affects and emotions generated in and by ACT UP also helped to secure the movement’s emotional habitus, its potentially unstable resolution to lesbians’ and gay men’s contradictory feelings about self and society, and its political horizon. It is hard to dispute the righteousness of angry, queer, defiant AIDS activism when, through such engagement, participants also experience sentiments of camaraderie, of political efficacy, of making history, of being changed, and of living meaningful lives. ACT UP participants faced both a society where street activism was frequently disparaged and a community that had a history of hesitancy about angry, confrontational activism. Direct-action AIDS activists were bucking both systems, and they took some heat for that. The intense feelings generated in the movement—of self-affirmation, purposefulness, connection to others, shared resolve, love—fortified a commitment to ACT UP, helping the movement to flourish into the early 1990s.

There is no fixed recipe for sustaining a movement, but the case of ACT UP indicates the importance of feelings in nourishing activism—feelings that derive from being recognized and affirmed in one’s self, from connecting to others and becoming part of a “we,” from engaging in something larger that oneself, from experiencing self-organization and autonomy within collectivity, from being enticed to change and try out new ways of being. I would venture that social movements sustain themselves at the level of desire. A movement milieu—shaped in large part by its emotional habitus—expresses desire for different forms of social relations, different ways of being, a different world. In doing so, a movement allows participants to feel their own perhaps squelched desires or to develop new ones that through articulation can become contagious, flooding others’ imaginations and drawing them into the movement. In articulating and enacting what previously might have been unimaginable, a movement offers a scene and future possibilities that surprise, entice, exhilarate, and electrify. One general lesson, then, is that movements enhance their sustainability when they speak to people at the level of desire, allowing, or better, enticing, participants to collectively develop and pursue their aspirations for a different world.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Emotion Work of Movements

To grasp the sources of political action and the various forms it takes requires attending to the emotion work in which activists and others engage, as the previous chapters suggest. In this chapter I focus on the central role that emotion work plays in sustaining social movements. The fact that part of the work of social movements is emotional is infrequently considered by scholars of contentious politics. But consider that in order to attract and retain participants and to pursue a movement’s agenda, activists continually need to mobilize affective states and emotions that mesh with the movement’s political objectives and tactics, and suppress those that do the opposite. Social movements provide affective pedagogies to participants and supporters, authorizing ways to feel and to emote that often go against the grain of dominant society’s emotional norms. They offer, in anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s phrase, “a vocabulary of sentiment,” a “sentimental education” (Geertz 1973, 449). More than manage emotions—a term that implies a preexisting emotional state that then is amplified or dampened—the emotion work of movements frequently generates feelings.

ACT UP had its emotion work cut out for it in relation to the broader U.S. context and to that of the more mainstream lesbian and gay com-

1. I define the term emotion work, drawing from Hochschild 1979, in the introduction.
community. Like other social movements in the United States, ACT UP confronted a dominant emotional habitus that typically disparages angry people, seeing anger as chaotic, impulsive, and irrational, and thus "something which a mature person ideally can or should transcend" (Lutz 1986, 180). Anger takes on an especially negative cast when expressed by people whom mainstream society marks as "other," particularly when large numbers of them are taking to the streets and breaking the law in order to disrupt "business as usual." ACT UP also confronted an American ideology of democracy that locates legitimate political activity in the halls of legislatures and in the voting booth, and maligns street activism as unnecessary and extreme, a threat to social order. ACT UP's task was complicated even further by the recently prevailing emotional habitus in lesbian and gay communities that had suppressed anger and in other ways made a confrontational political response to AIDS largely unimaginable.

Within this context, the work of AIDS activists that illuminated, embodied, augmented, and extended the newly emerging emotional habitus and explicitly linked that set of feelings to confrontational street activism was crucial in strengthening the direct-action AIDS movement. The Bowers v. Hardwick decision opened an imaginative space that allowed for confrontational AIDS activism, but the new feelings and political attitudes that Hardwick animated were not universally accepted within lesbian and gay communities, something we might expect in most communities and certainly in one where social marginalization produces ambivalent feelings about self and society. Within this contestatory moment, ACT UP's emotion work, its affective pedagogy, played a crucial role in securing the new emotional habitus and attracting participants into the direct-action AIDS movement.

I investigate the ways direct-action AIDS activists—sometimes consciously but often less purposively—nourished and extended an emotional habitus that was both amenable to their brand of confrontational activism and responsive to the contradictory feelings that make up lesbian and gay ambivalence. I analyze, for example, how ACT UP marshaled grief, tethered it to anger, and linked both sentiments to confrontational AIDS activism; relocated the feeling of pride from a politics of respectability to a celebration of sexual difference and confrontational activism; and altered the subject and object of shame from gay shame about homosexuality to government shame about its response to the AIDS crisis. ACT UP's emotional pedagogy offered new ways for queer folks to feel about themselves, about dominant society, and about political possibilities amid the AIDS crisis, offering a "resolution" of sorts to lesbian and gay ambivalence: it emphasized self-love and self-respect over shame and self-doubt, authorized antagonism toward society, eased fear of social rejection, and challenged the desire for acceptance on straight society's terms. The new matrix of feelings, expressed repeatedly in the movement's rhetorical and ritual practices, affected how people felt not only by legitimizing these feelings, but by naming and enacting them and thereby bringing into being and elevating those emotions while suppressing other feeling states. ACT UP also gave birth to a newly politicized queer sensibility that crystallized this new set of feelings and furnished a powerful response to lesbian and gay ambivalence. Foregrounding angry, confrontational activism as well as sex-radicalism, queer offered a compelling vision of "how to be gay" in this moment of crisis. ACT UP's emotion work—intertwined with and inseparable from its interpretive work—helped the direct-action AIDS movement to flourish into the 1990s.

Emotion work is typically less visible than the other tasks of a movement, which is one reason why scholars have tended to overlook it. But attention to the rhetoric and actions of movements illuminates the emotional dimensions of their work. The ephemera that materialize and instantiate a movement's collective action frames—its leaflets, fact sheets, T-shirts, stickers, buttons, posters, banners, speeches, chants—are particularly rich sources for exploring a movement's emotion work since framing entails mobilizing some feelings and suppressing others. Something else to consider is that although terms like emotion work, mobilize, and suppress might suggest conscious, purposive behavior, much of a movement's emotion work is nonstrategic and unpremeditated. Indeed, the generation of some feelings and the suppression of others often are crucial effects of a movement's many activities rather than the intention lying behind them. I return to this point below. A final point before turning to the case concerns the importance of studying a movement's emotion work in relation to other factors. Emotional dynamics and processes do not operate in isolation. Thus the task is to explore how a movement's emotion work articulates with other factors—for example, political opportunities and activists' interpretive practices, including framing—to affect movement sustainability.
ACT UP and a New Emotional Habitus

How did the movement respond to the emotional habitus that had until recently prevailed in lesbian and gay communities and to the one that still prevailed in larger society? How did ACT UP augment and amplify the emergent emotional habitus with its pedagogy of emotional and political practices, and how did ACT UP’s preferred ways of feeling, being, and doing activism become axiomatic to large segments of lesbians and gay men? In the following sections, I pursue such questions, first through an exploration of varying emotional and political norms in lesbian and gay communities, followed by an analysis of ACT UP’s surprising success in securing—however provisionally and incompletely—the ascendance and preeminence of its own. The story of ACT UP’s emergence challenges the social movement literature’s political opportunity model, as does an analysis of its meteoric rise and development. The perception of constricting political opportunities helped to nourish, rather than squelch, the direct-action AIDS movement largely because that hostile environment bolstered queer anger and validated activists’ claims that confrontational protests were now imperative.

Feelings in Flux

Although its emotional habitus and confrontational activism were ascendant and marked a new, more defiant moment in lesbian and gay politics, ACT UP had to vie with others in mainstream lesbian and gay communities who continued to be influenced by and reaffirm the previous emotional habitus and the more staid politics it encouraged. Even during ACT UP’s heyday in the late 1980s, this struggle persisted. Most revealing are those instances when speakers or writers acknowledged the pull of the older constellation of feelings and its attendant political horizon but nevertheless encouraged lesbians and gay men to embrace the turn to angry militancy. Consider the following excerpt from an op-ed by Achy Obejas in Chicago’s Windy City Times, which disparaged the continuing popularity of the song “We Are A Gentle, Angry People.”

3. This song, also called “Singing for Our Lives,” had become meaningful in the discourse of lesbian and gay politics. For some it signified activism and respectability; for others, it signified political passivity, complacency, and assimilationism. What it meant to those singing it, however, is often ambiguous. Some who participated in the massive civil disobedience at the Supreme Court during the 1987 March on Washington sang it along with “We Shall Overcome” and “America the Beautiful,” changing the refrain to “we are a gentle, loving people,” (Johnson 1987, 1). People perhaps sing that song in such circumstances in order to ameliorate the anxiety that comes from being seen as a troublemaker, in the hope of conveying to passers-by and to oneself that one’s actions are not really threatening since they are performed by gentle, loving people. Or, maybe, it’s just a song to sing.

Obelas wrote the piece in the summer of 1987, a few months after the emergence of ACT UP in New York and contemporaneous with organizing by DAGMAR for its first public demonstration about AIDS.

When I realized Holly Near’s “We Are A Gentle, Angry People” had become the unofficial anthem of the lesbian and gay movement, I was not proud. . . . Gentle anger, methinks, is repressed anger. . . . Too often in the lesbian and gay movement, we shy away from making a little noise, always fearful that we will lose more than we gain. . . . Pretending we are not angry—and we can do this so well we actually believe it—is the greatest tragedy that can befall us: it will keep us from being free. . . . The anger, that feeling of madness at the realization of how we’re denied, how we’re left to die, how we’re bleached out even when it’s impossible to totally erase us—that should never, ever be the gentle sort. Sure, it’s going to make some people a little scared, a little nervous. That’s OK. (Obejas 1987)

Its tone and content indicate that Obejas wrote the piece during a period of emotional transition; she acknowledged, but challenged, one set of affects and emotions and its accompanying politics, and advocated another.

Where Obejas exulted a righteous and raucous anger to disparage what she saw as gay quiescence, the following example reveals another side in the struggle, the exaltation of gay love and gentleness, seemingly mobilized as a challenge, perhaps even a reproach, to the confrontational anger that was becoming more prominent. In describing the sorrowful, somber, and love-filled mood of a Memorial Day AIDS service and candlelight vigil in Chicago in 1988, Windy City Times columnist Lawrence Bommer implicitly called into question the growing anger and embrace of militancy among some lesbians and gay men. Bommer described the speeches of two men with AIDS who marveled at the love they experienced from God and from friends once they fell ill: “Given that reservoir of love, any self-pity, even anger, turned irrelevant. The fact that these young men could rise above so much pain to thank their friends—when it would be just as understandable if they raged against the dying of the
light—that, too, proves we are a gentle, loving people” (Bommer 1988, 10). While anger was perhaps understandable, it verged on the disreputable, and lesbians and gay men should strive instead to prove their gentleness and lovingness. Prove to whom? we might ask. Bommer does not say, but the imagined audience might range from oneself to other lesbians and gay men to the straight world.

A *Windy City Times* editorial in its 1988 Lesbian and Gay Pride Day issue suggested an ongoing struggle between competing emotional ways of being. The editors acknowledged lesbian and gay discomfort with activism fueled by gay rage while indicating their own support for and pride in the new, angry activism. The editors reflected on the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion (the date commemorated by lesbian and gay pride parades) and drew connections to Chicago’s upcoming Pride Parade.

[Reliable sources] record that the [Stonewall Riots] began with the last patron the police rounded up, a lesbian who was too proud to submit to the humiliation of being forced like a criminal into the waiting squad car. At the moment, no doubt, she did not feel particularly proud. . . . What welled up inside felt like anger and frustration and a rage blind to the consequences of fighting back. She had simply had enough. But the wellspring of that rage and frustration was pride—was a sense that she was a person of equal stature to the cops . . . a sense that her way of expressing intimacy was fundamentally and profoundly good . . . It was this same pride which erupted in her fellow patrons and inspired them to rush to her aid. . . . Even more than in 1969, we have had enough. But the battle no longer occurs in a moment, culminating in a street riot. The struggle now is less dramatic and more drawn-out. . . . When we fight back now, it is not in a moment of passion; it is calculated and planned, leaving time for a thousand rationalizations to sap our wills. . . . The City of Chicago still lacks legal protection for lesbians and gay men. Seven years into the most severe epidemic of this century, the United States has authorized only one AIDS treatment drug. . . . We all know the statistics and we all know that we have had enough—but when the anger from the latest insult subsides and we are left in the hollow of reflection, we decide all too often that we can take some more. We cannot take any more. Pride week must mean more than a parade. . . . We have an ordinance to pass, and our aldermen need letters. We have AIDS funding to secure, and our activists need demonstrators. . . . So march in the parade—but when it’s over, take another step. (“Our” 1988; emphasis in original)

The editorial’s tone and content indicate two vying emotional habitus, with the newer one calling into question emotional norms and a concomitant political horizon that had prevailed in lesbian and gay communities since the earliest days of the epidemic.

A forum at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government in early 1988 also revealed emotional and political sparring, this time among elected officials and other lesbian and gay leaders. From the podium, openly gay U.S. Congressman Barney Frank (D-MA) criticized recent gay and lesbian civil disobedience actions in his state. According to the *Windy City Times*, Frank “drew hisses from the crowd when he said that such actions often amount to nothing more than ‘therapy’ for the movement and may actually set back the struggle for lesbian and gay rights” (“Frank” 1988). Other lesbian and gay panelists disagreed with Frank. Virginia Apuzzo, for example, stated, “We are not angry about one precipitous act, we are angry about a lifetime, a century, two centuries’ worth of deliberate oppression in its most fundamental form, saying, ‘You cannot be’” (“Frank” 1988). Apuzzo joined AIDS activists in justifying and promoting lesbians’ and gay men’s anger, explicitly linking it to confrontational activism. As I noted in chapter 1, a similar debate between Frank and Apuzzo had been publicly aired in 1985, at a point when Frank’s belief in moderate politics was widely shared in lesbian and gay communities and the rare articulations of anger were typically submerged. By 1988, the relative positions of these contending emotional habitus and political horizons had been reversed.

Clearly, then, a struggle in lesbian and gay communities over the proper emotional demeanor and the acceptability of various forms of activism persisted, but opposition to angry and confrontational activism was no longer axiomatic. ACT UP’s style of activism was ascendant, erupting around the country as more people joined direct-action AIDS organizations and formed new ones where they did not already exist. An *Advocate* article written less than two years after the *Harvard* ruling, “The New Gay Activism: Adding Bite to the Movement,” registered the growing militancy:

They’re picketing, protesting, chanting, and rallying. They’re holding sit-ins, “kiss-ins” and “die-ins.” New groups have formed across the country in unexpected places like Kansas, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, and Vermont. In the South, often regarded as politically inactive, groups have sprung up in
Georgia, Tennessee, and seven cities in North Carolina alone. Even places such as Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C., which have had strong gay organizations for years, have recently seen the creation of new, more militant groups. . . . All across the United States, gays and lesbians—fed up with the ineffectiveness of traditional lobbying tactics—are taking their case to the streets. . . . Groups are staging radical demonstrations that more often than not end up on the front page of newspapers or on the local news. And in almost every case, the new organizations are dedicated either wholly or largely to direct political action. . . . The new era in gay activism may have reached a high point the week of April 29, [1988] when more than 30 new and established groups across the country staged a series of direct actions [about AIDS], including rallies, protests, and acts of civil disobedience. (Freiberg, Harding, and Vandervelden 1988, 10–11)

In its last issue of 1988, the Windy City Times ran an article with the headline “ACT UP Proliferates Nationwide” that began with the statement, “They were everywhere.” It continued, “All year long, they kept showing up in the news. . . . AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, better known by its acronym ACT UP, is the fastest-growing grass-roots political organization in the world. Chapters are everywhere, from one newly formed in Palm Springs, California, to those in all of America’s major metropolises” (Schoofs 1988, 16). In an article entitled “A Decade of Rage” that commemorated ACT UP’s tenth anniversary, a Windy City Times reporter noted that the new militancy, while controversial, was undeniably popular within lesbian and gay communities. “From [ACT UP’s] beginning, the concept of direct-action activism divided the gay community”; nevertheless, “in its heyday during the late 1980s and early 90s, ACT UP was ubiquitous in the consciousness of gay America.” Indeed, “the group’s firebrand style of activism rallied a generation” (Weisberg 1997).

ACT UP was able to draw enormous support throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s. Increasingly calling themselves queer, lesbians and gay men, along with other sexual and gender outlaws who were politicizing bisexual and transgendered identities, embraced the new militancy. ACT UP drew enthusiastic praise even from more mainstream leaders, individuals, and institutions.

The emotional and political terrain for direct-action AIDS activism certainly was fertile, but that alone cannot explain ACT UP’s ability to sustain itself and flourish into the 1990s. After all, the moral shock of Hardwick might have worn off quickly, and the confrontational activist response consequently might have lost support. Moreover, the militancy that emerged on the heels of Hardwick might have been extremely brief, given the emotion and political norms that prevail in mainstream American society and given the structure of lesbian and gay ambivalence and the instability of any temporary resolution to it. Additionally, from a historical perspective, anything more than a burst of militancy seemed unlikely: accounts of the lesbian and gay movement demonstrate that the allure of more routine and staid political activism has typically exerted a greater pull on the lesbian and gay movement than has confrontational politics. But in this case, angry militancy won out for an extended period of time, and its predominance asks to be explained.

The Strategic Uses of Emotion

A possible explanation that takes emotion and emotion work seriously raises a question about intention and emotion work that I want to address at the outset. One might suppose that ACT UP was able to sustain itself because direct-action AIDS activists appreciated an emotional imperative: to generate support for their street activism, they had to challenge how lesbians and gay men understood and felt about the epidemic; they thus consciously set out to do so, and their strategic efforts to mobilize anger and suppress feelings not amenable to ACT UP’s form of activism were successful.

I have strong reservations, which I discuss shortly, about limiting my analyses of emotion work to strategic efforts, but this explanation is worth exploring, especially because AIDS activists’ emotion work sometimes was manifestly calculated and instrumental. That sort of intentionality, for example, was evident at ACT UP/ NY’s first meeting, where participants discussed how to shift the focus of the upcoming Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade from “Gay Pride” to “Gay Rage” (ACT UP/ NY 1987a). In a similar vein, the meeting minutes from a C-FAR meet-

4. This article conflated gay activism with AIDS activism: the new activism was focused on AIDS.

5. I provided examples from the period of the movement’s emergence in chapter 2. I return to this question of community support for ACT UP, and its later withdrawal, in chapter 5.

6. See, for example, D’Emilio 1998.
ing in October 1988 record the following rationale for an outreach proposal to change C-FAR's name to ACT UP: "the name [ACT UP] gives us a sense of anger which the name 'C-FAR' ... is lacking" (C-FAR 1988b). Even the emotional demeanor projected in demonstrations was sometimes quite conscious. In discussing a nationally coordinated day of AIDS actions across the United States, ACT NOW leader and member of ACT UP/Los Angeles, Mark Kostopolous, stated, "We want to present a picture to the nation that we're not just sorrowful, but that we're angry and expecting change" (Wockner 1989a, 40).

More generally, each exhortation to feel a given sentiment and every expression of a feeling could be read as an attempt by activists to mobilize specific feelings with the goal of garnering support for the movement. Viewed from this strategic angle, feelings might fit quite neatly into political process and political opportunity models via the framing concept. Along these lines, leading political-process theorist Sidney Tarrow has pointed to the intentional emotionality of collective action frames, writing, "The culture of collective action is built on frames and emotions oriented toward mobilizing people. . . . Symbols are taken selectively by movement leaders from a cultural reservoir and combined with action-oriented beliefs in order to navigate strategically. . . . Most important, they are given an emotional valence aimed at converting passivity into action" (Tarrow 1998, 112). Robert Benford argues for a similar recognition of the role of feelings, writing that they are "a vital social movement resource" that movement actors "produce, orchestrate, and strategically deploy" (Benford 1997, 419).

That sort of instrumentalizing of feelings certainly occurs in movement contexts, but beginning and ending our analyses there forecloses important avenues of inquiry and leaves crucial questions about emotion work unasked and unanswered. Any exploration of the strategic deployment of feelings, for example, begs the question of what we might call emotional resonance: why do people sometimes respond to such deployments of emotion—feeling the anger that organizers ask them to feel, for example—and why does this purposive mobilization sometimes fail? Investigation of these questions demands an analysis of the workings of feelings—of the ways they are generated, intensified, or dampened—that necessarily takes us out of the realm of instrumentality. Even if emotions sometimes are deployed strategically, we risk neglecting much of what is rich and significant about emotion if we reduce it to another tool in the social movement entrepreneur's framing toolkit. For example,

an angry chant at a demonstration might mobilize participants' and bystanders' anger toward the target of the protest, but rather than a strategic intent, the stimulus behind the chant simply might have been a felt need by demonstrators to express their own anger. A view of feelings as strategic deployments strips them of all of their bodily, noncognitive, non-instrumental attributes, thereby depleting them of some of their most interesting characteristics and diminishing much of their conceptual force. If we stick to an instrumentalist rendering, we will lose sight of the sensuous experience of feelings and thus of their power or force in stimulating and blocking activism.7

Grief into Anger

I return, then, to the question of how ACT UP, with its angry militancy, captured the imagination and secured the enduring participation of thousands of queer folks. Direct-action ACT UP activists' responses to the grief pervading lesbian and gay communities provides a useful entry point for exploring how ACT UP buttressed and extended the emerging emotional habitus and its concomitant politics. In its rhetoric and protest actions, ACT UP harnessed grief to anger and both feelings to confrontation action. Attention to how it did so and why this emotion work was effective can help us to explain why and how ACT UP was able to develop and grow into the early 1990s.

COMPETING APPROACHES TO GRIEF. Within lesbian and gay communities, there have been two fairly distinct modes for dealing with the constant grief surrounding the epidemic. Both provide an opportunity for public, collective grieving; the difference lies in their emotional tone and political sensibility. The first approach emerged in the early 1980s: candlelight memorial vigils that lesbians and gay men held to honor those who had died from AIDS-related complications (fig. 10). This approach was reinvigorated in the late 1980s with the Names Project Memorial Quilt, which has afforded lesbian and gay communities a similar opportunity for public and collective grieving. Initiated and first shown in 1987, the quilt contains thousands of patches—each a unique, creative expres-

7. In his insider's critique of the framing perspective, Benford initially seems to make a similar point, but his instrumentalist view of emotion quoted above undermines his own argument and simply magnifies, rather than rectifies, our existing "overly cognitive conception" of social movement participants (Benford 1997, 419).
Quilt was displayed on the National Mall. As part of its mobilization for the FDA action, ACT UP passed out a leaflet at the quilt showing (fig. 11). One side blared, “SHOW YOUR ANGER TO THE PEOPLE WHO HELPED MAKE THE QUILT POSSIBLE: OUR GOVERNMENT.” Text on the reverse read, “The Quilt helps us remember our lovers, relatives, and friends who have died during the past eight years. These people have died from a virus.

8. For more on the quilt, see Jones 2000 and Sturken 1997.
9. Activists demanded, among other things, that the FDA shorten the time taken to approve drugs and refuse data from drug trials that used placebos and prohibited enrollees from taking concurrent prophylactic drugs to protect against opportunistic infections. See Crimp and Rolston 1990, 79, 81.
But they have been killed by our government’s neglect and inaction. . . . More than 40,000 people have died from AIDS. . . . Before this Quilt grows any larger, turn your grief into anger. Turn anger into action. TURN THE POWER OF THE QUILT INTO ACTION” (ACT UP/NY 1988b, emphases theirs).

Here, ACT UP acknowledged lesbian and gay grief about the deaths of people with AIDS, and then attempted to transport them to another place, figuratively from grief to anger, literally from the quilt and the deeply felt grief manifest there to a demonstration at the FDA where that grief could be expressed in angry, confrontational political activism. The ACT UP leaflet located the source of lesbian and gay grief at the government’s doorstep, and then offered a clear, logical response: if you feel grief, as we all do, then you should also feel anger toward those who have caused you to feel grief; and if you feel anger, you should join us in confrontational activism to fight those who are responsible for turning a public health issue into the AIDS crisis. Rather than regarding the quilt as a memorial to gay men and others who had died, ACT UP suggested it be viewed as a chronicle of murder that necessitated a forceful activist response. In beginning with a prevalent and more or less acceptable feeling—grief—and then linking that grief to anger—a more disreputable feeling—ACT UP authorized anger. ACT UP’s emotional and political pedagogy both acknowledged and addressed lesbians’ and gay men’s ambivalence about political confrontation: given our grief and under these dire circumstances, where we and our loved ones are being murdered by our government, anger and defiant activism targeting state and society are not only necessary, they are legitimate, justifiable, rational, and righteous.

THE POLITICS OF GRIEVING. Direct-action AIDS activists’ criticisms of grieving rituals like vigils and quilt showings were often scathing and laid the ground for ACT UP’s different approach to grief. For example, founding member and longtime administrator of ACT UP/New York, Bradley Ball, disparaged a Memorial Day AIDS candlelight vigil that occurred in 1987:

A handful of people clustered at Sheridan Square and sang a pretty song and lit candles. . . . I [handed] out leaflets for the Washington demonstration [about AIDS, to occur on June 1, 1987]. I had intended to participate [in the vigil], but I simply could not. The opening lines of the pretty song [are]: We are a strong and gentle people. Singing, singing for our lives. . . . How can we be singing for our lives? I’m so upset. . . . I’ve spent this weekend [handing out leaflets] on streetcorners and in barrooms confronting apathy and hostility, and now I find out we’re singing for our lives. . . . Oh God, I’m tired and angry. I’ve been living AIDS for so long. . . . I want to go back to that mysterious time when I didn’t have this virus inside of me that is slowly and surely and quietly destroying my system. I want out. Goddammit, I’m so fucking angry! Stonewall was supposed to bring us out of the closet and into the streets. In 1977 it was Anita Bryant. . . . And now there’s this awful disease that is knocking us over like dominoes. . . . And we’re lighting candles and singing songs. (Ball 1987; quoted in Goldberg 1997, 63–64; emphases his)

A year later, Ball continued his criticism: “We have spent many years mourning and bereaving, and have developed that into a high art. A lot of AIDS benefits like candlelight vigils have pretty names, but they don’t express the fact that massive sectors of society are dying and that no one seems to care” (Anger 1988, 10).

Jeanne Kracher recalls having “very mixed emotions” about the candlelight vigils in Chicago:

They were very sad, they were very solemn. It was heavy. . . . It was a moving experience. But on another level, I remember all of us [members of DAGMAR and C-FAR] being very critical about it. We were very tough, and felt like if you’re gonna get two hundred people marching through the street with candles, have them say something. . . . But, I also think that I thought this is a good thing that people are paying attention to [AIDS]. [We] were trying to figure out politically what all of this meant, and sort of having contempt for people that were singing that “we are gentle, angry people,” and I’m sure we were making all the jokes that we always made about [that song]. [Our perspective was that] people should be angry. (Kracher 2000)

Kracher, in retrospect, emphasized the need for people to express grief, but in the moment itself, “I think there was this tendency [on our part] to want everything to be angry, and [we thought] that there was something that was extremely passive about these candlelight vigils” (Kracher 2000). Ferd Eggan had a similar recollection of a candlelight vigil he attended: “I remember feeling, ‘Well, this is very nice, and it’s sad, and it’s nice to be with these people.’ . . . But [I remember feeling] that it was pretty tame” (Eggan 1999). ACT UP/Chicago member Darrell Gordon thought that people at the vigils “had this kind of defeatist attitude, in-
stead of this empowerment idea of taking back, and trying to fight, the system. . . . It wasn’t about trying to fight the Reagan-Bush administration, or fighting the pharmaceutical companies, or anything of that nature at all” (Gordon 2000).

Many were similarly skeptical about the Names Project Memorial Quilt. Carol Hayse, a member of DAGMAR and later of C-FAR and ACT UP/Chicago, saw the quilt at the 1987 March on Washington. When interviewee, she recalled the deep sadness she felt: “I just cried and cried . . . I mean, you just can’t stop crying. I’m tearing up now. It’s very sobering” (Hayse 2000). Her sadness, however, was tempered with a political critique that she described as follows:

I generally remember being a little contemptuous of the Quilt. A little. I also cried at the Quilt. I mean, I was aware that these were people’s lives being represented. . . . But I was a little contemptuous of the Quilt, ‘cause in some ways, it seemed to divert energy from anger. It seemed to say ‘mourning is the valid response,’ and not say the other thing that needs to be said with that: . . . ‘turn your mourning into anger.’ . . . And so it seemed a bit reformist and diverting of energy to a lot of us. (Hayse 2000; emphasis hers)

Hayse’s recollection of ACT UP’s way of dealing with death provides some insight into her own, and other ACT UP members’, mixed feelings about the Quilt: “There was a great great deal of collective mourning in the queer community at that time. . . . So, if my memory serves, we were bending the stick in the other direction. We were saying, ‘Mourning’s fine. No problem. Make your space for mourning. But then, you know, get out, grab a rock and throw it through the window of the FDA’” (Hayse 2000).

In later years, some activists became even more disparaging of these more somber expressions of grief. In an article that began with the news that his entire immune system was shot, ACT UP/NY’s Bob Rafsky offered a fantasy: “I’d like to find a few people who have sewn Names Project Quilt panels but now see such gestures as inadequate. Then, the next time the Quilt is unrolled—with their permission, for all our dead and our dead yet to come—I’d piss on it.” Rafsky provided the following emotional and political reasoning in support of that fantasy:

It’s not grief itself we should shed; we need our grief. But if we can’t leave behind all the false comforts, the easy, symbolic embodiments of our grief, most of us will never feel our anger at full force for very long. Our anger, even the knowledge some of us have of our own forthcoming deaths, gets mixed up too easily with other agendas. . . . I [want] to take AIDS militancy further than it’s ever gone. (Rafsky 1992, 51)

Another person with AIDS angrily expressed his desire that someone “just burn that stupid blanket” (quoted in Patten 1998, 403). Even people who made quilt panels sometimes indicated ambivalence. A panel for ACT UP/San Francisco member Terry Sutton read, “Terry Sutton. He hated this quilt. And so do we! ACT UP.”

Returning to the leaflet that ACT UP distributed at the quilt showing in 1988, its emotion work should now be clearer. Confrontational AIDS activists initially operated in a context in which public grief among lesbians and gay men was articulated in a somber emotional register and from a political position that stopped short of oppositional activism. Many activists deemed these public grieving rituals a hindrance to the forms of activism that they thought might actually save lives. Despite sometimes being contemptuous of these rituals, they too felt the grief and knew how deeply felt and widespread it was. The ACT UP leaflet acknowledged lesbian and gay grief, but in affixing grief to anger and confrontational activism, it offered an alternative.

MARCHING WITH DEATH IN THE STREETS. ACT UP’s political funerals—introduced into ACT UP’s tactical repertoire in the early 1990s—offered an emotional and political sensibility that acknowledged, evoked, endorsed, and bolstered lesbians’ and gay men’s anger. Carrying the remains of their loved ones through the streets in a powerful joining of grief with anger, ACT UP drew on a tradition used by liberation movements from South Africa to Ireland and El Salvador that underscored the political nature of the deaths of their comrades. 11 ACT UP/New

10. See the photograph in Sturken 1997, 187. Some who were not in ACT UP also criticized the quilt. Urvashi Vaid, for example, contends that the quilt “didn’t do enough to politicize people” (Andriole 1999, 367).

11. There are, of course, important distinctions between these traditions as carried out by ACT UP and by liberation movements in other countries. In the latter, political funerals have been used in the context of an armed struggle and they mark the murder of comrades at the hands of the state or opposition forces. ACT UP’s political funerals marked the deaths of comrades, but, despite movement rhetoric that they were killed by government neglect, they were, of course, not directly killed at the hands of the state. As with all tactics, the political funeral has a different meaning in different contexts.
York issued an invitation/leaflet announcing the first of its political funerals, the October 1992 “Ashes” action:12 "Bring Your Grief and Rage About AIDS to a Political Funeral in Washington D.C." (fig. 12). The image that accompanied the headline was modest, the outline of an urn, with the following text as its contents:

You have lost someone to AIDS. For more than a decade, your government has mocked your loss. You have spoken out in anger, joined political protests, carried fake coffins and mock tombstones, and splattered red paint to represent someone's HIV-positive blood, perhaps your own. George Bush believes that the White House gates shield him, from you, your loss, and his responsibility for the AIDS crisis. Now it is time to bring AIDS home to George Bush. On October 11th, we will carry the actual ashes of people we love in funeral procession to the White House. In an act of grief and rage and love, we will deposit their ashes on the White House lawn. Join us to protest twelve years of genocidal AIDS policy. (ACT UP/New York 1992)

In using the ashes of dead people, the action was an escalation in tactics, a shift from actions that deployed representations of death (e.g., mock tombstones and fake coffins) to a funeral procession that carried the actual bodily remains of loved ones dead from AIDS-related complications. The leaflet offered the appropriate feelings and the appropriate activist response to "twelve years of genocidal AIDS policy": a love-inspired and grief-filled rage channeled into a funeral march that would force AIDS into the national consciousness.

Held in Washington, D.C., the same weekend as the annual display of the Names Project Quilt, ACT UP's "Ashes" action implicitly drew a distinction between the quilt's encouragement of grief and its own enactment of a grief-inspired rage. ACT UP/NY member David Robinson's announcement that he planned to scatter his lover's ashes on the White House lawn inspired the "Ashes" action. Interviewed the day of the march, Robinson explicitly drew a contrast between the political implications of the quilt and of ACT UP's funeral march: "George Bush would be happy if we all made Quilt panels. We're showing people what the White House has done: they've turned our loved ones into ashes and bones" (Wentzy 1995). During the procession, participants angrily chanted that message: "Bring the dead to your door, we won't take it

anymore” (Wentzy 1995). ACT UP/NY member Avram Finkelstein also contrasted the funeral march to the quilt:

One by one, we called out the names of the dead: without a podium, a loudspeaker or celebrity spokespeople. The procession was the Quilt come to life—walking, shouting and storming the White House. . . . The ash bearers charged the gate, surrounded by crews of activists with linked arms. A fog of ashes blew through the fence and the urns were hurled. . . . I saw someone actually scaling the fence. . . . We chanted and cheered and our dead floated over the immaculate green sod. . . . [After the action] I walked back to the Quilt, hoping to see [my deceased lover] Don’s panel before the rains came. . . . I wanted to snatch it up and heave it over the fence, where it really belonged. . . . [The “Ashes” march] has defined AIDS memorials for me. It connected me for the first time to the anger and grief of thousands of others, and reconfirmed what I have always known . . . action is the real Quilt. (Finkelstein 1992b, 22)

ACT UP’s message was clear: the way to grieve the endless deaths is with confrontational activism that angrily forces the reality of AIDS deaths into public view.

ACT UP/NY soon escalated further, shifting from ashes to dead bodies. Two weeks after the “Ashes” action, an anonymous person with AIDS issued a statement, “Bury Me Furiously,” calling on AIDS activists to hold a political funeral when he died, carrying his body in an open casket through the streets. The person, later revealed to be ACT UP/NY member Mark Fisher, wrote,

I want to show the reality of my death, to display my body in public; I want the public to bear witness. We are not just spiraling statistics. We are people who have lives, who have purpose, who have lovers, friends and families. And we are dying of a disease maintained by a degree of criminal neglect so enormous that it amounts to genocide. . . . Oppressed people have a tradition of political funerals. . . . Everyone who sees the procession pass knows that the living, those who love the deceased, are bereaved, furious and undefeated. . . . I want my own funeral to be fierce and defiant. (Anonymous 1992)

Weeks later, the funeral for Fisher slowly wound through the streets of Manhattan, “urged on by a single drum” (Finkelstein 1992c), ending at George H. W. Bush’s reelection campaign headquarters. Over the next few years, ACT UP chapters held a number of political funerals, carrying the bodies of their dead through the streets and attempting to deposit them at strategic sites, including the White House.

ACT UP’s political funerals, perhaps the most spectacular enactment of the movement’s conjoining of grief and anger in direct action, offered stark foils to the modes of grieving manifest at the quilt and candlelight vigils. In enacting the turning of grief into anger, these funerals transformed the staggering personal losses into a political as well as personal tragedy, into an injustice that should motivate lesbian and gay indignation, fury, and direct-action activism.

How Emotion Work Works

Through leaflets, speeches, chants, demonstrations, and other types of actions, AIDS activists encouraged queer folks to transform painful feelings of grief into anger and action. Why and how did the movement’s emotion work work? How did ACT UP’s emotion work further the shift in tone from somber grief to confrontational anger, and how did it animate and sustain a new, more confrontational activism? More generally, why is emotion work sometimes able to alter people’s feelings, and how does it do so?

We can begin to answer those questions by attending to the relationship between language and feelings, as Reddy’s notion of emotives does (1997). AIDS activists’ repeated naming of their grief as anger effectively and affectively altered how some queer folks were actually feeling. Like other feeling states, grief is a complicated matrix of sentiments that includes sadness, loss, depression, fear, anger, dread, and a host of others. Activists altered the meaning and experience of grief by renaming as “anger” that complicated constellation of feelings. Their repeated expressions of anger elevated the emotion of anger and suppressed sentiments of sadness, despair, despondency, and loss, temporarily eclipsing those aspects of grief. Lesbians, gay men, queers could then reexperience a potentially paralyzing affective state of grief as outward-directed, action-oriented anger. Ferd Eggan described ACT UP’s angry activism as both a buffer against and a channel for grief (1999). Jeanne Kracher recalled that “in the early days [of ACT UP], it was all about anger,” but she noted that the anger should be recognized as, at least in part, “a form of grief” or a stage in the grieving process (Kracher 2000). Through activists’ continual expressions, grief in a sense became anger. The way that
ACT UP/Chicago turned grief about the deaths of its members into ang-ry activism greatly appealed to Frank Sieple, providing him with a politi-cized route for his grief: "It's almost like we didn't have time to grieve, you know, turning that grieving into the energy to move on. . . . One way, at least with me, of grieving, was taking that energy that I would use on grieving and putting it into action to prevent, or to make their deaths not seem in vain. . . . I think a lot of people did that" (Sieple 1999). As Douglas Crimp (1989) has noted, many in ACT UP turned away from the pain of mourning; indeed, mourning became militancy. Reiterated over time, anger became defining of ACT UP's emotional habitus, and linking grief to anger and both to action became axiomatic to many.

Of course, AIDS activists' naming of anger and urgings to turn grief into anger did not result in the complete disappearance of feelings of sadness, loss, and devastation that help to make up grief. Consider the following recollections of the "Ashes" action by Bob Rafsky.

At the front of the march was a single line of people carrying urns. . . . Behind them were about a hundred of us who were willing to be arrested helping them to the White House fence. Behind us were three drummers playing rhythmic patterns that worked into our bodies: 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3-4-5. Finally came the supporting marchers, more than 1,500 of them. . . . A few feet from me a young man in a white T-shirt was shouting at an imaginary George Bush, "It's your fault! It's your fault!" before he broke down and sobbed. . . . The action had been coordinated by a 22-year-old classics graduate student at Columbia University who had joined ACT UP. . . . I saw him pressed by our bodies against the White House fence, kneeling and weeping as ashes soared over him. (Rafsky 1992, 22–23)

Similarly, a demonstrator at a 1987 protest by CMJ to protest the federal government's inactivity on AIDS threw himself against the door of the Federal Building in San Francisco, sobbing and holding up a sign that demanded medical care (Lineberger 1987b).13

The fierce anger expressed by confrontational AIDS activists never entirely suppressed and was never completely divorced from the intense grief that many felt. Still, activists' repeated expressions of an-

gger elevated that feeling and submerged grief. The two emotional states were tightly coupled in ACT UP's emotional habitus; indeed, activists so forcefully harnessed and subordinated grief to anger that grief could hardly be felt as something other than anger. That configuration transformed people's feelings and also offered a powerful impetus to confrontational activism.

emotion work and the feelings of Disjunction

We also need to consider how the context in which activists' emotion work occurs might affect their success in inciting, amplifying, and re-generating specific feeling states and dampening or suppressing others. Significant characteristics of that context include the makeup of the prevailing emotional habitus, the sorts of emotives that are available and authorized or can be made so, the sorts of discourses that are widely circulating, and aspects of the environment and of people's everyday lives that are especially emotionally charged. Activists' creative emotion work is constrained and enabled by such contextual factors, and its success is shaped by them.

An important contextual factor for AIDS activists in the late 1980s and early 1990s was the disjunction between queers' ongoing experiences with the epidemic and the dominant discourses about AIDS popularized by the mainstream media, politicians, and the scientific-medical establishment. The emotion work done by direct-action AIDS activists was compelling to wide segments of people within lesbian and gay communities largely because it spoke from and to the experiences of that disjunction. Through their emotion work, AIDS activists gave shape to the affective experience of the disjunction, naming as outrage what might have been experienced more amorphously as a mixture of incredulity, disappointment, and frustration that the government and mainstream society could be so unaware and uncaring about life for queers amid the AIDS crisis.

By the late 1980s, many lesbians and gay men had experienced the deaths of friends and lovers, caretaking of those who were ill, overflow-ing obituary pages in local lesbian and gay newspapers, and an endless succession of funerals. For those who were infected with HIV and symptomatic, taking care of their own health was a daily effort and often an emotional roller coaster ride. Medical and scientific breakthroughs were few, and when they did occur, the hopes they raised were soon dashed.
Moreover, lesbians and gay men were inundated with mind-numbing and grim statistics on deaths and new cases. Week by week, people were witnessing both the devastation of their community and the deaths of friends and loved ones. And there was no end in sight to any of it, only ongoing devastation. Such emotionally charged experiences, especially when widespread and frequent within a social group, can themselves motivate activism as well as create a reservoir of feeling states that are ripe for mobilization.

But even more was at play here. Dominant understandings of AIDS tended to blame gay men and gay male sexual practices for the spread of the virus. The media and politicians, not only those from the religious right, consistently made distinctions between “innocent AIDS victims”—children, hemophiliacs, and other ostensibly straight, middle-class people—and queers, junkies, and prostitutes, the lowlies of society who were “guilty” not only of bringing AIDS on themselves, but of spreading the plague to the innocent. Dominant discourses sanctioned repressive and punitive measures—including quarantine—to deal with the epidemic. As well, there were frequent assertions by the media, politicians, and bureaucrats that the scientific-medical establishment was doing all it could to fight the epidemic. There was no public acknowledgement of the role that homophobia, racism, and sexism were playing in the government’s and other institutions’ handling of the crisis.

Dominant discourses about AIDS simply ignored lesbians’ and gay men’s daily experiences with the epidemic, implicitly deeming the experiences as well as those having them inconsequential. Queer folks already were familiar with social nonrecognition, but the felt disjunction between their own emotionally wrenching experiences and dominant understandings of AIDS was, for many, staggering. How could state and society negate the horror they were living through? Dominant AIDS discourses seemed increasingly nonsensical: people were sick and dying as the result of a virus and government inattention to the crisis, not as the result of sexual deviance; gay men with AIDS were as innocent as anyone; lesbians and gay men were virtually alone in responding to the crisis; the government’s homophobia was having deadly consequences; the scientific-medical establishment was not doing all that it could. In explaining his decision to join C-FAR, Frank Siple noted this disconnect between his lived experiences with AIDS and dominant discourses that commended the government’s response to the crisis: “[I was] really tired of seeing friends diagnosed and dying while the newspaper wrote about the good things the government was doing” (Wockner 1990a, 35).

By the late 1980s, this disjuncture was large enough to create an affective and conceptual space from which queers could launch a strong challenge to hegemonic constructions of AIDS and a scathing critique of the state’s and other institutions’ paltry efforts to address the epidemic. Also important in wrenching that fissure wide open were the years of lesbian and gay discourses applauding the community for its responsible efforts against AIDS, which had bolstered lesbian and gay pride and helped to create a massive chasm between lesbians’ and gay men’s self-understandings and the construction of homosexuality in the dominant discourses. Gay shame was not purged, of course, but it was being challenged, and ACT UP built on and continued that fight.

ACT UP/NY member Dudley Saunders credits the movement for naming and authorizing the fury that many gay men were unconsciously experiencing but had suppressed largely because of gay shame. “Most people did not believe they had the right to be angry. . . . I think for a lot of gay men, there was such shame around being gay. And then, to have gotten yourself infected, even if you’d [gotten infected] before you knew anything. You’d done this dirty thing, and gotten this dirty disease, just as, you know, you deserved to get. You had nothing to be angry about. [ACT UP] did these things that tapped into this rage that people didn’t know they had, didn’t know they could have” (Saunders 2003, 37–38).

During a speech at a 1988 ACT UP/NY demonstration, Vito Russo pointed to the enormous disconnect between queers’ everyday lives amid the crisis and dominant society’s unwillingness to grasp or care about those horrors. The emotional effects—primarily anger and contempt toward dominant society, coupled with pride about being an AIDS activist—animated his activism.

Living with AIDS is living through a war which is happening only for those people who are in the trenches. Every time a shell explodes you look around to discover that you’ve lost more of your friends. But nobody else notices—it isn’t happening to them—and they’re walking the streets as though we weren’t living through a nightmare. Only you can hear the screams of the people dying and their cries for help. . . . It’s worse than wartime because during a war the people are united in a shared experience. This war has not united us—it’s divided us. It’s separated those of us with AIDS and those of us fighting for people with AIDS from the rest of the population. . . . It’s not
happening to us in the United States—it’s happening to them—to the disposable populations of fags and junkies who deserve what they get. . . . And the days and the months and the years pass by—and they don’t spend those days and nights and months and years trying to figure out how to get aholt of the latest experimental drug and which dose to take it at and in what combination with what other drugs and from what source and for how much money because it isn’t happening to them so they don’t give a shit. . . . They don’t spend their waking hours going from one hospital to another, watching the people they love die slowly of neglect and bigotry because it isn’t happening to them so they don’t give a shit. They haven’t been to two funerals a week for the last three, four, or five years so they don’t give a shit. It’s not happening to them. . . . AIDS is a test of who we are as a people. When future generations ask what we did in the war, we have to be able to tell them that we were out here fighting. . . . I’m proud to be out here today with the people I love and to see the faces of those heroes who are fighting this war and to be a part of that fight. (Russo 1986b, 10; emphasizes his)

In lesbian and gay communities, ACT UP’s emotionally charged frame—which built on earlier AIDS activists’ challenges to dominant AIDS discourses—became the alternative to dominant understandings of the epidemic. It took hold in large part because its outrage offered recognition of, and gave voice to, queers’ daily experiences of devastation. Street-based activists’ outraged framing of the AIDS crisis addressed queers’ fears, anxieties, and desires about their lives, their survival, their identities, their communities, their sexual practices, their relationship to dominant society, and their political options. Their framing was faithful to queers’ daily experiences of AIDS, and that made it emotionally resonant. That is, activists’ emotion work worked: their vocal acknowledgment of the chasm separating queers’ experiences from the straight world’s constructions of AIDS, and their expressed fury about that disjunction, echoed what some in the community were feeling, in some cases amplified people’s feelings, and generated feelings of outrage among others. This successful emotion work animated many lesbians’ and gay men’s support for ACT UP and their enduring participation in the movement.

The Emotion Work of Reconfiguring Death

The creative interpretive work of direct-action AIDS activists not only reconfigured many lesbians’ and gay men’s understandings of the crisis, but also reconfigured people’s feelings. The following example illustrates the emotionally charged nature of AIDS activists’ interpretive work and provides another opportunity to analyze why and how ACT UP’s emotion work worked.

Direct-action AIDS activists resitiedified AIDS deaths, as sociologist Josh Gamson (1989) has noted, from death caused by deviance or virus, to murder by government neglect. Where contemporaneous constructions of AIDS blamed a virus and gay male sexuality, AIDS activists blamed the homophobic government and other institutions. In 1988, for example, an autonomous, activist artist collaborative within ACT UP/NY, Gran Fury, designed a sticker that sandwiched a bloody handprint between blocks of text that read “The government has blood on its hands. One AIDS death every half hour” (Crimp and Rolston 1990, 80; see fig. 13). The graphic suggested that AIDS deaths should be viewed as less about infected blood than about government negligence and genocidal complicity in the murder of thousands.

Likewise, posters at ACT UP demonstrations often were in the shape of gravestones with the names of people who had died and the epitaph, “Killed by Government Neglect.” ACT UP’s die-ins, where demonstrators would lie in the street while others outlined their bodies with chalk, similarly conjured up a murder scene rather than death by disease or by “deviance.” Chants at ACT UP demonstrations drew attention to the government’s role in the crisis and in the accumulating deaths: “Land of the free, home of the brave, is putting queers in the grave;” “Justice, equality, it’s all a fucking lie, our homophobic government is letting people die.” A chant at a funeral march for ACT UP/San Francisco member Terry Sutton indicted a pharmaceutical company as well as the FDA: “We’re Terry’s friends, and we’re here to say: we blame Astra and the FDA” (Marquardt 1989). At a 1988 rally in Albany, N.Y., Vito Russo attributed his own illness and possible death to the social response to AIDS rather than to a virus.

If I’m dying from anything it’s from homophobia. If I’m dying from anything it’s from racism. If I’m dying from anything it’s from indifference and red
tape. If I'm dying from anything it's from Jesse Helms. If I'm dying from anything I'm dying from Ronald Reagan. . . . If I'm dying from anything I'm dying from the fact that not enough rich, white, heterosexual men have gotten AIDS for anybody to give a shit. (Russo 1988b, 10)16

All of these transformations in the meaning of AIDS deaths had an emotional charge. Where an understanding of death as the result of deviant sexual practices typically evoked shame, and where an understanding of death as the result of a virus might evoke terror and despair, an understanding of death as produced by government neglect—that is, of AIDS deaths as murder—stirred indignant outrage.

The mutual reinforcement of ACT UP's interpretive and emotion work created a robust, tightly knit system: If you shared ACT UP's interpretation of the AIDS epidemic, you were encouraged to feel angry about the crisis and to embrace direct action as the appropriate response. As an ACT UP/Los Angeles banner put it: "Angry? ACT UP!" (Sprecher 1990). Individuals could of course place themselves outside of this system: as tightly woven as the component parts might have been, the system was never totalizing, and an individual could embrace one part while ignoring or even rejecting the others. Still, once someone inclined toward one of the components, the tightly knit nature of the system bolstered adherence to the others as well.

The Emotion Work of Rituals

Rituals, as Durkheim argued, are important to emotional transformation, reminding us that the places and times in which activists' emotion work occurs affect its success.17 Reddy's concept of emotives highlights how language shapes feelings, but sometimes people experience affective states that become legible and motivating through a more bodily experience than naming, such as attending a meeting or a protest action. Avram Finkelstein credited his engagement in AIDS activism with producing that type of emotional transformation in himself: "Eleven years ago, I met my soulmate and fell madly in love. . . . Four years later, he was dead. . . . My landscape was flattened by loss. When the dust finally cleared, two things were apparent to me: I was not alone, and something—
Besides support work—had to be done about AIDS. Fear and grief faded away when I discovered action” (Finkelstein 1992a, 48). A person’s enactment of anger at a demonstration—through chants and facial and bodily gestures, for example—may suppress other feelings, making the anger physically legible to oneself while displacing the sensation of other feelings that simply are not enacted, at least not in a culturally recognizable form. ACT UP’s meetings and actions were ritualized happenings where that sort of emotional transformation could occur.

It is clear that ACT UP’s emotion work succeeded in part because it was tapping into and echoing what many queer folks already were feeling. In some cases the key was ACT UP’s authorization of queer rage and its expression. Sometimes what mattered most was ACT UP’s naming as anger a complex matrix of unstructured feelings that became intelligible through that naming; named political emotions gave form to more amorphous affective states. The movement also intensified, and even produced, feelings. ACT UP’s meetings and actions were especially emotionally generative.

The following account of one HIV-positive gay man’s decision to join ACT UP indicates the sort of emotion work that occurs during activist actions and how effective that work can be in transforming people’s feelings. In a 1994 interview, G’dali Braverman described his initial contact with ACT UP/NY: “I had received a couple of flyers in the mail about ACT UP. I breezed through them and, basically, tossed them” (quoted in Shepard 1997, 113). Braverman experienced an emotional transformation while watching New York’s Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade in 1988. “When ACT UP passed . . . I took one look and said, ‘I am going to go to the next meeting of that organization.’ There was a sense of power, a sense of action. It didn’t appear to be about pity or shame or sadness or guilt. It seemed to be about anger and action” (113). Braverman’s witnessing of ACT UP/New York’s anger in the streets seems to have altered his previous disinterest. Having tested HIV-positive the previous year, Braverman may have been feeling a variety of sentiments about AIDS and the epidemic, perhaps including the shame and guilt that he mentioned. ACT UP’s expressive demonstration of anger may have allowed Braverman to feel anger, by legitimating that feeling but also by enacting it.

In the ritualized happenings of a meeting or action, ACT UP’s emotion work linking anger to engagement in street activism might generate precisely those effects. In his memoir, *Queer in America*, Michelan-
teen minutes, he found himself walking toward the protesters and joining them. He began to chant, loudly and angrily, and did so for forty-five minutes, not knowing who he was but feeling their anger, and now his own anger, about the AIDS crisis. Although not in a calculated, strategic manner, ACT UP members were engaging in emotion work through their action. Public demonstrations with angry, chanting amasscd bodies encouraged public and collective expressions of anger about AIDS and were also a vehicle for the “transmission of affect” (Brennan 2004), allowing energy to cross bodily borders and incite others to join in. Riley happened upon the demonstration and became enthralled, evidently overtaken by the anger on protesters’ chanting faces. Their bodily expression seems to have generated in him an affective state that he had not been feeling just moments before, animating him to move toward them and become a chanting participant. He joined ACT UP soon thereafter. 18 Again we should recall Durkheim’s notion of collective effervescence, particularly his idea that the experience of coming together alters people’s psychic activity and subsequently their actions: “The vital energies become hyperexcited, the passions more intense, the sensations more powerful; there are indeed some that are produced only at this moment. Man does not recognize himself; he feels somehow transformed and in consequence transforms his surroundings” (1995, 424).

Billy McMillan had a similar experience that prompted him to join C-FAR. He was in Los Angeles and decided to go to an ACT UP/Los Angeles demonstration against presidential candidate George H. W. Bush, who was holding a fund-raiser at the Bellaire Hotel. Some of the protesters’ signs were simple crosses, with somebody’s name written on one axis and the date of death on the other. Someone gave McMillan a cross to hold, but another protester asked him if he would mind switching crosses. McMillan said “OK,” but then asked why, and the man replied that the guy on McMillan’s cross was a friend of his. That exchange, in the midst of this ACT UP/L.A. demonstration, stirred McMillan:

Here I was in the middle of this demonstration where I didn’t know anyone. That guy’s words really struck me, and I just started crying. This was so real, and so personal; so many people were affected by AIDS and so many more were going to be affected. I felt a great sense of loss. And then I began to get

18. This story comes from Green 1989.

real pissed off at all those greedy, wealthy people going into this presidential fund-raiser. I felt that they didn’t care if we all died right then and there. . . . I came back [to Chicago] and I hooked up with my friend Adam Burck, who was involved with this group called C-FAR, Chicago For AIDS Rights. . . . They were the only group in town doing anything proactive. . . . So I went to their meeting. . . . and I was all fired up because of this demonstration in L.A. (McMillan 2000)

The repeated expressions of anger at ACT UP meetings and actions made anger normative and intensified the feeling itself, suppressing other feelings that might have arisen or become intensified during the AIDS crisis—grief, shame, fear—or that might accompany participation in confrontational activism—fear and anxiety about defying authority, uncertainty about the utility or necessity of the action, or embarrassment about appearing crazy, foolish, or politically impasioned. Through the emotional preparations, each participant’s feelings were given meaning through language—labeled as anger—and thus could be felt as anger, perhaps producing the sense of being “a bottle of emotions with a great sense of purpose.”

Participation in ACT UP meetings and actions also provided an outlet, “a vent for rage and frustration” (Span 1989). Meetings and actions helped to address the painful feeling states that were part of daily life for many queers. Ray Navarro, a person with AIDS and member of ACT UP/NY, found activism to be “a way of healing, . . . a way of dealing with the fear” (quoted in Span 1989). ACT UP activists engaged in emotion work with regard to other feelings as well, especially gay pride, shame, and fear of social rejection.

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

ACT UP’s emotional pedagogy authorized anger and confrontational activism in part by making angry direct-action activism an object of lesbian and gay pride. In doing so, ACT UP dramatically dislodged pride from its place within what in some ways was a politics of respectability during the early 1980s. At an HRCF dinner held seven months after the formation of ACT UP/NY, Larry Kramer concluded a speech by encouraging attendees to join ACT UP/NY, partly by expressing his pride about confrontational AIDS activism:
With pride, I close by acknowledging ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—now almost 1,000 very energetic men and women who glory in nothing more than protesting in the streets. I cannot tell you how infinitely moving this organization is. . . . Their commitment is astounding. They have picketed and yelled and screamed and even been arrested on some dozens of occasions. . . . I beg all of you to come and join us at [our upcoming demonstrations] and at our Monday night meetings. (Kramer 1987a, 16)

An ACT UP button that said “I was arrested fighting AIDS”—pinned by activists onto one another as they were released from jail—also linked pride with confrontational activism and encouraged (re)commitment to the fight. A C-FAR leaflet announcing a meeting elevated its direct-action activism by making an implicit comparison between possible objects of gay pride. It blared, “FIGHT BACK, FIGHT AIDS!” followed by smaller text that read, “We MUST keep the pressure on in order to bring about the government and institutional responses necessary to combat the AIDS crisis. PLEASE JOIN US and experience the satisfaction and pride of helping your brothers and sisters. . . . LET’S FEEL RIGHTFULLY PROUD BY FIGHTING FOR OUR RIGHTS TOGETHER!” (C-FAR, N.D.; capitalization in original). C-FAR’s use of the qualifier rightfully before the word pride raised questions about previous objects of lesbian and gay pride and offered a new orientation: pride about collective and confrontational activism.

Repeated articulations and evocations of this new pride valorized direct-action AIDS activism, fortified commitment to the group, and encouraged others to support, and even join, ACT UP. Tim Miller recalled the pride he felt after joining C-FAR: “I think there was an incredible sense . . . of being proud that I’m doing something” (Miller 1999). Expressions of pride about AIDS activism were echoed by those not directly involved in the movement, suggesting that ACT UP’s pride was migratory. For example, in June 1988 Outlines columnist Rex Wockner distinguished C-FAR as “the most exciting new development in the Chicago gay movement” and continued with an assertion of pride about confrontational AIDS activism: “C-FAR’s Carol Jonas, Ferd Eggen, Lou Snider, . . . Paul Adams, . . . and countless others make us very, very proud this June” (Wockner 1988, 29).19

Emotional expressions have emotional effects. Repeated articula-

19. See also Markson 1987.

tions of pride about angry activism counteracted lesbian and gay shame, whether about sexual difference or about noisy activism that threatened to shake up the status quo. They thereby helped to authorize ACT UP’s direct-action politics, in part by supplanting, or at least suggesting the limits of, the previous emotional habitus and displacing the prior object of pride from its preeminent position. The frequent articulations of pride seem to have enlivened that feeling among street AIDS activists and among other lesbians and gay men as well.

Direct-action AIDS activists also reinvigorated the terms responsible and responsibility, and here again—strengthening the link between pride and confrontational activism by labeling the latter as responsible—this emotion work helped to generate support for ACT UP. In the mid-1980s, responsible gay men and lesbians took care of their dying friends and lovers, volunteered to be buddies for people with AIDS, and supported the work of ASOs. AIDS activists declared that responsible queers now took to the streets and were the new source of pride. Responsible queers might still take care of ill friends and lovers, volunteer at an ASO, and so on, but direct-action AIDS activists shifted the emphasis, privileging confrontational activism. Indeed, directly challenging the trope of responsibility that prevailed in the early 1980s, AIDS activists sometimes derided ASOs for not doing more to save actual lives.

ACT UP/NY member Steven Webb wrote a letter to the New York Native expressing his beliefs about what responsible lesbians and gay men should be doing. He described a recent ACT UP action and then asked, “Where were you?” He continued,

I get the impression that the New York community looks to the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) to lead the way in all issues concerning AIDS. The GMHC provides patient services and education. Their agenda has been to offer any person with AIDS high-quality care and a dignified way to die, and preventive education to those not yet infected. Laudable. Necessary. But this community must understand that what the GMHC does has next to nothing to do with saving the lives of those who are dying. It is within their substantial power to do more to save lives; it is simply not their priority. . . . We are at war and we are losing: 27,000 dead, at least one million walking wounded. We are at war. Will you enlist? (Webb 1987, 6)

Larry Kramer drew a connection between responsibility and activism in a speech that he gave to the annual Gay and Lesbian Town Meet-
ing in Boston in June 1987 (reprinted in the New York Native): “Why are there so few people out there screaming and yelling? . . . We are going to die because we refuse to take responsibility for our own lives” (Kramer 1987c, 37). Although Kramer suggested that responsibility included actions like writing letters and giving money, his view that confrontational activism was the truly responsible act is clear. After listing all of the governmental agencies that were supposed to be conducting research on drugs, and all of their shortcomings, Kramer asked,

What the fuck is going on here and what the fuck are you doing about it? . . . Twenty-four million gay men and lesbians in this country, and who is fighting back? We have a demonstration in Washington and we have 300 people. . . . How many dead brothers have to be piled up in a heap in front of your faces before you learn to fight back and scream and yell and demand and take some responsibility for your own lives. . . . [T]hey are killing us and we are letting them. (Kramer 1987c, 40)

Taking up Kramer’s equation of responsibility with confrontational activism, a man wrote the following in a letter to the editor: “I was so impressed by Larry Kramer’s article ‘Taking Responsibility for Our Lives’ that I could no longer sit by as others did something. I went to my first meeting of . . . ACT UP last Monday” (Franetic 1987, 6). In many contexts, the hectoring, shaming register that Kramer used might fail to mobilize, but in this moment the aligning of pride and responsibility with ACT UP inspired some to get involved.

The following example suggests how articulations of the righteousness and necessity of activism (and thus of the responsibility to participate) invigorated those already involved. In a keynote address to a national meeting of direct-action AIDS activists in 1988, C-FAR member Ferd Eggnan declared,

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

The crowd then cheered loudly, “giving Eggnan a standing ovation and chanting, ‘ACT UP, fight back, fight AIDS!’” (Olson 1988, 6).

Eggnan’s statement knit together many components of ACT UP’s emotional habitus and its concomitant politics. Acceptance by an oppressive and exploitative society should not be the goal; the course of action instead should be to reject and fight to change that “sick” society. Lesbian and gay anger and love must inspire a rebellious activism. Never mind dominant society’s emotional and political norms: angry, confrontational activism is the responsible thing to do given the injustices and cruelty of the AIDS crisis. Gay love must be a love committed to social change and righteous rebellion.

Along with resignifying responsibility in a way that valorized defiant street activism, activists also altered a previously used meaning of responsibility by laying the blame for the AIDS crisis at the doorstep of the government. Rather than claiming community responsibility in caretaking as an indirect way to counter dominant discourses that blamed gays as responsible for AIDS, AIDS activists directly countered the accusations against gay men: gays were not responsible for the AIDS crisis; rather, the government’s negligence and irresponsibility were to blame, and the government should be held responsible for resolving that crisis.

In its reconfiguration of the trope of responsibility and its reorientation of pride, ACT UP challenged the normative affective ties that lesbians and gay men might have felt with regard to dominant institutions like science, the media, and the state. Rather than trusting them, ACT UP suggested that skepticism, doubt, and distrust would be more appropriate feelings with which to approach and assess such institutions. Indignation and outrage also were appropriate, of course, as were hostility and disgust. Targeting them for their genocidal policies was proper and responsible.

ACT UP also transformed the subject and object of shame. ACT UP

20. The trope of responsibility was also used against ACT UP. Politicians and the mainstream media frequently constructed AIDS activists as irrational and irresponsible. For example, after heated exchanges with lesbian and gay activists, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley walked out of a town hall meeting and stated that he would meet with “responsible gay activists but not with those who wanted confrontation [i.e., ACT UP]” (Hanania 1989, 3). Expressions about the responsibility of confrontational street activism should thus also be seen as a response to mainstream views that construct activism as irresponsible. ACT UP engaged this discursive struggle over the meaning of responsibility (see chapter 5).
inverted gay shame by asserting that the (in)actions of the government and other institutions responsible for the AIDS crisis were shameful. A frequent chant at ACT UP demonstrations was “shame, shame, shame,” said while pointing to a specific target. The alteration of shame was connected to ACT UP’s other emotion work: lesbians and gay men angrily fighting back were righteous and responsible, and rather than feeling ashamed, they should feel proud of both their sexual practices and their confrontational activism.

The audiences for ACT UP’s rhetoric of shame were both the targets of its protests and its own members. An ACT UP/Los Angeles document written as an internal educational piece about the FDA evoked shame in a manner that seemed aimed at influencing how ACT UP members understood the government’s role in the epidemic, but as an internal document, it may as well have been designed to counter gay shame. “The shameful fact remains that no new drugs are being released to PWARC’s [people with AIDS-related complex] or PWAs . . . . Homophobia, sexism, and racism have all contributed to the management, delays in funding, and shameful neglect of those who are suffering” (ACT UP/Los Angeles, n.d., 2, 6). The shame was on the government and other institutions, not on those who were suffering through this epidemic.

AIDS activists also invoked shame to criticize lesbians and gay men who were critical of ACT UP. Many lesbians and gay men, for example, were critical of ACT UP/NY’s 1988 disruption of a speech by New York City’s Mayor Ed Koch, during which the mayor declared June “Gay Pride and History Month” and unveiled a new photo exhibit. ACT UP zapped the mayor because of his “failed leadership on AIDS” (Kirschenbaum 1988, 6), but others in the community felt that the mayor’s actions bestowed “official recognition of our status as an honorable, distinguishable community with a heritage of activism and pride” and should therefore be celebrated (Conkey et al. 1988, 6). In response to the heated criticism, Vito Russo wrote a letter to the New York Native that took ACT UP’s detractors to task and ended by shaming them:

I would like to register my wholehearted support of ACT UP for their appropriate and well-timed zap of Mayor Koch . . . . All those good and polite little boys and girls who have been whining about how ACT UP trashed its own party and how this wasn’t the time or the place to zap the mayor are not activists, they’re a bunch of politically naïve asswipes . . . . These people are like the Jews who said, ‘Don’t throw rocks at the Nazis. You’ll make them mad at us.’ How much worse can this administration possibly be? . . . . I would like to remind all of these so-called “activists” what activism means. Activists do things that you’re not supposed to do. Activists are not respectable . . . . Activists are not dazzled by the crumbs off a table for a mayor who is allowing their friends to die. Activists are not grateful for some rinky-dink exhibit which “allows” us to celebrate our history while our history is being systematically wiped out . . . . These prim and proper fans of gay history should take note. History will record that, like the Jews who did nothing during the Holocaust, they are the traitors and fools in our midst. Shame on them. (Russo 1988a, 6)

Such articulations of shame redirected the feeling away from self-doubt and self-hatred. Not queers, but the government and other institutions should feel ashamed for failing to address the AIDS crisis, and those who were continuing to kowtow to dominant society should feel shame as well. Gay journalist Jon-Henri Damski recorded the shifting subject of shame in a column he wrote about an eruption of sentiment against Chicago’s Mayor Daley who made a surprise appearance at a lesbian/gay antiviolence march. There were approximately a thousand participants, and when the mayor unexpectedly showed up, there was an outburst, fueled by the mayor’s negligence with regard to AIDS. “I found myself with the crowd around me, automatically pointing my finger at the mayor, and echoing ‘Shame, Shame, Shame!”’ (Damski 1992b, 15).

Damski noted the queer transformation of shame:

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

As with activists’ articulations of anger and pride, their articulations of shame seemed to affect their own and others’ sentiments about themselves and society. From the vantage point of Betty Berzon—a psychotherapist who had worked in the lesbian and gay community for years—ACT UP’s actions and rhetoric profoundly affected their feelings of.
shame. Reflecting on ACT UP’s actions and slogans, its popularity, and its fervor, Berzon noted, “I began to see the effects of these developments in the new ways my clients talked about being gay. I was hearing more pride of ownership in a community feeling its strength, speaking out, acting up, demanding attention to its needs. Clearly this transition ... from a victim’s mentality to an activist mindset was having a positive impact on the self-esteem of many gays” (Berzon 1994, 307–8).

I am not claiming that ACT UP successfully eradicated gay shame; that would be impossible in a heterosexist world where queers, like any other social outcasts, sometimes experience shame due to living in a state of nonrecognition and social erasure. Nevertheless, ACT UP’s reconfiguring of shame had the effect of ameliorating the feeling for many queers, and its work in that arena generated immense appreciation.

**ACT UP’s Response to Mainstream Emotional and Political Norms**

ACT UP also had to navigate the emotional habitus and concomitant political norms of mainstream society. In Western societies, and in the United States most specifically, anger is commonly disparaged when expressed by members of groups that are themselves socially devalued. Anthropologist Catherine Lutz lists several factors that contribute to the “generally negative evaluation of anger” in the United States (1988, 180). First, there is the dominant culture that “portrays much emotion as chaotic and irrational” (180). People expressing anger in public seem particularly out of control. Second, “anger is often seen as an antisocial emotion because it can involve protest against restraints that are social” (180) and seen as necessary to the smooth functioning of society. Lutz notes that there is some ambivalence here because the prevailing individualistic ethos in the United States sometimes legitimizes protest against “the system.” Nevertheless, who can challenge state and social regulations is severely prescribed by social hierarchies of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and the like. Only some groups of people are authorized to express “righteous anger” and even then only in certain ways and for a specific period before they too are derided as overwrought and crazy. A view of anger as righteous seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Lutz also lists a third factor that produces a negative evaluation of anger: “the strong association posited between anger and aggression” (180). In general, then, anger is suspect.

Thomas Scheff argues that “rationalism has come to be the dominant attitude in our present status quo, the social arrangements that go without saying in our society. One such arrangement is the suppression of emotions” (1992, 102). We uphold rationality as the ideal way to be, and “being rational”—assessing, evaluating, adjudging, considering, appraising—is equated with being unemotional. In the United States we are particularly inclined toward the suppression of strong feelings (103). We are made uneasy by expressions of intense grief, loudly articulated anger, enacted rage and fury. Emotionality in the streets—most obviously in the case of riots, but also in the case of confrontational protests—is even more unsettling because it seems to signify a breakdown in social order. In addition, street protest is often cast as unnecessary and dangerous, partly because of its emotional valence. As social movement theorists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have argued, “The ideology of democratic political rights, by emphasizing the availability of legitimate avenues for the redress of grievances, delegitimizes protest” (1992, 313). ACT UP, then, confronted a prevailing emotional habitus and dominant political norms that tend to discourage emotional protest politics.

AIDS’ activists might have responded by tempering ACT UP’s emotionality. Other movements have certainly followed that route. Julian McAllister Groves found that the animal rights activists he studied tried to manage the expressive tone of their movement so as not to appear overly emotional. “Activists learned to manage their own emotional responses to animal cruelty, and find emotional dispositions that appeared more legitimate... [They also] learned how to identify in others the emotional traits appropriate to animal rights activism, and avoided interactions with those who did not conform to the correct emotional disposition” (Groves 1995, 443). Activists made conscious attempts to appear rational and dispassionate, grounding their arguments in rights-based philosophy and drawing boundaries between an acceptable concern for animals and an overly emotional concern (447–49, 456).

Direct-action AIDS activists, in contrast, authorized ACT UP’s emotionality and political defiance by flipping conventional understandings on their head and asserting the rationality of their angry and confrontational activism. Recall Ferd Eggan’s assertion that “in the face of cruelty and injustice, it’s right to rebel,” and the standing ovation he received. Aware of the discrediting potential of dominant emotional and political norms, ACT UP participants repeatedly justified the movement’s militancy by pointing to the extremity of the AIDS crisis, to the geno-
cidual actions of people and institutions targeted by the movement, to the wholesale slaughter of their community, and to the effectiveness and necessity of ACT UP’s angry activism.

In many cases, the target audience was other lesbians and gay men who were skeptical about ACT UP’s emotionality and confrontational politics. In response to a gay man’s assertion that “action born of anger was ineffective,” lesbian AIDS activist Denise Kulp explained the link between her anger and her decision to commit civil disobedience. “People I love are dying, and that makes me angry. I am making my anger powerful by turning it into action, to change the way things are” (Kulp 1988, 22). Angry activism, Kulp contended, was an obvious and rational response to death. ACT UP/Chicago used its allotted speaking slot during the 1992 Pride Rally to counter criticism about its confrontational activism.

Some people in this community say we should stop rocking the boat. But the ship is already sinking, folks. They say we should shut up, tone it down, be more civilized, and grow up. We cannot be calm and polite when four people die of AIDS every day in Chicago, deaths that could have been prevented; when almost 200,000 people have already died of AIDS in this country alone. Why should we be nice and sweet when Mayor Daley and his Health Commissioner Sister Sheila Lyne fought every step of the way as we demanded an increase in their measly one million dollar AIDS budget? They told us that they would not and could not increase the AIDS budget just as they hadn’t in the last four years. But we forced them to increase it by 2.5 million dollars. We disrupted Mayor Daley’s appearances and shouted him down while he tried to ignore us. We invaded City Council meetings. We barged into the Health Department while they locked their doors on us... We won the additional AIDS funding because we were loud, disrupted their business as usual, and took to the streets!!! (ACT UP/Chicago 1992, 5)²¹

ACT UP’s leaflets and other agit-prop that used rhetorics of murder and government-sponsored genocide similarly challenged conventional emotional and political norms and justified defiant activism. Its repeated expressions of anger and indignation toward state and society, and of pride about both confrontational activism and sexual difference, coupled

²¹ This months-long campaign resulted in the city of Chicago more than tripling its 1992 AIDS budget. Full disclosure: I co-wrote this ACT UP/Chicago speech.

with ACT UP’s assertions about the rationality, necessity, and responsibility of activism, together valorized what is often derided as emotionally overwrought and politically unnecessary. ACT UP’s challenge to mainstream norms provided a language of resistance and an emotional pedagogy to lesbians and gay men, ways of feeling and acting that addressed those who were hesitant about engaging in ACT UP’s activism.

Summary: ACT UP and a New Emotional Habitus

Social movements face emotional imperatives, and their response to such constraints and opportunities affects their development. In their emotion work, direct-action AIDS activists addressed lesbian and gay grief by naming it as anger and tying it to confrontational activism; gave voice to queers’ infuriating experience of having their daily encounters with the horrors of AIDS ignored by mainstream society and simultaneously being blamed for the crisis; offered a response to lesbian and gay ambivalence by elevating anger at state and society and pride about sexual difference and confrontational activism, while suppressing shame about homosexuality and fear of social rejection; and countered mainstream American emotional and political norms, most effectively with rhetoric that asserted the necessity and rationality of emotion-driven, confrontational activism.

ACT UP’s emotion work was a crucial and necessary element in its meteoric rise in the late 1980s and growth into the early 1990s. If ACT UP had not engaged in this constant and extensive emotion work, it would not have been able to garner and sustain the support and participation of large segments of lesbian and gay communities across the United States. Arising in a moment of emotional transition but within both a structure of lesbian and gay ambivalence and a context of mainstream American emotional norms, the direct-action AIDS movement had to engage in the struggle between competing emotional habits, each with its attendant politics. ACT UP’s emotion work, sometimes strategic and premeditated but often simply the unintended by-product of its various activities, provided thousands of lesbians and gay men with a new set of affects and emotions that authorized angry, confrontational street activism. Activists’ repeated articulations and bodily enactments of this new emotional habitus helped to animate and sustain their own engagement in and others’ support for confrontational AIDS activism.
The (Re-)Birth of Queer

ACT UP not only inaugurated a new era in lesbian and gay politics and in AIDS activism, it also was the site from which a new, queer sensibility emerged and took hold, a sensibility that was embraced by lesbians, gay men, and other sexual and gender outlaws across the country. *Queer* wove together the new emotional habitus and the movement’s oppositional politics and sex-radicalism, creating a collectivity that set queer-identified folks apart from the more establishment-oriented gay leadership and institutions. Rather than an identity, or even an *anti*-identity in the way that queer theory posits, *queer*, in its moment of rebirth circa 1990, might best be understood as an emotive, an expression of self and collectivity that created and regenerated feelings that were a powerful and alluring response to lesbian and gay ambivalence about self and society: fury and pride about gay difference and about confrontational activism, antipathy toward heteronormative society, and aspirations to live in a transformed world. This new sensibility grew out of the political exigencies of the moment. The deadly consequences of existing as a despised population were by then unambiguous and staggering; there was a dire need to up the ante in the fight against AIDS. Also apparent were the repercussions for gay activism of the painful psychic effects of living as a despised group—most especially a widespread anxiety about acting up. *Queer* not only challenged the vehement homo-hatred that structured state and societal responses to the crisis; it also offered emotional, political, and sexual ways of being that addressed that anxiety. Even more, as a shared sensibility, *queer* generated a sense of connection with others in the room who were as angry, as willing to be defiant, as willing not only to celebrate gay difference but to believe that the world needed that difference. In a context of social nonrecognition, *queer* invited and intensified our recognition of one another.

As an affective antidote to the bad feelings that flow from social annihilation, the new queer sensibility helped to generate broad appeal for ACT UP and, largely as a result of its emotional effects, was a vital force sustaining the movement into the early 1990s.

22. I say rebirth to indicate that the term queer was embraced by some sexual and gender outlaws in earlier historical moments (Chauney 1995); I focus here only on its usage circa 1990.

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*Queer: Anger, Political Opposition, Sex-Radicalism*

By 1990, to identify as queer was to embrace righteous anger about homophobia and the AIDS crisis as well as political defiance; it was to feel proud about sexual difference and relatively unconcerned about social acceptance. With that sensibility, the new queer generation proudly and joyously shook up norms in straight and gay society.²³

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

Fighting the AIDS epidemic must go hand-in-hand with fighting for queer liberation. And we mean liberation for all queers! Queers of all colors and sexes, leather dykes and drag queens and radical faeries and bulldaggers and dykes on bikes and poofers and fish and studs and butches and femmes and clones from the 1970s and the 1980s. We need to celebrate our sexuality, our erotic innovations created out of this epidemic, our fantasies and fetishes, our particular ways of fucking, sucking, and licking. It is our queer love that has made us capable of fighting the insurance industry, the drug companies, the government, the bureaucracies, the gay-bashers, the right-wing zealots, the AIDS crisis. (ACT UP/Chicago 1992, 5)

The new queer sensibility unabashedly drew sex and militant politics together. ACT UP/Chicago member Mary Patten extolled ACT UP’s conjoining of the two: “ACT UP combined the red fists of radical 1970s feminism and the New Left with the flaming lips of neo-punk, postmodern,

23. I use the term *generation* not as a marker of age, but as a way to indicate the ascendance at this time of a queer emotional and political sensibility and its widespread influence on sexual and gender outlaws of many ages.
pro-sex queer politics. . . Red now stood for lips, bodies, and lust as well as anger and rebellion; fists connoted not only street militancy, but sex acts" (Patten 1998, 389).  

ACT UP also unleashed a queer coming together of lesbians and gay men, dykes and fags, and that made the movement enormously compelling for many. ACT UP/NY member Polly Thistlethwaite spoke about gay men’s and lesbians’ “passionate respect for each other,” recalling in particular how “revered” many lesbians in the movement were: “Faggots were crazy about these girls” (Thistlethwaite 1993; see also Moore 2003, 4). Jeanne Kracher recalled that gay men’s openness about their sexuality had a strong influence on her own sexuality.

I think for me, one of the earliest memories I have is of really feeling like, “Huh, this is interesting, this is something I haven’t experienced before, and this is something I better be open to and learn from,” was all the sex-positive stuff [in ACT UP]. . . . Sex certainly was never the basis of anything that I had organized around. Certainly not as a feminist. And there was a way that these guys were so expressive about their sexuality, which helped to free me. . . . There was something about being in that crowd that was very freeing, about being a lesbian, about being gay, that this was about sex on a very deep level. These guys . . . would take their shirts off at the first possible moment at a demonstration and would have a million nipple rings and were making out whenever they could possibly incorporate that into anything. And there was a way that that was very freeing. (Kracher 2000)

Ferd Egan credits lesbians for the movement’s embrace of queer sexuality: “I think that one of the reasons why ACT UP and the AIDS movement in general became a movement about gender and sexuality was because of lesbians. And all the advance work that people had been doing during the ‘80s, like On Our Backs [a lesbian sex magazine]” (Egan 1999).

Challenging the recent attacks on queer sexuality, gay men brought their highly developed (and much maligned) sexual cultures to the movement; lesbians brought their experience from the feminist sex wars and the recent renaissance in lesbian sexual experimentation; and both brought

an openness about learning from one another in the sexual realm. United (at least temporarily) by their activism, feelings, and sex-radicalism, lesbians and gay men in ACT UP turned to each other as political allies and friends, embracing and even trying on each other’s identities. Men in ACT UP/Chicago wore the Women’s Caucus “Power Breakfast” T-shirt, which pictured two women engaged in oral sex (fig. 14).

Around the country, dykes wore “Big Fag” T-shirts, and fags wore “Big Dyke” T-shirts. Queers embraced gender and sexual fluidity. Some queer dykes and fags started having sex with one another (see Black 1996).  

That is not to say that ACT UP created an utterly accepting and experimental sexual environment. Men and women having sex together often felt the need to hide their relationships; some of these liaisons I learned about only in interviews. Ann Cvetkovitch notes that there was “a significant discrepancy between ACT UP’s professed reputation as

24. Patten (1998, 425) credits lesbian pornography editor Susie Bright with popularizing the red fata/ red lips metaphor as a way to signal the transformation in lesbian identities in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

25. This phenomenon may have been more frequent on the coasts than in the Midwest. Although some gay men and lesbians had sex with one another in ACT UP/Chicago, we often joked that we were more “conservative” in the Midwest, where girls do it with girls and boys with boys.
a model for queer intimacies, including relationships between lesbians and gay men, and the actual practice, which involved a lot of secrecy" (2003a, 194). Still, my recollection is that many of us, although somewhat uncomfortable with the “hetero” queer sex going on in our midst, were trying to interrogate our gut reactions. Zoe Leonard’s reflections about the difficulties she faced in being “out” about having sex with a man in ACT UP/NY indicate some of the complexities of sexual ecumenicalism. At the time, she experienced people’s attitudes as “small-minded and painful,” but she came to an understanding of why these sexual relationships were difficult for some in the movement to accept: “We had created a safe queer space and now there were people having heterosexual sex within that space, occupying that space. I can understand now why that was threatening” (quoted in Cvetkovich 2003a, 193). *Queer* had its sexual limits, then, but there was nevertheless an immense opening out toward sexual and gender outlaws of most stripes, especially those who were outcasts in the mainstream lesbian and gay community—drag queens and kings, tranies, S&M practitioners, butches and femmes, bisexuals, leather dykes, nelly boys, public sex lovers, sluts, dykes donning dildos and other sex toy aficionados, man/boy lovers.26

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

*The Emotion of Queer*

The emotional effects of reclaiming a queer sensibility were perhaps what most attracted lesbians, gay men, and other sexual and gender outlaws
to embrace the term as well as the movement from which it grew. The AIDS epidemic had ravaged lesbians’ and gay men’s already conflicted feelings about homosexuality. *Queer*, as an emotive, offered a new sensibility that allowed, encouraged, and in a way enacted, a changed orientation both to self and to dominant society for those within as well as outside the movement. Artist and ACT UP/NY member Gregg Bordowitz has written eloquently about his need, after testing HIV-positive in 1988, to fight “an internal conclusion that my pleasure had led to my death” (Bordowitz 2004, 126). He describes “the discourse of blame that would judgmentally bring sentence down upon me for getting fucked up the ass, liking it, and getting a fatal disease from it,” asking, “Where did this discourse exist?” He answered, “Among the homophobes. Among the right wing. And in my own mind. Sometimes, I believe that my homosexuality is a disease and that I deserve to get sick from it. This thought can overtake me at any time. I think it in my dreams. I hear it in the voices of kind friends and see it in the faces of my relatives. It’s always present.” But, he writes, “I am not resigned to it. I fight it” (126–27). *Queer* offered a potent emotive for the fight. Bordowitz suspects that his embrace of ACT UP’s queer fashion was primarily about repudiating the shame he felt about his sexuality (Bordowitz 2002a). ACT UP/NY member Peter Staley credits the movement with queering him, both politically, by enticing him to become a confrontational activist, and in terms of his self-understanding and self-presentation: “ACT UP has had a dramatic effect on my life. I left Wall Street altogether and am doing ACT UP activities full-time, getting arrested, and wearing an earring” (Anger 1988). ACT UP’s queerness, along with the feelings of solidarity generated in the movement, encouraged ACT UP/NY member Michelangelo Signorile to embrace his sexuality. “I’d never felt so close to people I worked with. . . . We were putting our bodies on the line for each other, going to jail for each other. I loved these people—and was loved back—in a way I had never known. I was feeling powerful about being gay. Feelings from when I was a child came back. I had longed for people to tell me that being gay was great. My closet was opening. These people were the most out-of-the-closet, in-your-face people in the world” (Signorile 1993, 63). ACT UP’s queer sensibility created the means for recognition

26. *Queer* also had its racial and gender limits, a point I take up in chapter 6. Although for some it signified a political stance for radical social transformation, including challenges to white and male supremacy, for others queer elevated oppression due to sexuality above all other oppressions. See Barbara Smith (1993) for an analysis of how queer became raced as white and gendered as male.

27. Before joining ACT UP/NY, Staley worked as a bond trader. By his own account, he was deeply closeted while working on Wall Street before joining ACT UP (http://blogs.poz.com/peter/archives/2008/06/peter_staley_ai.html; accessed June 29, 2008).
of both self and one another, generating forceful feelings of solidarity within the movement.

Lesbians' and gay men's appropriation of the label queer, as with the appropriation of any collective identity or sensibility, entailed both "an affective as well as [a] cognitive mapping of the social world" (Jasper 1998, 415). Queer valorized anger, defiant politics, and sexual nonconformity, and displaced gay shame, self-doubt, fear of rejection, and the desire for social acceptance. As queer theorist Judith Butler has noted,

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

With outrageous, in-your-face, sexy, and angry activism, queers reappropriated queer, expurgating it of its shame-inducing power and, in the process, suppressing feelings of shame they might have had. Where mainstream discourses and some prominent lesbian and gay discourses had earlier blamed gay sexuality for AIDS, queer valorized non-normative sexuality and suggested the positive role of gay male sexual culture in the AIDS epidemic. Similar to Crimp, who asserted that "it is our promiscuity that will save us" (1987c, 253),28 Ford Eggn challenged criticisms that depicted the 1970s as "a death trip of putrid sexuality and alienation," urging queers to remember that "gay men's sexual networks in particular were the foundation to build the communities that care for each other now" (Eggn 1988).

As became evident during the feminist "sex wars" that raged during the 1980s, numerous lesbians had already been engaging in a sexual

renaisance that foregrounded a multiplicity of sexual pleasures, some of which had been disparaged in some lesbian feminist circles—use of dildos and other sexual accessories, penetrative sex and fisting, S&M, butch/femme, bondage, use of pornography. The rebirth of queer extended these and other lesbian sexual practices, and discussions about them, to many more lesbians, and marked a new explosion in lesbian sexual experimentation. Celebrations of queer sexuality united lesbians and gay men in a common cause: the fight against the stigmatization of their sexual practices and identities and the fight for sexual liberation. For both lesbians and gay men, characteristics that queers were supposed to be ashamed of now became sources of pride.

Pride in queer sexuality was pronounced, for example, in a demonstration that ACT UP/Atlanta hosted against Georgia's sodomy law. Five hundred activists from ACT UP chapters across the country demonstrated at the Georgia state capitol on the opening day of the legislature in 1990. Holding signs that read "Sodomy: the law is the perversion" and chanting "Suck my dick, lick my clit, sodomy laws are full of shit," demonstrators simulated sex acts as they blocked traffic (Gerber 1990, 1). In response to the governor's description of the action as "repulsive," one demonstrator stated, "it was an audacious affirmation of lesbian and gay sex" (quoted in Gerber 1990, 1; emphasis in original). Chip Rowan, an ACT UP/Atlanta organizer of the protest, called the demonstration "a source of strength and pride for gay people in the South who want to take the risk of coming out publicly" (3). After the sodomy action and a demonstration the next day that targeted the CDC, Rowan remarked, "Everywhere we went today and last night, people were applauding us, saying we had to continue this, saying how good ACT UP made them feel" (3). The pride demonstrated in ACT UP actions—whether it attached to queer sexuality or to confrontational activism—was infectious.

The embrace of a queer, anti-assimilationist, and oppositional sensibility also addressed lesbians' and gay men's fears of social rejection: as they themselves were rejecting society, they were less concerned with society's rejection of queers. To feel and express anger was now normative. The queer embrace of defiant activism valorized as rational and indispensable that which mainstream society typically disparaged as irrational, dangerous, and unnecessary. OutWeek columnist Nina Reyes registered the psychological and political shift that had occurred through ACT UP and that was propelling this new queer sensibility forward.

28. Crimp's reasoning was that promiscuity taught gay men about sexual pleasures and also about the varied ways to seek and attain those pleasures. "It is that psychic preparation, that experimentation, that conscious work on our own sexualities that has allowed many of us to change our sexual behaviors [amid AIDS]" (1987c, 253).
It took us years to realize that in our attempts to check the ravages of AIDS, we had contributed to the repression of our own queer sexuality. We have had to come to terms with the pall of fear that had descended upon our collective psyches, demonizing promiscuity and equating all of our sexual experimentation with death. Then, in 1986, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed that we have no basic right to our sexual self-expression. . . . When it became clear that AIDS would decimate not only individual queer lives but our sexually queer culture, ACT UP was spawned. The flickering spirit of liberation ignited queer rage, and our community developed a self-consciously sex-positive movement. . . . The AIDS-activist group has rebaptized the liberation impulse. . . . ACT UP erupted into activism with the incendiary passions of individuals united in anger, unwilling to take it anymore. . . . It gave lesbians and gay men who had had enough of the [gay rights] movement’s reservation and politesse the chance to fight hard and dirty and without apology. (Reyes 1990a, 41, 44)

Intense affective states of eroticism and sexiness, exuberance and euphoria, pride and self-respect, now attached to the term *queer* and animated identification with and the embrace of both this new sensibility and ACT UP, the site where new queer selves were being publicly and passionately enacted. The queer and confrontational components of ACT UP were part of what drew many young queers to ACT UP. Polly Thistletwaite indicated this when she explained her attraction to ACT UP/NY: “The thing that appealed to me about ACT UP when I first started . . . was that it was in the streets and it was queer, it was gay and lesbian, and I had never had the courage or the opportunity to demonstrate around that. And that was great” (Thistletwaite 1993).

In sum, the new queer sensibility—born within ACT UP and championed by the movement—offered an emotionally compelling response to lesbians’ and gay men’s often contradictory feelings about self and society. Additionally, as a collective identification that embraced opposition and an outsider status, queerness appealed to those who historically had been marginalized by the mainstream lesbian and gay movement and community. It validated those who held radical politics, who refused assimilation, and who celebrated sexual difference. Eliciting and fortifying a fierce pride in bucking political, emotional, and sexual norms, *queer* exerted a strong affective pull that enticed thousands to adopt the label and to support the movement out of which it emerged. For all these reasons, the rebirth of *queer* helped to generate and maintain support for ACT UP.

**Conclusion**

ACT UP’s rise in the late 1980s and sustained growth into the early 1990s was contingent on the generation and regeneration of intense sentiments among thousands of queer folks. This was true in part because ACT UP was operating in a society that typically disparages angry street activism, but it also was necessary in light of the gay world’s history of anxiety about rocking the boat. In their rhetoric, agit-prop, and actions, AIDS activists normalized and valorized anger and confrontation, making them sources of pleasure and pride. My contention is that ACT UP’s emotion work helped it to secure and extend the new emotional habitus and its attendant political horizon and was thus a crucial factor in the movement’s growth and sustainability. Its affective and political pedagogy had force: ACT UP became one of the important places to be if you were a self-respecting queer concerned about the AIDS crisis.

Emotional imperatives exist for all movements: like other organizations, including political regimes, social movements must establish a normative emotional order if they are to survive (Reddy 2001). We thus need to investigate how movements respond to such emotional exigencies, exploring the affective pedagogies they offer and how that largely nonconscious work influences movement sustainability.