Love, Memory, and Resistance:

The Respectability Politics of the AIDS Memorial Quilt and the AIDS Social Movement

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Most individuals battling AIDS in the early years of the epidemic were gay men and intravenous drug users, members of already marginalized groups in society that were further scrutinized with the emergence of AIDS. The lack of response from the U.S. government to calls urging them to mitigate infection and death rates was in part due to homophobic and prejudicial attitudes, and their silence informed civil society's response to this now stigmatized disease. Angered with the inadequate response from the U.S. government, gay civil rights activists began to publicly protest for better resources, more funding, and a general acknowledgement of the devastating impact of AIDS on these communities. At the 1985 annual candlelight march to honor those who died from AIDS, Cleve Jones, a San Francisco based gay activist, learned that over 1,000 San Franciscans had already lost their life to this disease. He was moved to encourage participants to write the names of their lost loved ones on placards, which he then taped onto the walls of the San Francisco Federal Building. When he looked back at the placards, Jones realized they resembled a patchwork quilt. This was the birth of what would come to be known as the AIDS Memorial Quilt (National AIDS Memorial).

Two years after this event, Jones, along with several colleagues, organized the NAMES Project Foundation which handles the addition of new panels, the fundraising for AIDS causes, and the display of the Quilt across U.S. cities. In October 1987, the Quilt composed of about 2,000 panels was displayed for the first time on the National Mall in D.C. According to the NAMES Project, the Quilt was visited by half a million people that weekend. Four months later,

after a national tour, the Quilt grew to over 6,000 panels. Today, the AIDS Memorial Quilt includes almost 50,000 panels, an incredibly large memorial that only represents a fraction of the 700,000 lives that have been lost to AIDS in the U.S. (National AIDS Memorial).

The goal of this memorial was to challenge the current understanding of AIDS in the U.S. while memorializing those who had already died. The Quilt meant to shift the narrative of AIDS from being depicted as a gay disease to an American disease, one that deserved more than the current indifference it was receiving both from the government and civil society. In order to achieve this narrative shift, the rhetoric and practices used by the Quilt's founders and participants were ones that, I argue, embodied respectability politics. Respectability politics is a strategy used by members of marginalized groups to counter the discrimination and prejudice of the majority by urging group members to behave in ways that adhere to dominant, mainstream norms. By embracing respectability politics, the memorial was seeking to alleviate the stigmatization that had been linked to AIDS and the gay community by ensuring that individuals with AIDS were depicted as adherents to conventional norms, and not as deviants who were deserving of death by AIDS, as was a common conception at the time. By creating a narrative of AIDS and of people with AIDS that did not threaten existing societal standards, the AIDS Memorial Quilt was able to catapult into the national (and global) sphere.

In this paper, I will examine the AIDS Memorial Quilt's use of respectability politics and the effects of this approach on the larger AIDS social movement. During the time of the Quilt's inception, other gay rights activists were mobilizing around the inadequate AIDS response and establishing organizations, such as ACT UP, that similarly worked to shift the existing narrative of AIDS through different means. It is important to place the AIDS Memorial Quilt at the center of this social movement as it was a seminal factor in the portrayal of AIDS as a national tragedy

that ultimately motivated an improved governmental response to the disease. Therefore, it is necessary that the tactics used by the NAMES Project and its founders are examined separately than the efforts of other organizations during this movement.

I seek to answer the following questions: How did the NAMES Project Foundation and its founders employ respectability politics and in what ways did it influence the public's perception and response to the Quilt and its messaging? Additionally, what response did their use of respectability politics garner from other AIDS organizations, specifically ACT UP? Existing literature on the AIDS Memorial Quilt has yet to fully explore this aspect of the Quilt's approaches and the impact it had on communities that were being disproportionally affected by AIDS, the larger mainstream society, and other gay rights activists and AIDS organizations who were also tackling similar goals. By evaluating how the Quilt embodies respectability, this paper will also extend existing literature on respectability politics that is currently most prevalent in the study of Black politics and Black social movements. Emphasizing the Quilt as a part of a larger social movement will further allow us to observe the role of respectability in social movements that are centered on other marginalized groups.

The next section will provide a deeper overview of existing literature surrounding the AIDS Memorial Quilt and respectability politics. I will then further explain my reasoning for why the Quilt is an interesting and ideal case to examine respectability politics and its effects on a social movement before moving on to a description of the paper's key concepts and methods. Lastly, I will discuss the ways the NAMES Project and its Quilt embraced respectability politics and how it elicited specific responses from different sectors of society and from other AIDS organizations.

Literature Review

The existing literature surrounding the AIDS Memorial Quilt has centered on its unique functions as a memorial, providing a place to mourn and memorialize while also being a tool for political mobilization and activism. Scholars have also considered the Quilt as a part of a social movement, evaluating its fit on the established social movement criteria. I will dive into this literature in this section, before reviewing the existing literature of respectability politics that largely exists in Black politics and the study of Black social movements.

AIDS Memorial Quilt

As a memorial, the Quilt was a prime vehicle for the creation of a collective memory surrounding AIDS. As Capozzola (2002) explains, the commemorative and the monumental processes of memory formation are distinct yet interrelated, with the former emphasizing the past and remembering the event or loss, and the latter targeting the future and using the past to shape current social or political discourse (94). A similar point of the saliency of the past on present issues is noted by Blair and Michel (2007), as they assert that "because of the pronounced tendency of contemporary public commemoration to take up subject matter that yields to ongoing fractiousness or at least to cultural anxiety, it is more likely that issues of the present will be deliberated by debating memory" (596). The AIDS Memorial Quilt embodies both commemorative and monumental functions, remembering a not-so-distant past that was still greatly affecting the present lives of many and stimulating a political discourse to encourage change of the current approach to AIDS. This was partly achieved by the unique design of the memorial, which allowed the Quilt to continue growing as individuals added panels as more people died of AIDS, an especially striking feature that aroused both grief and anger to those who visited.

However, many questioned the memorial's ability to mobilize civil society and provoke political action, arguing that the Quilt's role in providing a space to mourn only weakened its activist abilities (Gould 2002; Kramer 1989). Activists worried that emphasizing grief prevented a true discussion on the political and social shifts needed to amend the situation. As Rand (2007) explains, "gay men—codified as a group that is dying of AIDS—become socially recognized subjects by being mourned," and once they are "constituted as 'mourned subjects,' the agency of gay men is significantly constrained, and their potential for activism is severely limited" (665-6). Conversely, others argue that mourning strengthens the Quilt's activist abilities, as put forth by Brown (1997) when he expressed that the "cultural importance of grief and mourning…made the display no less political, but all the more meaningful for participants" (2800; see also Lewis & Fraser 1996; Krouse 1994). The act of mourning in itself can be seen as political. In a society that has discounted the perspectives of the gay community and created a hostile environment for them to express grief, publicizing a space where this grief can be seen is in essence a challenge to homophobic culture itself (Brown 1997, 31; Butler 1997). In this case, mourning is necessary for activism. This is reflected in Crimp's (1989) work where he states,

> "We look upon any interference with [mourning] as inadvisable or harmful," warns Freud. But for anyone living daily with the AIDS crisis, ruthless interference with our bereavement is as ordinary an occurrence as reading the *New York Times*. The violence we encounter is relentless, the violence of silence and omission almost as impossible to endure as the violence of unleashed hatred and outright murder. Because this violence also desecrates the memories of our dead, we rise in anger to vindicate them. For many of us, mourning becomes militancy.

Quilt as a Social Movement

As previously discussed, AIDS quickly became a stigmatized disease as a result of the homophobia that was rampant in America during the early 1980s and 1990s. Though the disease was affecting other groups, including intravenous drug users, hemophiliacs, and even heterosexual men and women, a narrative was put forth that was promoted by the media and accepted by the public that this was a gay disease (Hawkins 1993, 757; Stockdill 1996, 9). For this reason, gay activists were particularly motivated to act. Additionally, because of the preceding gay civil rights movements and the concentration of gay communities in largely white, middle-class areas, the gay community had more resources at their disposal to organize an effective social movement for AIDS (Hawkins 1993; Krouse 1994; Capozzola 2002). Cleve Jones was among those with the resources required to create a memorial that would advance the AIDS social movement.

Existing literature has considered the Quilt's qualities that enable it to fit characteristics of "new' social movements as opposed to "old" ones. Old social movement theories overlooked the cultural aspect of social movements, centering instead around interest group politics and the fight for better resource distribution. New social movements signify a shift of focus towards identity politics, where groups are motivated towards collective action to influence the framing of a narrative (Capozzola 2002, 101-3; Krouse 1994; 28-43; Stockdill 1996). In short, "these movements' contests and struggles have concerned symbols and meanings more than issues of institutional access and economic resources" (Capozzola 2002, 102). This shift occurred in response to the increased encroachment of government policies and regulation on the private lives of citizens, forcing people's identities to become salient when it directly impacts the treatment or import the government places on specific identities (Krouse 1994; 32).

Capozzola argues the AIDS social movement fits into both the old and new social movement theories. At its inception, activists were fighting for better resources, more funding, and influential research to aid in ending the epidemic. It soon became obvious to the gay men in the communities that had been hit the hardest that the existing marginalization of gay people was motivating silence from the government, media, and the public. The attack on the identities of these individuals drove them to collective action to not only fight for institutional assistance, but also to restore the group's dignity and public image.

Respectability Politics

The work on respectability politics originated with Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's seminal work *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (1993). Seeking to describe the role of Black women in the fight for racial equality during the Black Baptist women's movement, Higginbotham presented the politics of respectability, which promoted the "reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations" (1993, 187). She illustrated how the women of the Church were motivated by respectability to encourage Black individuals to adhere to societal norms and behave in ways that would counter the negative perceptions Whites held against Blacks. I argue the founders of the Quilt held similar motives, to challenge the existing views of the majority by highlighting the adherence of mainstream norms by people with AIDS and eliminate the existing stratification of hetero- and homosexuals.

Scholars of Black politics have expanded Higginbotham's work, evaluating the role respectability plays in Black identity and politics today. They have noted the effect of respectability politics on support for policies that might disproportionally affect Blacks (Orey et al. 2013), while also establishing a potential generational divide in support of respectability

politics as a tactic for minimizing racial tensions (Kerrison et al. 2018; Dow 2016). Additionally, while respectability is dependent on high identification with your group, it can also weaken effects of linked fate and group consciousness, potentially causing intergroup marginalization (Lopez Bunyasi & Smith 2019; Cohen 1999). Cohen explored this in her theory of secondary marginalization, where certain issues are understood as being able to advance the interests of the Black community, while other issues only hinder those opportunities. She centers her argument on the treatment of Black individuals with AIDS, who were not only marginalized by the mainstream society, but were further marginalized by members of their own racial group as they posed a threat to the respectability and advancement of the group (Cohen 1999).

Scholars have also considered the role of respectability politics in Black social movements, specifically the Civil Rights movement and Black Lives Matter. The leaders of the Civil Rights movement fully employed the strategy of respectability, seeking to fight for racial equality by proving that the Black community was worthy of being seen as equals. The leaders, who were mostly male, created an image of the movement that emphasized "well-dressed, trained, and nonviolent protesters who demonstrated using sit-ins, marches, and boycotts" (Board et al. 2020). Originating in a Black church and being led by Martin Luther King Jr., a minister, the movement established a "unique blending of familiar Christian themes and conventional democratic theory," that allowed King to succeed "in grounding the movement in two of the ideational bedrocks of American culture" (McAdam 1996, 347). In appealing to American ideals and presenting a nonthreatening face, the Civil Rights movement was able to tap into the minds of the dominant, white society and convince them that civil rights for Black Americans was an American problem, which motivated support for their cause (Clayton 2005).

Conversely, the recent BLM movement sought to dismantle the notion of respectability and challenge the in-group policing that places the blame of racist encounters on the behavior or appearance of Black individuals. Founded by four Black female activists who broke the civil rights decorum in their appearances, sexualities, and confrontational behaviors, the BLM movement unapologetically shines light on all identities, taking on an intersectional approach to equality for women, LGBTQ individuals, formerly incarcerated Blacks, and other individuals previously thought to hinder the group's advancements (Richardson 2019; Lopez Bunyasi & Smith 2019). The movement has garnered criticism from members of the Black community for its aggressive and bold tactics and has been portrayed less favorably by the media than the Civil Rights movement (Clayton 2005; Reynolds 2015; Board et al. 2020). Overall, BLM "has yet to appeal to mainstream America and convince them that its concerns are part of the national identity" (Clayton 2005, 474).

The Quilt as a Case Study

Scholars have drawn comparisons between the Civil Rights movement and the Gay Liberation movements, illustrating how the gay community adopted many strategies from the Civil Rights movement when fighting against homophobia (Stockdill 1996). The focus on the Quilt in this paper further adds to this discussion, highlighting how the use of respectability also carried over to the AIDS social movement through the Quilt. Additionally, the contrarian approach of BLM resembles that of ACT UP, which questioned the use of respectability and adopted more confrontational tactics. Similarly to the motives of Black social movements, AIDS activists were imploring their government to cease their neglectful practices of allowing members of marginalized groups, in this case Black people and people with AIDS respectively,

to continue dying at unnecessary rates. Both movements also sought to challenge the existing perception of their group in the mainstream consciousness.

These similarities provide support for the motives of this paper and the selection of the Quilt as a means to examine respectability politics in social movements. The Quilt is an ideal case given its influence in transforming the narrative of AIDS by using respectability to tap into the mainstream society. Jones and the NAMES Project chose to present gay people and other AIDS victims in a light that did not threaten norms with the hopes of uplifting the group and improving their treatment. Using respectability as a strategy to uplift marginalized groups is a controversial notion, as I will discuss further in the next section. For this reason, evaluating the public's response to the Quilt is important as it provides insight into the receptibility of this strategy across different groups.

Key Concepts, Data, and Methods

The key concept in this paper is respectability politics. As previously stated, respectability politics is a strategy used by members of marginalized groups to counter the discrimination and prejudice they face at the hands of the majority by behaving in ways that adhere to dominant, mainstream norms. Marginalized group members will consider the implications that unfavorable behaviors have on the social and political standing of the entire group and insist on presenting the group in ways that are palatable to the majority so as not to subject the group to further marginalization. Respectability politics entered the mainstream discourse with the rise of BLM, prompting scholars to express concern over the modern understanding of this concept and the ways it strays from Higginbotham's original conception. O'Connor (2021) breaks down this evolution of the concept, explaining how the way it is understood today emphasizes its elitist and stigmatizing nature that disadvantages the most

vulnerable members of the marginalized group, as opposed to its original understanding as a strategy to benefit and uplift the entire group. Respectability politics today holds an unfavorable connotation, with individuals accused of embracing respectability seen as colluding with the oppressors and further victimizing their own group members. Higginbotham did not seek out to judge the actions of members of marginalized groups who encouraged the best version of their group as good or bad, but simply explained their use of a respectability politics as a strategy to challenge existing perceptions (O'Connor 2021). This is the understanding I will take in this paper. Detailing the Quilt's embodiment of respectability is not to villainize the approaches of Cleve Jones and the NAMES Project, but only to shed light on one legitimate strategy used by disadvantaged groups to improve the group's standing.

In order to examine how the Quilt promoted respectability politics, I will consult interviews and speeches given by the founders of the NAMES Project and activists associated with the Quilt, as well as any materials from the NAMES Project that relay their message. The paper will also examine the effects of their approach on the public's perceptions and on its reputation in the eyes of ACT UP, an organization that adopted a different approach to further the AIDS movement. To do so, I will evaluate firsthand accounts of individuals who visited the Quilt, interviews from other activists, news and media products, previous literature, and the Quilt itself.

Discussion

The Quilt and Respectability

The use of respectability begins with the Quilt's design. Quilting has deep American roots, from the Freedom Quilts used to guide enslaved Blacks to freedom (Bryant 2019), to the sewing bees (Hawkins 1993, 757), and the legend of Betsy Ross and the American flag

(Randolph 2021). Jones was aware of the innate Americanness of quilts and the ubiquitous association of quilts as comforting, cozy, and warm, and as he envisioned a quilt filled with names of AIDS victims, he knew it was the best approach to reach the hearts and minds of mainstream America. It is a "middle-class, middle-American symbol" that makes people think of their grandmothers, and according to Jones, "that's what we need: We need all these American grandmothers to want us to live, to be willing to say that our lives are worth defending" (quoted in Andriote 1999, 366). Jones has reflected on the attachment he places on quilts and his family life, describing his great-grandmother's quilt that was a source of comfort during his childhood. He thought "what a perfect…traditional-family-values symbol to attach to this disease that's killing homosexuals and IV drug users and Haitian immigrants, and maybe, just maybe, we could apply those traditional family values to my family" (Jones PBS interview 2004). The Quilt created a sense of national identity that was forced to include groups that historically have not been embraced by the larger society. This neutralized the threat of individual identities by encompassing them under an umbrella of American identity that proved to mainstream America that these individuals were common Americans like them, whose lives were worthy of saving and whose deaths were worthy of inciting outrage. Framing the AIDS epidemic under this American image was a justified strategy for Jones, given that they "needed a strategy that would affect the outside world, which clearly is going to decide whether we're going to survive" (quoted in Sturken 1992, 85).

Beyond the symbolism of the Quilt itself, the process of making the Quilt was also designed to further neutralize the threat people with AIDS were perceived to pose to middle America. In what is seemingly a paradoxical challenge, the NAMES Project both highlighted the diverse communities and families impacted by AIDS while also portraying a homogenous and

collective mourning experience that bonded all Americans. This first aspect was achieved through the creation of the panels, as the NAMES Project allowed individuals to dedicate panels to their loved ones with minimal direction which resulted in thousands of distinct and personalized panels that each represent an individual's battle with AIDS and its lasting impact on family and friends. The second aspect occurs once the panels are sewn together, binding individual displays of private mourning and memorializing together with that of others to emphasize the shared experience, while urging those who have not yet been personally affected to also join in this memorialization as a nation. While the Quilt displayed a diverse range of families and relationships across people of all identities, it did so in a way that also presented to mainstream society that these were individuals that were loved and belonged to traditional families. Many perceived gay men as a threat to the traditional family unit, believing that their sexuality and "lifestyle" stray from the essential components of families. However, the Quilt works to assuage the threat of their sexuality, and demonstrate how gay men, and other people with AIDS, left behind mothers, fathers, siblings, and partners that loved them. Jones claims they intentionally "picked a feminine art to try and get people to look beyond this aggressive male sexuality component" (quoted in Sturken 1992, 82). Additionally, another founder of the NAMES Project shared,

> I have never, ever seen anyone walk through the quilt and not have their impression of gay and lesbian people changed. And that is a very important thing that, in walking through the quilt, you can't help but acknowledge the importance of male-male relationships. You can't help but notice that the love between those two men is as strong as any heterosexual marriage (quoted in Krouse 1994, 73).

These quotes demonstrate respectability at work. By emphasizing how gay men can in fact be a part of traditional families, and that strong homosexual relationships exist just as heterosexual ones, the Quilt is establishing that gay men are not as deviant to norms as society believes them to be. They are challenging existing homophobic stances and stigma surrounding gay men and AIDS by arguing that despite their different sexual preferences, their relationships conform to traditional American standards on all other accounts.

The founders of the quilt purposely adopted a messaging style that promoted a nonthreatening portrayal of people with AIDS. Despite the inherent political aspects of the AIDS social movement, primarily targeting the government's neglect, the NAMES Project declared themselves, and the Quilt, to be "completely non-political; we have no political message at all" (Jones quoted in Capozzola 2002, 91). An organizer for the foundation has described the first brainstorming session about the Quilt's messaging, explaining the hours they spent ensuring their nonthreatening approach would be able to reach everyone (Krouse 1994, 72). However, they still fervently embraced the American framing, as evidenced by the NAMES Project's first brochure, where they "deliberately used the word 'American' in every paragraph… to apply a uniquely American concept of this disease that everyone wanted to see as foreign" (Jones quoted in Sturken 1992, 79). Their nonpolitical stance allowed them to avoid alienating individuals who would otherwise not support movements led by gay activists. Also, there is a negative connotation attached to overly political organizations and activist groups, especially if they express their political views through violent or disorderly ways, as touched on by Jones:

> If you study the great nonviolent civil disobedience movement's leaders, they say it will only work when they claim and stake out the moral high-ground and they are able to make that legitimate claim through their suffering really. They make that claim and hold

> onto it. By enduring the suffering and responding with dignity rather than violence, with love rather than hate. So the Quilt was, I felt, right in that tradition though I was never prepared for the spiritual power of it (Jones quoted in Hinkley 2003, 74).

Jones acknowledges the importance of displaying the evidence of the suffering that people with AIDS and their communities have been experiencing in a way that did not provoke violence or was not attached to any overt political agenda other than saving lives. In this way, their suffering could be made palatable to and viewed as legitimate by the mainstream society.

Their nonpolitical stance, however, was at times contradicted. The NAMES Project founders frequently conceded that one of the Quilt's uses was as an organizing tool, which provided a space for political discourse to exist. Furthermore, Jones regularly targeted political figureheads and challenged their responses to the epidemic during his speeches at Quilt displays. During a 1988 speech given at the steps of Lincoln Memorial, Jones says:

> Fifteen months from now our new president will deliver his first State of the Union address. And on that day Americans will have lost more sons and daughters to AIDS than we lost fighting in Southeast Asia-those whose names we can read today from a polished black stone wall.... History will record that in the last quarter of the twentieth century a new and deadly virus emerged, and that the one nation on earth with the resources, knowledge, and institutions to respond to the new epidemic failed to do so. History will further record that our nation's failure was the result of ignorance, prejudice, greed, and fear. Not in the heartlands of America, but in the Oval Office and the halls of Congress (quoted in Hawkins 1993, 760).

Comparing the loss of lives to AIDS to those reflected on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial furthers the idea that this epidemic is an American problem, and its victims should be honored just as those lost during the Vietnam War. The direct criticism of the Bush administration's silence signifies an overt political stance, while still avoiding the alienation of the general public by affirming that this is not the fault of the "heartlands of America." Nevertheless, respectability politics was still present in his speeches, as evidenced by this section of his speech:

> Mr. President, you could have visited us today upon the quilt. You would not have been harmed, Mr. President, though many would doubtless clamor to gain your attention. You and your family could stand among us on the quilt and fear no harm at all. For in all truth, Mr. President, it is we who are kind. It is we who are gentle. And it is our light that will lead the way to victory and to life (Krouse 1994, 71).

Once again, Jones counters the perceived threat of gay men and people with AIDS, instead assuring the country that they are not threatening, dangerous, or aggressive.

Ultimately, the NAMES Project Quilt was by design and in practice an embodiment of respectability politics. Portraying gay men and other people with AIDS as honorable, worthy Americans that deserved to live and adopting a nonthreatening approach in messaging was a strategy that urged the general public to see beyond homophobic and prejudicial attitudes that labeled people with AIDS as deviants and threats to society. Was it a successful strategy? Did the NAMES Project achieve its goal of reaching mainstream America?

Responses to Quilt

MAINSTREAM SOCIETY – Like any other memorial or monument, the meaning or value that an individual takes with them after witnessing the Quilt is left largely up to the

individual. While the memorial is designed to appeal to middle America and inspire a shared identity, encourage participation, and push forth a call to action for more pressure on the government, whether the public takes heed of these intention is beyond the power of Cleve Jones and the NAMES Project. Nevertheless, many people were greatly affected by the Quilt. One aspect of the Quilt that has garnered criticism is its lack of educational value, both to help stop the spread of AIDS but also to educate people as to why there continues to be so many AIDS deaths, specifically among gay men (Krouse 1993, 160). However, the experience shared by an individual who was struck by the Quilt might illustrate how the Quilt's emphasis on eliciting an emotional response, rather than providing facts on AIDS, could be successful in reaching those who might not be willing to learn about a disease that has yet to affect them personally:

> The quilt spoke to me in a language that I understood. It didn't tell me about t-cells or homophobia, it told me about families, friends, lovers, and worst of all children. I could feel the pain of the loss in the fabric (quoted in Poole 1998, 20).

This individual was particularly moved by the familial impact of AIDS, and while it is unknown whether this individual would have been just as moved had the memorial focused on the victims of AIDS alone, this aspect of the Quilt was greatly influential in allowing the public to feel connected to these victims and their families. These sentiments have been echoed by others who also recall being overcome with great emotions as they felt the loss of these unknown families, including this visitor who shared her feelings simply: "I don't know any of the names on the Quilt, but you have all touched me deeply" (Lewis & Fraser 1996, 442). Others shared at greater lengths:

> I must admit that prior to seeing the quilt, my experience of the gay community was limited to childish gawking while passing through the gay areas of our major cities. My

> view of ‘them’ was negative simply because ‘they’ were so ‘different’ … The grief, the love, the loss and the hope of those present was palpable and powerful. We felt the emotion, as if those remembered were our own (Brown 1992, 306-7).

The Quilt was able to educate people in a nonthreatening way that still left them with the agency to decide how they would help end the epidemic. Some were motivated to become panel makers, others wrote to politicians to urge action, and others simply channeled within to confront their own prejudice beliefs (Krouse 1993, 127).

While the Quilt was an outlet for many families after losing a loved one to AIDS, others still struggled with the stigma that comes with dying from this disease, and they viewed the Quilt as a potential threat to the family’s status. An example of this fear of stigma is a panel that reads:

> I have decorated this banner to honor my brother. Our parents did not want his name used publicly. The omission of his name represents the fear of oppression that AIDS victims and their families feel (Blair & Mitchel 2007, 599).

Another example is recounted by a volunteer who was threatened with a shotgun if a panel made for this man’s son was not removed. This situation, however, exemplifies the impact having a firsthand encounter with the Quilt could have on individuals, at times leading them to change their perspectives on the stigma surrounding AIDS. After making the threat to ensure the removal of their son’s panel, the parents visited the Quilt display and were quickly struck with remorse. The volunteer recalls the father saying “I’m really sorry. I didn’t know what this was all about. My wife and I spent an hour here going through the panels, and now we’re gonna go home and make a panel for our son” (quoted in Hinkley 2003, 78).

There were, of course, others who would never come to feel moved by the Quilt or motivated to join the fight for an improved governmental response to assist the end of the

epidemic. There are limits to respectability politics, and whether for partisan, ideological, or religious reasons, AIDS would remain stigmatized in the certain sectors of society despite the efforts of the NAMES Project. This is largely reflected in the silences of both the Reagan and Bush administrations regarding the epidemic. Nevertheless, the Quilt did manage to expand AIDS awareness beyond the communities it had been disproportionally affecting, tapping into emotional energy and creating a sense of shared identity among victims of AIDS and middle America that was crucial in motivating a shift in the societal and political response to AIDS.

GAY COMMUNITY – As a memorial that was created by gay people and, at least at the beginning of the epidemic, for gay people, it is important to examine the effect the Quilt had on the gay community and whether they were receptive of its approach. As discussed earlier, the Quilt provided relief from the isolation that comes with a stigmatized disease, creating a space for gay men to express their grief and anger and process their emotions in solidarity with others nationwide. It also allowed them to witness the support from others outside of their immediate family or friends and even outside of the gay community. During Quilt displays, signature squares provided an outlet for viewers to record their reactions while walking through the panels. These three reactions highlight the sense of support felt by gay men when viewing the panels:

> To all of us who have HIV. How can we ever have believed we would or could be loved and honored by so many. I am daily reminded that I am loved and will be remembered. Let's pass our love onto others who may not be so fortunate (Lewis & Fraser 1996, 443).
>
> I am touched and encouraged by such a display of love. May we all act in this love everyday (Lewis & Fraser 1996, 444).
>
> I remember walking around the square of the panels that stretch along the mall and feeling numb… Being in Washington those few days made me feel that I could overcome

anything. Being in Washington those few days made me feel less alone (Carey-Mahoney 2016).

These reflections demonstrate that it was a worthwhile mission to garner nationwide support for people with AIDS and display that support to show that the gay community is not alone in fighting this epidemic. However, despite the impact of the Quilt on the gay community, the NAMES Project has at times alienated them in their attempt to appeal to other members of society. Jones has denied claims that the NAMES Project is a gay organization, arguing it would "be a disservice to the thousands of AIDS patients who are not gay" (quoted in Capozzola 2002, 99). While there is validity to his statement, given that heterosexual people of color were, and continue to be, disproportionately affected by AIDS, the gay community did not agree with the NAMES Project's decision to stray from its inception as an organization created by gay activists in response to the suffering of the gay community. Jones believed it was important to adopt "vocabulary that would not be threatening to nongay people" in order to "mobilize heterosexuals" (Sturken 1992, 85). But at what cost? A critic of the NAMES Project's approach has expressed anger over how the organization has "siphoned hundreds of thousands of dollars out of gay pockets, but omits the word 'gay' in its literature and puts a photograph of a mother and children on the cover of its commemorative booklet" (Robin Hardy quoted in Capozzola 2002, 100). This example demonstrates the organization's commitment to portraying a universal image of AIDS that appeals to the mainstream public through vulnerability and familiarity, rather than putting forth an image of a gay man that many believe they cannot relate to and will thus dismiss.

The NAMES Project's use of respectability politics achieved its goal of extending the issue of AIDS beyond the gay community and ensuring that gay men did not feel alone in their

fight against the disease. However, in the process, they risked sanitizing the organization of their gay activist roots, leading many to question their devotion to aiding the community. This illustrates the modern-day conflict with respectability politics. Is it an effective strategy to remove stigma and improve the group's status when it could simultaneously be creating divisions and issues of trust within the group?

ACT UP – Other gay/AIDS activists and organizations were also vocal in their critiques of the NAMES Project's use of respectability politics. Their main critique was the NAMES Project's nonconfrontational approach, which they viewed as ineffective in inciting real change, as opposed to ACT UP's more militant activism. This is exemplified in one critic's suggestion that the Quilt come with a warning sticker that says, "Don't feel that by crying over this, you've really done something for AIDS" (Hawkins 1993, 772). Unlike the Quilt's emphasis on mourning as an avenue to nonthreatening activism, ACT UP believed in channeling that grief into anger which then motivated action through angry protests, civil disobedience, die-ins, and other confrontational and disruptive actions. Their style relied more on "cultural defiance," which included "throwing condoms, same-sex kissing in public places, speaking explicitly and positively about anal sex, as well as unfurling banners promoting safer sex at public events" (Stockdill 1996, 12). Just as the Quilt aimed to shed light on the value of gay men's lives, ACT UP strived to do the same without sanitizing the discussions that are essential to saving their lives or succumbing to the status quo to ensure nongay people were not uncomfortable.

ACT UP was, nevertheless, aware of the attention the Quilt was receiving and recognized its abilities to gather crowds, which provided an ideal space to spread their message. At a Quilt display in Washington D.C., ACT UP distributed leaflets that read:

> SHOW YOUR ANGER TO THE PEOPLE WHO HELPED MAKE THE QUILT POSSIBLE: OUR GOVERNMENT. The Quilt helps us remember our lovers, relatives, and friends who have died during the past eight years. These people have died from a virus. But they have been killed by our government's neglect and inaction… More than 40,000 people have died from AIDS… Before this Quilt grows any larger, turn your grief into anger. Turn anger into action. TURN THE POWER OF THE QUILT INTO ACTION (ACT UP/NY 1988, quoted in Gould 2002, 182).

In a sense, the two organizations and their varied tactics could have blended together to create the most effective approach to mobilizing the public, both through appealing to their emotions and creating a collective consciousness and by explicitly demonstrating the implications of AIDS and demanding action. But ACT UP did not seek out a partnership, instead they attempted to fill in the gaps of where they thought the Quilt fell short.

Aside from fundamentally disagreeing with the NAMES Project's tactics, many also resented its use of respectability and the implications it had on people with AIDS that might not fit the assimilationist image created by Jones and the Quilt. The attempt to neutralize the threat of gay men simultaneously elicited feelings of shame within some in the gay community. Did they have to convince others their sexuality is not threatening, just as the Quilt was attempting to do? Should they feel ashamed that their "lifestyle" was being attached to the spread of this disease? Was adhering to mainstream norms the only way to convince mainstream society that they deserved to live and not die from AIDS? One activist argues that one reason the Quilt was such a successful memorial in the eyes of the public was because

> it can also be read as a memorial to a dying subculture, i.e. "We didn't like you fags and junkies when you were wild, kinky and having fun. We didn't like you when you were

> angry, marching and demanding rights. But now that you're dying and have joined 'nicely' like 'a family sewing circle,' we'll accept you (Steve Abbott quoted in Sturken 1992, 91).

More notably, however, were the feelings of exclusion from people of color with AIDS. The NAMES Project struggled to reach low-income communities where people of color were being severely affected by AIDS. This was due to their high cost of maintaining and displaying the Quilt, but also the lack of intersectionality in their messaging, which was largely geared towards middle-class white men. A member of a Chicago chapter of ACT UP sheds light on why the AIDS movement was just out of reach for many gay and straight people of color:

> For many gay white men living with HIV/AIDS, inaction, prejudice and discrimination related to HIV disease are the most palpable manifestations of oppression in their lives. For people of color, this may not be the case. AIDS is just one more injustice added to the list (quoted in Stockdill 1996, 160)

With this is mind, the traditional American values so prevalent in Jones' vision of the Quilt might not resonate with people of color who have been excluded from traditional America long before the emergence of AIDS. However, the Quilt was not alone, as ACT UP also struggled with issues of racism, sexism, and classism (Stockdill 1996, 30-48). The framing of these organizations of AIDS victims leads mainstream society to further associate AIDS with white gay men, which could be viewed as harmful for the gay community but also as the most effective way to appeal to middle America.

The literature on respectability politics has thus far centered on racial groups, though in a group diverse in race, class, and gender, respectability must be accounted for in all the ways individuals can be marginalized. The NAMES Project has made strides in ensuring the Quilt and

their messaging is inclusive and representative of all AIDS victims, but at the end of the day, a white gay man could potentially be the least threatening image of the disease compared to individuals with more marginalized identities in addition to their sexualities.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the NAMES Project's employment of respectability politics created a complex dynamic between the Quilt and the AIDS social movement. The Quilt was a driving factor in bringing the discussion of AIDS to the forefront both politically and socially and shaping the narrative of the disease as one that affected all Americans, not just the marginalized few. In their mission to provoke an improved response towards ending the epidemic, the NAMES Project sought to appeal to the mainstream society and demonstrate how people with AIDS were not deviants who disregarded mainstream norms, but fellow Americans that shared traditional values and morals and, for this reason, do not deserve to continue dying from AIDS due to a lack of action from the government or health care industries. While the Quilt's approach was effective in mobilizing the public, many took issue with their use of respectability to achieve this mobilization. Other gay activists and organizations, like ACT UP, opted for a more militant strategy that did not attempt to convince mainstream society that they were adherents to norms and not a threat, but instead emphasized their community's qualities unapologetically.

Jones has reflected on the efficiency of both of these approaches on moving the cause forward, considering whether adopting a more militant style for the Quilt would have been more beneficial. He asserted that "much has been made of the dichotomy between the two approaches. I have always felt that both approaches were valid, useful and necessary, and that the conflict between them was somewhat overblown" (Jones PBS interview 2004). When asked whether ACT UP's confrontational demonstrations alienated middle-America, he remarks:

> "With 20/20 hindsight, I don't know that I would have done anything differently. I don't know that we had any other option. It was only gay activists who were responding. So our response -- as necessary and as valid as it was -- contributed quite a bit to reinforcing the notion that this was a disease of homosexual men… we were the only ones fighting. So yes, I think much of what we did alienated Middle America, but I don't see what the alternative was" (Jones PBS interview).

Despite the contentious relationship some may have with the Quilt, it is an influential memorial that continues to shed light on the ongoing epidemic and honor those who have lost their lives to AIDS. As stated by journalist John-Manuel Andriote, the Quilt has "by itself arguably done more to increase awareness of the human toll of the epidemic - and of the humanity of those it memorializes - than all the nation's gay political organizations combined" (1999, 367).

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