with AIDS, returns to his family home. Since he had been previously closeted, the family has to confront both the truth of Michael's sexuality and the diagnosis at the same time. The plot is split into two main threads, one being Michael's coming to terms with his disease, and the other focusing on his parents' adjustment to their newfound knowledge. The mother, although initially disapproving, quickly takes over as the main caretaker of Michael's, and eventually invites his longtime partner to their family house. Michael's father, while less open and prone to violent outbursts of rage,

chooses to help his son whenever the situation demands it, and eventually the two manage to connect. Michael initially enjoys good rapport with his non-homophobic pregnant sister, although once his AIDS diagnosis is revealed, she tries to stay away from her brother to “protect her children.” This fear is, too, eventually conquered. Michael serves as a catalyst for change in heterosexual characters (a common theme for cinematic depictions of gay PWAs, seen also in *Philadelphia* and *Dallas Buyers Club*), allowing his kin to overcome their fears about homosexuality and AIDS.

The heterosexist assumptions and goals of this structure are clear. There is a parallel in between Michael’s own journey—coming to terms with the disease coursing through his body—and the journey of his blood relatives—accepting that homosexuality is present in their family. Just as Michael needs to accept his disease, the parents need to accept that their son is gay. Implicit in this structure is that AIDS and homosexuality are the same, if not ontologically, than at least in terms of their acceptability and desirability; they both deserve to get a flat *no* which gets surpassed if (and only if) one can do nothing else about it. The parallel is clearly homophobic, as it draws a link between a benign phenomenon of sexual variance, and a lethal disease that leads to a gruesome death.

Moreover, the story clearly accepts the prerogative of parents to be homophobic. After Michael’s coming out, his father wants to beat him up. The son is fuming later in conversation with his mother, who, staged as the most common-sense character, exhorts him: “You were so afraid to be judged by us, now don’t you judge him. You give him another chance” (00:33:55-00:34:00). The mother herself admits she disapproves of Michael’s homosexuality, but adds that this is not a reason for them to grow apart. The father, despite the progress he makes in the course of the movie, remains openly homophobic and does not accept his son’s sexuality. Their choices are presented as perfectly valid, even though they violently discriminate against Michael at the time he is deeply vulnerable. This homophobia is not depicted to have

particularly detrimental effects on Michael's life. While his parents' reaction might upset him, the traumatic experience of not being accepted by his kin does not visibly influence his health; in fact, the ties to his family, homophobic as it is, remain a positive presence in his life. Michael's parents are further absolved through contrasting them with the story about the parents of Victor, another AIDS patient in the movie, who was refused help by his family. This comparison marks the limits of what gay people may expect from their families; at worst, the inhuman cruelty, at best, merely an unaccepting tolerance. Homophobic prejudice is shown in the movie as simple variance of commonsensical opinion, to be bridged by the sentimentalized familial love; the chasm is never, however, truly overcome, nor is the systematic culprit responsible for its existence identified, or even alluded to.

The assumption that homophobia within family has no negative impact on the gay kin is a heterosexist perspective on parental homophobia. As Schulman argues in her non-fiction book *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences*, the experience of being mistreated by their family is one that almost all gay people share to some degree. In her account, the withholding of support is often enacted by the relatives indirectly:

They vote for politicians who hurt gay people; they contribute to religious organizations that humiliate gay people; they patronize cultural products that depict gay people as pathological. They speak and act in ways that reinforce the idea of gay people as 'special interest.' In many ways, the message is clear that the gay person is not fully human. (19-20)

The choice of a religion, a political party or a brand that partakes in the oppression of gay people betrays the ties of kinship. This mechanism can be also translated into withholding emotional or financial support that families typically grant. As Kramer notes in *Reports from the Holocaust*, "this is a horrible singularity of the gay situation: Can Jews imagine being hated by *their parents* for their Jewishness?" (232; emphasis in original). What is unique in gay exclusion

is that it is not shared with their family members in the way that ethnic and racial exclusion is. As a result, empathy and loyalty towards gay kin are constructed as optional, whereas such bonds with straight kin are ubiquitous and unquestionable. The gay child is expected to be eternally patient, and grateful for not being cast out *despite* their sexuality and for the little signs of progress and tolerance among their kin. Michael in *An Early Frost* is such an exemplary gay child, and his story proves that the heterosexist approach of his family is correct, sufficient, and above all, harmless.

What complements the common-sense privilege of birth family is the absolute silence on the subject of queer kinship and chosen families. The only character in Michael's social network in Chicago presented in the movie is Peter, his partner of two years, thus reinforcing the monogamous couple narrative. No friends take care of Michael after he gets sick, and while some of them are alluded to in the movie, there is more space given for discussion of Peter's parents, and their good relationship with Michael. Birth family is constructed as the cornerstone of existence, and caretaking as their pure prerogative, a disputable image in the context of many stories about gay PWAs abandoned by their families, or forced by them back into the closet. Ties built on queer kinship, such as chosen families (which often took over caretaking responsibilities for PWAs) or communal efforts to provide help for all afflicted, such as buddy system, are almost completely non-existent in the universe of *An Early Frost*.

A singular exception in the movie is the character of Victor, another patient at the ward where Michael is treated. Victor is a campy gay man who has been suffering from AIDS for years and who helps Michael come to terms with the reality of his disease. Their spontaneous friendship and mutual help they provide for each other could be perceived as an instance of queer kinship. That plot, too, however, reconfirms some implicit assumptions. Victor's campy manner of speech and behavior identifies him as gay much more clearly than butch Michael, who used to be a college jock and who is a successful WASP lawyer. This further reinforces

the equation of homosexuality and AIDS in the movie, as the character who is more visibly gay is, too, more seriously ill. Furthermore, Victor is entirely objectified as Michael's catalyst for change, in a similar way that Michael is objectified as his family's. Once Michael learns to live with AIDS, Victor dies. Implicit in this depiction is the patriarchal hierarchy of power in which, while all gay men are beneath heterosexuals, the campy men who do not adhere to the masculine gender role are beneath the gay men who are not effeminate.

Pernicious identification of homosexuality and AIDS courses throughout the movie. Although there are repeated interpellations to the scientific facts, for instance in the form of scenes where some characters assure that AIDS may happen to anyone, they are of little importance in the view of the fact that the omnipresent truth of AIDS as a gay disease is conspicuously demonstrated in flesh. As Bart Beaty reminds in "The Syndrome is the System": "the visible is objective truth in a realist film; the verbal, merely subjective testimony" (115). The viewer is thus faced with a visual/descriptive doublespeak of simultaneous embrace and negation of the equation between homosexuality and AIDS. Such contradictory movement reinforces two mutually exclusive understandings of the epidemic. On the one hand, it remains dangerous to everyone. On the other, it allows for a moral judgement of PWAs as punished—by God or by laws of nature—for their promiscuity or other unseemly behavior. It is due to this doublespeak that AIDS can be at the same time a pathologized gay disease and danger to heterosexuals. From this constellation of images, a semi-coherent narrative emerges, in which a depraved PWA, identified with a homosexual, poses a threat to the virtuous rest of population.

Through its ritual assertion that "it might happen to anyone" superimposed on the images that confirm association of the disease with homosexuality, *An Early Frost* unwittingly dramatizes the main conceit of a problem play about AIDS: that divulging the information has to have a transformative effect on how PWAs are treated in the society. That model assumes that all that was not right with the American response to the AIDS epidemic was rooted simply

in homophobia, and that homophobia is rooted exclusively in ignorance. Simply by *stating facts* that contradict homophobic prejudice one is thus able to end it and improve the American response to the epidemic. In brief, the problem is merely a lack of information. This fantasy fails to account for the heteronormative superstructure; the ubiquity of homophobia is not rooted in lack of information, but in the system of sexual hierarchy and in the politics of shame, and so was the lackluster reaction to the epidemic. Therefore, displaying information without transgressing the barriers of shame is not an action directed at the improvement of PWAs' well-being, but merely a simulacrum of one.

An Early Frost is a movie constructed around the idea of superiority of the birth family which is presented as the only network that takes care of the ill. The idea of the chosen family is, at the same time, rendered entirely invisible. Homophobia, which is an undeniable part of the reality of many family lives, is presented as virtually harmless. While there is an account of one victim's pathologically homophobic family who further victimize the sick man, it is presented offhandedly, as a testimony—to contrast the truth represented by the main plotline, where a family is represented visually, as heroes of the main plot—that blood is thicker than water, and most necessarily thicker than any other relationship a gay person might develop throughout their life in a gay neighborhood. These plot developments clearly misrepresent the roots of homophobia, as they are based on the major conceit of the problem play that it is lack of information, rather than politics of shame, that drives exclusion of sexual minorities. This assumption allows for audiovisual doublespeak that at the same time acknowledges AIDS as a disease that might happen to anyone, and represents it as a gay one.

Monogamy as a Cure

In 1985, Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* premiered Off-Broadway. Kramer is a very important figure in the history of AIDS activism; among other activities, he was one of the

founders of both Gay Health Men's Crisis (the first New York organization to respond to the epidemic) and ACT UP. He was notorious for his outspoken support for monogamy among gay people, which traces back to the times before the crisis. That support was visible in his debut novel *Faggots*, published in 1978, which exhorted gays of the liberation generation for their inability to form long-lasting relationships. His line of criticism only intensified when it was becoming increasingly probable, and later, scientifically proven, that a sexually transmitted viral agent was killing gay men. Among Kramer's extensive oeuvre covering the issues surrounding the epidemic, it was his play *The Normal Heart* that was noticed by the mainstream media, and promptly moved on to Los Angeles, London and Poznań productions. It was also revived on Broadway in the 21st century, and turned into a Golden Globe-winning movie. As of now, it stands as one of the most famous texts of the AIDS epidemic. It was also an innately moralistic piece, reinforcing the judgmental, anti-sexual readings of the epidemic. Being created by a gay man, it paved the way for the conservative narratives which took over the movement in the 1990s.

The Normal Heart is to a great extent an autobiographical piece. As previously stated, Kramer founded the first organization in New York to respond to AIDS, Gay Health Men's Crisis, from which he was expelled after a few years. *The Normal Heart* tells exactly this story, revolving around Ned's (stand-in for Kramer in the play) attempt to turn GMHC into an activist, dissenting group, rather than a community help organization it was turning out to be. The plot is propelled by Ned's conflict with Bruce, the president of GMHC. The two are mirror opposites; Ned is out, tirelessly angry, convinced there is an urgent need for in-your-face activism, and unpopular because he speaks his mind; Bruce is closeted, calm, careful not to offend anyone, he tries to get help through official channels, and he is extremely popular (to a great extent due to his dashing handsome looks). In the course of the play, Bruce's approach

proves to be politically ineffective, but it is Ned who, due to his confrontational style, gets dismissed from the organization.

At the heart of the conflict between the two central characters is the organization's message about maintaining sexual health. GMHC leadership favors vague, broad guidelines similar to those articulated by the medical institutions in the early 80s, acknowledging no decisive claims can be made on the subject until research is more advanced. The real medical authority in the play is, however, Emma, a paraplegic doctor with gay men's best interest at heart, who strongly recommends that gay people stop having sex altogether until the disease is better understood. As she states in Act I: "if having sex can kill you, doesn't anybody with half a brain stop fucking?" (38) Ned keeps pushing for this kind of messaging, but the board, wary even of putting the full name of the organization on the envelopes of mail they send out in fear of disturbing the privacy of their subscribers, is dead against making authoritative warnings against having sex. Interestingly, the unwillingness to speak out against sex is associated here with remaining in the closet. Kramer performs a rhetorical reversal; while coming out is a speech act that asserts one's right to a gay life (including sex life), Ned's "coming out" *against* that gay sex life is framed as a dissenting stance against "gay status quo" of sex positivity. While coming out against the beliefs identified with gay liberation, Kramer assumes the position of the underdog, as the popularity of queer ethos is presented as unfair advantage he struggles against.¹⁴ However, if gay liberation with its avowal of sexual variance was revolutionary for the heteronormative world, Kramer's disavowal of queer sex was congruent with dominant cultural narratives of homosexuality, and thus decidedly counter-revolutionary.

This reaction ought to be understood first and foremost not in terms of HIV prevention, but in terms of the moralistic control over sexual lives of individuals. As already discussed, the

¹⁴ As we have seen in Chapter 1, IGF used exactly the same reversal for rhetorical purposes in the 1990s.

anti-sex approach yields no results in HIV prevention. Kramer himself is aware that total abstinence is not a real option, as Ned gets involved with Felix, a closeted *New York Times* journalist. Even though this constitutes a concession that radical policies which prohibit sex are impossible to maintain in the long term, Kramer resolves this conflict not through its logical implications, that people will have sex and this reality needs to be dealt with, but through an emotionally appealing sentimental image of a monogamous couple. It is the love connecting Felix and Ned that justifies exemption from the radical anti-sex policies recommended by Emma. Romantic love has a long-established history of constituting a sympathetic revolt against the law; from *Romeo and Juliet* to modern soap operas, the antinomian power¹⁵ of love is an easily recognizable and widely accepted given. The two star-crossed lovers get a dispensation from the law in the popular imagination, and their reunion is the desirable outcome regardless of danger or pain it might cause. In the dramatic logic of the play, Felix and Ned are thus excused from breaking Emma's provisions. This development does not modify in any way the letter of the law; when Ned confesses to Emma that he has a new lover, she disapproves, and rightly so. If it were not for romantic love, Ned's transgression would be inexcusable; but with it, it is a human failing, which does not subvert the law, but does constitute an acceptable exception. Logically, HIV finds no obstacle in the construct created by Kramer. However, the narratives rooted in the system of sexual hierarchy, which privilege monogamy, starkly contrast more sexually active characters with the central couple, who is the main object of audience's sympathy.

This disjointed position fails to translate into any consistent strategy of limiting the spread of the epidemic, which is the play's overt purpose. Kramer does not pretend that gay

¹⁵ I use the word "antinomian" in the secular sense, in a similar manner as the term was employed by George Orwell in his essay "Inside the Whale," meaning "defiant of arbitrary societal rules." By "antinomian power" I mean the right, assigned to certain concepts, to act against those societal rules while still remaining acceptable, or at least understandable and sympathetic, to that society at large and thus having the ability to subvert these rules.

men who become monogamous are safe from the virus (Felix dies of AIDS in the course of the play, and so do several partners of Bruce, each of them in a monogamous relationship with him). Nevertheless, it is the monogamous couple that is presented as the only possible compromise between uncivilized, disease-spreading promiscuity and unattainable, loveless celibacy. In the words of Douglas Crimp:

Common sense, in Kramer's view, is that gay men should stop having so much sex, that promiscuity kills. But this common sense is, of course, conventional moral wisdom: it is not safe sex, but monogamy that is the solution. The play's message is therefore not merely reactionary, it is lethal, since monogamy per se provides no protection whatsoever against a virus that might already have infected one partner in a relationship.

(56)

Kramer's account of the epidemic ignores almost completely the ongoing debates on safer sex practices which were proving effective in limiting risks. By doing so, Kramer commits the fallacy of false dichotomy, i.e. presents the moral dilemma as an either/or situation, whereas there is a third logical option available. The issue of safer sex, crucial for the initial response to the epidemic (and still central to HIV prevention) is completely sidelined in *The Normal Heart*.

There is only one moment when safer sex is even mentioned as an option. After his diagnosis, Felix mentions at one point to Emma (who is the medical authority in the play) that certain doctors "are saying it's okay if you use rubbers" (93). In response, she dismisses this advice completely, claiming she has no clear answers; her main argument remains for absolute abstinence. While this represents well a kind of epistemological crisis that the Western world is faced with when a new disease arrives and suddenly there are no clear medical guidelines, this dismissal is the only context in which safer sex appears in the play. In contrast, monogamy, even though it has never been proven useful in combating the epidemic, is represented as a moral dilemma with good reasons on both sides, and construed as the only possible solution in

the universe of the play. Significantly, at the point when Felix is diagnosed as HIV-positive, the relationship he and Ned have in all likelihood will turn out to be detrimental; without condoms or other means to remain safe, repeated sex with a seropositive person is very likely to eventually lead to transmission. Even if Kramer, who wrote the play at the very early stage of the epidemic, might be partially excused by the fact that there was no absolute certainty regarding the ways in which AIDS is transmitted at the time of writing the play, this problem shows poignantly why the moralistic stance was a mistake.

These sentiments were at the heart of the debate over sexual conduct in response to the epidemic. On the one hand, anti-sex policies recommended by Kramer felt intuitive to many. “AIDS gave new life to the ancient assumption that sex, and especially queer sex, had to be unethical—unhealthy, irresponsible, immature, and, in short, threatening to home, church, and state” (Warner 50). On the other, those invested in queer ethos were highly (and correctly) suspicious of the usefulness of such assumptions in preventing actual infections. This suspicion is, too, represented in *The Normal Heart*, albeit without proper contextualization. Mickey, one of the GMHC board members, bursts out in response to Ned’s constant criticisms of GMHC’s unwillingness to give clear sex guidelines:

I’ve spent fifteen years of my life fighting for our right to be free and make love whenever, wherever... And you’re telling me that all those years of what being gay stood for is wrong... and I’m a murderer. We have been so oppressed! Don’t you remember how it was? Can’t you see how important it is for us to love openly, without hiding and without guilt? We were a bunch of funny-looking fellows who grew up in sheer misery and one day we fell into the orgy rooms and we thought we’d found heaven. And we would teach the world how wonderful heaven can be. We would lead the way. We would be good for something new . . .

Ned, I'm not a murderer. All my life I've been hated. For being short. For being Jewish. Jerry Falwell mails out millions of pictures of two men kissing as if that was the most awful sight you could see. Tell everybody we were wrong. And I'm sorry. Someday someone will come along and put the knife in you and say everything you fought for all this time is . . . shit! (*He has made a furious, running lunge for NED, but TOMMY catches him and cradles him in his arms.*) (103-04)

This is by far the most compelling representation of gay liberation ethos in the play. In the preface to one edition of the play, Tony Kushner writes that while Kramer's point is clearly in favor of monogamy, "the antimonogamist riposte . . . is given a fair amount of eloquent stage time" (xxi-xxii). However, due to virtual absence of safer sex debate in the play, the sexual freedom is, regardless of its motivation, presented as dangerous and lethal, immediately discrediting the pro-sex argument as purely sentimental and failing to deal with the urgency of the epidemic. (Ironically, these are exactly the pitfalls of the pro-monogamy argument.) Moreover, while the speech Mickey gives is emotionally compelling, it fails to account for the bigger framework in which gay liberation criticism of monogamy and marriage were grounded. In *Thinking Sex*, Gayle Rubin contested privileges of various concepts belonging to "the charmed circle" of the sexual law, including heterosexuality and monogamy. Kramer does represent the inequality of this system solely in terms of unprivileged gays and privileged heterosexuals, dramatizing this particular exclusion, but reinforcing the whole moralistic structure which privileges monogamy. The superiority of monogamous couples amid the epidemic is assumed, rather than argued; the ongoing practice of promiscuity is, on the other hand, dismissed rather than contextualized.

The moralism present among some gay people, as visible in *The Normal Heart*, paved the way for the neoliberal takeover of gay movement in the 90s, as inspired by the Independent Gay Forum. The play's erasure of safer sex practices and sentimental (if illogical) exaltation of

a monogamous couple represent gays opting for monogamy in the time of epidemic, and falsely show it as the safer option. Such depiction was a vital point of IGF's narrative of gaining maturity by the gay movement. They tended to represent the AIDS epidemic as the turning point for gay people, who, faced with the terrible consequences of their openly sexual culture, grew up, stopped being promiscuous, and got ready for marriage. Both Kramer and IGF needed to sideline the safer sex practices and sexual education effort in order to make this story sound plausible. This congruence is also visible in lukewarm approach to intersectionality. In *The Normal Heart*, Kramer rejects the affinity between various sexual dissidents. The only time when drag queens and lesbians are addressed in the play, they are dismissed as the characters expect them to be uninterested and uninvolved in AIDS activism. Time has proved this conceit to be decidedly false, as lesbians' involvement was absolutely crucial in the community efforts to limit the epidemic.

Another parallel between the play and the language of IGF was a reductive representation of the queer ethos of liberation. In Kramer's play, during the scene where Bruce is elected the president of Gay Men's Health Crisis, he comments that "the entire gay political platform is fucking" (57), thus simplifying the critique made by the liberationist thinkers. The play clearly implies that this is a bad platform, and worthless of any longer consideration, a conceit echoed by the IGF critics of the liberation period. It is also to blame for the AIDS epidemic, as Ned states: "the gay leaders who created this sexual liberation philosophy in the first place have been the death of us. Mickey, why didn't you guys fight for the right to get married instead of the right to legitimize promiscuity?" (85). Strikingly, Kramer urges gay movement in the direction of same-sex marriage exactly due to the calamity of AIDS, in a manner echoed a decade later by the IGF. In other words, *The Normal Heart* is decidedly anti-sex. Sex in the play is the vehicle of contagion, and aside from a monogamous couple, it has no place in the world.

In his discussion of the play, Douglas Crimp emphasizes that Kramer's blatant disregard for the liberation period completely ignores its achievements, and the influence of these achievements on the communal response to the epidemic. "Everything [GMHC] were able to accomplish—from fundraising and recruiting volunteers to consulting with openly gay health care professionals and getting education out to the gay community—depended on what had already been achieved by the gay movement." (60) Contrarily to the partial culpability of gay people suggested by the play, the sexual practices of the gay liberation were actually instrumental in development of safer sex guidelines. Therefore, erasure of these guidelines from the play was not only crucial for the argument of superiority of monogamy, but also for assigning blame to gay movement.

The play received mixed reviews when it first premiered Off-Broadway and in LA. Expectedly, the elements journalists liked best were exactly those speaking to the moralistic middle-class sensibilities, which allowed to assign blame for the spread of the epidemic partly to gay people. Dan Sullivan writes in his review for *Los Angeles Times*:

Beneath the social concerns of "The Normal Heart" is the story of a man who must learn to adjust his expectations of other men downward if he hopes to do any good among them. This is interesting. So is the play's message that having sex with as many partners as desired is actually a kind of addiction. What play in the liberated '70s and '80s has dared to say that? (31)

The anti-sex sensibility of Kramer becomes framed and praised as a kind of subversion in the field of cultural politics. Such framing is clearly inspired by the play itself, as it conceives of Ned as paving new ways of thinking through his anti-sex approach. However, the moralistic exhortations were not groundbreaking, but retrograde; they sought to re-establish the system of sexual hierarchy among gay people, scaring them away from the newly-formed, subversive ideas of the gay liberation period towards the normative identity thinking. A similar rhetorical

maneuver was to be assumed a decade later by the IGF, which masked their conservative takeover of the gay movement as a reformative, fresh viewpoint that “gay establishment” didn’t approve of. The irony lies in the fact that both Kramer and IGF were actually parroting the heteronormative, middle-class morality, aligning themselves with the dominant culture, which is the opposite of subversion. This trick allows them, however, to garner the sympathy the position of an underdog evokes, as discussed in chapter 1. Additionally, they enjoy the advantages provided by sharing the dominant worldview, as their assumptions are invisible and understood in their sociocultural context to be common sense. Mickey’s defense of liberationist ethos, on the other hand, may be “woundingly played” (17), as Frank Rich wrote for *The New York Times*, but it does not succeed (nor is it supposed to), as the reviewer clearly presents Ned’s argument as the logical one. The reviewer also exalts the dream of a prideful gay identity “that isn’t just sexual,” much like the sanitized, desexualized gay and lesbian identities championed by IGF.

In conclusion, Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* paved the way for the anti-sexual, neoconservative rhetoric deployed a decade later by the IGF. This discourse bridges the identity gap between the gay and the straight subject, seeking connection between the two in universalization of heteronormative assumptions about sex and admonishing those gays who refuse to accept these assumptions as, in the words of Ned, “anything but common sense” (100). For that purpose, Kramer needed to disavow a public sexual culture fostered in the times of gay liberation. In this disavowal, Kramer exalted monogamy and took a moralistic stance against any sex unless made invisible by marriage; in order to do so consistently, he had to evoke the antinomian power of the romantic love and completely erase the existence of safer sex practices. In this narrative, the epidemic is a turning point, which redeems the villainously promiscuous gay men from their sexualized lives and guides them towards the domestic safety of marriage, the only conceivable option in response to the epidemic. Analyzed more critically, this narrative

has all the effects discussed in the previous chapter as the consequences of IGF politics: de-politicization of gay constituencies, making them ineffective in fight against anti-sex interests of increasingly corporatized policies at the turn of the century, erosion of the public sexual culture and queer ethos, and isolating divergent dissident groups, developments that were congruent with larger politics of neoliberalism at the turn of the century. Considering both the clearly identitarian elements in the narrative itself, and the way it worked in favor of the capital, I read it as a prominent example of the culture industry of AIDS.

A Simulacrum of Diversity

The rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s and the fact it encompassed the whole political spectrum was crucial for the new identity politics. These identity politics accentuated differences of excluded groups, such as gays, lesbians, people of color, or People With AIDS. In the process, members of these groups were encouraged to identify with each other in an identitarian manner. The process was mediated through the market, which began to offer paraphernalia used for displaying the excluded identity, thus universalizing it through consumption. This process was described in more detail in chapter one.

It is in this environment that *RENT* came to be. Jonathan Larson's 1996 musical by that title won a Pulitzer Prize as well as several Tony Awards, and it was one of the most discussed Broadway shows of the '90s. It is loosely based on Puccini's opera *La Bohème*, as well as on Sarah Schulman's novel *People In Trouble* (although the latter has never been officially acknowledged, more on which later). Since the plot of the play is not only important for the points made in this chapter, but also for the future analysis of Schulman's source novel, I will now try to briefly summarize it.

RENT tells the story of a group of friends who live in New York's East Village, and self-identify as "bohemians," i.e. a kind of counterpublic for whom dissent to capitalist power

is important. The first act takes place on Christmas Eve. The two most central characters are Mark and Roger, two straight white men living in a decrepit apartment as the neighborhood is undergoing gentrification. Mark is an aspiring filmmaker. He has recently broken up with his girlfriend, Maureen, who has left him for a black woman, Joanne. Maureen is a (clearly mediocre) performance artist and an activist who protests gentrification and homelessness. The first act is centered around her performance for that cause, which leads to a riot reminiscent of the factual events of 1988 Tompkins Square Park riot. Before the performance, Joanne, who was appointed as the stage manager (even though she has no experience with such matters as she is a professional lawyer) runs into trouble with the sound system. Maureen calls Mark to ask for help, which leads to a scene where both Mark and Joanne repair the equipment all the while Mark is sharing stories of his relationship with Maureen, warning Joanne of her promiscuity.

In the meantime, Roger, Mark's roommate and an aspiring musician, attempts to write his hit song. Roger is haunted by the memory of his former girlfriend who killed herself after they both were diagnosed as HIV-positive. In the first act he meets a Puerto Rican woman named Mimi, who is their neighbor, and who works as a stripper at a nearby club. Mimi is a drug addict and she is HIV-positive, too. The two are clearly attracted to each other, although at first they do not know about each other's seropositive status and they are unwilling to open up.

The third main plot thread focuses on Tom Collins, a friend of Mark and Roger's. Tom is an anarchist professor of "computer-age philosophy" at NYU. At the beginning of the play he has just come back from Boston where he taught at MIT, and he is to visit Mark and Roger for Christmas dinner. Before he gets there, however, he is mugged. A Puerto Rican drag queen, Angel Dumott, patches him up and the two fall in love. Having just returned to the city, Tom does not have any place to stay so he moves in with Angel. Both of them are HIV-positive.

One last important character is a former friend and the current landlord of Mark and Roger's, Benjamin, a black man who stopped being a "bohemian" after he married a wealthy woman. As previously stated, the first act is centered around Maureen's performance. Her protest concerns the authorities' plan to take down several buildings in order to make place for the new, more expensive ones. Benjamin, who orchestrated the investment, is worried about bad PR and asks Mark and Roger to stop Maureen's performance in exchange for settling the debt the two accrued being unable to pay for their rent. However, the tenants stand by their anti-capitalist principles and support Maureen. At the end of the first act, the whole group celebrates the performance which has sparked a riot.

While the first act tells the events of that one fateful Christmas Eve when all the above mentioned events take place, the second act tracks the lives of the whole group in the following year. Maureen's constant flirting with other people indeed becomes an issue for Joanne, and they have an on-and-off relationship throughout the year, but they never really resolve the issue. Mark himself is faced with a (rather absurd) moral dilemma: MTV, which epitomizes big buck corporation, wants to buy his footage of the riot. He agonizes over the choice, and eventually decides to "sell out." The two HIV-positive couples face the most dramatic fate: Angel suddenly gets worse in the middle of the second act and dies soon in the hospital, leaving Tom grieving. Their relationship is represented as the healthiest throughout the play. Mimi, who breaks up with Roger having failed to keep the promise of dropping her drug addiction, seems to be set up for a fate similar to Angel's at the end of the play, but she recovers miraculously, allowing the couple to get back together and sing out the musical's main message: that the main thing any HIV-positive person can do is cherish and celebrate life and try to make the most of it.

The characters in the play are a dazzling mix of identities; there are two Puerto Rican characters (Angel and Mimi), three black characters (Tom, Joanne and Benjamin), four queer characters (Joanne, Maureen, Tom and Angel), and four HIV-positive characters (Roger, Mimi,

Tom and Angel), not to mention that the play represents a drag queen (Angel) and a stripper (Mimi) in a non-judgmental light. This assortment of identities does not, however, translate immediately into the representational value of the work. It does not follow that *RENT* shows a variety of experiences of exclusion that this diverse cast of people would have likely gone through. In fact, Larson seems to deliberately obscure the entanglement of systemic racism and poverty, as of the three black characters in the play two are the most upper-middle class (Joanne is a lawyer, and Ben, a former friend of Mark and Roger's, is now their landlord) in the play, while the third, Tom, is idiosyncratically both homeless and a professor, making his class status unclear. Similarly, queer characters in the show are not shaped in any way by their experiences of homophobia. As a result, *RENT* erases systematic exclusion while it lays claim to represent the excluded groups.

However, the case is a little bit more complicated with the experience of People With AIDS. *RENT* does establish its dramatic effects to some extent. Roger's former girlfriend killed herself after diagnosis; his own obsession to write a great song is clearly recognizable as an attempt to make something that outlasts him before he dies. The scene in Life Support, a mental therapy group for the HIV-positive that helps them to cope with the illness, also gives more nuance to the experience of AIDS. The stories shared there are clearly rooted in the real experience of the disease, including decreasing T-cell counts and a struggle to stay hopeful. Perhaps most poignantly, the members of Life Support are not given specific names in the libretto; instead, they are supposed to be named differently each day, after the names of cast members' friends who died of AIDS, turning the scene into a commemorative practice of sorts.

There is, thus, a certain merit in *RENT*'s representation of AIDS and people living with it. However, the way it is handled hammers down one possible way of handling epidemic: celebration of life as it is, as long as it is. Life Support members and all cast in the finale alike encourage its audience to "forget regret" (117) and "give in to love" (118) in the face of

adversity. *RENT* reverberates with acceptance of hardship, not dissent; it is dissent, however, that fuels political action.

In fact, political activism is not presented as a viable, effective solution to the challenge of AIDS. For the most part, it is the butt of a joke rather than an instrument to fight for change. Maureen, the artist protesting gentrification, is perhaps the most comical character in the play. Her performance, which is the central scene in Act I, turns out to be an absurd rigmarole about a cow living in a technocratic state which has the audience joyfully mooing by the end of the scene. Another activist character in the play is Tom, but his greatest achievement as an anarchist is apparently the fact that he “ran naked through Parthenon” (21). The play clearly juxtaposes activism with the approach of Life Support members and the therapist. The mantra repeated by them in attempt to cope goes as follows:

I can't control

My destiny

I trust my soul

My only goal

Is just—to be (38)

Strikingly, this fragment rejects any wish for change and urges acceptance that one has no influence over one's fate while facing the epidemic. While this stoic approach might be, admittedly, helpful in coping with the infection, it clearly de-politicizes and universalizes the issue. Coping with AIDS in this context becomes simply coping with death, a universal experience that all human beings need to go through. This accepting approach eliminates historical and political specificity of AIDS as an epidemic that might have been avoided; as a disaster which was allowed to happen due to institutionalized homophobia; as a disease which required direct action and intervention of the sick themselves to actually get those in power to search for an effective cure; as a premature experience of death not just for single persons, but

for a whole generation of gay men. The reality of the epidemic as a cultural and epistemological crisis is thus obscured through this universalizing gesture.

Furthermore, the disease itself is largely sanitized in the musical. Physically, there is no impact of the disease on the characters until one of them suddenly dies (Angel), and another almost dies (Mimi). The hospital scene does not in any way refer to the grim reality of healthcare that the majority of PWAs had to face. Gone, too, are the needs of the PWAs; unlike in many texts of AIDS literature, Angel is never presented as needing the care and support of Tom, making the everyday heroism of people who nursed dying PWAs invisible.¹⁶ Angel is also a one-dimensional character in his irrepressible optimism and kindness. This could be read as a subversion of a trope which tends to show HIV positive people as tortured and despairing. However, it also allows Larson to omit the uncomfortable truths about the state of American healthcare, the needs of PWAs that this system failed to meet, and the scale of suffering caused by the indifference of heteronormative world.

Perhaps the most telltale sign of *RENT*'s politics is its approach to the issue of drugs, and specifically, AZT. AZT (azidothymidine) was an anti-retroviral drug developed with the support of the American government, and helpful in slowing down the progress of disease in *some* cases, typically extending the lives of seropositive people without AIDS. It was the first therapy to bear any resemblance of effectiveness in the United States. However, it was also used for profiteering among multiple conflicts of interest and blatant disregard for human life. First, AZT was not, in fact, developed as a drug for AIDS, but for cancer, and it had been tested in the 1960s already. Nevertheless, Burroughs Wellcome, the manufacturer, took advantage of the Orphan Drug Act which allowed for significant tax cuts for developing cures for rare diseases (the status which, at the time of drug's introduction to the market, AIDS still had).

¹⁶ Memoirs such as Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time* and Amy Hoffman's *Hospital Time* come to mind in stark contrast.

Despite these tax cuts and the fact it was not a new drug but a substance that had been developed already, the prices were very high.¹⁷ In response, ACT UP demanded that details of Burroughs Wellcome's financial operation were made public, in order to exemplify with hard data how pharmaceutical companies profiteer off the epidemic. However, the call was not successful because the law protected the corporation. Another problem with AZT was that it was an antiretroviral drug believed to suppress HIV, which helped best people with HIV who had not developed AIDS yet. Since the syndrome typically manifests through opportunistic diseases, which at the time were most typically cytomegalovirus, pneumocystis pneumonia, or toxoplasmosis, it was treatment of those opportunistic diseases that could do most to help PWAs, but the number of studies conducted on the subject was scarce. This means that the people who had already developed the syndrome itself were being written off. Third, the American government was strongly biased towards AZT, even though a range of other medications were being developed. This bias can be explained by the fact that "main virologists working in federally funded clinical trials also had consultative arrangements with private pharmaceutical companies. Conflict of interest, according to the activists, significantly explained why AZT and its affiliates had been the family of drugs primarily researched by the government and the industry" (Elbaz 53). Other drugs were tested less often and they were subjected to lengthy FDA approval processes. These were the reasons why AZT was the main drug prescribed to American People With AIDS. One of the main demands ACT UP activists voiced was thus to shorten the testing process and allow for quicker introduction of the drugs to the market, especially the drugs for opportunistic diseases, in hope of saving lives of those who did not respond to AZT well or who suffered from the fully developed AIDS.

¹⁷ "The strong financial support of the U.S. government in the testing of AZT was not seen by Burroughs Wellcome as an invitation to lessen the purchasing cost of the drug: a yearly supply of the drug ran as high as \$12,000 . . . Burroughs Wellcome's profits rose to 60% in 1987 (Wellcome PLC, 1990) and the company temporarily reaped over 40% of its profits just from AZT and Acyclovir, another nucleoside analog." (Elbaz 54)

Understanding this context is crucial for seeing the problem in the way *RENT* represents AIDS treatment. All HIV positive characters in *RENT* take AZT, and their relationship to the drug is not problematized in any way, even though it feels quite obvious that it should: since Angel dies, and Mimi almost dies in the course of the play, they were likely suffering from fully developed AIDS and thus they were in dire need of treatment for the opportunistic diseases. The musical represents AZT as treatment, without getting into details about its efficacy. In connection with sanitization of AIDS, this means that the medical reality of the disease is wholly misrepresented. The drug provides a smoke screen for the audiences to feel more comfortable about the American healthcare; *some* treatment is offered, after all. That it fails to save Angel, who dies in the middle of the second act, is regrettable; but, on the other hand, Mimi survives despite the brush with death at the end of the musical, which could be conceivably linked to her treatment.¹⁸ The highly controversial context in which AZT became the main drug that American PWAs would take is not thematized in any way. Even though Larson refers to ACT UP in the lyrics of the last song in the first act, “La Vie Boheme,” this important area of activist action is decidedly ignored. This also makes a poignant example of how the two activist characters never actually articulate their ideas in the play, and how the work avoids making any statement about the politics of AIDS. “Activist” thus becomes just another identity to check off the list, and ACT UP just another name one ought to mention while discussing AIDS, without any voice given to what actual activists might say.

An additional sign of *RENT*'s representational vapidness is visible in its unwillingness to explore intersectionality. Considering that Joanne is both black and lesbian, or that Tom is both black and gay, or that Angel is gay, Puerto Rican, and a drag queen, one might expect some difference between their viewpoints and that of straight white men such as Mark and Roger.

¹⁸ Angel's death, especially in the context of Mimi's survival, is also evocative of the pre-Stonewall literary trope of a doomed homosexual.

For instance, queer of color characters might be expected to have a different relationship with their families than the white ones. As Richard T. Rodríguez argues, queers of color are not likely to cut off ties with their families (unlike white gay people who often distanced themselves from their homes) because they need their support in white-dominated culture. This is why “when considering the convergence of metropolitan identities of racial-ethnic gay men and lesbians, one must always consider the sustained relevance of family and kinship in their discrepant articulations” (326). Nothing of the sort occurs in the musical; the complex ways through which queers of color negotiate their ethnic and sexual identities are glossed over, and the readable ethnicity of the actors is thus subsumed under “bohemian” colorblind viewpoint. Unsurprisingly, this viewpoint happens to align with the perspective that is comfortable for the dominant culture.

Perhaps the most striking instance of that blindness to the reality of minorities’ life is visible in Mimi’s plot and her unproblematic status as a seropositive woman of color. First, one can only imagine where Mimi, who works as a stripper (and thus is unlikely to have health insurance) and who lives in a decrepit building, would find the resources to afford the highly expensive medicine. Furthermore, throughout the ‘80s and somewhat into ‘90s, women had been ontologically excluded from being diagnosed with AIDS, as the definition used by various institutions focused on opportunistic diseases experienced by men. While the play never specifies the exact year when the action takes place, the early workshops took place in 1993, and the plot clearly predates the introduction of protease inhibitors and combination therapy in 1995; Tompkins Square Park Riot, which inspired the events of the first act, took place in 1988. And it was not until 1993 when institutions such as the Social Security Administration or FDA agreed to expand the guidelines according to which they worked so as to include the needs of women. That Mimi survives in the play despite these odds is a noteworthy fact; that it was not

noted by the play itself, as it keeps its audiences oblivious to these exclusionary practices, is an act of omission.

It could be argued that some representational choices in the play might have been Larson's deliberate attempt to subvert the audience's expectations or to show a reality he desires. For instance, Judith Sebesta states in her defense of the musical that "Larson's very vision was an obviously utopian one intended to create a world inhabited by 'bohemians'" (426). However, the carnivalesque, topsy-turvy logic of the work seems to apply only to those elements of reality which might make a heteronormative, white and middle-class audience uncomfortable: for instance, that a woman of color without financial resources, like Mimi, would most likely not receive proper medical help, or that a gay man, like Angel, might have suffered due to ubiquity of homophobia. In contrast, the HIV-positive characters are either gay or use drugs, reconfirming the pre-existent idea of "risk groups" rather than subverting it. The carnivalesque overturn apparently does not apply here. Similarly, when Joanne substitutes for Mark as Maureen's stage manager, she is incompetent enough with the equipment to cause it to blow up; a man's help is needed to repair it. Maureen herself, coded as bisexual (she never identifies her sexuality, but is in a relationship with Joanne having broken up with Mark, with whom she still occasionally flirts), is stereotypically represented as promiscuous. In the same vein, Joanne is criticized by her parents for constantly wearing Doc Martens (footwear stereotypically associated with lesbians) and never putting on dresses. Larson seems to use a clear key as to where he abandons stereotypes, and where he does not. The harmful effects of systematic social problems, such as racism, lack of universal healthcare, or homophobia, which might make Broadway audiences uncomfortable about their privileged position, are erased. These are the issues *RENT* gets "utopian" about, whereas the comfortable ideas of "risk groups" (separating predominantly straight audiences from the virus) or feminine technical ineptitude

(typically seen as reconfirming biological basis of the heteronormative, patriarchal gender order rather than a result of the vicious circle of sexism) remain unchallenged.

The resulting simulacrum of diversity is a work that both does and does not represent the excluded minorities on the Broadway stage. Presenting identity markers, but withholding experiences of exclusion or political and cultural implications of the epidemic allows the audiences to conceive of themselves as tolerant and progressive. As Schulman states in *Stagestruck*:

Rent's strategy allows a predominantly white audience to see themselves as antiracist because they are buying tickets to a show that casts black actors. Yet, they never have to hear about the consequences of race in a black person's life.

In fact, in *Rent*, race has no impact on social hierarchy. The greedy landlord, for example, is black. His oppressed, harassed good-guy tenant is a white boy from the suburbs. This switch in the paradigm masquerades as "progressive" because it defies stereotypes, but actually it obscures the real racial dynamics of New York City real estate. This creates a comfort zone for white audiences who, in our neo-con culture, are constantly wanting to assert that white people are just as disempowered as blacks. Or, even more sinisterly, that white people, like the white middle-class tenants, are more disempowered than blacks, an ideological stance that has led to the dismantling of affirmative actions programs. (88-89)

The mechanism works similarly for the exclusion of gays, lesbians and de-politicization of AIDS. As very diverse people were embraced within the play by their friendship group, and as their identities had little impact on their lives, audiences were reconfirmed that gay people were doing fine, at a time when their basic rights were still not secured and when they were dying of a lethal disease.

The central position of the heterosexual characters in the play is also an example of how *RENT* treats various excluded identities instrumentally, so that it can be called a progressive play (for including them), but always in a way that serves mostly straight audiences. The subservient role of the lesbian couple is very clear: the women constantly bicker as Maureen keeps flirting with people around her, and they never provide any sustenance or enrich each other's lives. One attempt of mutual support, when Joanne tries to handle Maureen's sound equipment in the first act, requires help from a man, reinforcing gender stereotypes. Significantly, this was the only representation of a lesbian couple in a Broadway show at the time. The other gay relationship in *RENT*, between Angel and Tom, the professor and the drag queen, is certainly a much more successful love affair, defined solely in terms of mutual love and support. However, the two men are quite one-dimensional, romanticized characters who never do anything wrong (perhaps with an exception of the scene where Angel causes death of a dog for financial gain; this action is never really examined by the play, though, and appears only as a recurring joke). Along with Angel's death, the play reiterates the trope which had been a cause of concern among gay critics for a long time: that gay men are represented as positive characters only when they are the doomed characters.¹⁹ Granted, this is progress from the pre-Stonewall trope of a doomed homosexual, who used to be both tragic and a villain; now a gay man is a doomed hero, mostly because he is a young man about to die tragically. Nevertheless, it does not hide the fact that the gay couple, in the best-known Broadway story *about AIDS*, is sidelined in favor of the story about a seropositive heterosexual couple, Mimi and Roger, the characters middlebrow audiences are more likely to care about.

¹⁹ In Andrew Holleran's short story "The Housesitter," one gay man succinctly expresses this viewpoint: "We will never be accepted. All this so-called assimilation is only because of AIDS. We wouldn't get any sympathy at all if we weren't dying. Happy, healthy fags—*that's* offensive. Like rich blacks. Everything that's happened the last twenty years, the acceptance of gays, is a, superficial, and b, because we are dying. As we should be, in their logic" (256).

As *RENT* is a musical play, its conception was a highly collaborative process. Tracking the changes it underwent, especially inasmuch as they were directed at getting a positive response from the audiences, can give important insight into how the culture industry operates. Bearing this in mind, it is worth noting that putting Mimi and Roger at center stage was not Larson's idea. It was his dramaturg, Lynn Thompson, who pushed for this direction. Thompson's job was to turn the messy jumble of ideas Larson had written into a coherent piece. After Larson died and the play became a smash success, she sued "for a share of Rent's sizable profits: reading through her lawsuit one is struck by just how much of the 'message' she takes credit for: focusing on the heterosexual love story, reducing the number of HIV-positive characters, purging the show of 'unsympathetic' emotions to make it 'positive, life affirming'" (Saunders). It seems, then, that it was an intervention of an expert, who knew what product would be better received, that influenced the contents of the play so that it could be marketed more effectively, and that this influence was to focus on the heterosexual component. There is a clear parallel between this development and the focus the Patient Zero story was given in marketing *And The Band Played On*, following the advice of a book promoter. The story of marketing *Band* was a rare instance when the business decision to focus media attention on the component allowing for homophobic narratives was made visible. Similarly, Thompson's court argument is a rare occurrence when the shift in author's intentions towards more heterosexual content for the sake of achieving popular success has been recorded. In both cases, the financial circumstances influenced the work (either its content, or the emphasis in its marketing), making it a clear example of how the culture industry operates. In the case of *RENT*, it was crucial for the play's success, to eliminate "unsympathetic" emotions, which likely made the play comfortably "utopian" (but only where it could actually make middle class audience uncomfortable), and to focus to a greater extent on the heterosexual heroes, who have taken the center stage in the story about AIDS.

RENT was lauded as a milestone in the representation of both minorities and AIDS on Broadway. Its success, however, was clearly rooted in its unwillingness to upset audiences with its subject, regardless of how upsetting it actually was. For that purpose, various experiences of exclusion were erased from the reality of play, making PWAs, black people, queer people, Latinos and Latinas as well as white guys from the suburbs identical. It also depoliticized AIDS and activism, through its misrepresentation of the disease and its treatment. Finally, despite touting its diverse cast, the work focused on straight white male characters and marginalized the groups actually affected by its overt subject (even though it worked actively to reinforce the stereotypical link between the disease and the “risk groups”). All these strategies were deployed for a comfortable consumption, which resulted in one of the biggest smash hits on Broadway in the 1990s.

Conclusion

In this final section, I intend to highlight several points of convergence between these diverse examples. This does not imply that any of these works will adhere closely to all the principles discussed below. Instead, the idea is that all these ways of representation can and have been used to reinforce identity thinking and the goals of biopolitics. In that sense, I consider them the mechanisms of the culture industry of AIDS.

First, clearly the story of AIDS has been told through the lens of what was already familiar, and in order to reinforce what was already assumed. These assumptions often refer to the issues of sexuality directly. The culture industry of AIDS shows that monogamous couples are the only good and acceptable form of social relationship in which to realize one’s sexuality; that any other kind of sex is immoral and transgressive; and that the epidemic is a punishment for this transgression, while salvation lies in monogamy and family. Voicing these middle-class

dominant values is construed as a bold act akin to coming out, in an attempt to garner sympathy granted to the underdog; actually, however, it is repetition of the heteronormative narrative.

Second, the culture industry of AIDS operates with an assumption of a stable gay identity, which is internally coherent, and while markedly different from the rest of society, it is being pulled ever closer towards the sameness. In order to do so, it is being desexualized, as the freedom celebrated through queer ethos of the liberation generation is eroding. This way, a gay character can appear in a story about AIDS which remains silent on the issues of intersectionality, systematic homophobia and its consequences, safer sex practices, chosen families or activism. Thus, any idea which might be subversive to the heteronormative order is sidelined.

Finally, these narratives tend to deny the crisis, even if on some other level they emphasize its urgency. “A strategic *but*,” as Chambers called it, is used for this purpose; it is a tactic of including and emphasizing facts and issues that prevent critical reflection on the state of the Western civilization and its institutions, as it focuses blame on the PWAs (for instance, Gaetan Dugas). Works of the culture industry of AIDS set up this “strategic *but*” to their representations of inhumane healthcare, government, and scientific research, and that maneuver allows them to diagnose the problems within the institutions, but avoid the critique of the current epistemological order which grants these institutions their power. This, in turn, helps the heteronormative social order to avoid the blame, and, through the previously listed familiar narratives, throw it back at gay people.

The complex issues which the AIDS crisis brought to stark visibility formed a labyrinth where many well-intended authors might have got lost. With the voice of PWAs being silenced, and familiar narratives pushing towards misrepresentation, taking up the subject of this epidemic was a difficult endeavor. The remaining chapters take a close look at how Sarah

Schulman, an AIDS activist and a novelist who did not reinforce identity thinking or contribute to the culture industry of AIDS, dealt with these challenges.

Chapter 3: Activists and Bohemians

Sarah Schulman is a Jewish American writer who has authored both novels and nonfiction books in which she elaborated her political ideas about the homophobia and sexism of dominant culture, role of community in resistance, and the strategies of avoiding responsibility used by those who are comfortable within the current order of power. Throughout her career, she has been uncompromisingly out as a lesbian, and her work has explicitly centered on lesbian characters, often to the detriment of her public acknowledgment and commercial success. During the AIDS epidemic, she found herself reporting stories about the disease, at first in the journalistic pieces published in gay community newspapers and, eventually, in novels on the subject. Although AIDS was briefly mentioned in some of her earlier fiction, it was not until 1990, when she published her fourth major novel, *People in Trouble*, that the epidemic became a major theme in her writing.

People in Trouble is a realist novel that tells the story of a love triangle between Kate, a middle-class painter, Molly, her newfound younger lover, and Peter, a theatrical lighting designer and Kate's husband of many years. The story begins *in medias res*, as Kate has already been in a relationship with Molly for some time. The plot focuses mainly on the effects this relationship has on all three characters. Kate, since she leaves the heteronormative world, undergoes the most radical change; she becomes aware that excluded people surround her, and gets involved with AIDS activism, whereas earlier the disease was not anything she would give much thought. She also begins to realize the borders and limits of hegemonic concepts that used to give shape to her life. This emancipation is, however, limited in scope; she remains held back by her internalized homophobia, even though she grows more and more confused about her

feelings for Peter, which seem to be a mixture of genuine fondness, habit, and preference for safe life.

Her indecisiveness negatively impacts both Molly and Peter. Molly attempts repeatedly to wrench out more space for their romance as it is impeded by Kate's fear of hurting Peter. Dissatisfied with the constant need to limit her expectations, Molly eventually gives up on the endeavor and chooses to pursue a real relationship with Sam, an out lesbian. Peter, who is the most explicitly heteronormative character in the novel, comes unwillingly to a realization that right outside his comfortably normative life there is a whole gay world. To manifest his disapproval, he tries to ignore the affair as much as he can. While both Kate and Peter are artists, and they conceive of themselves as subversive in their life choices (not unlike Larson's "bohemians"), the novel dramatizes the coziness of heteromatrix regardless of how intellectualized or non-normative the choices of the heterosexual couple are. The tensions are further exacerbated by Peter's barely concealed sexism, and they eventually lead to the breakup of the marriage.

This personal drama plays out against a looming backdrop of AIDS. As Molly introduces Kate to the queer community, the disease begins to play ever larger part in the newcomer's life. She meets and befriends People With AIDS, joins a fictional activist group called Justice (clearly based on ACT UP), and she eventually takes a new direction in her artistic work—instead of painting, she constructs an artistic installation called *People in Trouble*. Her endeavor, intended to foster awareness regarding exclusion that Kate has grown conscious of, turns out to be financed by a real estate mogul Ronald Horne, and used as a smokescreen intended to make him look more socially conscious. Horne is a distant villain of the book, a ruthless businessman based loosely on pre-presidency Donald Trump, who profits greatly from gentrification of New York and ignores the suffering this process brings to the people living in the urban neighborhoods. When Kate realizes the connection between her artwork and Horne's

interest, she furtively sets it on fire which ends up burning the investor alive. The event does not have a transformative effect for her, however; her radical action is co-opted by the neoliberal culture, and a few months later she travels in Europe, being a new fashionable artist whose gimmick is burning installations.

If the story of a female artist who was in a heterosexual relationship and found a new girlfriend sounds somewhat familiar, it is because the novel's plot clearly was the inspiration for the story of Maureen, Joanne and Mark from *RENT*. While Larson's estate never publicly acknowledged Schulman's influence (the author himself could not, because he died before the show opened), the similarities are striking.²⁰ Jonathan Larson's work largely borrowed its queer themes from Schulman's novel, starting with main ideas about the plot and the characters, through specific scenes, and ending with minute details and observations characteristic of the period, for which Schulman was often praised, and which were carelessly transplanted into the musical. The comparison between *RENT* and *People in Trouble* in this chapter shall bring into visibility major differences between how the memory of the initial stage of AIDS epidemic has been distorted by the culture industry, and how it has been preserved by writing rooted in queer kinship.

In the following chapter I will analyze how Schulman utilized a specific historical situation she found herself in to use the convention of a realist novel for subversive, non-normative writing. Then, I will discuss the two main heteronormative characters, Kate and Peter, as similar to *RENT*'s "bohemians": people who conceive of themselves as sympathetic to the plight of PWAs but fail to realize different perspectives and subsume all social issues under their own, neoliberal framework. Next, I shall take a look at Schulman's representation

²⁰ Schulman wrote a whole non-fiction book on the subject, entitled *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America*. In it, she points out all the similarities, relates her experience of taking legal action as an individual against the colossus that was a smash hit which generated millions of dollars, and skillfully links the whole controversy to the broader issue of reframing gay culture under neoliberalism in 1990s.

of queer communities and the kinship among queer people as a meaningful, often crucial presence in their lives. Finally, I will focus on the novel's representation of activism as a meaningful practice that can bring about actual change, and Schulman's use of the text as a platform to voice social issues which were at stake within the AIDS activist struggle and to preserve the memory of AIDS activism.

Realism in the Postmodern World

Among many major developments in 20th century literature, one of particular interest for the following discussion is the shifting attitude towards realism. This, previously dominant, mode of representation had been increasingly subject to criticism, which eventually gave rise to a postmodernist novel. As Christine Belsey explains in *Critical Practice*, the realist novel used to be an object of unproblematic interpretation. The text was seen as a medium in the process of communication between the author and the reader. The critical practice in this framework started with a set of assumptions: "that novels are about life, that they are written from personal experience and that this is the source of their authenticity" (Belsey 1-2). The author was the final authority on the meaning of the text, and the task of criticism was to unveil the author's intention. The meaning itself was a stable, tangible concept which was either grasped or not. Overall, reading was a "common sense" practice, where what felt intuitive was right.

The basic concept around which a realistic novel revolves is the principle of plausibility. Under the condition of realism, the success of a narrative relies to some extent on the ability of the story to be *convincing*; the "yes, it could happen" reaction. In this way, the realist novel maintains what Barthes called the illusion of reality, the intelligibility and meaningfulness of the sequence of scenes. As Belsey summarizes different schools that criticized realism and its assumptions, this very intelligibility lies not, as common sense would have it, in the internal logic and coherence of the signifiers which make up the text, but in the familiarity of the tropes

and situations that connect them. Moreover, the straightforward understanding of realism fails to account for what Belsey refers to as ideology:

My use of the term, derived from Althusser, assumes that ideology is not an optional extra, deliberately adopted by self-conscious individuals (“Conservative party ideology,” for instance), but the very condition of our experience of the world, unconscious precisely in that it is unquestioned, taken for granted . . . Ideology is inscribed in language in the sense that it is literally written or spoken in it. (4)

The “common sense” reading of a realist novel, and its assumptions regarding meaning, is thus deeply involved with that ideology which shapes social life precisely because it delimits what feels intuitive. Since the very language is ideological, the practice of reading which assumes the intuitive and the commonsensical to be “right” or “true” reinforces the invisibility of ideology and thus its pervasiveness.

This rupture in the perceived coherence of interpretative practice was one of the reasons why the realist novel came under criticism. Numerous critical positions were articulated in the 20th century to address the problem of meaning, the position of the author, and the role of ideology in the text. Some of them, strongly encouraged by the post-structuralist and new-historicist divergence from the construct of the author, gave birth to the a gamut of late 20th century hermeneutic practice of reading texts from a variety of non-authorial subject positions—such as the queer position, to which this very thesis subscribes to—exploring the wider cultural positioning of the text. These critical practices encouraged numerous authors to move away from realism and its assumptions, even though this mode remains pervasive in popular culture.

Thus, postmodernist novels rose to prominence in the 1960s and they put the realistic mode of representation in disfavor with the critics and the young writers who shared the “conviction . . . that the realistic novel was no longer possible” (Wolfe 215). It was not until the

'80s, when works of authors such as Raymond Carver and Tom Wolfe found recognition, that the realist novel became rehabilitated in the critical eye. It was, however, a new kind of realism, more sensitive to the unobvious status of the intuitive and the objective. It shied away from the idea of meaning that, once an appropriate interpretive practice was employed, would be revealed to present some truth about the human condition. Winfried Fluck describes Carver's realism as one in which "crises and catastrophes are not heroic moments valued for their potential to reveal an existential truth but accidental occurrences in a dehierarchized sequence of daily events. Consequently, the characters that experience them are not transformed or deeply affected by them, but continue to live on as before" (71-72). Avoiding discoverable meaning, while retaining realistic plausibility, was the answer made by these realists to the challenge of postmodernism.

It is in this context that Schulman chose to write her first novel, too, in the realist mode. She argued that the specific historical situation of writing about the AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s gave her more freedom than the mode usually provides:

Because of this strange situation, writing a novel at the beginning of a new literary class, there was not yet a common language for how to create AIDS fiction. There were no established paradigms, agreed-upon images that could serve as code or shorthand. That was why I'd chosen social realism for the book. I needed a smooth surface texture to explore the complex idea at the root of the novel, namely that personal homophobia becomes societal neglect, that there is a direct relationship between the two. The frameworks were wide open and very unclear. (*Stagestruck* 23)

The major idea Schulman wanted to convey was, at its core, subversive; it called to question the unexplored assumptions of the dominant culture, for instance the separateness of the issue of homophobia from other social problems, and its virtual harmlessness insofar as no one gets physically attacked. By making a link between homophobia and the omnipresent misery in the

New York which was undergoing gentrification at the time, Schulman posits the issue of prejudice as crucial not only for the wellbeing of gay people in the United States, but for everyone.

Unlike the realism of Carver, Schulman's does seem organized around a certain locus of meaning. Throughout the novel, she clearly constructs what Wayne Booth called an "implied author": "As [the author] writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's [sic!] works" (70-71). This implied author is ultimately the most authoritative voice within the hierarchy of voices in the novel. It is not merely a narrator, who may be unreliable, limited, or prejudiced; rather, it is what can be inferred as the voice of the author themselves, what is understood as the author's identity constructed to tell the story in the novel. Whereas Carver's realism would tend to avoid constructing a strong voice of an implied author, this is not a concern for Schulman.

The story in *People in Trouble* is told by a third person narrator, although the narration is strongly focalized around the point of view of a protagonist, each of the three main characters starring in their own sections of the book. Occasionally, the narrative slips into first-person to present thought processes of the characters. The result is a polyphony of voices. The omniscient narrator does not seem to be particularly partial to any of the characters; this strategy, too, contributes to the "flat surface" Schulman was aiming for. However, the way the events are selected, and the sheer ridiculousness of some actions and conceits of the characters in the story suggests that there is a clear meaning at play, one that the author spelled out later, in *Stagestruck*: that personal homophobia leads to societal neglect.

What is interesting about this endeavor is that Schulman's implied author does not take a normative position; contrarily, it is critical of the norm, which might be easily identified with

Peter. As the plot moves towards closure, Molly's truth is, in line with the realist mode, reconfirmed by the narrative. At the same time, Peter's perspective is ironically reconfirmed *for him*: he bumps into Molly in the novel's epilogue and tells her self-satisfiedly that "you approach the world your way and I'll approach it mine" (267), never having figured out what Molly's approach actually is. The conclusion of Peter's story registers as a plausible, common-sense endpoint; he still remains sure that AIDS is irrelevant to his life, and that his reservations (more on which in the next section) are well-grounded. Thus, the heteronormative characters in the novel either fail to transform altogether (as in the case of Peter), or their transformation is inconsistent with the values of the implied author (as Kate's is). Their assumptions and the manners in which they make sense of the reality around them, clearly, are incoherent with the world as represented in the novel, showing that the normative perspective is rarely abandoned, but it is built upon false, exclusionary and inherently violent foundations. Schulman's implied author is close to Molly's subversive ideas, rather than Peter's common-sense heteronormative assumptions. In the process, the text defamiliarizes the dominant culture position, thus deploying the mode of realism against its supposed and often-criticized purpose of maintaining the status quo. In short, the familiar voice of heteronormative perspective in the novel is circumscribed as one perspective among many, readable yet not agreeable, thus deploying the familiarity against itself, subverting its hegemonic nature and inspiring an ironic distance towards it.

In summation, Schulman opted for a realist genre in order to make use of a wider and more fluid framework that opened up because she witnessed the very specific historical situation of the AIDS epidemic at its beginning. This fluidity allowed her to maintain the position that was dissenting towards the status quo without violating the principle of plausibility. Because the narrative included the normative voice, yet circumscribed it as a

limited and flawed perspective, it encouraged the reader to move outside the framework that takes the intuitive and the already known to be true, avoiding replication of ideology.

Forgetful Bohemians

As discussed in Chapter 1, the neoliberal narrative of AIDS was one marked with disidentification. Having constructed a moralistic narrative in which AIDS was caused by sexual transgressions, neoliberal media outlets used to construe AIDS as a disease of the Other. This translated into the position of acknowledgement of the tragedy that might even be somewhat compassionate, but which was completely devoid of urgency. It was an example of racism in the Foucauldian sense, i.e. division of the population into those whose lives need to be preserved, and those whose need not.²¹

It is in accordance with that imperative that Peter responds to the increasing presence of queer elements in his life. His initial, gut-feeling reaction is clearly tinged with machismo. For instance, as he sits at a cafe where a few gay men also happen to pass the time, he compares his own muscular body build to their slighter ones. Hearing their repartee, he also judges their behavior as effeminate: “Peter watched them whine like two suburban matrons. He hated to see men act like that. No, he corrected himself, he hated when anyone acted like that” (33). Interestingly, there is a visible tension between his automatic and instinctive reaction, (which associates gay men’s behavior with femininity) and his more intellectualized adjustment. The former is a simple feeling of hatred motivated by his gender identity: “far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of ‘feminine’ traits; in women, of the local definition of ‘masculine traits’” (Rubin, “The Traffic...” 180). Intending to escape his masculinist sexism and homophobia, Peter universalizes those feelings, as if they

²¹ See Chapter 1, p. 28.

were rooted in some view of equality; it is not that such repartee is an unsuitable behavior for men, but that it is wrong *for anyone*. This intellectualization leaves him entirely satisfied. Much like the liberal discourse of AIDS could not bear direct discrimination against homosexuality, and opted for condemnation of universal “promiscuity,” Peter does not condemn gays’ behavior as unmanly, but simply dislikes the unmanly manner of behavior altogether. The result is, however, the same: he disapproves of effeminate behavior in the gay men he encounters. Moreover, the sexist terms which cause his emotional reaction indicate that the conclusion he comes up with is an instance of false intellectualization allowing him to avoid examination of his feelings while keeping his self-image as tolerant.

It is exactly this kind of dual thinking, which both follows the exclusionary patterns and moves away from them upon closer examination, that informs Peter’s reactions towards anything queer he encounters. For instance, as he witnesses a crowd of gay people at a funeral, the following train of thought ensues:

Ever since Kate had begun her gay affair Peter had been slapped in the face by homosexuality practically every day. How ironic that her affair had coincided with this AIDS thing. It was like running into someone he hadn’t thought about for years and then seeing them coincidentally three times a week until the recognition became an embarrassment. Peter had always been around gay men—being in the theater, how could he avoid it? Not that he wanted to avoid it, of course . . . But he had to admit that his and Kate’s inner circle were all heterosexual couples. It had just turned out that way. Some of the men he knew had been bisexual at one time, but those experiments were all over now, he noted with some relief. Now things were more clearly defined. (35-36)

The sudden appearance of the queer element in his life makes Peter uncomfortable. He is also clearly uncomfortable with his discomfort, negotiating between what he feels and what he believes he ought to feel through a series of linguistic slips from the homophobic to the non-

homophobic and in reverse. He is “slapped in the face by homosexuality,” i.e. mere visibility of gayness is for him a sort of violence. But it is mostly about visibility in his private time; he does not have a problem with gay men at work, because he sees their presence as unavoidable. Having phrased it this way, Peter mentally corrects himself, claiming that he does not want to avoid them. That heterosexual identity of his friends is now more fixed than it used to be, is, however, a source of relief; it is one thing to cooperate with people and relate to them on a professional basis, and something wholly different to relate to somebody as a friend. Friendship invites exchange of opinions, and attempts to understand another’s worldview, and Peter prefers to be surrounded with opinions and worldviews like his. This is, perhaps, why seeing gay people he feels slapped; their mere presence suggests perspectives wholly different from his, an act he implicitly conceives of as aggression.

In the middle of the novel the narration follows Peter for an extended period of time as he imagines himself to be a part of some kind of dissident community. He sees this affinity among people in a way not unlike Larson’s “bohemians,” as he imagines kinship understood through imprecise and loosely defined disapproval of the status quo. However, since he is unwilling to open to perspectives different from his, this sentiment rings very false. For instance, at one point he notices a crowd of people waiting to eat at a soup kitchen, and experiences a very empathetic reaction: “Peter felt a deep, deep compassion. It drew him closer to them, this sense of injustice that they had been treated so badly” (161). As he enters the eatery, he merely watches the people inside, yet imagines himself to be one with them:

Peter stood there this whole time, rain dripping from his raincoat. Everyone else’s clothes were soaked through, but his were dry.

How can you relieve suffering for even one moment? he thought. *Here we are, the homeless, the old, the artists. The sadness is so overwhelming I can’t imagine what to do. Nothing in my life has prepared me for this.* (163)

In his fantasy, the suffering felt by all the people gathered in the soup kitchen as well as his own misery make them of a kind, but clearly the experiences belong to two completely different orders. The people who regularly gather there suffer because they are homeless or poor, and have to remain in the building because of the rain which has soaked their clothes. Peter is suffering because his marriage is failing, but he does not have to stay at the soup kitchen, and he eats elsewhere. His suffering does not cripple him the way it does the other patrons of the establishment. To dispel his fantasy further, in the next scene he complains about New Yorkers' failure to understand how to dress properly and avoid the cold:

It was really pouring and Peter wore his boots and raincoat and carried an umbrella. He liked to be well protected from the weather. He didn't like to get wet and it was easy to stay dry if you just took the time to put on all the necessary accessories. In New Hampshire, when it snowed, the ground reflected the moonlight and everything was clearly illuminated, even without stars . . . Peter could start at the top of the hill and roll down the whole way without getting hurt because the snow was so deep and soft and people knew how to dress warmly up there. (164)

Since the garments are used as the symbol of class stratification in the scene at the soup kitchen, this rant could be reasonably read as indicative of his privileged assumptions in a broader sense. The homeless and the elderly from the soup kitchen are soaked not because they are extremely poor and excluded, but rather because they do not know how to dress. For Peter, dressing warmly is purely a matter of choice: he assumes others have exactly the same kind of agency he does with all his privilege, regardless of social and cultural contexts that may constrain them. Metaphorically, this belief acts like the waterproof outerwear itself; it protects Peter from unpleasant realization of his privilege. His childhood suburban area in New Hampshire plays out in the fantasy as a safe space, because people know how to protect themselves—not only

from the rain, but also from the subversive ideas and lurking gay presence, which, like soaked clothes, make the likes of Peter uncomfortable.

This protective layer of beliefs allows Peter to equate the suffering of everyone around him—the homeless, the poor, the People With AIDS—with his own. This, in turn, lets him obsess over his own feelings of being wronged regardless of the context. As he works with Robert, a younger black man, on stage lighting, Peter brings up the subject of AIDS. Robert turns out to be a kid from a patchwork family with a father who has a male lover. That lover is PWA as well as Robert’s dear friend. As Robert begins to talk about his home situation, Peter loses interest and switches the subject quickly back to himself. On another occasion, the two men work together on the day Robert’s father’s lover dies. Peter tries to be compassionate, but he feels physically unable to do so: “He felt his throat constrict. When he intended to answer with a typically jovial response, there was no sound. He saw white. He felt cold. Kate was ruining everything” (158). Jealous of his wife’s affair, unwilling to confront her, and thus being angry at all things gay, he becomes unable to form a connection with the younger man who opens up to him when in need of emotional support. He is so self-involved that he focuses on anxieties about his own uncertain future with Kate and his flaws, rather than on helping the grieving person next to him.

Unsurprisingly then, Peter approaches signs of AIDS activism he encounters with dislike bordering on distaste. As he witnesses James, a black leader of Justice, talk for the first time, he judges him through the lens of machismo: “*They shouldn’t have let him be the spokesman*, Peter thought. *They should have picked somebody more masculine, so people would be more sympathetic*” (68). He considers effeminacy to be detrimental to the efficacy of political action. He also feels discomfort seeing gay members of Justice put on sweaters over T-shirts with pink triangles on them: “Some went off to have coffee, others went home to rest. Once those shirts were covered, they stopped looking like gay men with AIDS. They looked

just like everyone else. *That, thought Peter, is their most effective trick*" (69). Unintelligibility of homosexuality, or earlier stages of AIDS, is in his view "their trick" which allows gay men to hide their common "flaw." This, in turn, disturbs the mainstream belief in impermeability of the barriers between the heterosexual and the homosexual and the feelings of safety and disengagement this myth produces.

Peter's view of AIDS largely depends on identity thinking and neoliberal myths of the disease. His distress relates to ease of hiding both homosexuality and AIDS activism. The distinction needs not be made, as, for Peter, the one is a figure of another. When he first takes up the subject of AIDS with Robert, his younger co-worker, he immediately worries he might have said something offensive: "For one second he panicked because maybe Robert had AIDS, but then he looked at him again and decided that Robert was not a homosexual" (72). The manner in which Peter calms himself down is based on the most basic myth of AIDS: that it is a gay disease, and thus if one is not gay, they are not sick. His identity thinking also fails to acknowledge possible divergence among PWAs: "*These are men with AIDS*, Peter realized. *Forty of them. But that one doesn't look like he has it. He looks like he works out. The thin one has definitely got it*" (68). His assumption is that somebody muscular and thus healthy-looking cannot be a PWA, and in reverse, a thin AIDS activist congruent with the media image of a frail "AIDS victim" must be HIV-positive. He feels the need to assign people into these clean-cut categories, which is why James, the effeminate black leader of Justice, confounds him so much: "*I wonder if he's gay or if he got it from drugs*" (68). James' color of skin directs Peter's thoughts towards another mode of transmission, and he feels the need to resolve the confusion, unable to read James' status.

His identitarian thinking and the protective barrier shielding his privilege make Peter fail to connect even when he tries to. Soon after his visit at the soup kitchen, still propelled by a wish to combat his loneliness, he attempts to help a man on the street who is hurt, and whose

hand is swelling visibly. The man has a prescription, but cannot find an open pharmacy. Peter starts leading him from one closed drugstore to another, to no effect. Eventually, they bump into Molly, who recognizes the drug from the prescription as a painkiller and offers the man a sensible substitute. What follows is an awkward scene where Peter seeks Molly's approval for his good deed, shows off his casual sexism, and tells her off for "lesbian separatism." Molly responds to this last part with a rhetorical question: "You can't take anything that isn't about you, can you?" (169), a charge that is wholly unintelligible for Peter. Having failed to understand her point, he asks Molly to repeat. Exasperated, she says: "I understand what you're saying . . . I don't agree, but I know exactly where you're coming from and I understand precisely what you mean" (169). Seeing that any confrontation makes no sense, Molly merely acknowledges that his views are a result of his identity. Mistakenly, Peter takes it to be a sign of her agreement, forces a kiss upon his wife's lesbian lover, and leaves congratulating himself on how much Kate is going to appreciate that he has befriended Molly. He is utterly clueless about Molly's actual negative feelings towards him, and neither they nor she really matter to him, just like the man in need of help did not really matter to him; all he cares about is his own self-image, and that he sees himself as a progressive and altruistic person. That he gets to blurt out his opinions in the faces of people who differ from him, and then fully miscomprehend what they are saying in response, only fuels this approach.

Miscomprehension is not solely Peter's prerogative, however. Throughout the novel Kate is also shown to occupy an in-between position which indicates failure to grasp the urgency of the crisis. On the one hand, she keeps learning new information about the lives of the excluded, and this knowledge pushes her towards activism. On the other, just as quickly as she is learning this information, she keeps forgetting it, repeatedly engaging with and disengaging from the queer community that stimulates her development and growth as an artist and a person.

This duality is perhaps most visible in her view of her own sexuality. As the story develops, Kate hits major milestones in discovering her sexuality and developing queer identity; she starts having a lesbian affair, eventually she professes her love to Molly, she goes to gay bars, and she takes part in Justice meetings and direct actions. This coming out narrative is repeatedly interjected by Kate's constant assertions that she does not identify with her new queer friends: "'This is how I know I'm not a lesbian,' Kate said. 'Because I'm turned on by cock. I like cock'" (101). The discovery she makes, that she is interested sexually in both sexes, does not translate into any kind of queer identity, though; the only situation in which she talks about how she identifies is when she preemptively (for no one ever suggests it) claims she is not a lesbian. The tension between her pleasure in her sexuality and her push against it is best exemplified in a scene where Kate visits Molly's friends and, after seeing the two women in a happy relationship, she begins to think about her own affair:

She missed Molly. She missed talking to her. She missed touching her. She heard the two women making love and thought about when she and Molly made love and could not accept that it was the same thing.

No matter how much I think about it or hear about it, no matter how much pain it causes me or how exciting it can be, it has not become acceptable for me. It is not regular.
(225)

Kate's reminiscing about the pleasure of sex with Molly is cut short when she considers similarity between this experience and the experience of the lesbians in the room next door. To acknowledge it would mean to take up some kind of queer identity, which is prevented by an anxious bout of deeply internalized homophobia that makes her disidentify from her own pleasure.

Why is she so anxious to disidentify, however? Kate is, after all, fascinated by some elements of queer counterculture and she does appreciate and enjoy being a Justice activist.

Nevertheless, she always negotiates her own identity in such a way that the comforts of the heteronormative life are not lost to her and can be easily returned to. Both Kate's fascination and anxiety are visible when she enjoys a walk with Peter and she sees Molly:

Molly had looked so solid. Her shoulders were squared and she looked tough, completely in charge. It was late and dark but she didn't rush with fear, just kept on steadily from an internal power that compensated for size and caste. Kate had watched herself with Peter. They were loud and obvious. They moved all over the sidewalk and said anything they liked. At the same time Molly was aware of every presence and event in her path and made herself invisible to all of it. (194-95)

The stark contrast between the couple and Molly can be interpreted as the effect of sexual orientation on bodily presence. As Sara Ahmed argues, "sexual orientation involves bodies that leak into worlds; it involves a way of orientating the body towards and away from others, which affects how one can enter different kinds of social spaces . . . even if it does not lead bodies to the same places" (423). Careful to hold off the identitarian impulse, Ahmed nevertheless notes on the different positions available to heteronormative and to non-heteronormative subjects inhabiting bodies in the heteronormative public space. Molly's body, as positioned and moving through the city at night, makes readable the struggle she has endured, and the alertness characteristic of a queer presence in a public space. The significance of this alertness, and Kate and Peter's "obviousness" may be illuminated by Gill Valentine's account of 'heterosexualization' of public spaces:

whilst sexual dissidents are constantly aware of the performative nature of identities and spaces, heterosexuals are often completely oblivious to this because they rarely have to be conscious of, or examine their own performativity. They can take the street for granted as a 'commonsense' heterosexual space precisely because they take for granted their freedom to perform their own identities. (Valentine 148)

The latter position is enjoyable for the heteronormative couple, because, as Ahmed notes, it is comfortable:

normativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it. The word “comfort” suggests well-being and satisfaction, but it also suggests an ease and easiness. To follow the rules of heterosexuality is to be at ease in a world that reflects back the [heteronormative] couple form one inhabits as an ideal. Of course, one can be made to feel uneasy by one’s inhabitation of an ideal. One can be made uncomfortable by one’s own comforts. To see heterosexuality as an ideal that one might or might not follow—or to be uncomfortable by the privileges one is given by inhabiting a heterosexual world—is a less comforting form of comfort. But comfort it remains. (Ahmed 425)

Kate might, too, be fascinated by Molly’s awareness of her surroundings. However, what fascinates her also repels her; her comfortable subject position would be in danger were she herself to take up any queer identity. Thus, Kate is stuck in her ongoing interest in queer people, and drawn to Molly as a lover, but unable to give up her heterosexual privilege.

Kate’s deep investment in her own privilege pushes her also towards identity thinking and makes her unwilling to let go of old thought patterns in the light of new experiences. When she goes with Molly to a gay bar, she encounters a friend of hers:

‘Look,’ Kate said, pointing to the front door. ‘That woman, I know her. That’s Susan Hoffman. Her husband is a sculptor . . . Isn’t that great?’ she said to Molly.

‘Isn’t what great?’

‘That a straight woman like Susan can feel comfortable coming to a place like this.’ . . .

‘She’s not straight.’

‘Of course she is. I know her husband.’

‘She knows yours . . . Watch. I’ll bet you anything that’s her girlfriend . . . That femmy girl with the great earrings. See, wait, yep, watch that smooch. She came here to meet her lover.’

Kate stared at the door for a minute and then drank down her four-dollar beer.

‘But I know her husband.’ (96-97)

For Kate, the unwillingness to acknowledge the bodily pleasures she experiences extends to other people she identifies with her “straight” life. Thus, in a bar full of lesbians, where she herself has come with her girlfriend while married, Kate sees Susan Hoffman as unquestionably straight. Persistence in failure to acknowledge the obvious falsity of that assumption has little to do with the woman in question, and a lot to do with the perceived stability of boundaries between sexual identities. For Kate, her affair with Molly, along with the escapade to a gay bar, is a wild adventure that could not happen to anyone she knows; it is a world in itself, entirely separate from the heterosexual one. In order to preserve her privileged worldview that utilizes heterosexist assumptions, she needs to act as if that were true, and faced with undeniable observable facts disproving these beliefs, she is visibly distressed.

Throughout the novel, Kate’s growing awareness of non-heteronormative perspectives, as well as her acknowledgement of poverty, homelessness and AIDS are repeatedly washed away by her privilege whenever this knowledge might jeopardize her comfort. In early chapters, she witnesses an event which, in all likelihood, is the Tompkins Square Riot. She watches with disbelief police violence employed to pacify the protest: “It was real violence in the midst of great confusion. It was not a movie of the week. It was hot. It was stylized. It was unbelievable when it happened so openly” (14). However, a few chapters later, having listened to several people begging for money, she wonders: “*Do they say the same thing to each person, thirty times an hour, twelve times a day? Why aren’t they rioting? Why are they standing so politely on street corners?*” (80). As she asks these questions, she seems to have already forgotten the

police violence she witnessed at the beginning of the novel. It is not the only example of her strategic forgetfulness, which she uses to remain unconscious of how urgent the issues she claims to care about really are. Similarly, whenever she sees the homeless, Kate ponders upon their plight, empathizing with them. She does not see, however, how separate their existence is from her own:

‘Here we are trying to have a run-of-the-mill illicit lesbian love affair,’ Molly said. ‘And all around us people are dying and asking for money.’

‘It is absurd to see people suffering every day.’

‘And to be so untouched personally,’ Molly said. ‘That’s the really scary part.’

‘What do you mean *untouched*? We see this constantly.’

‘Okay, Kate, but our city is so stratified that people can occupy the same physical space and never confront one another. New York is a death camp for thousands of people, but they don’t have to be contained for us to avoid them. The same streets I have fun on are someone else’s hell.’ (135)

For Kate, witnessing the dehumanizing poverty is very much akin to living it. Such view obscures her privilege and the actual plight of the homeless. Kate goes on to defend her views by saying that more and more artists, including her, create political art. This belief allows her to feel her painting helps the people with whom she conjures feelings of kinship. It is also the view she parrots after Peter; once Peter has finished a book, Kate reads it as well, so that they “always have something to talk about” (241). Since it is Peter who selects their readings, he has the power to delineate the borders of their intellectual life, thus enacting a kind of epistemological hierarchy within the marriage. Thus, this view is betrayed as a tool to cement security of a heterosexual couple imposed by a man in a position of power. Considering both the source and the meaning of this perspective to Kate, it is unsurprising that Molly remains

unconvinced. For her, Kate's claim is a smoke screen that protects her privileged comfort zone rather than a genuine attempt to actively alter the power structure.

In order to fully explain the significance this account of Kate's perspective bears, it might be useful to come back to Ross Chambers' idea of a crisis event. In *Untimely Interventions*, Chambers discusses the figure of Dalmane—a drug taken by the narrator in Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time*. This drug allows him to go on after the death of his lover, because it works as a painkiller while making him all woozy and forgetful. On a larger scale, Dalmane is for Chambers the figure of “cultural haze,” which consists of “things like being comfortably at home, well fed, able to persuade ourselves the story has been satisfactorily told and is consequently ‘over’” (viii). For Chambers, the Western culture as a whole “takes Dalmane” when faced with a crisis event. The drug, for instance manifest as the products of the culture industry of AIDS, actively prevents the realization that the West is not as fully civilized as it assumes itself to be. This is why the work of a witness is to keep reminding whoever might be willing to listen that the crisis did happen or is happening, lest it be forgotten altogether. The dynamic between the witness and the consumer of culture industry is clearly readable in the following scene:

‘Well,’ Kate said sometime later in that conversation. ‘I don’t think we’re as far apart as you say. I mean, when the shit comes down, we’ll both be on the same side of the barricades.’

‘The shit is already down.’

‘I mean when people are dying in the streets.’

‘Kate, people are dying in the streets. It’s not the movies, where the world divides into freedom fighters and brownshirts. Here in New York City there are people who take action and people who do nothing. Doing nothing is a position. It means giving approval without having to actively say so.’ (196)

Molly explains to Kate that her anticipation of an action-movie narrative where the good and the evil clash in direct combat, and where people eventually end up on one side of the barricade or another, makes her blind to the violence of inaction. This is not even a personal attack on Molly's part; by that point, Kate is a member of Justice and she has taken part in a few actions of the activist group, so she could be seen as one of those who take action. However, she still clings to the view according to which inaction simply means not taking a position *yet*. In all likelihood, she does so in order to keep her option to come back to the inactive position open. Molly challenges this view, pointing out that the comfortable position of inaction may very well be vested in the upkeep of *appearance* of acceptability. An individual such as Peter may sit in their living room and enjoy their hobbies fully convinced that there is no need to take action because they are unwilling to see the intolerable reality which might challenge their comfortable routine.

By making visible the convenient forgetfulness of both Kate and Peter, Schulman represents the neoliberal subject who purports themselves to be compassionate whilst they remain, in fact, complicit with the violent power structure. The novel as a whole is constructed very much as a critique of that subject and their approach. Incidentally, this subject is very much consistent with *RENT's* bohemian, a worldview that the whole ensemble of musical's protagonists implicitly share. Clearly, Larson's work prefers to glorify rather than criticize it, making the work stand in stark contrast with its source material; the contrast, however, merely dramatizes the limits of this "bohemian" worldview.

As discussed in the previous chapter, all the main characters in *RENT* share a similar set of values. These are loosely understood as dissatisfaction with the status quo, defined mostly via making a point of not participating in the capitalist consumer culture. No challenges arise between the characters based on their values (unless petty jealousies and the attempts to dissuade an addict from drug use be counted), despite the vastly diverse array of backgrounds

supposedly represented in the musical. By and large, this unified outlook is the perspective of Peter in *People in Trouble*—who, as he enters a soup kitchen, feels connection with the despondent having to eat there, but still scoffs at them for failing to dress appropriately for the weather, completely unaware it is his privilege that allows him to do so. Whereas Schulman’s novel delineates the clear limits of this approach, as Peter finds himself unable to translate his empathetic impulse into actual help due to his passing interest in making a change, *RENT* simply shows this worldview as shared by the whole cast, reinforcing its common-sensical quality for its audiences.

Another difference between Schulman’s critique of the current order of power and the way the culture maintains it resides in their understanding of activism. The two activist characters represented in *RENT* do not actually achieve much; in fact, Maureen’s performance seems rather ridiculous. In contrast, as we shall soon see in the discussion of the way Schulman depicts Justice, the actual power people can use to make a change via collective direct action plays a huge part in *People in Trouble*. Significantly, *RENT*’s “bohemian” approach to activism as another neutered label, much like gay, white, or homeless (which all belong, for Larson’s characters—and conceivably the author himself—to the same order) is also present in Schulman’s novel, once again articulated through Peter. Towards the end of the novel, frustrated with Kate’s involvement with Justice, he confronts her in the following manner:

‘What are you doing, Katie? I don’t understand you. You don’t care about anything unless it’s gay. You don’t think about anything unless it’s gay. I’m really surprised you would become so narrow . . .

I understand you feel a need to be politically active but I think that is something we can do together. Homosexuals don’t have a monopoly on morality, you know. We have always agreed that our artwork is our political work. We have always agreed that challenging form is more revolutionary than any political organization ever can be. But

if you feel a need to be a part of a group, we can do that together. I mean, I care more about Nicaragua than I do about a group of rich white gay men. Wouldn't you like to work together on something less exclusive?' (256-57)

Activism, for Peter, is something of a pastime, much like a weekly bowling session or following the newest movies. Thus, he understands it in consumerist terms, solely as a need that ought to be fulfilled. Isolated as he is by his protective layer of privilege, he finds the causes for which one might fight entirely interchangeable. His claim that he cares about Nicaragua rings about as false as his failed attempts to help an injured person. The dominant motivation for taking up activist work would be spending time together with his wife, once again, as if they were looking for a new hobby. Peter is completely unaware of the reasons why Kate engages in her political work, the organic way she got involved, or the people that made her care about the issue. Neither does he want to hear about them, or the actual lives of People With AIDS, who are neither exclusively rich, white, gay or men. While Larson replicates Peter's neoliberal skepticism towards direct action, showing it through the disinterested lens and turning it into an amusing yet pointless protest performance authored by Maureen, Schulman both represents meaningful direct actions and accounts for the neoliberal view of activism as one complicit in persistence of the oppressive power structure.

Consistently, the two works promote completely opposite approaches to AIDS and different strategies of handling one's seropositive status. *RENT* preaches acceptance: a peaceful, meditative solution in which PWA agree to see their disease as a fact of life and force outside their control, a tactic with undeniable benefits for mental health. What it fails to acknowledge, as a universalized answer, is the historical specificity of AIDS. This acceptance glosses over the fact that the epidemic could have been prevented and that there actually were at the time things to be done in order to pressure the government and medical industry into action. This solution is also highly egoistic—individuals accepting the oppressive situation

make for a weak community that will remain subjugated. It is from dissent, which is preached in *People in Trouble*, that power to make a change arises.

Both similarities and differences between the two works read, in fact, as an uncanny dramatization of the scene where Molly tries in vain to tell Peter something that does not belong to his comfort zone, and he fails to hear. *RENT* is, by and large, the story of that mishearing; it is the tale of homelessness and AIDS told from a perspective with little understanding of either, and little insight into its author's own privilege. That in all likelihood Larson composed that work *after* reading *People in Trouble* shows his complete failure to understand Schulman's novel. The writer herself, in fact, remarks upon it in *Stagestruck*: "I agree with his lawyers that he used my ideas, not the 'expression' of my ideas. In fact, he used my ideas to express something that is the opposite of what I expressed. It may not be legally binding, but it is immoral, especially given the meaning of my novel versus the meaning of his play" (37-38). The task Schulman took up in her novel was to witness the epidemic, along with its backdrop of homelessness rooted in gentrification. She wanted to show the direct link between personal homophobia and societal neglect. As she diagnoses, *RENT* states exactly the opposite; it obscures the dynamic between the two, acting as Dalmane to its audiences so as to prevent them from realizing that the AIDS epidemic was not handled by the institutions of biopower the way it should have been.

Meaningful Kinship

As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the most prevalent features of the culture industry of AIDS is representing the unique character of the crisis through the lens of narratives and tropes that were already familiar to its audiences, an approach which favors identity thinking. These narratives include a straight male hero, sex as sin and the family unit as a solid foundation in every individual's life. These tropes are taken to be universal and applicable in every situation,

including the specific historical situation of the AIDS epidemic. Since the reality of the epidemic saw very few straight male heroes, and perception of both sexuality and family among queer people thoroughly differed from those prevailing within the dominant culture, these narratives had little to do with actual lived experiences of People With AIDS. On the obverse, the grassroots communities emerging to help PWAs were largely invisible to the dominant culture; they were rarely represented at all within the culture industry of AIDS, and even more rarely were they shown as the principal caretaking and sustaining institution in lives of PWAs they were in reality.

Arguably, *RENT* could be appreciated for the representation of a dissident community, made up of a very diverse set of individuals. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the community Larson conjures fails to give voice to subject positions of its non-heteronormative and non-white characters. Thus, the diverse community is only fantasized about, and done so from the dominant culture perspective. It sees the people supposedly representing different identities come together seamlessly through sharing the dominant culture perspective. They are, in fact, the hollow visages of the excluded individuals, as seen by the dominant culture deaf to their specific positions and concerns. Thus, *RENT* falls in line with other works of the culture industry of AIDS, which tend to either not represent queer communities at all, show them as partially to blame for the crisis, or, at best, as a catalyst for the hero (typically straight) to change and to overcome their anxieties about the disease.

The representation of a dissident community is profoundly different in Schulman's works. She consistently represents queer communities as a multi-faceted, positive presence in her character's lives. This does not mean the characters in her novels are pedagogically written as exemplary good gay people who would help anyone; they are represented as people with their own limits, insecurities and biases. However, the community they all contribute to can be depended upon actually improving their lives, whether through mutual help, caretaking, or

activist action that might change the situation of People With AIDS. *People in Trouble* is a good example of this difference, as it shows gay people, both men and women, form and grow from meaningful bonds in a larger nexus of relationships within the queer New York community.

Despite the unstable nature of her commitment to countercultural values, Kate's development indicates most clearly the impact queer kinship might have on broadening horizons and changing perspectives. This is because she has only just now entered queer communities, thus exemplifying a change such exposure grants. For that reason, Kate spends much of the novel somewhat bewildered. For instance, she is repeatedly astonished by the signs of solidarity among queer people. At one point, when she enters a gay porn store, she is surprised to see that a man with visible signs of AIDS on his body works there:

The first thing that she noticed about the guy behind the counter was that he had Kaposi's lesions on his face. She knew that's what they were from pictures she had seen and some sideways glances at deteriorating men on the street, but never on the face of someone she had to interact with in an equal way. How great, she thought. *How great of this place to let him keep working like that.* Then she remembered that this was a gay place, so that particular brand of compassion could probably be expected. (101-02)

This fragment not only attests to the commendable practice of allowing PWAs to work for as long as they can. Kate's surprise, and her identification of the practice with the gay provenance of the store, make readable the obverse: the struggle PWAs need to face at work in heteronormative places. Queer environment is in this context more humane, because the sick are still treated there as fully human. It should be also noted that, despite her liberal views, Kate is somewhat startled by interacting with PWA face to face. This points to a highly mediated way in which the majority of Americans became aware of AIDS and developed their understanding of the disease. Kate was fed with media articles and art projects, but actual

interaction with a sick person came only upon engaging with queer communities. It was not until she entered them that People With AIDS became *real* for her.

Just like Kate didn't expect People With AIDS to become real for her, she didn't expect her romance with Molly to become important. In fact, this is why both she and Peter allowed the relationship to develop: "Funny at first, the fact that it was a woman threw them both off guard. She didn't panic and neither did he, because they didn't expect that to mean anything. It just snuck up on both of them. If it had been a man it never would have gotten this far" (82-83). The assumption that a homosexual relationship would be a meaningless fling was obvious to the heterosexual couple; since, being "bohemians," they were not guarding their limits of sexuality as fiercely as a more conservative heteronormative couple would, there was little cause for concern for both of them. That belief falters, however, when Kate begins to change and it turns out that her lesbian romance actually may have some impact on her. As a result, she meets new people and develops a sense of herself separate from Peter. This is visible in the new direction of her art, in her participation in activism, and in her new ability to relate to gay people around her. For instance, when she travels on the bus, she strikes up a conversation with a gay man next to her who is reading *New York Native*, a local gay magazine. They share a moment of surprisingly pleasant, genuine connection that lasts until she disidentifies by asserting that she is not gay. Afterwards, she notes with some surprise that "*it was our gayness that connected us*" (193), a bit alarmed that this could be a ground for such connection. Kate's assumptions and revelations attest to two facts: first, that for the heteronormative world the relationships formed outside of the heteromatrix are insignificant, lesser than the ones formed within it, and thus they can be safely ignored, and second, that those non-normative bonds have, in fact, impact and meaning which should not be underestimated.

What is a startling discovery for Kate, Schulman presents as a day-to-day reality for the people who actually form queer communities. This is palpable in various ways in which queer

relationships are represented in the novel. These include: the manner that gay people perceive their own relationships, representation of non-normative families, bearing witness to actual experiences of PWAs, and representing the language and signs which might be obscure for the outsiders, but are easily readable for queer people.

Kate might have felt surprised about the fact she actually became invested in the relationship with Molly, seeing same-sex relationships as less meaningful than the heterosexual ones, but the lesbian characters in the novel most certainly do not share her assumptions. Schulman depicts gay and lesbian relationships as sources of love, help and sustenance, and as completely equal in those respects to how heteronormative narratives represent straight couples. Towards the end of the novel, Molly begins to go out with Sam, another lesbian and someone who can actually focus on their relationship (unlike Kate, who always thought first about protecting Peter's feelings). As a result, Molly can finally calm down in the presence of her lover: "[Sam's] voice gave Molly permission to relax into her and let Sam's warmth penetrate her deeply. *It feels good to be safe*, she thought. *I feel so happy to be safe. When I'm intimate with another person I always learn something. If it's with someone I can grow to love, the things I learn are so beautiful they lift me*" (230). Later, when they are at a Justice action, Molly is glad to have Sam by her side, a thing that she could not depend on with Kate. Her new relationship gives her a sense of joyful security. This representation differs vastly from the depictions offered by the culture industry of AIDS that either fails to notice gay relationships at all or treats them as means of transmission and weak reflections of heterosexual relationships.

In the novel, gay relationships are meaningful enough to form bases of families and be a good influence on the children. Robert, a young co-worker of Peter's, is a child of a gay parent. This type of patchwork family is yet another expression of queer kinship, somewhat reminiscent of chosen families, since in the 1980s there were no institutions—cultural or legal—that would recognize gay relationships, so their perception and acknowledgment was

purely a matter of volition. Significantly, embracing such family destabilizes the assumption that kinship is a strictly heterosexual formation. The first time Peter mentions AIDS at work, Robert says in response that he is comfortable with PWAs since Curtis, his father's boyfriend, is one. After Curtis dies, the young man mourns him in the following way: "Curtis really was my friend. He wasn't a parent and he wasn't just Dad's boyfriend. He was *my* friend because he was for me. We didn't agree all the time but he wanted me to make the right decisions. But when I made the wrong ones he still cared about me" (158). Robert identifies the cultural void in which their relationship existed, as he uses a broad term "friend" to describe it, but while he tries to specify it in terms of kinship, he can only do so by saying what it was *not* (not a parent, not just Dad's boyfriend). Nevertheless, the actual features of the relationship he describes are those laudable both in a friend, a parent, and any other family member. Care, kindness and acceptance are presented as signs of love independent of the blood relationship.

The status and image of People With AIDS within queer communities is also vastly different than in the works of the culture industry. On the one hand, they are not victims, but active members of the community. They work, like the man Kate encounters as a clerk in a porn store; they take part in direct actions in order to fight for the betterment of their situation. On the other hand, their needs are actually represented in the novel and addressed by the community. For instance, at one point Molly thinks about the impact of the disease while she takes part in a service that commemorates people who died of AIDS by releasing helium-filled balloons with their names:

For Molly, it had made all her relations with men more deliberate and detailed. First, the men changed. They were more vulnerable and open and needed to talk. So she changed. Passing acquaintances became friends. And when her friends actually did get sick there was a lot of shopping to do, picking up laundry and looking into each other's eyes. She had never held so many crying men before in her life.

Molly had recently spent three months cooking dinner for a man who was so disoriented he couldn't decide how to cut the spinach. His name was on one of her balloons. There were drugs that he wanted to try but the Food and Drug Administration wouldn't approve them. (52)

The service Molly engages in is reminiscent of the "buddy system" set up by Gay Men's Health Crisis, which assigned a healthy person to a PWA in need so that the healthy person would attend to daily needs of the sick one. This was unpaid volunteer work that queer people took upon themselves because the alternative was to leave people to die in terrible conditions, since state health services failed to even acknowledge the need for such effort. Significantly, this reminiscing does not sugarcoat the relationships; there is a readable tension between lesbians and gay men, which predates AIDS and which Schulman sees as rooted in gay men's sexism. Thus, at the same time the author escapes identity thinking by representing queer communities as varied and non-monolithic, full of people who have different perspectives and sometimes exclude inasmuch as they are excluded. However, she also shows that when the crucial need arose due to AIDS crisis, those communities were ready to react in accordance with their moral standards. This is in stark contrast to the vast negligence on the part of the government, as well as families who, in the dominant culture, are typically seen as the groups obliged to take care of the sick.

It is worth noting that Molly's motivation to take care of the gay men also has to do with identification. When she talks to Pearl, her ex-girlfriend, before going to yet another AIDS funeral, they both acknowledge how lucky lesbians were that they did not spread HIV that easily:

'Molly, do you realize how easily that could have been me?' Pearl said first thing after getting off the Greyhound bus.

‘I know, I thought of that too. If women could pass it on as easily as men it would be us and our lovers that the world was mourning or ignoring. Instead it’s just our closest friends.’ (90)

Unlike the heteronormative world, they do not look for a moralistic explanation of the disease which would prove that their superiority is the force protecting them from AIDS. Instead, they see it as a stroke of luck. Perhaps it is their underprivileged position that allows them to engage meaningfully with PWAs.

This theme, as well as the plot of Molly and Kate’s participation in Justice is a testimony to the influential role lesbians played in AIDS activism at large, and ACT UP New York specifically. Ann Cvetkovich’s early ACT UP oral history effort focusing on women shows that many of them were thrilled by the open culture of the organization that, regardless of their HIV-negative status or predominantly male composition of the group, allowed them to feel at home. For instance, an activist Amy Bauer states: “It was a very queer place. It was really queer, you know, to the core, and that was very appealing. I sort of instantaneously liked a lot of people in it, or felt at home in it” (qtd. in Cvetkovich 384). Her sentiments are echoed in quotations from interviews with Ann Northrop and Heidi Dorow. Schulman herself has expressed similar experience, both in her non-fiction work as well as novels, and she has acknowledged that gay men during the epidemic became more willing to listen to women.

The open culture of ACT UP helped lesbians identify with PWAs and thus react empathetically to their needs. This impulse was further propelled by friendships between gay men and lesbians, which lead some of them to engage in the political fight:

A large number of women mention coming to ACT UP out of the immediacy or emotional need. Their anecdotes tell a collective story about the importance of friendships between lesbians and gay men, and between artists, both of which occur within public cultures that frequently overlap in New York. David Wojnarowicz had

been telling Zoe Leonard how exciting ACT UP was, and she came with him to a meeting on the same day that he told her he was HIV+ . . . Not to be underestimated, then, is the concrete power of a specific individual relationship to serve as an entrée into ACT UP. (Cvetkovich 387)

This impulse, too, is represented in the novel. While Molly is recruited to Justice by an unknown man, she has been primed to become an AIDS activist by having lost several friends. As she discusses her decision to join the organization, she states: “All I know is that [the Justice recruiter] is the only person in the world who has come to me with something substantial to do in the face of all these funerals. I’m tired of feeling helpless in hospital rooms” (Schulman, *People in Trouble* 112). This impulse towards action is what Douglas Crimp considered a queer mode of mourning. According to Freud, regular mourning has to do with the ego’s move inwards. In that state, the mourner continually reexamines all their memories of the lost love object, releasing the libidinal energy bound up in the attachment up to the point when reality is bearable again, which allows the ego to return to normalcy. As Crimp argues, for gay people the process is disturbed, because they were never granted “normalcy” in the first place. It is on this ground that his argument that militancy is coextensive with grief, and necessary to process queer grief, rises. This is exactly the position Molly finds herself in; not only is she drained from multiple deaths of her friends, but she has no “normal” to return to, especially not in the middle of the epidemic. Her personal grief can thus be processed only through communal rites of mourning and her activist work.

Through representation of different reasons for which lesbians became AIDS activists, the narrative not only bears witness to their significant role in the movement, but also destabilizes the borders between those who were seropositive and those who were not. Since most lesbians who engaged in AIDS activism were HIV-negative, and in many cases they were at lower risk of getting infected than both gay men and straight people, their story is in direct

contrast with comfortable inaction fostered by the culture industry in the majority of HIV-negative Americans. The meaningful bonds they had developed within queer communities propelled them to address the epidemic at the time the dominant culture was calming HIV-negative people down with narratives casting blame on PWAs and representing social divisions delimiting “risk groups” as impermeable borders. In doing so, lesbian AIDS activists demonstrated impressive ethical responsibility which was not only greatly useful for the movement, but also proved that HIV-negative people could (and should) have reacted meaningfully to the epidemic.

Another issue where Schulman’s representation of People With AIDS differs from the culture industry is her bearing witness to the experience of illness. The dominant culture tended to show gay men with Kaposi’s Sarcoma lesions, which were selected by the media as ominous yet palatable stigmata. These are present in *People in Trouble*, too (Kate recognizes them on the PWA in the porn store), but among them there is also a whole set of other symptoms which disrupt the daily lives of People With AIDS, and which show the necessity of immediate action and help. For instance, the man Molly takes care of is disoriented due to dementia, which becomes so severe that he begins to hallucinate and cannot recognize the people closest to him.

The novel also subverts the assumption expressed by Peter, that only rich gay men suffer from AIDS; Justice is made up of characters of different classes, men and women, black, white and Latino. This may sound similar to *RENT*, but, unlike Larson’s musical, the issues of access and privilege are represented and dramatized on several occasions, e.g. when women are not allowed into drug trials or when people without green cards cannot get healthcare.

Schulman’s work, moreover, attests to the experience of timelessness that breaks the universal narrative of illness. As Monica B. Pearl wrote in her book on AIDS literature: “Illness disrupts life and makes time go out of synch. AIDS, which strikes in episodes, is particularly disruptive of the conventional conception of the progression of illness unto death; AIDS

disrupts the normal progression of time but also what is conceived as normal illness time” (75). While all illnesses tend to bring a narrative of life to a halt, AIDS does so in an unpredictable way, through interchangeable episodes of improvement and attrition. This experience, too, is reflected in Schulman’s novel when Molly reminisces about the man she looked after: “He went to the hospital and then he went home. Then he went to the hospital. Then he went home. Then he went to the hospital. Then he died in the hospital” (*People in Trouble* 52). Unlike *RENT*, which shows its PWA characters as functionally healthy all the time until they get gravely sick, *People in Trouble* represents the disease as one that takes much of strength and resources of both PWAs and their support networks due to varying symptoms and the unpredictability of the disease itself. In this way, Schulman shows PWAs as functioning individuals who face mounting problems and who require help and attention as soon as possible, thus underlining the urgency of the crisis.

One more crucial detail in Schulman’s representation of queer communities is her chronicling of emergent signs and customs connected with the real experiences of PWAs amid the early stage of the epidemic. As discussed above, Schulman recognized that there was no readily available vocabulary of AIDS-related tropes and images that would mediate meanings in the novel. In order to deal with that, she drew upon her own experiences: “I made a list of hundreds of details of the AIDS crisis that I observed from my lived experience. Then I selected fifty and used them throughout the novel, hoping that some would resonate broadly and be part of the beginning of a literary AIDS vocabulary” (*Stagestruck* 23). These were signifiers that were easily readable to PWAs and those who actually knew them, i.e. to the group that was fully aware of the urgency of the epidemic. At the same time, these signs were completely obscure to those who had not yet come to this realization, and on various occasions the novel explained their meaning.

One such detail has to do with alarm clocks. Whenever Kate is at a Justice meeting, she hears alarms going off all the time. Eventually, she asks Molly if everyone is “schedule-crazy” (188), and she learns that these alarms are set up to remind people to take their AZT every four hours. This is a kind of sharp detail that is very difficult to imagine unless it is observed through actual interaction with PWAs. As Schulman notes in *Stagestruck*, it is also a detail that made it to *RENT*, which is the final proof that Larson did indeed borrow from her book: the alarms were ubiquitous in the late 1980s, when Schulman was writing her novel, but they disappeared by the early 1990s, when Larson was working on his musical, because AZT doses had been cut so PWAs needed to take it only twice a day.

Another signifier of this kind is a custom and a rite of passage. After Molly takes Sam to a Justice meeting, they end up talking with a friend of Molly’s who thinks it likely that he is positive but, since there is no actual treatment at the time and there are grounded fears of possible repressions against PWAs, he is unsure whether to get tested. At one point, this friend offers Molly juice he’d been drinking out of a carton. She takes a sip and when the man leaves, she explains to Sam that this was a test. While there has never been any evidence to support the idea HIV might be transmitted through saliva, the fears one might get infected this way were rampant, making a lot of people panic when interacting with PWAs. This, of course, made life very difficult for those living with the disease. Refusal to succumb to the media fearmongering was one of the basic things allies of PWAs could do to improve the lives of the sick; hypocrisy, however, ran rampant and many people might claim they do not believe these myths, but still feel uneasy about sharing a drink with a Person With AIDS. Doing so, then, turned from a basic friendly activity into a gesture of defiance and acceptance.

These signs are clear for PWAs and their friends, but unreadable for the rest of society. This dichotomy is especially manifest when Peter sees Justice activists wearing T-shirts with a pink triangle, a symbol once used by the Nazi Germany to brand homosexuals in death camps,

and then reappropriated by gay activists. The symbol was often used in AIDS activism, most famously along with the slogan SILENCE = DEATH. To the knowing observer, it testifies to how the medical category of a homosexual constructed in the 19th century was then utilized by the Nazis amid the nightmare of WW2 to systematically oppress and kill sexual minorities. It bears witness to the fact that gay people have a history and a martyrology of their own, and it draws a powerful parallel between death as administered through the camp and death as administered through inaction in the hospital. Since Peter is thoroughly isolated from any such uncomfortable context, he fails to recognize the sign or, at first, identify the men wearing it as activists; instead, “he wondered if that was just another rock band” (30).

Appropriation of the pink triangle symbol was both a gesture of defiance and of remembrance. Writing, preserving and making visible gay history is always a subversive task; part of the reason why gay people can be conceived as insubstantial is because they are often cast as an isolated phenomenon, sometimes even as at odds with the whole Western civilization. John D’Emilio, one of the precursors of studying gay history wrote: “A generation ago, the dominant idea about GLBT people was that we didn’t really exist. Oh, yes, there were some individual freaks and sexual perverts. But a people? A community?” (123). From this discursive void a field of historical inquiry emerged: “[Studying gay history] started on the ground, in the decade after Stonewall, in the new queer communities that were taking shape around the country. History was being found and made by men and women who believed that a people without a history was a people impoverished, a people made powerless” (124). Preserving gay history enables to articulate non-normative subject positions as not merely temporally unique abnormalities, but points in a sequence of resistance as old as the civilization itself, a fact that can be used to subvert the dominant narratives which imagine heteronormativity as timeless. Allan Bérubé, another pioneer scholar in this field, emotively discussed the importance of such dissenting history both for individuals and communities:

I've begun to realize that my desire for history comes from a painful, dislocated place inside me. It's there that I feel seduced by the power of events I haven't lived through that promise me the kind of unifying experience I've longed for all my life. My historical research is itself a journey from that place into the past, a passionate search for stories of social struggles that, in the retelling, might give me the chance to recover a wholeness and sense of belonging I believe I once had but lost . . . By searching for a past when people pulled together to fight such threats [as AIDS epidemic, gentrification and other issues] despite their differences, then pulling that experience back with me into the present, I think I've been trying to rebuild a sense of myself that's not isolated, that's instead connected to a multi faceted, cross-generational "we" made so strong it can't be destroyed by the destructive forces that have torn my own life apart. (275-276)

The ability to encounter dissenting communities in the past gives Bérubé "a wholeness and sense of belonging," because the work and the positions enabled by the modern gay subjectivity are then shown to not be isolated in history. Conversely, this experience of wholeness, and the very memory of such dissenting communities point also to their persistence. Thus, doing such history used to be a highly political endeavor suppressed by the dominant culture. While under neoliberalism the paradigms have shifted and the academia often greets gay history, the memory of AIDS epidemic is being largely sanitized by the culture industry. Bearing witness to struggles, codes and issues of AIDS activism subverts the effort to rewrite gay history according to the precepts of dominant culture.

The dynamics between the experience of history, understood also as rites and customs, and the communal dissent against heteronormativity come into a sharp focus when queer people need to deal with death. Because of strategic silences deployed in public discourse against the homosexual desire, during the initial stage of the AIDS epidemic there were few rites and modes of commemoration through which queer people could articulate their grief. Normally, families

and religions are in charge of death; these are the institutions responsible for funerals, the blood family is assumed to grieve the most, and the rites are focused on letting them process this grief. For gay people, however, relationships with families and religions were often strained or even non-existent; the people closest to them, in turn, were often not recognized by the larger culture as anyone of significance. As funerals upstaged parties as gay social gatherings, the queer people were faced with the issue of mourning, and they challenged the traditional rites and modes of remembrance as inadequate; since the people being buried did not agree to heteronormative supremacy in life, their queer kin objected to flaunting it in death by the straight family or the local church. This, of course, caused tension between queer community around the deceased and their biological families.

As established in Chapter 2, the very idea there might be any conflict would be absurd from the perspective of the culture industry. According to the mainstream narrative, the biological family is the institution that looks after the PWAs (who, in its language, would be “AIDS victims”), and grief is their prerogative, while queer bonds are invisible and nonexistent, aside for perhaps gay monogamous couple. Thus, the very representation of this tension, along with the mourning rites invented by queer people is already subversive to this order.²² One of the funerals in *People in Trouble* sees a blood family and queer friends together at a service, mourning a young gay journalist. The friends reminisce upon the details of his life in a context that differs greatly from a regular funeral:

Jeffrey had planned his own funeral and so it started with Nina Simone wanting to know what being free would feel like. The whole service was just like Jeff, sentimental, deliberate and goofy. There was a rainbow gay liberation flag draped over his coffin and fresh strawberries and figs for everyone to eat. There were silly pictures of him

²² Which is why the scene in *RENT* that commemorates friends and relatives of the cast and crew who died of AIDS is the most striking and genuine moment in the musical. Here, the very fact of grieving differently than usual, and the non-normative kind of community brought together through this grief makes for a powerful scene.

pasted up on the walls so people could walk around remembering this or that. Then different friends spoke about little things; his recipe for strudel, the time he dyed his hair blue, how badly he played the clarinet. They read aloud some of his early newspaper articles against the closing of the baths . . . There were many different feelings in the chapel listening to those words. They talked about the time he'd taken in a man who had no money and helped him to die, the time, the time. Jeffrey's was one short life filled with kindness and mistakes . . . Then the tape played Billie Holiday singing 'These Foolish Things,' Molly thought, *they remind me of you, Jeff.* (111)

Jeffrey's service is filled with minute details from his life and experiences he shared with other queer people. It moves his friends to a whole spectrum of emotional reactions, ranging from tears to laughter. His family, however, does not really participate in this ritual of remembrance. Instead, they follow the universal, religious script of grieving: "Then the family moved to the front and brought in a rabbi who got to stand up at the end and say, '*Yiskadol veh yiskadosh shemay rabah,*' which seemed to be the only part of the whole event that they could understand. That was when they cried" (111). As Schulman drily observes, it is easier for the blood family to understand a prayer in Yiddish than the actual life events from Jeffrey's life described in English. The latter is something they would preferably forget and render invisible in the "ritual of misremembrance" gay lives were subjected to by their relatives. Thus, not only does *People in Trouble* represent queer grief that does not fit the cultural conventions of mourning; Schulman's gesture is even more powerful as it shows queer people to know Jeffrey far better than his own family does, because they shared life—and death—on a daily basis.

Just like the culture industry of AIDS fails to acknowledge the queer, uninstitutionalized grief, it obviously does not represent the inner workings and mechanisms of the heteromatrix, which operated to ensure this grief was not given cultural space. To this, too, Schulman bears witness where the mainstream does not. The novel attests to how social hierarchy is replicated

in the ways in which grief is allowed to be articulated in public. When Scott, a member of Justice and a gay man living with his partner, dies, Kate reads the obituaries in the *New York Times*:

The *New York Times* obituary said that Scott was ‘survived’ by two daughters, a wife, mother, father and sister in Kansas City. Then Kate found a privately placed notice at the bottom of the obituary page.

Scott Yarrow died in the arms of his lover, James Carroll, with whom he shared a vision of freedom for lesbians and gay men. (258)

The language itself shows a certain hierarchy in between the two acts of remembrance. The former is “**the** *New York Times* obituary,” presumably of a somewhat official nature. Visibly, this one favors the heteronormative relationships within the blood family, who are considered the actual kin. The very presence of the other obituary, “privately placed” by James, points to several issues. First, there is a striking contrast between the mainstream narrative and the actual experience, the former being seen as more appropriate in the context of grief. Second, it shows the cruelty of heteromatrix which forces a despondent man who has just lost his lover to have to fight for being heard. Third, however, it points to the possibility of voicing queer grief. Schulman shows through this fragment that while queer people will not be helped by the normative institutions and they will be treated as less than human, they can and need to fight to destabilize the false, normative narrative of AIDS. Towards the end of the book Molly decides to “remember the truth and not just the stories” (267), which testifies to Schulman’s prescient anticipation of the distorted cultural memory of the epidemic. The dissenting response that queer people can have to this violence on their shared memory is simply bearing witness, not allowing the normative narrative to wholly drown out the actual memory.

Mourning was, thus, an exceptional struggle for queer people; not only did they have to face the hopelessness and sudden disappearance of what felt like a whole generation of gay

men, but also the ongoing attempt to take over their stories and adjust them to the dominant values. This was unacceptable, because the AIDS deaths were not anonymous to them as they were to the majority of Americans; these were their friends dying one by one, often after a whole life of escaping normativity. This constant struggle was extremely draining emotionally. This is another way in which *People in Trouble* differs from the culture industry of AIDS. The latter tends to use the disease for personal drama, attempting to evoke sympathy through victimizing the PWA; thus, death is a climactic moment aimed at transforming its audience, while the tragedy is more or less individual and isolated. Schulman's novel, on the other hand, shows the communal experience of death and mourning as so omnipresent that it struggles to remain meaningful. Rather than flaunting the tragedy, the novel attempts to come to terms with it from the perspective of someone who is completely aware of its size, and needs to live on in an America which not only allows that such a crisis happens, but also barely notices it.

For instance, when Molly reflects on the epidemic during a memorial service where people march with balloons bearing the names of their dead PWA friends, she feels that the sheer number of deaths changed the way they are seen: "To a certain extent she had gotten used to hearing about people dying. She hadn't gotten used to seeing it, but now when someone said, 'I couldn't call you back because a friend of mine died,' it was said calmly" (51). Unlike normative narratives with the structure of a problem play that tend to show individual tragedies, this dry observation points to the scope of the disaster that is bigger than any single death. Queer people in big cities like New York or San Francisco, many of them in their 20s and 30s, people for whom death would be still a rare occurrence in their life under normal circumstances, suddenly saw majority of their generation wiped out. For them, deaths were too omnipresent for each one to remain dramatic. In the time of crisis, the mainstream, sentimental approach to death was simply unsustainable, which felt like a tragedy of its own.

This does not mean, however, that queer people grew indifferent to the deaths happening among them. There are two emotional responses that Schulman represents as working interchangeably: numbness and anger, both growing at the same time. On the one hand, friends of PWAs learned to perceive death as respite: “When a friend finally dies of AIDS there usually is not much surprise and often some kind of relief for everyone involved because the man they loved was suffering too much. Also, the people around him needed to go on” (108). What might seem inhumane—to await one’s friend’s death—becomes both mercy, a *coup de grace*, and a way of preserving energy, sometimes because there are so many other friends suffering who need to be attended to. The very injustice of the situation is what sparks anger which at times also erupts among the characters:

Another friend of Molly’s died.

‘That’s the problem with having friends,’ she said. ‘You have to watch them suffer and die.’

Jeffrey Rechtschaffen 1960-1988. She was in a great rage. She was so angry, clicking her jaw, uttering a variety of obscenities. She spoke them with such a fury that a crease appeared between her eyes in the morning and by that afternoon it was deeply embedded. She didn’t know what day it was. She didn’t look both ways crossing the street. She didn’t think to button her jacket against the December wind. All she knew was anger. She alternately burned and tightened on the way to the bus station to pick up Pearl, who had come down for the funeral. Thank God for Pearl. Pearl let her know she belonged to someone. (85)

Molly may have become more used to people dying around her, but she is livid with the world for allowing it to happen. This anger is part of the emotional toll the epidemic takes on her. It is worth noting that it is her friendship with her ex-girlfriend Pearl that comforts her, showing the importance of queer kinship in facing the epidemic. Pearl is a friend who understands her,

and who is similarly angry. Importantly, this anger is not merely a negative emotion. It is productive, because it is a basis for militancy, which Douglas Crimp describes as an equal mode of grieving for queer subjects. It propels her into action. Thus, from the experience of death and grief shared through queer kinship emerges that most striking tool of dissent against the unjust state: activism.

Acting up for Justice

In 2012, a documentary movie about ACT UP co-directed by Schulman was released. It is called *United in Anger*. As she repeatedly states in the book that tracks the history of ACT UP *Let The Record Show*, anger was the driving force for the movement. This was not, however, a blind fury. Rather, it was anger caused by very specific injustices that motivated the people who suffered (and the people who empathized with those suffering) into action that had a clear goal of improving lives of People With AIDS by changing the social reality in which these injustices were acceptable. Unlike acceptance preached by *RENT*, which could only ensure that lethal status quo would go on, Schulman ennobles the anger as a tool for achieving actual change.

This approach is visible in her representation of activism. It is not treated simply as an identity or merely a hobby (unless by Peter, as this view fits his neoliberal reservations against making a change). Instead, as Molly and Kate attend Justice meetings, they are suddenly faced with a whole web of issues that need to be taken care of and which may have a profound effect on the situation of PWAs. The very fact these issues are specifically named, and that they are verbalized within a militant context of an activist organisation, goes against the grain of how the AIDS epidemic was represented by the dominant culture. Within the culture industry, the drama of an AIDS story obscures the memory of systematic violence, attempting to represent the tragedy either as hopelessly unavoidable, or highly dependent on various variables, including those for which PWAs can be blamed (e.g. many sexual partners or drug abuse).

People in Trouble, on the other hand, represents the larger systematic ways in which the state and the biomedical industry abused the rights of PWAs. In doing so, it both raises awareness and bears witness to the issues with institutions that did not act appropriately in response to the AIDS epidemic, and the underlying, wholly uncivilized, set of assumptions regarding who needs to be helped by the healthcare system and who needs not.

To exemplify, on the first meeting Kate and Molly attend, the activists discuss in a quick succession: community publications on AIDS health; long FDA drug approval process; exclusion from healthcare of PWAs without green cards; and needle exchange at prisons. Each of these points on the agenda is described within one or two paragraphs, just enough to make it somewhat understandable. However, each of them points to a deeper issue related to state neglect in responding to the epidemic. For instance, community publications with medical facts and advice on AIDS often struggled to receive funding. At that time, if there was some government messaging at all, it was the unproductive sex-negative preaching. Because activists knew that insofar as sexual transmission of HIV was concerned, their main target were sexually active gay men, they did not care to make their publications palatable to the normative audiences; they cared about the efficacy of the messaging. This raised continuous opposition from the Republican party and from various religious communities such as Orthodox Jews or Catholic Church. Infamously, when senator Jesse Helms got hold of a comic strip presenting gay sex where men were using a condom, he was so outraged that he took it up with President Reagan, and ended up amending the AIDS education bill so that gay organizations, which had the most experience and were the most effective in reaching the people who needed education, had trouble benefitting from the funding. There is a similar history of struggle and exclusion to each of the issues raised at that Justice meeting, grounding the novel in the political and social reality of the epidemic.

Significantly, each issue is not only voiced, but also appended with a specific action to improve the situation. The lack of competent government education is countered with community publications prepared by activists who use company xerox machines at their offices to make as many copies as they can get away with. The issue of prisoners getting infected while sharing needles can be solved by providing fresh needles for them, typically without the consent of the overseers, by means of smuggling them. Drugs stuck in the FDA approval process can be made at home, and the recipes are handed out at the meeting. People without green cards receive fake passports and IDs so that they can survive. Each problem has a solution, although many of them are illegal. However, this illegality is not damnable of itself; on the contrary, the activist power to defy the letter of the law when that law is inhumane is a sentiment that is deeply ingrained in American culture. These actions can be seen as rooted in Thoreauvian notion of civil disobedience. As Thoreau states, “if [the law] is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine” (199). The state of radical injustice that was the epidemic of AIDS encouraged the activists, much like radical abolitionists of the 19th century, to believe that in a country which treats its citizens inhumanely, breaking the letter of the law is an ethical necessity.

The only excuse for breaking the rules in the culture industry of AIDS tends to be love; in Schulman’s novel, however, it is empathy and ethical responsibility for one’s community. Chapter 2 already discussed how many narratives, including Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*, absolve acting against the law in the name of romantic love. Clearly, activism as represented by Schulman also operates on some assumption of antinomian power. It is worthwhile to consider the ideologically different roots of the two phenomena that grant this right to act against the law.

Romantic love, as already established, has a long history of revolt against the law in the name of passion. This antinomian power of romantic love, however, reinforces, rather than subverts, the current order of power. In the modern age, a fulfilling marriage with the person one loves is conceptualized as happiness, which all citizens are entitled to pursue. This marriage, by the power of a hegemonic concept that Lee Edelman calls reproductive futurism, is given meaning through the possibility of raising a child: “the child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and been enshrined as the figure for whom that order must be held in perpetual trust” (290). David Eng corroborates this in his analysis of transnational adoptions, stating that citizenship is fully acceded only when the family includes children:

for white middle-class subjects in the era of late capitalism, the position of parent has become increasingly a measure of value, self-worth, and “completion.” Indeed, I would suggest that the possession of a child, whether biological or adopted, has today become a sign of guarantee not only for family but also for full and robust citizenship—for being a fully realized political, economic, and social subject in American life. (306)

While this trajectory is unsurprising as regards the relationships understood to be legitimate, the antinomian power of love manifests most clearly in the disruptions of that legitimacy—in the misalliances, interracial and gay relationships etc. It is in them where it can be clearly seen that the relationships that were once thought unacceptable or even taboo, become increasingly welcome because they are conceptualized as grounded in love and, perhaps, capable of creating an environment appropriate for raising children.

However, these disruptions, as they enable new discourses, produce democratization of reproductive goals: “countless public pronouncements in the United States make a similar argument. Love makes a family. And laws that stifle the natural connection between love and family by restricting reproductive technologies (with adoption as a legal reproductive technology) are therefore perverse and antidemocratic” (Povinelli 363). Significantly, these

more democratically acceded families become entangled in a powerful consumerist narrative: “capitalism colonizes idealized notions of family and familial sentiment to sell its products and services to newly emergent transnational families” (Eng 306). The process, in Eng’s argument related to transnational adoption, could be extrapolated to other newly imagined families, such as gay ones.²³ Ultimately, thus, the antinomian power of romantic love is coherent with neoliberalism (understood as the ideology covering the vast majority of the American political mainstream) and it subverts merely its conservative exclusionary practices, which, in the long run, are incompatible with capitalism. Thus, rebellion in the name of love becomes a powerful tool that reinforces the link between citizenship and consumerism, and thus allows the neoliberal ideology to encompass and market goods to an ever larger part of the social body.

The antinomian force of AIDS activism, on the other hand, was rooted in a sense that the state—which was liberal, democratic, and capitalist—had failed to preserve life. This ineptitude resulted in dissent that gave rise to AIDS activism. The culture industry, in response, deployed narratives which attempted to justify state racism in the Foucauldian sense—its ability of the state to divide population into subgroups and then enact the power to preserve life selectively. This was done to account for the government’s failure to preserve life and extinguish the antinomian force directed *against* the neoliberal state. Thus, the issues taken up by Justice were often discounted on grounds of neoliberalism. While AIDS activists—both the fictional ones in Schulman’s novel, and the actual ones from ACT UP—smuggled syringes into prisons in the 1980s already, the issue of needle exchange programs still remained controversial for the mainstream at the beginning of the 21st century. Such was the state of affairs despite the ample evidence that those programs positively impacted AIDS prevention efforts, at the time when IV drugs were becoming the most prevalent mode of HIV transmission in the United

²³ In fact, Eng arrives at this idea in his analysis of a commercial featuring a lesbian couple adopting an Asian baby.

States. For instance, needle exchanges were criticized by President George W. Bush in a remarkable coalescence of reproductive futurism and discourse of vice:

Drug use in America, especially among children, increased dramatically under the Clinton-Gore Administration, and needle exchange programs signal nothing but abdication, that these dangers are here to stay. Children deserve a clear, unmixed message that there are right choices in life and wrong choices in life, that we are responsible for our actions, and that using drugs will destroy your life. (qtd. in Buchanan et al. 431)

Visibly, Bush constructed IV-drug-using PWAs as people who deliberately transgressed the rules and were justly punished for doing so.²⁴ This exemplifies how, through deploying the discourse of vice, state power tried to disarm the antinomian impulse provoked by its failure to preserve life. Bush framed the loss of life not as a failure of the government, but as a failure of the governed. Clearly, he acted against the best medical practices and recommendations, as his approach did not account for the reality of the epidemic where a lethal virus was spreading across the borders delineated by moralism. Since IV drug users, much like gay people, were identified and branded with their “vice,” the issue of needle exchange was problematic for the neoliberal discourse, and the culture industry of AIDS in the initial stage of the epidemic did not represent it, rendering these deaths unworthy of representation and preservation.

The discourse of vice is, too, inbound with the notion of “promiscuity.” Within the culture industry of AIDS, high-risk sex without protection with multiple partners was easily conflated with other non-normative practices which comprise Rubin’s outer limits of sex.²⁵ This strategy was not only intended to reinforce the “risk groups” narrative, but also to create a false

²⁴ While I selected Bush’s comment as the most striking, the criticisms of needle exchanges were by no means strictly Republican. In 1998, the Clinton administration extended the ban on federal funding of the programs which was introduced initially by George H. W. Bush.

²⁵ See Chapter 1, p. 21.

impression that only normative sex is safe sex, which is untrue on various counts: much like heterosexual sex can transmit HIV, there are diverse non-normative ways in which sex can be had that limit the risk. This is a sex-positive message that many activists wanted to give voice to, because it did not require people to *abandon* their sexual habits (which is a very difficult and rarely effective way of prevention), but, instead, merely to *adjust* what they do. *People in Trouble* represents this idea when one man during a Justice meeting reminds the members that “S and M is safe sex” (140). S&M sex does not necessarily require exchange of bodily fluids to achieve erotic pleasure, which makes it, subversively, *safer* than any sex with penetration (including one which takes place in a marital heterosexual bed) despite strong taboo that is associated with it.

The actions organized by Justice are not only associated with achieving very specific goals. Activism, as represented in the novel, is also oriented towards broader awareness-raising actions, such as protests. Sometimes they are merely about recruitment; an important element of activity, which pushes people who disagree with the injustice to do something about it. When recruited, Molly is glad to finally have something to do, and thus address her feelings of helplessness. The novel represents activism as an empowering activity, one that allows to turn a directionless anger into a productive force for change. This energy is released during protests against Horne and his plans to evict People With AIDS, as well as against the Catholic church which blocked many activist efforts to help PWAs. The latter was clearly inspired by the actual ACT UP action “Stop the Church” organized in protest against cardinal John O’Connor, which included not only a picket in front of the St. Patrick’s Cathedral, but also protests within the building during a mass. The action was very famous, and while many commentators (including some activists) looked at it unfavorably, according to Schulman’s report many ACT UP members felt it had a transformative effect on New York politics. For instance, Victor Mendolia noted that a few weeks after the action an NBC reporter challenged Cardinal O’Connor for

opening AIDS hospices but opposing safer sex education: “And that question would never have been asked [before]—in New York, the press did not ask questions of the cardinal. They only took what he said, and reported it, and they never questioned him... He had always been completely unchallenged. And it was the first time, ever, that I had seen it done. And then I knew that we won” (*Let The Record Show* 169). Since the Catholic Church was instrumental in blocking sex education in New York, this was a welcome change from the point of view of AIDS prevention efforts.

Schulman’s novel also attests to many ways in which PWAs were mistreated by the medical institutions. The issue of access to drugs reappears several times. The man Molly took care of wants to take a new drug that FDA still has not approved, and he points out the lack of logic in applying the normal procedures to the extraordinary situation of a new epidemic:

‘I’m dying,’ he said before the dementia set in. ‘Let me take the goddamn drug.’

The best he could find was a placebo program where half the men got sugar pills and the other half got experimental drugs. No one knew who got what.

‘Why do they need a comparison study?’ he said to everyone. ‘They already know what happens if you don’t treat it.’

He didn’t say that to the doctors though, because he was afraid that if he made trouble they would give him sugar instead of medicine. (*People in Trouble* 52)

Drug access was another important area of AIDS activism. ACT UP authored and eventually forced the authorities to adopt “parallel track” drug tests which allowed PWAs who were too ill to participate in regular drug trials to still take the experimental drugs along with other medications and without adhering to strict (and, in their state of health, often impossible) regulations necessary in the regular trial. Due to activist intervention, then, people like Molly’s friend were eventually able to actually take untested drugs. It was simply illogical to follow the normal procedures at the time of crisis; while with most diseases patients have their choice of

available treatments, in which case taking time to fully test a drug makes sense, in the initial stage of the epidemic, when there was no treatment unless it was experimental, limiting access was inhumane.

Another issue *People in Trouble* bears witness to is exclusion of the women living with AIDS. One of the most significant achievements of ACT UP was forcing the Center for Disease Control to change the definition of the syndrome. Since AIDS is a disease that weakens the immunological system, its diagnosis and definition was based on a range of opportunistic diseases that PWA displayed. This definition was established when most of the cases doctors observed were gay men. As a result, it failed to include some illnesses that appeared only among women, while covering the infections women did not suffer from. This caused many of them to be misdiagnosed. This epistemological misjudgment had very real consequences to the lives of women with AIDS, who struggled to get treatment or insurance money for the disease they were dying from. The slogan for the issue stated that “women don’t have AIDS, they just die from it” (*Let The Record Show* 243). Undeniably, the small number of AIDS diagnoses among women reinforced the dominant culture narrative of the epidemic as defined via “risk groups” and associated with homosexuality and promiscuity. It also helped to maintain the appearance of boundaries between “risk groups” and “general population.” Significantly, the women targeted specifically as one of “risk groups” were sex workers, who, as research has shown, were at no greater risk of HIV infection unless they were also IV drug users. The dominant narrative was inclined, thus, to connect the epidemic to promiscuity, both male and female, while it obscured the actual ways women were getting infected and how they were suffering from AIDS.

One of seropositive characters Molly meets is a lesbian named Daisy. She used to take drugs, and this is how she got infected. Daisy tried to get into drug trials for Ampligen, a drug that was supposed to be as effective as AZT without the destructive side effects, but “the

hospital turned her down on a formality: she was a woman” (208). Nevertheless, she was determined enough to network with other women in that situation and eventually forced the pharmaceutical companies, which were responsible for the rule, to reveal their reasons:

‘Finally we got the official explanation. *Birth defects*. They won’t give dying women treatment because they’re afraid of being brought to court on birth defects. I mean, I understand protecting a fetus, I was raised Catholic after all, but a woman has to live too. So, I told the guy that first of all, two of us were gay and secondly the other one had no intention of getting pregnant. She has AIDS, for God’s sake . . . He says, “Who’s going to protect my company against lawsuits? That’s what I want to know.”’ (209)

It turns out that even when it comes to getting medical help for AIDS, women are victims of the heteronormative narrative according to which they all need to be mothers. It does not matter that they do not intend to have children. Here, Schulman shows how the law, which creates special protections for the mothers, ends up excluding women who do not give birth. The pharmaceutical company is not particularly interested in resolving the issue; however, it eventually relents because Daisy does not give up and keeps organizing women to demand treatment. Even then, however, the corporations are not maximizing the positive impact of the broadened access; the protocol is run in Pittsburgh, which is another problem for Daisy and the women she coordinated: “There are at least four thousand women with AIDS in this country and most of them are right here in New York City and most are too poor or too disorganized to get down to fucking Pittsburgh so there’s still a lot of work to do on this, but we’ll do it” (209-10). While the story of Daisy’s fight attests to a multitude of roadblocks women with AIDS had to overcome, her achievements and her optimism show the point and the necessity of action.

In her novel, Schulman also bears witness to economic pressures exerted over PWAs. The climactic sequence which ends with burning the eponymous art installation revolves around shameless profiteering from the epidemic. This issue takes the shape of real estate speculations

arranged by Ronald Horne, the eventually-burnt-alive villain entrepreneur. He buys out buildings, often with rent controlled apartments, where he knows People With AIDS live. Then he hands them eviction notices based on fake claims, typically stating that they keep pets in the apartment while not allowed to do so. He does so in hope that PWAs will be too weak to fight him in court and, as a result, he will clear the rent-controlled apartments from current tenants, increasing the value of the building. This project is supplemented by his political program to put PWAs in a ghetto. Significantly, while the novel represents this story first and foremost from the perspective of activists, it also shows it as reported by the liberal media:

Marauding bands of AIDS victims roamed the city today looting. Real-estate magnate Ronald Horne, announcing his decision to run for mayor, told the press that he advocated barge internment camps for all those infected with the deadly AIDS virus. Horne said he would personally finance and administer this quarantine program to show his love for the people of New York. He added that any apartments in Horne-owned buildings that might be left vacant due to internment would immediately be converted to luxury co-ops for intact nuclear families, which statistics show are the least likely to spread AIDS. (247-48)

This is an example of how Schulman's implied author provokes ironic distance towards what is normatively common-sensical: she does so by representing the discrepancy between the media narrative and the experience of PWAs. The careful wording of Horne's message, which connects his actions to the liberal values, along with a clear contrast between the images of dehumanized image of AIDS activists and the well-meaning businessman attest to the distorted way in which the media covered the AIDS crisis. Additionally, Schulman connects through this plot the brutal and exclusionary process of the gentrification New York underwent towards the end of the 20th century with the mismanagement of the AIDS epidemic. The dehumanizing aspect of that gentrification reappears throughout the novel as a background, serving as a silent

explanation of how the AIDS epidemic was allowed to happen. The crisis was caused by the fact that people, including liberals like Peter, did not care, just like they do not care about the homeless and the poor.

Molly, much like most of the members of Justice, is closer to those excluded because she, too, lives outside the norm. This is why the queer people in the novel are interested also in the systematic oppression that does not concern them directly. For instance, Molly sometimes helps her old friend, who has become a drug addict and is homeless now. While doing so, she learns that “you have to have an address to get welfare” (105), of which she later informs Pearl. By doing so, she raises her friend’s awareness regarding the ways homeless people get excluded. In the same conversation she connects this problem to the general decline of the welfare state and American society’s egoism towards the end of the 20th century. In this way, queer bonds are shown as those through which information that the media fail to broadcast gets transmitted. Queer communities in Schulman’s novel are thus a means of spreading narratives alternative to those shaped by the culture industry.

Awareness and empathy are two traits which allow Justice to welcome very different people with very different perspectives into its ranks:

Attendance at meetings had grown to well over five hundred and numbers like that meant all kinds, all kinds. There were the tough street Furies who had all been around the block a couple of times. There were distinguished homosexuals with white-boy jobs, who had forgotten that they were queer until AIDS came along and everyone reminded them . . .

There was also a contingent of old-time radicals of various stripes who had rioted in the sixties at Stonewall, in Newark, with the Young Lords, with SDS, and hadn’t done a goddamn thing since. No straight men showed up at all. (189)

Schulman bears witness here to the way many white middle-class gays were accustomed to identifying with power because they reaped the rewards of being white and male. She also points out the shortsightedness of such strategy which, when AIDS struck, proved vulnerable because they became powerless as soon as they were identified with homosexuality. Poignantly, Schulman also specifically mentions lack of straight men engaged in AIDS activism. This is in direct contrast to the narratives of the culture industry of AIDS, which often set straight men as heroes of the AIDS stories (e.g. *RENT*, *Philadelphia*, or *Dallas Buyers Club*). Such reimagining of the fight follows the familiar trope of a heterosexual male hero, while also representing queer people as powerless on their own; it is also a falsification of the group effort carried out by an organization made up mostly of other demographics.

Schulman also stresses the benefits of coming together and the efficacy of collective action. Different social groups, from Furies—biker butch lesbians—to upper-middle-class gay men, find a common ground within Justice:

At first the white collars had wanted to bring lawsuits and carry out polite picket lines, while the Furies had been willing to bash in a few heads at the expense of getting bashed themselves. But soon the two factions were able to unite in anger and a commitment to direct action when the homos found out what a lifetime of anger could create and the Furies discovered that nothing raises the level of outrage as efficiently as the level of expectation. (189)

This common ground is anger which propels these characters towards activism. While middle class gay men at first did not want the anger to take over, they learned to respect what it can achieve witnessing Furies fighting for their rights; Furies, in turn, see that the privilege of white gay men can be used to fuel their anger once their worldview turns out to be wrong and they understand they are less important to the state than they used to think. As a result, both groups have enough manpower to pull off an action in which they, as a group, illegally gather company

credit card numbers, and then use them to buy food for poor people. This action, while not specifically connected to the AIDS epidemic, serves as an expression of dissent towards societal neglect that leaves the poor and the homeless helpless in the gentrified New York. This way, Schulman represents the obverse of the link between homophobia and neglect—a non-homophobic stance that is also empathetic to the plight of the others.

Interestingly, this action is also a theme that appeared in *RENT*, where it is mentioned as an achievement of Collins, the MIT professor, who hacks the credit cards. This minute detail already shows the difference in perspective: whereas Schulman stresses the collective character of activism, Larson casts it as individual endeavor. Without collective action, activists are disempowered, because an actual political change in a democracy cannot be achieved in isolation.

People in Trouble shows how this collective spirit is rooted in meaningful kinship among queer people. James, one of the most esteemed members of Justice, addresses the organization during one meeting in a manifesto-like manner:

‘The gay community,’ James said, ‘is a unique community because our family is bonded on love. Each one of us has defined our lives by love and sexuality—the two greatest human possibilities. We have all recognized these truths in the face of great denial. And now we must use that insight to fight the hypocrisy surrounding the AIDS crisis.’ . . .

‘We want prevention, care and cure. But America will never be healthy as long as it exists in a state of advanced hypocrisy. And fate has chosen us to correct this wrong.’

(141-42)

This speech begins with a bold vision which reimagines homosexuality and queer kinship, seeing them differently than the neoliberal order does. It rejects what Michael Warner called

the politics of shame,²⁶ refusing to consider sexuality as inherently shameful, and, instead, seeing it as a noble basis for human connection. The vision also clearly points to the potential for change that queer people have when they come together. And that very pride and potential are the subversive powers that the culture industry of AIDS had to contain so as to keep the neoliberal status quo intact.

People in Trouble may be seen as a story of a clash between different perspectives, discourses and understandings of the world. Neoliberal beliefs, as represented by Peter, are brought into stark contrast with the more progressive, communal and activist perspective of Molly. Kate's journey, as she moves from the former worldview towards the latter, depicts the subversion and shattering of neoliberal assumptions, while the incompleteness of Kate's transformation dramatizes their tenacious attraction. What is readable from this multiplicity of voices is Schulman's decidedly anti-normative implied author who articulates clearly the idea of a link between homophobia and broader social inequalities. This idea is central also to the larger scope of the story, as *People in Trouble* represents the suffering of People With AIDS, the heroism and communal spirit of those affected by the disaster and those participating in AIDS activism, as well as the societal neglect which caused the epidemic to spread. It also shows queer communal experience as a decidedly positive one, and queer relationships as meaningful while oppositional to the dominant culture. As a result, the novel destabilizes the hierarchy dominant within the culture industry of AIDS, where supposedly compassionate liberals are the most admirable members of society, while gays are often constructed as victims of a disaster which they have, at least to some extent, brought on themselves.

²⁶ See Chapter 1, pp. 22-23.

Chapter 4: Witnessing Among Rats

Schulman's sixth novel, *Rat Bohemia*, also takes AIDS as its central theme. It was published in 1996, which means it was written before the introduction of combination therapy. Being a testament to over-a-decade-long fight that seemed to have no end, it was less hopeful than *People in Trouble*. It dealt with the burden of surviving multiple deaths and with AIDS burnout, the feeling of hopelessness which caused ACT UP to lose its momentum after 1992.

The novel does not tell a linear story; instead, it is made up of a rapid-fire series of miniscule vignettes, in which the emphasis is put on the experiences and impressions of the main characters, rather than on any unified plot. Thus, in order to outline the contents of the novel, I will now briefly describe its three major characters who serve as narrators: Rita, David, and Killer. All of them live in New York, all three are gay, and they are close friends to each other.

Rita works at Pest Control which struggles with increasing rat infestation in New York City. She quite often ruminates on the most effective ways of killing rats. Rita's mother, Louisa, was a German Jew who fled the country to escape being sent to a death camp. The fact that her mother was a Holocaust survivor makes Rita identify with her more, because she finds herself in the position of a survivor too, having buried many men who died of AIDS. Louisa arrived in the United States, married Rita's father, and died when her daughter was only 10, a fact which leaves Rita feeling displaced as she has not been properly guided into womanhood. Rita was abused by her father, mentally and economically; they used to argue often when she was a child, and he would regularly throw her out of the house. When he caught Rita in bed with a daughter of their neighbors, Claudia Haas, he threw her out for good. Later, she was living on the streets, but the girls' passionate romance survived until Claudia found a respectable boyfriend in

college. Rita is friends with David and Killer, the other two narrators. Towards the end of the novel, Killer's new girlfriend, Troy, suggests to Rita that she should spy on Claudia now, years later. The final chapters of the novel follow a road trip where Rita, Killer, Troy and Lourdes, Rita's lover, set off to find Claudia, but run out of money before they even leave New York.

David is an HIV-positive man who is very angry at most people he meets, especially his family. He blames them for failing to acknowledge his suffering both as he buries multiple friends, and as his own health decays. David's father clearly distances himself from his son; the mother tries to keep the appearances of empathy, but falls short of genuine affection. His siblings do not have much sympathy for their brother, either. David buried his partner, Don, who had been struggling with the illness almost since the beginning of their relationship. Currently, David is an ACT UP member, but not a very active one. He struggles with feelings of shame, because he got infected in 1984, when it was already common knowledge that the virus was circulating. He is also a published (albeit obscure) novelist, who was guided by a successful closeted lesbian writer Muriel Kay. Kay's newest book is a bestseller mentioned repeatedly throughout the novel, and finally revealed to discuss characters very much like those of *Rat Bohemia*, but heterosexual (for instance, Rita and David are married). David is angry at Muriel for being closeted in her work, and the two are not in touch anymore. He dies of AIDS in the course of the novel.

Killer is another lesbian character and Rita's close friend. She has an affair with Troy, a poet who is cheating on her longtime girlfriend. Killer's romance with Troy is based on genuine affection, which allows the former to survive the disapproval of her family a bit better. Killer does not have any kind of career, she is living in a decrepit building and earns a very modest living by watering plants. She is quite interested in killing rats as well.

Moving away from a consistent plot and focusing on introspections from first-person narrators, Schulman abandoned the realistic mode known from *People in Trouble*. The new

direction allowed her to focus on the havoc that both the AIDS epidemic and familial homophobia wrecked on the psyches of gay people.

“Familial Homophobia...”

Schulman’s work has been affected deeply not only by her homosexuality and experience of AIDS epidemic, but also by her Jewish identity, and the inherited experience of the Holocaust. As she states herself: “I knew about the Holocaust since I was born. There was never a time I didn’t know about it. I was from a generation where the kids sat there while the parents talked. So of course it’s very influential in everything I do—it’s my number one influence” (“Sarah Schulman with Jarrett Earnest”). Her identity as a Jewish lesbian informs her writing project. This position is intersectional in the sense described by Anna Carastathis, who defines the aim of the term in the following way: “to render visible phenomenological experiences of people who face multiple forms of oppression without fragmenting those experiences through categorial exclusion” (55). In this sense, the identity of a lesbian is intersectional in its simultaneity, its immediate inclusion of the experience of oppression belonging to both a woman and a gay person. This position is further nuanced by the historical persecution of Jews, another experience of oppression Schulman identifies with, if not through lived experience, then through her postmemory.

The term “postmemory,” coined by Marianne Hirsch, refers to what is “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection” (22). It is understood to be, first and foremost, the experience typical for children of crisis event survivors. In Hirsch’s words: “Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (22). The experience of a child of a camp survivor is, in fact, Hirsch’s foremost

example, as the term's usefulness is presented in the context of her analysis of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. The idea of postmemory also describes well the relationship that Rita, the protagonist of *Rat Bohemia*, has with narratives of the Holocaust. Schulman's writing links that crisis event with the AIDS crisis. It is a significant and potent connection seen by some other authors, including Larry Kramer, who drew the comparison in many of his speeches and articles. He said, for instance, that "AIDS is our holocaust. Tens of thousands of our precious men are dying. Soon it will be hundreds of thousands. AIDS is our holocaust and Reagan is our Hitler. New York City is our Auschwitz" (*Reports from the Holocaust* 173). Whereas Kramer focused on the direct rhetorical power of the comparison to incite people into action, with little space given for nuance such comparison clearly requires, Schulman's intersectional approach explores a complex network of interconnections between exclusions and privileges that she could observe, experience and relay as a Jewish lesbian author.

Much like Schulman herself, Rita, one of *Rat Bohemia's* protagonists, is shaped by her postmemory of the Holocaust, which in her case is directly related to the story of her mother's escape from Germany taken over by the Nazi regime. Through her knowledge of her mother's story, she feels connected both to the Holocaust, and to the experience of migration. Like her mother's, her own life was shaped by the experience of expulsion from where her roots were and of a crisis which had cast doubt on the notion of a "civilized" culture; she was thrown out of her house by her homophobic father and then she survived many gay friends dying from AIDS. Both inherited and lived-through experiences become intertwined for Rita, one being a figure for another. For instance, after her first sexual encounter, which positioned her outside of the heteronormative experience, she fills the postcoital silence by describing a childhood memory of her visit to a store where all clerks were concentration camp survivors. According to John Goshert, as little Rita sees tattoo numbers on their arms, she "realizes that the experience of the Nazi holocaust is available only to initiates, and is furthermore, only available to Rita

(who speaks neither Yiddish nor German) as an untranslatable noise or as a semaphoric communication through the image of serial numbers” (“The Aporia” 58). Both the camp experience and her homosexuality are phenomena for which she has no language, which is conceivably why one ineffable experience triggers the memory of being in close vicinity to another.

This lack of language is a direct result of the more general invisibility of the non-heteronormative subjects within a family. Rita notes there is a difference between gay and straight coming of age as far as family engagement is concerned. She ponders upon the subject while she reminisces about her teenage romance with Claudia Haas:

The fact is that in real life, not just on TV, most teenagers get some kind of family cheerleading when they go out on their first date . . . “What’s he like?” mothers and sisters and neighbors would gossip on grocery checkout lines . . . Encouraging or obstructive, there was a recognition of the importance of these events . . . For me there was no ritual. There was only secrecy . . . The Haases and the Weemeses would pass in the hallway with approving comments about nice young couples and decent hardworking girls, young men. I worked hard. I was decent. (*Rat Bohemia* 184-85)

Rita remembers these formative experiences as unjust, since she felt that she met the criteria normally expected by the kin of prospective spouses—being hardworking and decent—yet she was excluded from these rituals. Ineffability of homosexuality is the reason why gay rites of passage are necessarily hidden from view, rather than observed and recognized by the family. In a heteronormative society, the vocabulary of sexual and romantic self-actualization thus becomes assembled from scraps of information, rather than transmitted by the elders, causing separation from the blood family.

This way of representing families is coherent with the ideas spelled out directly by Schulman in her 2005 non-fiction book *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences*. She argues there that the experience of being mistreated by their family is one that almost all gay people share: “We have each, at some time in our lives, been treated shoddily by our families simply, but specifically, because of our homosexuality” (1). While the degree of displayed homophobia may vary, from microaggressions to disowning and shunning, Schulman argues that very few gay people do not suffer any kind of mistreatment from their family. This wrongdoing does not have to take the form of overt acts of homophobia; since family is expected to provide a network of emotional and economic support, the mistreatment often manifests as acts of withholding. Straight relatives withholding emotional support, love and genuine interest in the lives of their gay kin constitute a major theme in *Rat Bohemia*.

In the initial stage of the AIDS epidemic, this withholding of emotional support often manifested as denial of the urgency of the AIDS crisis. In this way, familial homophobia functioned in accord with the culture industry as “cultural Dalmane,” a force to reject the awareness of the crisis event. Much of the action in *Rat Bohemia* is centered around sickness and eventual death of David. As the narrative shifts to his perspective in the middle of the novel, David recounts his numerous attempts to force his parents to acknowledge the crisis in some way:

I started mentioning AIDS to my parents around the time that Don got sick. I waited to see how they would respond. When they didn't respond, I couldn't say anymore. I just mentioned. Mentioned, mentioned, mentioned, mentioned . . . “I just came from visiting my friend Robert at NYU. You remember Robert? He's the one I mentioned last time who is in Co-op Care? Remember, I mentioned that he was trying out this new drug that was really promising? Well, I gotta go now . . . I'll let you know how he's doing next time.” But the next time I'd wait and wait. I'd wade through all the stories of eighty-

year-olds with heart attacks and whose daughter was getting married and I'd wait and wait for one word. I just wanted them to utter that word. That word was *Robert*. (85)

There is an astounding contrast between the omnipresence of AIDS in David's life and its virtual invisibility for his parents. Family is observed here as shaping, through tactical silences, the discourse in a way that allows its members to remain inactive and leave queer people to die. For instance, at one point David's sister mourns the loss of her graduate school professor who died of old age. David is astounded, given his experiences of the epidemic, to hear his mother say to his sister: "You've had more people die in your life than anyone I know" (87). He startles, but before he even reacts in any way, his mother notices his disquiet and turns to him with accusation: "You mean the AIDS thing . . . You're always looking for ammunition against us" (87). Through this reaction, the mother reveals that her behavior is intentional and that she is aware of the losses in David's life; she simply does not consider them to be as important as the loss her sister suffers. This discrepancy is caused by the status of a mourned relationship in the heteronormative system. The loss experienced by David's sister is a part of their normative world, and thus it is acknowledged; David's dead, on the other hand, are the people he met through queer communities, and thus they are non-existent to his parents. His interventions in an attempt to force them into an uncomfortable acknowledgement of the epidemic are perceived as a continuous, relentless assault on their peace of mind.

The rift between David's experience of the epidemic and his parents' failure to acknowledge it is so great that even if they do react to the AIDS stories, they do it so as to dismiss the gravity of the crisis. At one point, David visits his parents right after helping yet another PWA friend, and provocatively describes the symptoms to his family in order to elicit some response: "Gino shit all over himself and the other guy didn't know what to do. He was so busy retching every time he got near the bed that he'd let Gino lie in his own shit for almost half an hour trying to get up the guts to deal with it" (93). He describes the graphic details

intending to disrupt his parents' self-involved perspective. However, they react by equating this story with their own, normative and normalized, experiences: "I saw a client, just the other day, with cancer,' my father said. 'A fifty-year-old man. We see this every day.' 'More and more people come into our agency needing home care,' my mother added'" (93). Rather than acknowledging David's suffering, the parents opt for the anecdotes intended to underscore that heterosexual people have problems, too. In this way, AIDS becomes only one of many issues that medicine still fails to deal with, rather than an epidemic for which the government is responsible due to its gross negligence. Visibly, then, the environment in which David's accounts of the AIDS epidemic are relegated into discursive void is carefully constructed by his relatives through their repeated choice to overlook or dismiss his interventions. This exemplifies how, through the praxis of excluding and ignoring gay members of families, the straight majority *chose* to remain unaware of the reality of AIDS crisis, and thus lost its right to claim ignorance.

David reacts to this strategy by throwing a tantrum, crying and screaming, a scene which makes his family close ranks. The night after his breakdown, he receives a message on his phone: "Dave, this is your brother. I'm sick of this bullshit. You fucking asshole. Fuck off" (95). David's actions disturb the status quo where AIDS can remain unacknowledged, which is upsetting to his blood family because it makes them uncomfortable. He sums up their reaction by stating: "They think we're pretending and mentioning it repeatedly just to ruin their day. Just to guilt trip them for something they didn't do. How could we do this to them?" (95). A similar stance of solidarity in homophobia is visible in other families. For instance, Killer's father once visits her when Rita comes by. Afterwards, Killer receives a call from her father, in which he scolds her for "hanging out with dykes" (135). The fact that Killer herself is a lesbian, and that she has come out to her parents, has been strategically forgotten. Having been shunned by her father afterwards, Killer writes to her mother who responds by crediting him with the

family's subsistence, and admonishing her daughter for being difficult: "*Your father and I are old now. He is sixty-eight years old and I am sixty-five. We are not going to live forever. We want to enjoy our last years of our lives with as little tension as possible. You are so uncompromising. You are the one creating the problems*" (136-37, italics in original). In a similar (albeit less confrontational) manner, when Rita calls his father, he quickly hands the phone to his brother who chats innocuously about his good relationship with their dad. This maneuver completely derails Rita's attempt to reconnect with her parent.

The aforementioned brotherly interventions are informed by the stakes straight siblings have in the heteronormative power structure, which is a relationship noted and commented on by the main characters. Having finished the call, Rita ponders:

What is it with these brothers and sisters of homosexuals? They love that special treatment. They love to take advantage of it. Would it ever occur to Howie to refuse to go to Shea until my dad invited me too? No way. He loves those special rights, those special privileges. You know parental booty is a limited thing. Why split it with your queer sibling if you don't have to. Why give up the one thing that makes a regular shmuck like Howie into something special—his normalcy? (189)

David expresses a similar sentiment regarding his siblings, remembering particularly that his sister "perfected her role as head snitch" (66) in their childhood. He connects their behavior to the event from many years ago, when David, being the oldest of three children, argued about something with his father. The latter, as the head of their upper-class intellectual family, expected to be worshipped without question and reacted angrily to his son's defiance. Since David would not relent, the situation escalated to the point where the father told his son to get out of the car. His gambit was to drive a bit forward and have David walk that distance and re-enter the car, repentant. However, the insubordinate son turned around and started walking away, which eventually forced the whole family to chase him. When they were finally reunited,

David felt good about his decision but what he encountered in the car wholly surprised him: “I was greeted by my sister and brother crying uncontrollably, with expressions of sheer terror on their two little faces. What had happened to me was the worst thing either of them could ever imagine” (65). This scene signals both David’s subversive enjoyment of breaking the rules and defying normative scenarios, as well as the siblings’ absolute fear of being punished for doing so and thus their willingness to subordinate.

David’s account of his teenage years, too, testifies to the strategically deployed discursive silences, as well as more overt modes of conditioning with the aim of achieving heteronormativity. He states that he was “undiscussable” (66), because he was not what his parents expected him to be. The concern that he has caused his parents with his general “inappropriateness” manifested already in early childhood. This is visible in his failure to follow the codes of masculinity as a young boy:

As a child I was always being gender-corrected. I was one of those little boys with a high squeaky voice who waved his hands in the air and got too excited. It made my parents deeply uncomfortable. They tried every way they could think of to convey their disapproval of my basic self, starting at the age of four. There was always an invisible Dave, one that had never existed and could never exist, that they expected to find miraculously each morning at the breakfast table. And when, instead, all they got was little silly-willy me, with limp wrists and a will of steel, little courageous sissy-wissy me, they were deeply angry. (64)

What exactly the family wanted gets elaborated in a conversation between David’s father and Rita. He tells her the story of his parents’ migration into the United States and their struggle to assimilate. His point of pride is that he was the first in his family to be truly acceptable, a fully integrated American, the one to have achieved normalcy. Thus, he feels his son wasted away

his life's work by slipping back into the abnormal. His sentiments are perhaps most clearly legible in the fantasy he shares with Rita, one he had when his wife was pregnant with David:

I imagined a scene, from my own future. I imagined that my wife and I were older, about the age we were ten years ago. My wife and I are attending the theater accompanied by our son. Broadway. My son and I approach a waiting taxicab from either side of the car. Dapper and fit in crisp tuxedos and tails, you know, like Fred Astaire. I am older than he is, grayer, more elegant and in excellent physical condition. He is impetuous, laughing, handsome. We open the doors simultaneously as our ladies step in before us. His mother, contented, elegant. His wife flirtatious and witty. We glance at each other over the top of the cab before stepping in—two halves of one person. Our unity and similarity are indescribable, unspoken and thoroughly understood. But you see, my dream will never be realized because my son took it away from me the day he decided to be a homosexual. (201-202)

Codes of masculinity are mixed with glamour in father's fantasy centered on two main images: the successful heterosexuality of the two happy married couples and the uncanny resemblance of father and son, who form a cross-generational unity. Since the father imagines his son to be his faithful replica, it is a fantasy of immortality as achieved through reproduction. The false chord which dispels this fantasy is David's homosexuality, which the father assumes to be purely a choice. This allows him, once again, to see himself as a victim rather than the perpetrator of violence.

Nowhere is the disconnection between David, representing queer communities, and his father, who stands in for the heteronormative world, visible more starkly than in the eulogy the father gives to commemorate his son:

My son, David Gabriel Berman, was born on February twenty-second, 1958. George Washington's birthday. We promised him that all his life, his birthday would be

celebrated as a national holiday. But then they changed the law and George Washington's birthday was no longer celebrated on February twenty-second. David accepted this without complaint, just as he later accepted having AIDS without complaint. David graduated magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, from Columbia University and lived for a year in Portugal and for a year in Rome, Italy. I am sorry and will always be sorry that David is no longer with us. So long, Dave. (162-63)

The father's eulogy focuses on the moment of birth, and an awkward anecdote about accidental contiguity of David's birth and George Washington's. He rambles about it for almost half the speech. His account of the man's actual life comprises a lackluster list of academic achievements and places Dave lived in, as academia and tourism are two normative routes of accomplishment. It's a tormented attempt at fitting a life of resistance into the dominant scripts. One point at which it seems to come closer to the reality of David's life, mentioning "acceptance of AIDS without complaint," is an outright lie. David did complain about AIDS and was terrified by it, and much of the book's plot revolves around his failed attempts to communicate this to his blood family. Similarly to his feelings about the disease, none of David's experiences, relationships and ideas, nor the gay novels he published, are discussed in the father's eulogy, since they did not adhere to the heteronormative script.

Interestingly, this scene is a direct nod to Schulman's earlier book. Anna, the protagonist of *Empathy*, is asked by her psychotherapist to imagine her family life as a movie. What follows is a movie script which explores family dynamics during the funeral of her father's childhood friend. A rabbi gives a familiar eulogy at that funeral:

Morris Levine had a life. He was born in the Bronx in 1923. He worked hard for his parents in their small shoe repair shop. He was a perfect son. When his country called him to duty he fought bravely at D day. And true to his sense of responsibility Morris returned to the shop. Twenty-five years later when his father died, Morris took over the

shop and turned it into a thriving travel agency. Years from now when we think of Morris we'll say, "Morris, thanks for the memories." (48-49)

The selection of details from Morris's life seems to be governed by a clearly readable key. Only those events are recalled which follow the powerful cultural scripts: familial, patriotic and capitalist. His life is reduced to a review of kinship ties, work accomplishments and combat experiences. Clearly shaped by those narratives, his life is replete with events that can be recalled in this speech. This was of course not the case for David, which is perhaps why a forced connection with George Washington takes up so much space in his father's eulogy.

Reading the tributes side by side, it is hard to miss that both speeches end with apostrophes to the dead. These passages encapsulate the whole process of enclosing a life within a script. The last words directed at David are impersonal and formulaic. The father's escape into the universal is his way of avoiding the particular, and thus the queer, in his son's life. Looking at the rabbi's address to Morris from *Empathy*, we can see that the rabbi at least *thanks* the deceased for the memories. The father performs no such positive gesture, which might signify that he is indeed *not* thankful for the memories of David he has. The fact that he struggled so much to find some he could talk about corroborates this manner of reading the apostrophe. Additionally, the phrase "so long" means "until we meet again," which *could* be read as an expectation to meet David in the afterlife. However, considering the connection drawn in most religions between homosexuality and damnation, this seems unlikely unless the father assumes he would be damned, too. A much more likely interpretation of this phrase would be the father's incomprehension, or even denial of the situation. Just as he refused to understand David's reaction to his seropositive status, and denied the seriousness of tragedy gay people experienced, he refuses to fully recognize the fact and significance of David's death. Finally, the jarring casualness of the phrase, associated with a goodbye said in passing, with little gravity, can be read as an indexical sign of the heteronormative society brushing off the

epidemic in the 80s, when it was treated as a “special interest” problem to which not much attention should be paid.

In *Rat Bohemia*, Schulman subverts the image of a family as the main caretaker and source of support for People With AIDS. The novel points to the discursive void surrounding the subject of homosexuality among blood families and represents the strategies of silencing gay subjects within them. Families are shown to fail People With AIDS because they withhold the support in sickness normally offered by one’s kin and because they deny the gravity of the crisis. When challenged on that account, they close ranks and punish gay people, whom they see as needlessly difficult. These tactics are not a pure prerogative of the conservative parents; the alliance is intergenerational, and heterosexual siblings partake in the power structure. Ultimately, gay people do not get the support they need, and they are raised feeling isolated from their kin. This is very clearly articulated in the scene of David’s funeral, where his father gives an eulogy that completely misrepresents his life and articulates a whole set of heteronormative assumptions which were stopping him from helping David when he was still alive.

“...and Its Consequences”

Rat Bohemia does not limit itself to a critical perspective on the institution of family and, specifically, its deeply ingrained homophobia. The novel also provides vivid depictions of gay people raised in such families, with their weaknesses and mechanisms developed while surviving such upbringing. David’s funeral is one occasion where Schulman represents the effects of familial homophobia on gay people. It is made visible through the reaction of the largely gay audience to the eulogy given by David’s father: “In the silence that followed, nobody even gasped. Some people looked at each other and raised those eyebrows, but most of us were not surprised. We’re so used to it. We’re so used to parents who show up at the last

minute and never took the time to know their child. Who have no idea of who they are talking about. We suffer them silently” (163). This tepid reaction to the ignorant cruelty of the father’s speech might be somewhat surprising. Since David was an ACT UP member, there are likely many activists in the room, representatives of an organization that prided itself on very little concern for propriety. It is, after all, an organization that broke the taboo and organized the protest inside St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Yet none of them speaks up when David’s father distorts the memory of his son’s life.

Rita, who narrates the funeral scene, pauses to think about the reasons why it is so. In her opinion, consistent with Schulman’s ideas from *Ties That Bind*, gay people are unwilling or unable to speak up and testify to the effects of familial homophobia. In Rita’s words:

There are rarely any parents whenever we all meet. And their sudden appearance immediately deprives us of our collective adulthood. We know they are against us and it is so hard to maintain stature in the presence of your fiercest opposition . . .

The most common link between all gay people is that at some time in our lives, often extended, our families have treated us shabbily because of our homosexuality. They punish us, but we did not do anything wrong. We tell each other about this all the time, but we never tell the big world. It is the one secret not for public consumption.

We’ll stand up proudly on television in slave collars and penis tucks, but we will never speak out publicly about what our families have done to us. It is too true. (163)

As represented in *Rat Bohemia*, then, gay subjects have internalized the discursive void in which they were brought up, at least insofar as the family context reappears. Coming out might have given them some vocabulary and narratives to talk about the gay experience in general, but not the ability to articulate the pernicious effects of familial homophobia. Therefore, even the most militant gay people still tolerate the erasure of queerness performed by David’s father.

The violence of belittling and ignoring what is not heteronormative, and thus the right to isolate gay people, is thus legitimized by the passive gay audience of the father's eulogy.

The force of familial homophobia puts a strain on memory of the dead in more than one sense. Rita, and her complex relationship to her own heritage, may serve as an ample example. Much like David, she often felt gender-inadequate in her childhood. While David was often gender-corrected as a child, Rita was confused about womanhood, a confusion which was directly connected to the early death of her mother. One time, she visited Claudia Haas's house and the two played with Mrs. Haas's cosmetics. Rita, however, did not know what most of them were, which led her to a more general meditation on how she lacked guidance from a female adult: "There's so much now that I wish I'd understood. But no one ever sat me down and looked me in the eye, lovingly, with information. To tell me that some things lead to certain other things and letting me in on the codes, shortcuts, and signs. Everything about the future came to me in the form of threatened punishment. Or a silence surrounding my own wild imagination" (21). Significantly, Rita's mother was a great beauty who fulfilled the codes of femininity with ease. Being gone before the daughter reached adolescence, she could never pass on her knowledge. The only guidance from an adult Rita ever received came from her homophobic father, which left her feeling isolated. Having lost her mother early, she is not only unable to fit into the codes of femininity, but also she has never learned the native language of her ancestors. When Claudia Haas sang a German song, she noted with some surprise that she needed to translate it for Rita, because "her mother forgot to teach them" (22). Rita's connection to her roots is thus at best tentative, and at worst marred by complete miscomprehension. However, these roots are a lens through which Rita understands her homosexuality and its social condition. It is the only meaningful narrative she encountered in her childhood that could give some meaning to her excluded status, as, at first, she identifies with the Jewish experience of being persecuted, and, later, conceptualizes the AIDS epidemic as genocide. Her postmemory

allows her to connect, through her own experience of exclusion, with the roots from which otherwise she is cut off as she is mistreated by the blood family. That very connection is on the one hand persistent and significant, but on the other strained and far-fetched, as Rita has only an early childhood memory of her mother to ground it in.

Of course, her family does not recognize the resemblance between Rita's condition and her mother's. Both the sense of exclusion from family heritage, as well as the choice her relatives make to overlook the link between her postmemory and her lived-through experience, are represented by Schulman in geographic terms. Rita's identification with her queer communities is connected to the sense of space in the novel, and, more specifically, to her neighborhood. In the words of Monica Bachmann, "many of Schulman's lesbian and Jewish characters express this sense of belonging in the mixed urban jumble of downtown Manhattan" (83). This identification makes sense both for a Jew and for a lesbian, because, as Bachmann states, the island is historically and ideologically significant to both groups:

the Lower East Side becomes a cultural touchstone for American Jewish identity, in Schulman's novels and elsewhere the site where Jews are recognizable, authentic, making the brave transition from Europe to the new world, taking the first steps that got us to where we are today: to integration, to assimilation, to the suburbs. Similarly, Greenwich Village functions as a mythic place of origin for gay people, the original space of bars and cruising spots, of gay writers and gay lives, where Beebo Brinker and Allen Ginsberg ran the streets, and of course, where gay people first fought back against oppression. (88–89)

Schulman utilizes the geographical proximity of the Lower East Side and the Village, and their significance to Jewish and queer communities respectively, in order to represent Rita's predicament. Living in Manhattan, she remains close to the "cultural touchstones" for both her lesbian and Jewish identities, and the lack of distance between these spaces points to the lack

of internal contradiction between the two. However, Rita does not feel able to visit Jackson Heights, the neighbourhood she grew up in. The closest she gets to revisiting her childhood area is Yorkville, “Manhattan’s version of Kraut-town” (*Rat Bohemia* 197). In there, she experiences both proximity and exclusion as she observes people in a store:

A rehashed old argument about something that happened back home in a Germany that could never exist again—a paradise. The last place any of these people was Somebody. The last place any of them had a family. The last place they’d ever belonged. Their last good night’s sleep. I guess Jackson Heights was my version of Bremen. Now, I too am in exile, staring through a store window in a foreign part of town. (198)

In this passage, Rita identifies with the store customers’ sense of abandonment, and connects her own experience of displacement with her mother’s escape from Germany. Although Rita has moved merely to another part of town, reconnecting with her childhood and her family feels just as impossible for her as it was for her mother after moving from one continent to another. Schulman’s rhetorical tactic in this passage is the usage of an available discourse of geographic distance to express the intensity of Rita’s experience of exclusion, and the mental distance homophobia and the denial of AIDS have put in between her and her family.

Familial homophobia is thus shown in the novel to permeate the lives of gay people throughout; it shapes their childhoods, heavily impacts their self-understanding in adulthood, and leads to the erasure of queer experiences in death. On several occasions, the novel makes allusions to the impact this neglect has on the health of People With AIDS, making blood families partially responsible for untimely deaths of PWAs. Specifically, David describes on regular basis the way his family treats him in terms of murder stating that “I realized that my parents were trying to kill me. In fact, my entire family is in on it . . . It is their only possible motive” (63) and that “there’s nothing on earth that could kill us more efficiently than parental

indifference” (87). The novel also represents the reverse idea; that actual, genuine interest on the part of the family might be beneficial to the health of PWAs:

[Rita’s] friend Ronnie LaVallee said that the reason he felt better when he took some useless drug was because it was his father who found out about it and told him to try it, thereby proving that his father actually loved him. So why didn’t the newspapers announce the next day that parental kindness helps people with AIDS live longer? Because that’s asking for more than people can do. Love our gay children? Impossible! We just want a pill. It’s easier. (53)

This passage not only points to certain validity in David’s claims (since parental love and support help PWAs survive, their lack can be understood as lethal), but also clearly voices the implicit understanding of familial relationships for gay people. They know not to expect this kind of support from their families, because, for the vast majority of them, it verges on impossibility. This is a sharp, distinctive contrast with the way the family is represented by the culture industry of AIDS. As seen in *An Early Frost*, the dominant narratives fall back on the idea of family as the principal caretaker. The care may be problematized (but not prevented) by homophobia, but the stories about familial mistreatment are haunting the narrative from the outside, spoken about but not shown, and thus less relevant. In *Rat Bohemia*, Schulman shows the status quo to be the family *failing* to meet the standard of care established by the dominant narratives of blood kinship when queer kin is in need, and gay people never really expecting (although incessantly longing for) their families to be supportive. Familial homophobia in *Rat Bohemia* is therefore no longer an ethical, understandable prerogative of the parents, partly to be overcome with love, partly inconsequential to the well-being of PWAs and thus necessarily acceptable for the gay kin themselves. For Schulman, it is murderous.

The novel shows that safety and comfort granted by the dominant culture narratives are not purely the prerogative of straight families, however. Queer people, too, can become invested

in the normative power order on many occasions. Troy, Killer's girlfriend, makes the following remark while talking about the activist group Queer Nation:

Queer did get old very fast, nowadays only academics take it seriously. But *Nation* managed to live on in many fond conversions. Transgender Nation, Alien Nation, Reincar Nation. And all along the line no one noticed how much that word echoed with the secret store of nostalgic desire for normalcy, normalcy, normalcy. Those apple pie, warm kitchens, and American flags that are trapped somewhere back there between the hypothalamus and the frontal lobe. Someplace in the Central Drawer where *One Nation Under God, Indivisible, With Liberty and Justice For All* resonates eternally. (111-112)

In spite of the dissenting, often confrontational actions of ACT UP, Schulman notes that gay activism at large was often motivated by a desire for normalcy. This is implicitly entangled with Rubin's idea of sex hierarchy that designates some kinds of consensual sex as acceptable, and others not. By mid-90s, when *Rat Bohemia* was published, the shift in gay movement discussed in chapter 1 was already in progress; gay politics, influenced by neoliberal pundits associated with Independent Gay Forum, were moving away from contesting the idea of sex hierarchy, and towards redefining its boundaries so as to include a gay monogamous couple within the realm of acceptability. Troy observes that *queer*, i.e. that which contests the sex hierarchy, "got old very fast" and remains of interest mostly to the academic papers such as this one; whereas politics, even at its most progressive, welcomes only that which can be conceptualized as fitting the sex hierarchy and express the desire for normalcy evoked by the word *nation*.

It does not come as a surprise that a gay individual, raised in a family structure permeated by heteronormative assumptions, and struggling with the effects of familial homophobia throughout life and even in death, would long to be included at last. Therefore, gay people are by no means insusceptible to the power games intended to make them the part of the repressive normative structure. Rita's experience shows how, since teenage years, she

has been taught that it is in her best interest to keep her homosexuality invisible. When she was thrown out of her house by her father because she had been found in bed with Claudia, the girl tried to stay with the Haases:

When I got to Claudia's her mother was waiting, all loving kindness. She knew nothing in particular and would never suspect such a repulsive reality. So, I concocted some sham story about a family argument, assuring her it would all be over soon and so, from this—my first confrontation between my homosexuality and the world—I lied from the beginning. I know to this day that I was treated better that way. I know that lying was the only thing I could do. (192)

Rita learned that obscuring the truth about her sexuality was necessary to be treated well by the people living heteronormative lives. She had a place to stay and got food because Ms. Haas, who seemed to extend her motherly love for Claudia to her daughter's motherless best friend, had no idea there was a sexual connection between the two girls. The moment of respite ended quickly, however, when Rita's father called the Haases:

As he spoke I saw her expression shift to one—not of shock—but registering rather that everything had simply changed . . . When she hung up the phone she could no longer look at me. But she did put the meat on my plate. And that was my second lesson about being a homosexual. Not everyone would refuse me, but there would never be a full embrace. (193-94)

Ms. Haas's reaction destabilizes the binary opposition between good parents (who help their gay children) and bad parents (who throw them out) perpetuated by the culture industry of AIDS. There is a space between the two positions for a full spectrum of less violent (yet still harmful) experiences gay people go through. Ms. Haas did not fully withdraw the warmth with which she had greeted Rita, but she did recognize that, since the girl is queer, she could not accept her, either. Rita ate dinner at the Haases', but then she had to leave. Allowing for this

kind of nuance makes the ubiquity of familial homophobia visible. The prejudice of blood families is not always taken to the extreme where it would break the bonds between the kin. Nevertheless, it might still be harmful, and render the blood families unequipped to actually support their gay relatives—an idea glossed over, or outright denied, by the culture industry of AIDS.

Throughout *Rat Bohemia*, the effects of familial homophobia can also be seen in the toll that having a bad relationship with her father takes on Rita. Even her lover's casual observation on how her own Hispanic ethnicity is visible through the color of her vagina points to the traceable genetic origins and ultimately makes Rita miss having familial bonds. After a failed attempt to contact her father, however, she describes her emotional response in terms of a physical suffering of cosmic magnitude: "I feel transported to Planet Pain. My molecules go there. It is unbearable" (189). She acknowledges her inability to let go, understanding each instance of exclusion as a conscious choice made by her father over and over:

As my life has progressed, I have changed. I have learned things and come to understand new things. So, it would seem natural that my father would do the same. That's why his abandonment of me has always been a big surprise . . . My problem is that as long as he is still alive, he has the chance, every second, to change the way he views me. So every time he refuses, I'm devastated. (187-88)

Rita's account is similar to what David experiences in his relationship with his own parents. He expresses the virtual universality of parental rejection for queer people: "these reactions are so typical. My friends and I exchange them like baseball cards" (87). In this way, Schulman represents the ubiquity of familial homophobia in the lives of gay people, and the depth of its impact on their psyches.

Survival in the heteronormative world is a goal that Schulman represents as one capable even of breaking the bonds of queer kinship and causing disloyalty among gay subjects. Shortly

after David's funeral, Rita, who still struggles with the lack of paternal acceptance, stumbles upon David's father:

What would it have been like to have a father like this one? He seemed so calm and well dressed. Not some stupid slob like my dad. David's father was educated, somewhat genteel. He wore a suit. I hardly ever saw my own father in a suit. Never for the delight of it.

Right away the mechanism of betrayal started up in my brain. Immediately I was burying David, finishing him off, dismissing him, discrediting him. I was blaming him for his family's abandonment . . .

I, Rita Mae Weems, could convince his father and therefore own his father. Once I transformed his father, his father would belong to me, and then I would have a father.

I could be a daughter. I would finally, because of David's death, get a family. (198–99)

In this scene, Schulman explores the dynamics between Rita's two identities: the lesbian and the daughter. Her unsatisfied desire to connect with her family overrules her feelings of queer kinship, leading to her transition from the resistance to the alignment with power, that is, seeking approval from David's homophobic father. She fantasizes she might establish a connection and reach an understanding with him, and as a result be embraced by some family (if not hers). However, the real consequence of her betrayal is that Rita has to listen to the father's fantasy in which David would be a heterosexual and a younger replica of himself. Thus, instead of redeeming herself by helping David's father to overcome his homophobia, she relives the trauma of being punished by her own father. In the words of John Goshert:

The conversation thus serves a double function, both as an indication of the inability of people who represent normative sexuality, ethnicity, or citizenship to recognize the suffering of others, and as an object lesson to Rita about the stakes of betrayal. When David's father appropriates the victim position in the conversation, Rita too is

implicated in the network of responsibility, for she faces simultaneously the possibility of being both the agent of abandonment of the people with AIDS and the recipient of rejection by the legitimating cultural structure of the family. (“The Aporia” 65)

Rita’s loyalty to her dead is ultimately rendered inadequate, as her own losses bring about her betrayal; regardless of that, the institution of family remains as impenetrable and punitive as before, and Rita still cannot comfortably identify both as a daughter and a lesbian at once.

The scene is an example of the author’s stance against the simplified images of marginalization, as Schulman, in Goshert’s words “resists the temptation to present one image of marginality through sexuality, religion, or ethnicity which would serve as the index for other subordinate identificatory concerns; instead, she simultaneously deploys and calls into question the gamut of identificatory possibilities” (“Is it really bad...” 54). This approach clearly rejects the identity thinking characteristic of the culture industry of AIDS. The hybrid identities of Schulman’s characters enable shifts from one mode of behavior to another, which are sometimes at odds. The dynamics between the two is clearly brought into light in the context of Rita’s approach to the idea of the “meaning of AIDS.” Early in the novel, Rita (as a lesbian, a witness, and a queer kin) realizes the inadequacy of looking for such an explanation, or searching for a redemptive narrative. However, her own disloyal attempt is based on the odd narrative of redemption she invents: “Was this the hidden purpose of AIDS—to give the rest of us a chance to have parents? . . . Maybe these hateful parents would regret the way they abandoned their gay children and would come to other abandoned gay children and love us instead. That way, at least one of us would have love” (*Rat Bohemia* 199). Rita, as a daughter who has never had a loving father, begins to believe she can fulfill her dream of having *some* accepting father figure. Enticed by this idea, she becomes willing to sacrifice the insight her other identities grant and readily imposes a meaning onto the AIDS epidemic, hoping it will make her a part of a family at last. The invention of that new narrative justifies to her the betrayal

of David's memory and of queer communities she belongs to. Through this turn of events, Schulman shows how tempting it is to align oneself with an institution of power (such as family), even if it betrays her queer identity and her loyalties based in queer kinship.

The construction of a stable narrative of meaning for the AIDS epidemic has been usefully theorized by Monica B. Pearl as a work of mourning. The implicit goal of such a narrative is to accept the loss and thus sever the link with a lost love-object (in the case of AIDS, usually a partner or a close friend). This approach is juxtaposed with the one Rita represents in the beginning, when she acknowledges the meaninglessness of the epidemic and the disruption it imposes on the system of signification. Pearl calls this position melancholic and attempts to rehabilitate the term (originally coined by Freud to describe a pathology) by pointing to its positive effects on modes of representation: "melancholia, as conveyed and constructed in AIDS literature, rather than being pathologically debilitating, as the term is often understood, was instead productive; the inability to control grief or accept loss made for a more challenging and complex literature and therefore a more resonant expression of complex identities" (162). In the case of melancholia, the goal is not to sever the link with a lost love-object, but to keep it very much alive. Pearl divides queer writings about AIDS into two categories, that can be seen as works of either mourning or melancholia. The culture industry of AIDS, insofar as it engages with the actual experiences of AIDS, does so through the mode of mourning, encouraging severing the links and eventual acceptance of the loss (and of a culture that allowed such loss). Rita's story represents both mourning and melancholic positions: first, she is melancholically rejecting the consolation of a possible meaning; then, she invents the understanding of the epidemic that makes her more comfortable and hopeful; finally, her fantasy is dispelled by the reality of David's father's unchanged homophobia, showing her work of mourning to be a delusion. This turn of events puts *Rat Bohemia* writing firmly in the category which Pearl called melancholic. The novel not only does not impose any narrative

meaning onto the epidemic, but also represents such attempt as disloyal to the bonds of queer kinship.

Schulman shows also how the discursive void in which gay people were raised structures the way in which they later shape their cultural landscape. The simplest example is the question of being out as an author, and writing stories that take up the gay subject. Schulman's argument is that lesbians tend to leave lesbian content out of their work, not because they would rather write about different things, but because writing about lesbians limits their publishing opportunities. In the introduction to *Gentrification of the Mind*, Schulman describes her meeting with young queer writers who were trying to understand ACT UP:

As we continued to talk, more emerged. The woman's book did not have primary lesbian content. The art world she was situating herself in, excluded lesbian authors whose work did. Instinctively she had figured out that for professional advancement, this was the way to go. To her it was expected, and to me it was closeted. I detected that she felt strangely superior for getting the access one gets by avoiding lesbian content, even though her choices were not making anything better. (8)

Much like IGF pundits found themselves more relevant and better equipped to articulate gay sensibility because they were invited to air their views through the mainstream channels, the girl with whom Schulman conversed felt superior because she did have the access to the art world that excluded lesbians. Visibly, we can see how the culture industry operates here; queer voices were silenced because the economic structure allowed them to articulate their subjectivity only in accordance with the precepts of the heteronormativity if they wished to acquire financial gain from their art.

This very dynamic is represented in *Rat Bohemia* by the character of Muriel Kay. Muriel is a successful writer who once mentored David, and her newest novel, *Good and Bad*, is an often-mentioned bestseller many of Schulman's characters read. Sometime after David's death,

Rita stumbles upon Muriel who is also an old acquaintance of hers, and they begin to talk; the writer cannot believe she wasn't informed about David's passing, given how close they used to be. This was due to their argument and subsequent contempt David had for her. While talking to Rita, Muriel tells her version of their story. When she met David, she was already a somewhat established writer, and David had not published anything yet. Seeing some potential in his work, Muriel helped him, editing his stories and using her connections to get them reviewed. This became a repeating pattern with the next works David wrote. He became increasingly bitter due to his failure to succeed on his own merit, and she was getting exhausted, yet unable to abandon a friend who was getting sicker and sicker. Ultimately, David wrote a journalistic piece on Muriel which she describes as "a hatchet job on my personality" (*Rat Bohemia* 172), and the two lost touch. Muriel's perspective is that David could not stomach the fact she succeeded and he did not. While it is likely that these dynamics played a part in the bitter story of the two, Rita points out that David had a major grievance against Muriel's work—that she is closeted as a writer. She responds defensively:

"I am so out. It says there that I've written for *Genre* magazine."

"But what straight person is going to have ever heard of *Genre* magazine? "

"Don't tell me what to do," she said, throwing down a twenty-dollar bill. "David was just jealous. Have you even read my books?"

"I skimmed one."

"David was jealous. You read my book before you complain. It's not about that.

My books are not about homosexuality. They're about family." (174)

Muriel has three different lines of defense used in response to the accusation that she is closeted. First, she restates that the reason she and David had a falling out was his jealousy. Second, she makes an argument that she is out, which is an obvious smoke mirror, transparent enough for Rita to see through at once. Third, and perhaps most significantly, she states that her novels are

simply interested in something else. Tellingly, this “something else” is family, showing that for Muriel, writing about family and about homosexuality would be an internal contradiction. This distinction points back to the erasure of the gay subject in the familial context.

There is another reason why this last argument requires attention. Muriel’s claim to being preoccupied with a different subject matter is compromised in *Rat Bohemia*’s epilogue. That section consists of four short chapters of Muriel’s novel, *Good and Bad*, which track the lives of characters clearly based on those in *Rat Bohemia*, but heterosexual. Rita plays the role of a wife to David, and Claudia Haas is her best friend with whom marital troubles are discussed. The reader thus finds out that Muriel exchanged the possibility to represent their life stories adequately for financial gains connected with successful publishing. Through this gesture, Schulman performatively dramatizes the erasure and invisibility of queerness ensured by the culture industry. The remaining subtext is that, since the stigmaphobe context requires distance from the stigmatized, it is possible that Muriel’s work was not necessarily more successful than David’s due to its own merit, but rather, due to its avoidance of the gay subject.

The insight that queer voices are censored out is, too, visible throughout the novel in less overt ways. At one instance, Rita points out to Troy that *Red River* with John Wayne codes homosexual desire. At another, Troy notes that over time, fashion choices made initially by drag queens become standard for Midwest housewives. These are signs that may have gay underpinnings, but remain acceptable precisely because their queerness is obscured. These scenarios are representative of Schulman’s take on how the culture industry blocked and appropriated queerness at large. Crucially, since David was a PWA, it also specifically points to power structures silencing the voices of people living with the disease.

Betrayal of queer kinship, and gay people’s capitulation to the heteronormative narratives are also readable in Schulman’s representation of PWAs’ sexuality. David’s narration

begins with the effects of the epidemic on gay sexual culture. First and foremost, it led to sexual stigmatization of HIV+ people within gay communities. When David hears that someone is positive, “that means I’m supposed to immediately lose interest” (57). The effects of such an approach is that a PWA feels ashamed of having the virus: “I’m angry at myself. I got it in 1984 when I should have known better” (57-58). By “knowing better,” David means avoiding HIV+ sexual contacts. These anxieties are akin to the stigmatization of the Patient Zero in *And The Band Played On*; that someone might keep having sex while they are seropositive is seen as ghoulish and akin to murder.

Schulman, however, does not forget that People With AIDS are sexual beings. For instance, David reflects on the problem of excitement entangled with risky sex in the following manner:

Those of us who kept unabashedly fucking after the siren went off, those of us still alive and willing to talk, say it was so exciting.

“I wouldn’t have taken one less dick,” a dear friend once said . . .

I can’t stop recalling those costumed gents getting off to the danger of fucking when you know you could die. What a turn-on . . .

No one can deny that, after all, there is something about desire that makes men treat each other like meat and love it. Goodness and badness have nothing to do with it.

Desire can’t be decided. (58)

Instead of pathologizing the sexual drives and seeing them purely in terms of vectors of infection (or, in more conservative readings, sins being met with punishment), Schulman engages with the reasons why people would have unsafe sex even after transmission of HIV through sexual contact had been scientifically proven. In comparison with constructing Patient Zero as a sexual fiend, this is a deeply humanizing approach. While it does not absolve gay men from the responsibility for their own health, it seeks to understand the reasons why they might

endanger it. It also does not put the blame for infection on sexuality, seeing that for some subjects it is a hardly controllable force of nature rather than a choice made with a clear head. Additionally, it shows that the scare tactics deployed by the governments, the media and the texts such as *Band* or *The Normal Heart* were ultimately ill-equipped for the task of actually reducing risk. If an encounter with death is part of the charm, reinforcing the association only makes risky sex more desirable. Through this lens, the moralistic narratives of the culture industry of AIDS cannot be seen as a means of risk reduction they claim to be; instead, they are unmasked as a means to strengthen sexual hierarchy.

Another significant context omitted in representation of Patient Zero, but present in Schulman's portrayal of sexual life in the time of epidemic, is a cacophony of contradictory information that reached gay people during the initial stage of the epidemic. Some things that the characters in the novel believe are just plain wrong; for instance, Rita's hookup with Lourdes almost comes to a premature end, because Lourdes insists that they use gloves. Rita protests, stating that to her best medical knowledge it does not make any difference whether they do or not. The two, being members of queer communities, and having personal connections to the AIDS crisis, still cannot agree on the basic facts of what constitutes safer sex; there is a difficulty in finding balance between risking one's health and getting hysterical, using needless protections that may deprive sex of its desirability. The discourse of safer sex is represented as decidedly high-pitch, to the point of obscuring the information. For instance, at one point David fumes every day at the TV shows that tell a story similar to that of Patient Zero: "At that time there was a whole series of talk shows about people who supposedly purposely infected others with HIV—these completely infuriated and depressed him. Especially because the shows never mentioned that if everyone would use condoms, these questions would disappear" (172). In conjunction with this media fearmongering, there are histrionic reactions some gay characters have to the slightest possibility of HIV infection. Muriel recounts the reactions of her friend:

“Robert’s previous boyfriend had died of AIDS and he was extremely paranoid about getting infected. I remember at one point when Robert, who was negative, had been fucking X and the condom broke and Robert was hysterical even though he was the penetrator and X was, himself, negative” (168). Anxious and bombarded with conflicting information, gay communities in *Rat Bohemia* often are themselves punitive to PWAs. For Schulman, it is this betrayal of queer kinship in the hour of need, and not the fact that sexual lives of HIV+ individuals go on, that is the actual tragedy of the situation.

Visibly, *Rat Bohemia* takes a more critical look than *People in Trouble* did at gay communities in the trying times of the AIDS epidemic. It represents gay individuals as dependent on parental approval and submissive in the face of familial homophobia. They are willing to align themselves with power, either to try and win fatherly love, or gain financially in a homophobic publishing industry. They also join in on the stigmatization of PWAs, especially insofar as their sexuality is concerned. Significantly, however, none of these harsh criticisms seeks to make gay people responsible for the epidemic. If anything, it makes them responsible for the failure to resist the culture industry of AIDS enough, an obligation that queer kinship calls them to.

This does not mean that Schulman represents queer people only pessimistically. There are still kernels of resistance to be found in the novel, too. Much like *People in Trouble*, *Rat Bohemia* represents gay relationships as meaningful and important, not less than their heterosexual counterparts. The clearest example of that is the relationship between Troy and Killer. It begins with Troy actually cheating on her previous, long-term girlfriend, and the consequences of the eventual breakup between the two are devastating: “When you’ve been with someone that long, losing them is indescribable. It is like cutting off half my body. It is like I lost myself and I don’t know what’s left” (134). But the intensity of queer relationships

is not measured only in terms of pain of breakup, but also as positive impact it can have on gay psyche. Such is Killer's reaction to being loved by Troy:

One day, as Troy was loving me, I realized that I was exceptional. That I was that strange ball of fire on whom romantic figures are traditionally based. I realized that I will never be alone for very long. I will never be bored and I will always be loved. I had to come to terms with the fact that I am sexy and I am easy to love. And it hit me, like a comet, that underneath all the huge waves of pleasure and all the passion and beauty and wonderful experiences and all the new ideas and emotions traveling with me, underneath all of that there might be this GASP pathology that has something to do with gay people and our families. How they have abandoned us and so we remain isolated. Yet, Troy can love me despite what America has done to us. (122)

Troy's love not only builds up Killer's self-esteem; it also works as an antidote to the effects of familial homophobia. Schulman's suggestion here is that gay people may have difficulty with maintaining long-term relationships because they have been denied the formative experiences of romance, its importance to their kin, and the acceptance of that kin. As a result, they feel unlovable and sabotage their romantic relationships. However, love can conquer these deeply inbuilt psychological mechanisms, and it can do away with both self-loathing of gay individuals and instability in their relationships. In short, it can make up for what the parents did wrong. Clearly, positioning a gay relationship as one that redeems an individual in that in which family has failed is in stark contrast to the narratives of culture industry of AIDS which emphasize and exalt blood kinship while they belittle the queer one.

The novel also ends with a celebratory moment, when four women on a road trip realize what the gay movement has achieved. They take this trip in order to reach Claudia Haas' house and let Rita confront her in her housewife role. Eventually, however, they realize that even if

they do not get there, the world must be reminding Claudia about homosexuality, and thus about Rita, every day:

“Yeah, the world has changed,” Lourdes said.

“Thanks to people like us,” I said.

That shut us all up, because it was so true. And sitting in traffic somewhere on Mott Street, us four little dykes were suddenly proud of ourselves and the work that we had done to make this world a better place for everyone else.

“Gee, you guys are the best,” I said.

“Well, it hasn’t changed that much,” Killer added. “I just remembered everything homophobic that has ever happened to me.”

“Oh, every minute of every day? Don’t think about that now. We were having a weepy moment of delusion.”

“Well, it’s half true,” Lourdes said. “Every night now when Miss Thing turns on the TV she has to see *you*. Every day when she opens up the newspaper there is some sign of *you*. Every time she goes to a dinner party, something about *you*, Rita, just happens to come up. You and the military, AIDS and you, you in the movies, you on *Roseanne*. Try as she might, that bitch cannot get you out of her mind.” (216-17)

Of course, the triumphant feeling is undercut by the ever-present experience of homophobia, but as they compare their teenage years to their current lives, the lesbians realize that some progress has been made. In this way, Schulman recognizes the gains that make it impossible to assign homosexuality to absolute discursive void anymore; yet, she grounds it in the ongoing struggle, rather than presenting the world as a post-homophobic utopia like *RENT* does.

It is important for Schulman to keep the understanding of homophobic reality present and to avoid an escapist fantasy. It is only the former that can bear witness to the epidemic, as it brings back into visibility the uncivilized way in which the AIDS epidemic was handled. This

sentiment is even more clearly visible in yet another funeral scene, this time organized by the parents of a dead ACT UPer, Charlie. In this case, the family “was really okay and really loved him” (82), so no one from his queer kin interfered with organization of the service. As a result, the ceremony was overly sentimental for the activists:

Finally, at the end they invited anyone in the room to get up and speak. This was followed by a barrage of straight girls who had known him from prep school. All just *sooo* emotional over his death, unlike the war-weary ACT UPers seething in the pews.

Each girl came up in her flowered dress and sang some stupid song or broke down into tears about Charlie being gone. All I could think was *Where the hell were you, asshole? I never saw you at any demonstration. I never saw you trying to get the price of Foscarnet reduced as Charlie was going blind.* (82)

It never occurs to the heterosexual mourners, for whom a singular AIDS death is a rare experience, that there is a connection in between their acquiescence to the power system and Charlie’s death. They did not do anything when he was still alive to help him survive. They went about their business while the epidemic was raging instead of joining the resistance. And it is the ACT UPers who find it necessary to bring this matter to their attention:

Right then, Rafsky got up. He was covered in Kaposi’s from head to toe and had taken to wearing tiny cut-off jean shorts and spaghetti strap T-shirts so that every person he passed on the subway would have to deal with it. As he walked up to the platform, Walter and I smiled at each other like Victoria’s messenger finally did come riding.

“The least we can do,” Bob said carefully into the microphone, “is not take false comfort.”

And then he sat down. It was so beautiful. He told them that they were not even doing the minimum. (82-83)

Bob Rafsky's comment serves as a reminder that this singular tragedy is entangled with the more systematic oppression and the ongoing epidemic. He directs his statement at all the overly sentimental straight mourners who fail to see the link between their inaction and this tragedy, as well as many others like it. This might be uncomfortable for the normative audience, but David, as a fellow witness to the crisis, recognizes that such statements are necessary. Their goal is to counter the work of the cultural Dalmane that made the straight majority—even when progressive, liberal and non-homophobic—inert in the face of the mass deaths that AIDS caused.

Much like the heteronormative narrative is resisted during Charlie's funeral service by Rafsky, David's funeral also includes a curious scene of resistance: "After Dad [finished speaking], a gay guy, a real queen, who had gone to Columbia with Dave read the Kaddish and all the Jews started to cry. What a switch from Dad to hear this quiet, gay Jew in hot pants and a tallis, whine our friend's death in a five-thousand-year-old tongue. We are old. We do exist. We can mourn. We do have language" (163-64). Significantly, there is a stark difference between prayer during a funeral scene here and in *People in Trouble*. In the latter, the rabbi's prayer was the only part of the service the family of the deceased was able to understand, which served to underline the distance between them and the daily life of their relative. In *Rat Bohemia*, because the prayer is uttered by a visibly gay man, "a real queen," it does not serve to mark the distance between the actual life of a PWA and its version sanitized for the purpose of heteronormative mourning. The mixture of queerness and religiousness allows Rita, as a member of collective queer "we," to claim right to her heritage; no longer are queer people and queer experiences to be invisible as deaths are mourned, or prayers said.

These more hopeful and defiant aspects of queer communities are then, too, represented in *Rat Bohemia*. They show that queer individuals who share history, both their own and the ancient history of their people, have the right to voice it as their loved ones pass—and to bear

witness to the tragedy they are surviving, even if that could make straight audiences uncomfortable.

Unbearable Witnessing

Bearing witness is crucial to resisting the culture industry and the narratives it wants to impose on the crisis events. As discussed by Chambers, witnessing writers are posited between ineffability of their traumatic experience and necessity to relay it in order to prevent their dead from being dehumanized further by being forgotten:

[t]he dilemma of surviving AIDS witnesses has much in common therefore with that of Holocaust survivor-witnesses and that of the witness survivors of trench warfare. It is the dilemma of having only a story of surviving to tell, when the story to be told would rightly be that of those who did not survive, and of having to tell that story of surviving for an audience one step further removed by virtue of survivorhood that blinds them to the hauntedness of the situation of survival. (246)

The survivor recognizes their particular position as a link between the one who died and the one who remains unaware of deaths caused by the crisis event and they attempt to bridge the gap between the two. In order to resolve the problem of telling the story of another who cannot tell their own story, Chambers suggests what Deleuze and Guattari called “agencing,” which entails “using one’s own voice to make the tellable story, of surviving, readable as referring to, because haunted by, the story that cannot otherwise be told” (246-47), which causes a move from the text being “haunted” (by the ineffable presence of trauma) to it becoming a “haunting” text (one that relays the trauma and renders it recognizable to its audiences). In Schulman’s writing, both her postmemory of Holocaust and the memory of people who died of AIDS are such a haunting presence. Rita, as a gay person, has a close experience of AIDS. Many of her male friends are dying while her unthreatened health allows her to witness the spread of the

epidemic. In the words of Edmund White, she is “both inside and outside the disease . . . an ideal chronicler of a community in distress” (“Witness” 31). That relation to the crisis event is true also of Schulman herself.

The work of witnessing in the novel is less often focused on minute details, like *People in Trouble* was, and more interested in the existential dilemmas posed by the disease. On many occasions, the novel discusses fears and challenges that are caused by living with AIDS. One clear example is the preoccupation with the clear and rapid link between passing time and deteriorating health signified, for instance, by the ongoing monitoring of T-cell count. T-cells are defensive cells that are attacked by HIV, making immune systems of PWAs more vulnerable. In the initial stage of the epidemic, this was often read as a sign of either tentative stability (when they remained on the same level), demise (when they dropped) or recuperation (when they were increasing). Understandably, it was an important metric for PWAs. The first page of *Rat Bohemia* already states that “David is HIV-positive but he still had 600 T-cells when he went to China” (3). By chapter twelve, he is down to below 200 T-cells, and a few chapters later he fantasizes about getting above that threshold. Not only does this number describe the biological facts of David’s health, but it also serves as a countdown to death, making him and the loved ones around him constantly and painfully aware of the passing of time.

Such acute awareness of one’s death translates into increased focus on it, and on what remains after:

David is very concerned about being remembered . . . [He] brings memory up all the time. I can see how appalled he is at how little any of us react to AIDS deaths. He’s focused a lot of worry on being forgotten. That’s one of his greatest motivations for

going on trips and writing us letters. Continuing to make new friends and building relationships is one way to ensure his legacy. (44)

Visibly, as David cannot control the sickness and has to come to terms with a great likelihood of premature death, he is trying to exert some control over how he will be remembered. He sees the relationships he can make in the community—the witnesses to his demise—as the means for such control. Thus, bearing witness to the epidemic acquires yet another meaning, aside from ethical and political; it is the matter of comfort given to a dying friend (or lack thereof, as David is disconcerted by tepid reactions to AIDS deaths), and of remaining loyal to them after they are gone. It also adds another layer of significance to the queer relationships represented in the novel; it is through them that gay PWAs can influence the way they will be remembered after their deaths. As this dissertation has argued on multiple occasions already, more traditional rites of remembrance typically neuter the subversive aspect of the lives of dead PWAs. It is up to their queer kin, thus, to remember the lives of those who died of AIDS as they were, and to know how the dead wanted to be remembered.

This perhaps makes the violence of David's father's eulogy clearer; not only does he deny what his son's life really was, but also he fulfills what David was scared about, i.e. being misremembered and his actual life being forgotten. This is true, too, of Muriel's account of their relationship, and her misrepresentation of David's criticism as rooted in jealousy, not her closetedness. This betrayal is metaphorically underscored in an especially vivid manner; as Muriel tells Rita the story of her friendship with David, she is eating dinner. Observing her, Rita begins daydreaming:

By this time the second plate of wings arrived and I watched her devour them again.

The smell of lard was deafening. It brought back the embalming fluid of that afternoon and for one moment, I imagined her tearing off David's flesh from his coffin filled with

hot sauce and pulling his gristle out from between her teeth. Dipping his celery fingers in blue cheese dressing. (169)

The cannibalistic imagery may have been triggered by an olfactory signal, but it clearly has a deeper significance. As Muriel spins her story, she misrepresents David who, in her memory, is a weak, angry and jealous man. While it would be false to say that David is none of these things, they become definitive in Muriel's account; as they fit her vision, they become the way their relationship is remembered, obliterating valid criticisms he had of her career. The destruction of a dead man's memory for one's self-serving purposes is, figuratively, linked to the abominable act of cannibalism. Just like having one's flesh eaten unmakes one's body in service of another's nourishment, the memory of David that the man himself wanted to remain after his death is unmade by Muriel, who needs to belittle him in order to keep her own, anxiously closeted, narrative consistent. Through this disconcerting imagery, Schulman makes readable the normalized violence of silencing queer voices and of misremembering their lives.

As previously stated, David worries how his queer kin might remember him. More specifically, he is anxious that the nightmare of illness will supplant any other memory of him, as he has seen it happening in other cases: “‘When Victor died,’ Dave said, ‘I asked Steve what he remembered of their thirteen years together and he said that all he remembered was piles of Victor’s shit from changing his diapers for two months. Rita, how do I ensure that my friends don’t remember me like that?’” (51). What further amplifies his fear is the fact that he is, too, a survivor who witnessed multiple deaths, and cannot see past the illness in his memories. Most importantly, he survived a relationship with a PWA. Don had been his boyfriend only for a few months before he got sick. Feeling responsible, and having genuine affection for Don, David decided to stay and became his primary caregiver. As a result, the majority of David's memories from their relationship are related to sickness, and he fights a losing battle when he tries to remember anything else about it:

Most of my memories of Don are in bed, plastic tubes up his nose and arms, lying there, infusing . . .

For a while I tried really hard to remember his chest the way it was at first in my hands. Like the side of a mountain. But the real memory is tired and sad with silvery worms of plastic coming out of his nose. That is how I will always picture my love. (71-72)

For David, there was no life with Don and without AIDS. Even if David tries to remember different aspects of their shared life, the disease cannot cease to be the defining attribute of their relationship. In this way, David, too, fails Don; the only thing that remains of their love is the memory of him “lying there, wan, very anxious, plastic in his orifices” (71). In David’s first-person narration very few things are said about the man he loved that are not AIDS-related, and the reader cannot make out what kind of person Don was. Presumably, however, he did not want to be remembered solely through the lens of the illness that killed him any more than David does. Thus, it is David’s own failure to bear witness to Don’s life that provokes his desperate attempts at making himself more memorable for those whom he is eventually going to leave behind.

As diminishing and bleak as David’s memory of Don might be, the novel also makes it clearly visible why it would be so definitive. The experience of giving care to a PWA in the 1980s, of being their life partner as they inch ever closer towards almost-certain death, is represented by Schulman as wholly overwhelming. When David calls his friend who is, at the time, taking care of his dying lover, the conversation cannot escape the subject:

“Hi Bob, how’s kicks?”

“Oh, Fred seems to be doing a lot better.”

“That’s great,” I said.

“Yeah, today he went outside on his own.”

“How are you doing?”

“Fine. Let’s see. This morning I took Fred to the herbalist. Those Chinese herbs are really miracle drugs. Then I took him into the clinic for a spinal tap and it really made him feel a lot better. He’s not so disoriented as he was last week.”

“Great. How are *you* doing?”

“Fine. Tomorrow I’m taking Fred to a neurologist and we’re doing exercises every day.”

“Do you get out at all?”

“Oh yeah, I get out. We have plenty of friends who come by. Thursday I take Fred to massage and we’ve been trying this vitamin B for neuropathy. Assotto Saint recommended it. It coats your nerve endings apparently.”

“Whatever.”

“Ooops, gotta go. Fred needs to eat. Thanks for calling.” (72)

This minute insight into Bob’s life makes it clear that being the primary caregiver to a PWA takes one’s life over completely. Bob repeatedly fails to differentiate between his efforts to heal Fred and his own life. The purpose of this scene is illuminated by the chronology of events in the novel. The conversation takes place immediately after David tries in vain to remember Don as a healthy person. Thus, it might be read easily as Schulman’s attempt to contextualize that failure. Various minutiae suggest that David’s caretaking of Don was as defining for that period of his life as taking care of Fred is for Bob. Being this intense an experience, it had to become the main thing David associates with Don. Significantly, all that the lovers struggle to achieve, both keeping PWA healthy and remembering them fully, are endeavors ultimately marked by failure. Attempts to heal end in death, while the struggles to keep the memory that would go beyond the sickness cannot escape it.

The situation of failing under extremely strenuous conditions is a defining characteristic to many of witnessing experiences shown in the novel. When Don became ill, he asked David to euthanize him in case it was needed:

When Don first started to get sick we barely knew each other. He asked me to make sure that if it ever got critical I wouldn't let him be reduced to infancy. That I would put him out of his pain. But then the time came and it was too late. I realized too late what was involved. I couldn't take Donny's life. He had to do it. If he didn't want to end up in diapers, then he had to choose death before he was too weak to make that choice. He couldn't leave that up to me. What did I know about death? I was only twenty-four. (78-79)

The burden of obligation turns out to be too much for someone so young, and for a relationship that was only just beginning. David fails once again, unable to assist Don with death despite having clear instructions what to do. That memory, too, haunts him and makes it impossible to move on, while it also informs his own experience of living with AIDS.

The failure to bear witness while facing the crisis event—and the impossibility of this task—is not limited to the lovers of PWAs, but to all queer kin. After over a decade of living in the state of crisis, queer communities go through the “AIDS burnout.” In the middle of 1990s, when Schulman wrote *Rat Bohemia*, queer relationships had become increasingly defined by being weary with grieving too many dead at too young an age. This, unwillingly and disturbingly, resulted in their inability to respond to individual deaths in a way that would give them justice. At one point Killer forgets about a memorial service, a drily ironic commentary on how ordinary they have become. During David's funeral, Rita wonders whether she should have ensured that he would have a Jewish funeral (as both she and David were Jews), but only in hindsight, once it has been planned already. Each of them has a sense of having failed their dead, but also of the inability to always avoid it since there are so many of them.

Omnipresence of death makes it also impossible to grieve each passing person in an ordinary manner. This is palpably visible during a memorial service organized for Robert, David's friend, and attended by many from his ACT UP circles:

Then they showed all these slides of him doing this and doing that—usually at a demonstration or with his family in California or wearing some T-shirt with a slogan on it. But the unexpected sideline was that many of the slides also included handfuls of our other dead. Peeking over his shoulder or deep in conversation or carrying the other side of the banner was inevitably someone we'd already buried. Someone I'd met through David or at a benefit or rally and who I knew for a fact was dead. Plus all the others that I'd never met, but the silent shifting of feet registered their forgotten absence.

The end result was that when the slides were finished and it was time for people to come up to the microphone and say what they had to say about Robert, no one had anything to say. What I really mean is, no one wanted to talk. They just wanted to get the hell out of there. I saw Assotto Saint, skinny and drawn, saying to a friend, "Well, I'm still here." Then, when no one had anything to say, he stood up slowly and just left.

(105)

The point of the memorial is to remember life, and to underscore the individual that Robert was. However, due to the heavy toll that the epidemic took, the slides mostly remind the audience about deaths of others, those who have been already forgotten, and dissolve the individual grief over the tragedy of Robert's demise into the collective agony of having a generation of gay men wiped out. The earnest effort to grieve and commemorate Robert ends up failing; no one has any more words to say on the subject because there is nothing more to say, nothing that has not been said yet. And, increasingly, there is a feeling that there is nothing to say or do that would stop the disease from killing them off.

The dead lurk not only in the slides whose main purpose is to trigger memories. Lost friends also haunt many everyday objects, to the point where they render it difficult to communicate with the living. As David decides to call somebody on a lonely evening so as to get some company, he reads his list of contacts:

By two a.m. I was going through my phone book wondering who I could possibly call. Could I call Kurt? It really was too late. What about all those people in San Francisco? Amy is in Berlin. Bob isn't agitated enough for late night phone calls. John is dead. Mark is dead. Sam is dead. The other Bob is waiting for his boyfriend to die. Maybe I'll call Kurt . . .

I could call José in Phoenix. He'll remember me. But what would we talk about? If I wanted phone sex I'd dial 1-900. I could call David in LA, but he'll think something's up and ask me four thousand times if I'm all right. Joe is dead. I could call Linda except she's so annoying. Phil Zwickler is dead. Bo Houston is dead. John Bernd is dead. Martin Worman is dead. Jon Greenberg is dead. Robert Garcia is dead. I already talked to Carl last week. Don is dead. (72-73)

Since many of the potential recipients of David's late-night call are dead, the phone book unintentionally loses its original, practical purpose. Instead, it too becomes an object of remembrance. Since it has become haunted by so many ghosts, it detracts David from living on; reading his list of contacts, initially motivated by the purpose of talking with the living, becomes yet another encounter with the dead instead.

The repetitive invocation of the plentiful friends David has lost, each one by name, is highly reminiscent of the roll call motif. Once again Schulman's postmemory of the Holocaust is clearly readable in her writing, as roll call is a highly important theme in camp literature. In concentration camps, it was a twice-daily ritual during which the living met the dead and the

soon-to-be-dead. When Ross Chambers discusses Charlotte Delbo's trilogy *Auschwitz and After*, he summarizes it in the following manner:

A common topos of Holocaust writing, roll call in the camp is a subject to which, in *None of Us*, Delbo reverts as to an obsession, as if for her roll call is the ordeal that best captures the nature of the whole Ordeal, its crucial synecdoche. The reduction of individuals to a gray mass of anonymous figures; the gratuitous cruelty of forcing starved, thinly clad, physically exhausted and psychologically demoralized people to stand for hours motionless in the snow; the selections for the gas and for medical experiments; the sight of the dead en route to the ovens, but also the mandatory presence, alongside the still living, of the corpses of those who have died overnight or during the day; all this on top of endless deprivation, unbearable fatigue, daily beatings—this ordeal figures the nature of the camps itself: their inhuman cruelty, meticulously organized in conception, random in execution. (214)

This horrific ritual is also, however, an occasion for solidarity. The women Delbo writes about know that they need to come together in order to survive:

Roll call figures a situation of extremity that is at the opposite pole from return—the very threshold of death. At the same time, however—something that surprises Delbo—it is a twice-daily manifestation of a will to survive, and of a tacit agreement among the women prisoners that the only way to endure is through collective solidarity and mutual support. (214)

Based on this duality, Chambers distinguishes two kinds of roll calls in Auschwitz; one a part of the genocidal system, another the sign of resistance among its victims, one “that takes stock of the damage and seeks, somehow, to keep going . . . [that] calls to the dead and restores something of the lost continuity between them and the groups of survivors” (216). This second type of roll call is both an acknowledgement of kinship, and of a loss.

When David pores over his phone book, he clearly “takes stock of the damage.” The roll call turns out to be a strikingly apt manner of remembrance and grieving. Each person is given an individual sentence that spells out their name; for a short flash both David and the reader become aware, or reminded, of each singular death. Yet, there is no fantasy of regular, extensive grief over each loss, as there are simply too many of them. Due to the multiplicity of individual deaths, David both acknowledges each individual and, by listing so many of them, he makes readable the scope of the epidemic, and its influence on a life of an individual survivor. In stark contrast, the slides utilized during Robert’s memorial were intended to underscore an individual death over a longer period of time, in what we might call a regular mode of grieving in the West. Since this attempt to grieve ignores the reality of the epidemic, the memory of Robert is invaded by other ghosts who accompany him on the slides; soon, his memorial ceases to be about him, and becomes about the epidemic as a whole. Thus, the slides fail in its task of underscoring individuality; meanwhile, the roll call succeeds in its attempt to make the scope of the loss readable, through amassing bursts of individual grief.

Clearly, this is a strikingly disillusioned, unromanticized grief that is at odds with the dominant perspective of mourning. The latter takes as its overt purpose to allow those who mourn to heal. As Jacqueline S. Thursby states in her study on American funerary practices, “death has always brought with it a sense of loss and a reason to create or construct practices and behaviors to provide some level of comfort for the survivors and some sense of security for those being placed in the grave” (27). These practices often take the shape of elaborate festivities that, when applied to the people who died of AIDS, become increasingly out of touch with the reality where death is not as an extraordinary event, but a regular one. The work of mourning in *Rat Bohemia* thus moves away from ordinary modes of grieving whose main purpose is to comfort the mourners and allow them to express their sadness. Those ordinary modes of grief would normally include looking for a meaning in both life and death of the

buried individual. The task of the witness, however, is to testify to the events as experienced, not as comfortably interpreted. As Rita puts it:

One thing I know for sure is that AIDS is not a transforming experience. I know that we tend to romanticize things like death based on some kind of religious model of conversion and redemption. We expect that once people stare down their mortality in the mirror they will understand something profound about death and life that the rest of us have to wait until old age to discover. But that's not what happens. Actually, people just become themselves. But ever so much more so. (*Rat Bohemia* 52)

The meaning of an individual death can be—and according to age-old narratives, is—found in the profound truth and wisdom that accompanies it. However, to bear witness is to acknowledge that there is no comforting recompense for these deaths. They are unnecessary and pointless, and the fact they have not been stopped should not be offset by any compensating narrative.

On a larger scale, meanings have been imposed on the epidemic as a whole. These explanations ranged from the conservative narratives which saw the virus as an instrument sent by God to punish the sinners to IGF's account of the epidemic as a stage in the maturation of gay people.²⁷ They all shared the inevitable result of the imposition of meaning—that the crisis event became more bearable and acceptable, i.e. less subversive and dangerous to the Western assumption that the civilization behaves in a civilized manner. The task of the witness is, then, to *resist* the imposition of meaning onto the crisis event, which is exactly what Rita is doing:

The public discourse on AIDS is getting more twisted by the minute. So many want to believe that there is some spiritual message at the core of this disaster—something we can all learn. That makes it more palatable, doesn't it? That makes it more redemptive. We all know the only good homosexual is a dead one, but if we can prove that we're getting some kind of benefit out of our own destruction, then maybe straight people will

²⁷ See Chapter 1, p. 50.

have a little more pity. But facts are facts. There is nothing to be learned by staring death in the face every day of your life. AIDS is just fucking sad. It's a burden. There's nothing redeeming about it. (52)

For Rita, to romanticize the epidemic by seeing it as an opportunity to learn some profound truth about life and humanity is a betrayal of the task of the witness. Paradoxically, it is only the brutal truth that these deaths were meaningless and needless that can do them justice; only that can make America recognize the tragedy it allowed to happen. Of course, the more redemptive narratives are much more seductive, and through the operation of the culture industry of AIDS they mostly succeed in imposing meanings onto the epidemic. After all, even Rita betrays the memory of her dead for a moment, inventing her own, queer narrative—that the havoc wreaked by the epidemic was meant to give the survivors parental love. Significantly, though, as she tries to test this narrative, she becomes bitterly disappointed and rediscovers the meaninglessness of the epidemic. This turn of events serves as a testament to how unfounded the narratives which impose meaning onto the epidemic really are.

In the time of AIDS burnout, this unromanticized approach to death also translates into a similar reaction to illness. No longer can each gravely sick person be treated as a separate tragedy, and no longer can they expect that their queer kin will see them that way. Thus, the witnesses and caregivers in *Rat Bohemia* are not guardian angels fully committed to comforting the dying. The burden simply has made this kind of sacrifice unsustainable. Moreover, to protect the feelings of the dying would be to make the whole situation more bearable on the basis of a lie, thus occluding the reality of the crisis event, which Rita refuses to do. Therefore, the feelings are not spared and when Rita talks with David, she is straightforward: “David sat there and told me his most private thoughts about this death. While he was talking, I did exactly what I'd done forty times before which is to very matter-of-factly refuse to pretend that he's not going to die” (51). When he asks her anxiously what he needs to do in order to ensure his

friends will not remember him only through the lens of the disease, she responds pragmatically: “You could tell us it’s okay to hire a nurse” (51), knowledgeably anticipating the guilt such move, eventually necessary, provokes. While her responses might sound crude, her purpose cannot be to lift the weight off the shoulders of the dying. Such an attempt would be futile, anyway: after over a decade of the epidemic, it is counterproductive to console the dying PWAs anymore, as they, themselves, used to console their own dead and thus know the falsity of the reassurance. The ordinary means of assisting the dead have been compromised. What Rita can do is bear witness—to understand what is happening and resist any explanation that would make it easier on anyone, including her and David. Or, as Molly put it in the epilogue of *People in Trouble*, “remember the truth, and not just the stories” (267).

To bear witness to the epidemic means also to testify to the effects caregiving has on the witnesses. This is a subversive endeavor, as it disputes the deeply-rooted assumption present in many cultures, including the Western culture, that the caregiver should be self-sacrificing. In her vivid blog post describing her experience as a primary caregiver for her husband, Ann Hoffmann talks not only about the obvious strain the experience has on her life, but also about the burden of social expectation she needs to manage:

When I say caregiving sucks, you tell me “no, you don’t really mean that.” But yes, yes I really do.

I’ve come to see this practice as caregiver-shaming and would like it if you’d please stop.

To start, you can stop telling me how I should be feeling. Stop telling me I shouldn’t be angry. Stop saying there is something rewarding about what I’m doing because trust me, there isn’t. And also, for the love of all things mighty and good: Please stop telling me how lucky I am. As one military caregiving wife I know says, “Sure I’m

glad my husband came home alive. But he's in pieces, not whole. I don't get how people somehow think this makes me 'lucky?'" (Hoffmann)

The authorities concerned with the issue are well aware of the burden social expectations have on the caregivers. For instance, University of Derby has published a self-help article for students in caregiving professions to acknowledge the issue and prepare them for the shame-related issues intertwined with their chosen career:

Shame is experienced in relation to the expectations placed upon them, so being aware of this standard can trigger their sense of shame (for example, "I shouldn't feel down because I am supposed to help others who are depressed"). Our recent research identified that the levels of shame felt by caring subject students were indeed high, and that those with stronger caregiver identities tended to feel more ashamed of having a mental health problem. Furthermore, unsurprisingly, increased shame was related to poor mental health. (Kotera)

Visibly, caregivers struggle with unrealistic social expectations placed upon them. The shame of failing to fulfill them, or having negative emotional reactions while fulfilling them, might be damaging to the caregivers' mental health. On the other hand, voicing a negative experience of caregiving may be perceived as a breach of social taboo that elicits a shaming response. Caregivers are, simply put, expected to never have any negative feelings about their difficult and unpaid work; they are expected to be self-sacrificing and silent about what they need to sacrifice.

With its task of bearing witness as its primary goal, Schulman offers in *Rat Bohemia* honest and unromanticized representation of caregiving and accompanying the dying. As already demonstrated, Rita's loyalty is not the most comforting. Killer, too, breaches the taboo as she voices in her narration her disgust when she visits David: "I watched [sweat] dripping and was utterly repulsed. I didn't want to be, but honestly, I was. I felt like I was going to throw

up—the way you want to vomit at the smell of homeless people even while having nothing against them and a great deal of pity” (*Rat Bohemia* 107). Revulsion is a reflex that does not fit the dominant narratives of kin taking care of their loved ones. Similarly, Killer is tired with the cultural taboo which forbids to speak ill of the dead: “There’s that strange pathology at memorial services where the person had to have been perfect. You’re never allowed to mention any trouble or doubts you might have had about him” (104-05). The inability to share any misgivings about the dead is very constraining when one’s memory is densely populated with ghosts. It is also another manner of eradicating memory for the purpose of a story; the failings and flaws also make for a fuller picture of a human being, one that does not necessarily fit the dominant narratives.

While the dying go through a horrible tragedy, survivorhood, too, is a tragedy of its own. At one point, David goes out with a few friends, but Manuel, the only one who is not seropositive, is distant during their conversation: “I felt sorry for that schmuck. He was surrounded by the faces of his future ghosts” (91). Even though it is Manuel who is healthy and thus in an enviable situation, David recognizes and sympathizes with the burden of witnessing that awaits his friend. Rita struggles with the position of survivor, too, and she recognizes it to be the root of a profound inequality in her friendships with gay men. Since her tragedy as a survivor is incomparable to the tragedy of the dying PWAs, the experiences of the latter are what her friendships revolve around. Her own tragedy, however, is in desperate need of acknowledgement: “what I had to say paled in comparison to [David’s] experiences but I’m the one who’s gonna be left behind again. Doesn’t that have a meaning too?” (51). Interestingly, the question is never posed to David. It is as if, as she cannot count on the sympathy of her dying friends, Rita implored the readers to hear *her* story and bear witness to *her* distress. What she does is an example of “agencing”—her story is defined by the men who die around her, and who cannot tell their own story. That she wants to have her own story heard is not in

contradiction with the task of the witness, but rather in congruence with it. Rita has only her own story to tell, and it is through that story that the readers become aware of the stories of the dead.

It does not mean that she expects David to be less self-centered and a better friend to her, either. Instead, she is glad that she still has strength to be his friend: “Thank God pure mutuality is not my prerequisite for relationships. If it was, I wouldn’t be able to talk to anybody except one or two dykes sitting on park benches watching the rats” (53). In the world where all her friends are dying, Rita cannot count on being listened to—only on having to do the listening. Even voicing such thought processes bears signs of crossing some taboo. Death of a loved one as understood outside the crisis event is such a rare occurrence that life can and is expected to revolve around it for a while. However, with as many dead as Rita comforted, it cannot feasibly be so. For Schulman, the witnesses are not heroic; they are thoroughly distressed by the tragedy around them, but they are also deeply human. They are not the presence that makes death more bearable; they are yet another group of people for whom the epidemic is unbearable, and addressing it is of critical importance. And crucially, unlike the dead, they have not been completely silenced yet.

Bearing witness does not mean merely pointing the finger in the accusatory gesture. Schulman represents the task of the witness as the uneasy company kept in the impossible situation. The main responsibility for her characters is not to comfort or to make passing away easier, but to stay honest and true. It is only through that painful honesty that the dead can be given justice, rather than a false, palatable narrative. And it is only through such painful honesty the tragedy of the witness, the one who remains, can also be finally voiced.

No Country for the Rats

Schulman's claim is not only that the American government ignores the violence done to the PWAs. Rather, she shows how violence permeates the Western culture. One of her greatest achievements is that she does not represent the inhumane response to the AIDS epidemic in a vacuum, but as a logical consequence of deeper problems troubling the Western world. Homophobia, class exclusion, imperialism or racism, too, are different layers of violence that are integral to American social life. Troy, who used to be an activist, voices the idea: "Americans are dangerous, Killer. We destroy the earth, mind, and lymph node, and then market that destruction. We make it sound groovy" (127). There is an obviously anti-capitalist sentiment in her grievances against marketing. Clearly "the earth" refers to the ecological crisis, whereas "lymph node" refers to spreading the disease through tourism and failure to provide medication to the PWAs. "Mind" conceivably refers to the culture industry itself, with its aim to shelter its audiences from the uncomfortable truth and to discourage critical thinking. Destruction of all three works against the dominant idea of the United States as a beneficial presence in the world, subverting the patriotic narratives in American literature. Significantly, these grievances were articulated in the 1990s, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, at the time of unprecedented global domination of the United States, democracy, and capitalism.

Rita assumes that violence is to be expected within American life. In fact, she is used to it enough to be able to differentiate between its various brands:

That guy, last Sunday, who was throwing bottles? All he cared about was himself. His personal expression was more important to him than other people's eyes. That's the kind of attitude that makes this town a dangerous place to live. You never know when it can hit. The shooting in front of The Unique was more reasonable. It was just a bunch of friends killing each other. Don't have friends like that and it won't happen to you. (5)

It is not the *fact* of violence that rattles Rita. She takes it for granted that some kind of shootout is bound to happen, as they are commonplace in her New York experience. She finds consolation in the fact that participation in violence can be avoided by taking appropriate precautions, such as avoiding socializing with violent people. However, even that safeguard is insufficient, as it cannot shield her from being at risk due to senseless, random acts of violence which are commonplace enough to make her feel that her city is dangerous.

The normalized violence is not only the one between the friends who might have guns; it is also systematic violence, manifested through exclusion, silencing, or eradication of memory. Once again, gentrification is particularly important for Schulman in representing the state as inherently violent. A memorial for another dead PWA involves an awkward situation:

The official stepping-off spot for the funeral was at Houston Street and First Avenue at five o'clock. But, the organizers forgot that about twenty-five homeless people sold their stuff on that very spot every day. There is no more public space in urban life. The people with no private space live in it. Then the city tells them that that is their private problem. So we all had to kind of stand around them, step over them, and refuse them nonchalantly while crying and comforting each other at the same time. (155)

Copresence of the mourners and the homeless attests to the multiple facets of what is both inhumane and normalized in the United States. Those who mourn should not have their grief disturbed by the homeless; the homeless should have a space to live in; and, of course, none of them, including those who died of AIDS, should have been ignored by the government. Yet all of them are, and it is to be expected, just like a shootout among friends.

The idea of normalized violence is central to the symbolic meaning of rats, which appear as a key symbol in the novel. Annihilation of pests is very normalized, and fairly non-controversial. The figure of rodents blurs the boundaries between the obscene and appropriate discourses in the Western culture. The rat infestation, as well as Rita's determination to manage

it, open the possibility of employing the discourse of genocide: “Once it became evident that no poison was ever going to get them, the guys at the lab came up with the most diabolical tactic ever attempted in the history of Rat vs. Human warfare. Warfarin. It is this odorless, tasteless, anticoagulant that produces massive internal hemorrhaging” (151). An effect-oriented development of killing methods is justified and only mildly disturbing due to its normalized purpose: rodent extermination. However, in the context of Rita’s Jewish heritage, death camps are a clear subtext. Just like American scientists work on the most efficient ways of killing rats, Nazi scientists looked for means of performing mass annihilation on human beings. Conspiracy theories regarding the manufactured origin of AIDS, and the suggestions that the government intentionally sought to get rid of the “undesirable demographics,” are another implicit meaning of this passage.²⁸ The employment of a culturally justified discourse of genocide in thematic and compositional relation to the extreme events draws attention to the availability of genres in which such discourse is viable. Ultimately, it achieves a transgressive effect, introducing the obscene implication that the viability of such conversation with regards to other objects, including humans, is not entirely uncivilized, but rather relies solely on the definition of “rodents.”

On many occasions, Schulman explores the polyphonic meaning of the symbol, having her characters discuss the actual rats, while also invoking their symbolic meaning. There are several links through which they can be linked to both PWAs and Jews. First, rats are strongly associated with disease: “In 1898 Simond showed experimentally that rats could spread fleas infected by the bubonic plague bacterium (*Yersinia pestis*), and since then the rat has been considered the carrier of plague” (Edelman, B. 3). This points to a popular interpretation of gay

²⁸ These were the theories circulating freely within queer communities, and often referred to in AIDS writing. For instance, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick relates them in the following manner: “speculation was ubiquitous about whether the virus had been deliberately engineered or spread, whether HIV represented a plot or experiment by the U.S. military that had gotten out of control, or perhaps that was behaving exactly as it was meant to” (123).

people as “spreaders of HIV,” a dehumanizing view that simplified the story of how the epidemic came to be. It also harkens back to the centuries-old images of Jews poisoning the water supply.²⁹ Moreover, Rita’s reflections on the rat migration point to both the spread of AIDS epidemic and the Jewish migration:

[New Yorkers] don’t realize that at the exact second that they are watching rodents frolicking on the subway tracks, somewhere off in a faraway ocean, a weather-beaten fishing trawler is about to dock on a tiny island. Stowed away in the locker of that boat is a pair of one-pound Norway rats ready to scoot along the hawser when the sun goes down. At the same moment, deep in the hold of a neighborly grain barge, a family of Polynesian rats are about to come ashore. Once they’ve invaded the previously pristine spot, these rats are going to go after large unsuspecting birds by biting the backs of their necks, severing their spines and chewing off their legs. (*Rat Bohemia* 149–50)

The image of rats travelling to devour pristine lands refers to the ways HIV virus has spread throughout the world due to air travel and to the way in which Jewish immigrants fled Europe. The copresence of these meanings serves double purpose of simultaneous description and commentary; recognition of rats as the figure for HIV virus draws attention to the restrictive policies preventing the migration of HIV-positive people. Both, in turn, point to the history of anti-Semitism related to the Jewish migration. The metaphors of purity and contagion are introduced by Schulman in a non-obtrusive form of commentary on rodent extermination, but point towards, and demand to acknowledge, the obscene discourses of dehumanization constructed to talk about Jews and People With AIDS.

This unstable meaning of the rats is utilized not only to draw parallels, but also to make a social commentary. For instance, rats function in the novel as a symbol of the state’s ineptitude. In the opening chapter Rita notes that “sometime in the 1980s I started to see them

²⁹ See Chapter 2, pp. 69-70.

scampering regularly in the playgrounds of Central Park. Reagan had just become president and I held him directly responsible. Rat infestation felt like something the U.S. government should really have been able to handle” (5). This is clearly linked to the ideology of neoliberalism, not only through Reagan, but also through the politics of cuts on public spending: “A few years ago the mayor of New York decided to cut back on rat extermination. He also cut back on streetlights. As a result, night increasingly meant these dark outlines of buildings surrounded by the scampering of eighteen-inch varmints. Ten million of them at least” (4). Frugality and neoliberalism link rat infestation at yet another angle with the AIDS epidemic: both rats and the disease are the problems neoliberal ideology failed to address properly, to a great extent because it did not want to spend money.

John Goshert discusses another significant point made using the parallel meanings of the symbol. At one point, Rita’s co-workers from Pest Control kill rats by hitting them with shovels, a scene observed by a crowd of art students, none of whom would take the picture, “too busy being surprised, I guess” (*Rat Bohemia* 46). Pest Control workers exterminating rodents are clearly an interesting photo opportunity replete with symbolic meaning that the art students would be expected to respond to; yet none of the intellectual youth has the drive to bear witness.³⁰ As Goshert argues, this scene represents both increased visibility that queer people obtained with AIDS and ongoing inaction (or punitive action) on the part of the state: “The visibility of AIDS was . . . typically associated with gay men, but visibility did not provide any new legitimacy for people with AIDS or gay people; on the contrary . . . visible manifestations of AIDS provided the grounds for renewed commitments by families, cities, and nations to the marginalization of their gay constituents (“The Aporia...” 61–62). Rat

³⁰ Kate’s constant surprise at the violence of gentrification and obstinate unawareness of the crisis come to mind as a correspondent theme in *People in Trouble*. See Chapter 3, pp. 129-30.

extermination figures AIDS and the Holocaust, and lack of response on the part of students refers to the failure to bear witness to these crisis events.

Significantly, the issues of rodent extermination and gentrification are intertwined; the gentrified areas are finally free of rat infestation. As Rita and David enter reopened Tompkins Square Park, they are in awe:

“God, it’s beautiful,” I said.

And it was.

New paths, new drinking fountains that worked, new benches, new chess tables for old men. A dog run, bike paths, three playgrounds, and a basketball court.

“No rats,” Rita noticed right away. (*Rat Bohemia* 96)

A park in the gentrified neighborhood is a more pleasant place to visit, offering comfortable respite in the heart of the city. The place Schulman chose to represent this transformation could not have been more significant. It was the closing of this particular park that caused a riot in 1988, one referred to both in *People in Trouble* and in *RENT*. The homeless that used to live there are not gone because the problem has been solved; they have been merely pushed out of sight so that they would not disturb anyone else. Once again, we can observe “cultural Dalmane” at work here. Disappearance of rats points also to the erosion of gay villages in the gentrified areas, which have been largely heterosexualized. The park is beautiful because it does not include any “undesirables”; there is no place for rats in America.

Since the image of rats is often used to signify dehumanization of excluded groups, Rita’s own job in Pest Control is of particular significance. It clearly foreshadows her later betrayal of David’s memory. She sees herself as the link between the rats, the Jews, and gay people. One of her formative moments was the first time she identified with rodents:

One night I was so alone . . . And I looked up at a passing boat and saw a rat climbing out of a hole on the dock about three feet from my face. Then I saw that there was a whole swarm of them, that they owned this place and could do as they wished . . .

My first rats. They were the symbol of my condition. And, I have to say, that although it is a blasphemy, I thought of my mother and compared myself to her. We had both been punished and neither of us had done anything wrong. Is it really bad of me to compare myself to a Jew? (196)

The boat in the scene stands for New York City, filled with gay people, and for the early twentieth-century Germany full of Jews. There is no strength in numbers, however; as soon as the rats leave the ship and hop on the American shore, they become subjects of Pest Control hunt and may end up killed by Rita who identified with them before. That Rita occupies this liminal position, able both to identify with the rats and to hunt them, relays the liminality of *all* witnessing; such work can be very easily undone at any moment, if the witness slips and fails to attest to the truth. As they do that, they “join the hunt,” i.e. they partake in systematic violence against the memory of the crisis event they initially intended to resist.

As noted by Goshert, at another point Rita’s betrayal is foreshadowed by rats devouring bodies of their dead: “there’s that oh so familiar smell of rotting carcasses, rat flesh. The other rats feast off of it for days” (25). As it has been discussed already, the cannibalistic imagery is used in the novel elsewhere; Rita imagines Muriel consuming the body of David as she eats chicken wings. Muriel spins her story of disturbing friendship with David and distorts his memory as she eats. Similarly, Rita first identifies with rats who can eat their own kind and then she is able, just like Muriel, to betray the memory of David for her own purposes when she meets his father.

A plurality of readable meanings contained in the figure of rats results in repeated agencing of the story of the dead. It uses the tellable story (of systematic rat extermination) to tell the untellable story (of systematic human extermination, of state failure to respond to the epidemic). Agencing, as discussed by Chambers, always depends on foreknowledge (of the death camp; of the history of lethal exclusion) that is “culturally occluded” (37). I understand the cultural occlusion to take place through the operation of the culture industry, in accordance with the processes described in more detail in chapters 1 and 2. Chambers states that agencing works through *reminding* the reader of what they already know, but prefer (and are enticed to) forget. Rats’ regular reappearance serves, thus, as a reminder of what the culture industry intends to obscure; the rodents are unwelcome in America even though (or perhaps *because*) they are an antidote to Dalmane, chewing away at the comfortable blur allowing the Western culture to remain confident in its civilizational status.

Significantly, rats are related to another important figure in the novel, that of a bohemian. As Rita tries to find a social category she fits in, Killer is of assistance: “We’re bohemians. We don’t have those dominant culture values . . . Nowadays it’s not generational. Bohemians aren’t grouped by clothes or sex or age. Nowadays, it’s just a state of mind. Anyone with a different idea is IN” (*Rat Bohemia* 29). Bohemians are understood as people who resist power rather than align with it. This figure, as defined by Schulman, is not very different to that seen in *RENT* and discussed in chapters 2 and 3: it is vaguely dissenting towards broadly understood status quo. However, whereas Larsson stops at that, drawing clear and fairly stable lines between bohemians and non-bohemians, Schulman allows for more nuance. The figure of a bohemian, as discussed by Killer, is very unstable due to economic circumstances: “In the fifties, the Beats, those guys were so all-American. They could sit around and ponder aesthetic questions but a cup of coffee cost a nickel. Nowadays, with the economy the way it is, you can’t drop out or you’ll be homeless . . . You have to meet the system head-on at least once in a while

and that meeting, Rita, is very brutal” (30). Alignment with power, which constitutes a betrayal of bohemian values, is rendered inevitable due to the American economy in the last two decades of the 20th century. For instance, the economic circumstances make it necessary for Rita to work in Pest Control. Pushed by the economic exigency, she cannot avoid compromising her values, which further complicates the difficult task of bearing witness. *RENT*, whose plot has been adjusted for the needs and tastes of its middle-class audiences, may be seen as an attempt at bearing witness which has aligned with power due to the operation of the culture industry. That it draws clear lines between the “bohemian” and “non-bohemian” positions allows it to comfortably occlude its own betrayal of the task of the witness and the pressure the economic reality actually puts on Americans. Because *Rat Bohemia* testifies to the difficulty of witnessing, as well as to the impossibility of the clear division between the bohemian and non-bohemian positions, it also invites scrutiny whether it fails or succeeds at bearing witness.

Rita, identifying with rats, recognizes herself both as an exterminator, doing a job for which she is getting paid, and as one of the exterminated, witnessing the lack of response to AIDS. The refusal to embrace fully the former and gain rewards for aligning with power is expressed by Schulman in a manifesto-like passage:

I’m an UnAmerican. I believe that ninety percent of the people can be wrong at the same time. Your entire family can be wrong and you might be the only one who is right.

QUESTION: Is it better off, in that case, to be wrong?

NO. That’s the patriotic way. Don’t do that.

BE RIGHT.

Because, the way I figure it is that if I make my contribution to truth, some Rat Bohemian down the line will notice and appreciate it. She’ll be sitting down in a city strewn with rats and rat carcasses and will come across my petite observation. That’s

the most amazing relationship in the universe. The girl on rat bones who knows that she is not alone. (53–54)

Through this passage, Rita manifests her alertness to the practices that aim at the incorporation of minority experiences within normative narratives without actively helping any of the subject minority groups. This is akin to Goshert's notion of increased visibility that provides no legitimacy, which, in the case of the AIDS epidemic, amounted to representation of the disease in the media and the culture industry of AIDS that failed to grasp the perspectives and needs of PWAs. Remaining vigilant in the face of narratives that warp and misrepresent the crisis event is at the core of a successful witnessing practice. Such practice provides, in turn, the site for actual community in time of a crisis event. It would be a community of the eponymous "rat bohemians," a queer community of those who not only present a dissenting stance, but who are also acutely aware of how easy it is to align with dominant culture.

Schulman represents the complex nexus of interrelations that the rejection of gay people from their families causes in their lives, the lives of their families, and in social life as a whole. She does so through the lens of her postmemory of the Holocaust, which allows her to convey the experiences of being discriminated against and the tactics of turning the excluded into the excluding. Showing that gay people are not exempt from the allure of alignment with power, the author problematizes the figure of a witness and shifts the way it is understood from a stable identity to an unstable practice. This practice necessarily fails at times, as the witnesses of the crisis event face an impossible situation. By encoding the ideas of failure, isolation and betrayal into the symbol of rats, Schulman agences the story of dead PWAs as she simultaneously invites the discourse of rodent extermination and destabilizes its object, thus pointing to the obscene reality of the epidemic. The awareness that witnessing is a constant practice of dissent from cultural techniques that relegate crisis events to the edge of consciousness is represented by Schulman as a precondition of a successful testimony, while

her use of the symbol of rats serves as an example of such dissenting stance. The practice of witnessing, just as the rats, remains a constant in the lives of Schulman's characters, as they are both at odds with the dominant American culture looking for ways to purge itself from the burden of reality.

Conclusion

The culture industry of AIDS, understood as an instrument of biopolitics, represents the epidemic in a manner that strengthens the sexual hierarchy system and facilitates the neoliberal takeover of gay activism. It does so through proliferating the familiar narratives invested in maintaining the status quo. These narratives tend to show gay identity as stable and desexualized, and to dilute the sense of urgency through imparting a share of the blame for the epidemic on the groups most directly impacted by AIDS—and through focusing on that share. These strategies are deployed in order to avoid answering the epistemological and ethical questions posed by the epidemic insofar as the civilizational standards—so cherished and touted by the official Western discourses—are concerned.

The effects of its operation are still visible, as the dominant and pervasive narratives of the AIDS epidemic are very much aligned with its mainstream representation. However, at the historical moment of what I call the initial stage of the epidemic—the period between the realization that there is a new lethal viral agent circulating within the population and the introduction of combination therapy, which made the prospects of those wealthy enough to afford it much better—it was in especially stark contrast to a multitude of expressions of queer kinship that motivated various forms of AIDS activism and non-normative art about AIDS.

The struggle between the grassroots witnessing to the epidemic and the systematic attempts to rewrite its history is palpable in Sarah Schulman's body of work. Two of her novels—*People in Trouble* and *Rat Bohemia*—take this issue specifically as their main focus. They represent the heteronormative conceits about the epidemic vis a vis actual experiences of PWAs and their social circles. They put to question the powerful cultural narratives of blood kinship with respect to the behavior of many families in response to the epidemic, as opposed to the behavior of the queer communities PWAs belonged to. They tell the stories of communal

empowerment as achieved through activism, seen as a tool able to force change. And they testify to the very weaknesses and deficiencies that the epidemic exposed in the midst of the Western self-image and that the culture industry of AIDS tries to obscure. Thus, Schulman is able to question the limits of the Western concept of “the civilized,” focusing on how we can process death in multitudes, on the kinds of freedom the late capitalist state allows, and on how it decides who is worth saving and who is not.

Within this context, Schulman sees queer kinship, the manner of sociality based in volition yet partaking in the very rituals of life and death normatively assigned to blood relatives, as crucial in imagining a better, more just and ethical kind of bond. In her much later novel, *The Cosmopolitans*, she extols this manner of sociality as the one that joins Bette, the novel’s protagonist, with Earl, her gay best friend:

There are many different kinds of love. True, novels and cinema, the work of culture and commerce, have prepared all to believe that only two really matter: the romantic pairing of a man and woman and the love between parent and child. Every message trumpets these as everlasting, of central importance, and beyond evaluation or reproach. But in Bette’s experience, neither claim was true . . .

“Love,” in these examples, was an enactment of value. It was an assertion of place in the social order. It meant everything on the outside and little within.

Bette looked inside herself and knew for a fact that the love she had for Earl and he for her—the years of loyalty, the time, the confiding, the rooting for, the thinking of, and now her unfaltering faith that he could ultimately do the right thing, the acceptance of conflict, and the refusal to shun him—that all this was more powerful than the twisting and discarding that took place between blood relations. Than the deceptions that transpired between lovers. She knew that this love should be the center of novels and poems and plays, operas and such, but it couldn’t be. Because then all the falsity

would be exposed in comparison—to love when you are not supposed to is so much deeper than to love as instructed to do. (240-241)

Queer kinship, Schulman's argument goes, is special because it is not supported by the social superstructure. On the contrary, it sprouts and blossoms regardless of it, and often in spite of the hostile cultural climate. Because of it, it is not entangled in the powerful narratives which support the status quo; it needs not be congruent with the aims of biopolitics, nor does it require sexual borders or neoliberal justifications. It is a goal in itself. While the dominant culture imagined itself as more ethical, civilized and just than it proved to be at the time of crisis, it was queer kinship, despite the hardships, that propelled people to articulate a more humane response to the epidemic.

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