An ACT UP Case Study:

How the Mainstream Consumption of Queer Culture and Contemporary Masculinities Obscures a Continuity of Queer Oppression

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Abstract

Throughout the AIDS crisis, mainstream media depicted queer populations, specifically queer men, through a lens of deviance. These depictions, in concert with political homophobia, slowed AIDS research, limited media coverage of the crisis, and created barriers for marginalised people to access healthcare. To oppose this queer disenfranchisement from dominating medical, scientific, and political establishments, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) emerged—promoting a more forceful, equitable, and humane response to a disease killing the most vulnerable members of society. By advocating for queer rights and facing challenges brought on by the AIDS crisis, ACT UP ruptured the invisibility of queer oppression and brought queerness from the fringes of society into mainstream cultural awareness. Since ACT UP, there has been some progression in queer rights and many of the challenges faced in the early days of the AIDS crisis have come to be (perceived as) resolved. However, queer people continue to face discrimination via increasing amounts of anti-queer policy and extreme-Right hostilities. Yet, the radical voices that once brought such issues to the forefront have since dispersed. Therefore, this study argues that queer oppression made visible during the AIDS crisis has continued to the present day but it is no longer as salient nor as apparent to mainstream society as it was during the time of ACT UP. A key reason for this argument is that queer visibility in mainstream media gives the illusion that traditional forms of queer discrimination have been resolved when in actuality, the consumption of queer culture by non-queer audiences obscures a continuity of queer oppression. These processes of obscuration may, in part, be driven by the lack of attention historical forms of queer resistance have received.

To provide theoretical insights into ways the mainstream consumption of queer culture has perpetuated and obscured a continuity of queer oppression, this study employed an exploratory case study evaluation of ACT UP. This case study was guided by the

sociological and Black feminist frameworks of intersectionality and the matrix of domination, with a particular focus on controlling images. Special interest was also devoted to exploring the ways contemporary masculinities can be used to understand configurations of power in the queer community. This study found that mainstream media perpetuated and obscured queer oppression throughout the AIDS crisis by spreading misinformation surrounding AIDS and the AIDS crisis, misrepresenting people with AIDS, and mis-historicising ACT UP. Additionally, this study found that masculinities influenced how men in ACT UP navigated and accessed power, most notably by leveraging their maleness and whiteness. This study concludes by framing this contemporary phenomenon as a form of epistemic violence. This study also expands upon the concept of queer blindfolding as an investigative tool for understanding how queer voices are silenced. This research is important because it draws on historical accounts to expand present-day understandings of an under-researched, contemporary queer issue, as well as honours the people who put their bodies on the line for queer rights.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Contextualising the AIDS Crisis

In 1981, the HIV/AIDS epidemic (hereafter referred to as the 'AIDS crisis') began in New York City and has since been an ongoing worldwide public health issue. AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is the most advanced stage of HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), an infection that attacks the body's immune system. Without proper treatment, AIDS makes the body vulnerable to opportunistic infections, leading to debilitation and death (Schulman, 2021, p. 127). As of 2022, 40.4 million people worldwide have died of AIDS-related illnesses (UNAIDS, 2023). Over 700,000 of those deaths occurred in the United States (U.S.), with 100,000 deaths being New Yorkers (UNAIDS, 2023).

Due to the greed of international pharmaceutical companies and various health industries, vast quantities of 'people with AIDS'—a descriptive term preferred by AIDS activists—around the world cannot receive medications that already exist (Schulman, 2021, p. 10-11). For instance, in the U.S., people with AIDS (PWA) without insurance and with no targeted funding lack access to the current standard of care. For this reason, around two-thirds of a million people throughout the world still die every year of a disease that is entirely manageable; in 2022 alone, 630,000 people worldwide died from AIDS-related illnesses (KFF., 2023).

What makes the AIDS crisis a prominent issue for queer people is that AIDS disproportionately impacts queer populations. Specifically, gay and bisexual men, and other men who have sex with men and transgender women (CDC., 2021). Here, the term 'queer' is drawn from queer theory to describe a political identity that is "liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant, state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality" (Cohen, 1997, p. 441). Additionally, this study uses

‘queer’ more colloquially to encompass identities that do not adhere to the heterosexual and cisgender binaries (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, pansexual, intersex, genderqueer, etc.) (Wilchins, 2004; Yep et al., 2003; Smith & Shin, 2014).

At the height of the AIDS crisis (from 1987 to 1996), queer men disproportionately composed the highest volume of AIDS-related deaths in the U.S. (Rosenfeld et al., 2012; CDC., 2021). More recently, even though gay and bisexual men comprise only about 2% of the U.S. population, they comprise 58% of people living with HIV and male-to-male sexual contact accounts for 66% of new HIV infections (CDC., 2021). The disproportionate impacts of HIV/AIDS on queer men are further heightened along intersections of sexuality and ethnicity. Black and Latino queer men account for the largest number of new HIV diagnoses (9,420 and 8,007 in 2019, respectively), and Black queer men are at a greater risk of being diagnosed with HIV during their lifetimes compared to Latino and white queer men (CDC., 2021).

Beyond the ways HIV/AIDS physically harms the body, the AIDS crisis itself has been described through a deviancy lens adversely affecting queer people, allowing for further scrutiny and stigmatisation of queer populations (Cohen, 1997; Schulman, 2021). A key way queer people were stigmatised was through political homophobia: systematic discrimination, prejudice, and negative attitudes directed towards individuals based on their sexual orientation (Rahman, 2020). Historically, institutions have weaponised homophobia as a political strategy to frame queer people as “cultural” or “religious” issues, dictating which rituals, ceremonies, and spaces queer people could access and be welcomed (Muparamoto & Moen, 2022; Gunda, 2010).

Queer activists, and in particular, Black feminists, were some of the first to recognise these issues and conceptualise how health disparities for Black, Latine, and queer PWA predominantly arose from deeper structural and social problems in the U.S. (Gentry et al.,

2005; Opara, 2018; Taylor, 1998). Political homophobia was highly salient for these activists in New York City (NYC) because even before the crisis, the NYC council had repeatedly failed to pass basic gay rights bills to protect queer New Yorkers from discrimination in housing, jobs, and public accommodation. Consequently, when the crisis began, those who were most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS likely also faced other structural issues such as acquiring accommodation (housing) and job security (Schulman, 2021). Therefore, it was made clear to activists and PWA in NYC that the health of those living closer to the margins of society was not a high priority. In many ways, the AIDS crisis shed light on how multiple intersecting social inequalities worked in concert to marginalise queer populations.

The Emergence of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)

At the intersections of sexuality, class, gender, and ethnicity, many PWA fell through the cracks of constitutional protection. The lack of protections made PWA vulnerable to state-sanctioned abuse and discrimination through political homophobia, systemic racism, and government and corporate negligence. The political rhetoric at the time, perpetuated via mainstream media, allowed for these forms of discrimination to slow AIDS research and limit media coverage of the AIDS crisis, creating barriers for marginalised people to access healthcare (Bell, 2020; Gamson, 1989). To oppose this queer disenfranchisement from dominating medical, scientific, and political establishments, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) emerged—promoting a more forceful, equitable, and humane response to a disease killing the most vulnerable members of society.

ACT UP was established on the 12th of March 1987, at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in NYC. Its first initiation was composed of 1960s Black liberation and Women's civil rights activists, and newly politicised, first-time activists (Schulman, 2021). Activists from traditions with well-organised frameworks of resistance

came to ACT UP with developed analyses and strategic experiences, whilst first-time activists brought with them “an enormous energy for change” (McLane-Davison, 2016; Schulman, 2021, p. ixx; Taylor, 1998). Together, ACT UP flourished into an international grassroots political group that ultimately spanned 148 autonomous chapters worldwide, with NYC as the “mother ship” (Schulman, 2021, p. xi).

As the AIDS crisis revealed the deprivation of many different communities—many of which used to exclusion from mainstream recognition in varying ways—ACT UP united people living on the margins of society. Subsequently, the movement became a broad, rich, and diverse queer countercultural space that expressed the authentic needs and realities of marginalised communities; a space that provided agency to people abandoned by those in power, especially queer communities (Schulman, 2021, p. 411). In this way, ACT UP was a response to society's gradual shift towards a form of domination in which power was maintained through normalisation processes (Gamson, 1989).

ACT UP resisted domination by hailing to the greater population how mainstream media and medical science stigmatised PWA as abnormal identities undeserving of care (Foucault, 1979). For instance, historian Cathy J. Cohen (1997) noted how ACT UP’s increased efforts in needle exchange and prison outreach programs acted as sites of possibility where people from a variety of backgrounds (e.g., heterosexual, gay, poor, wealthy, white, Black, Latine) converged to challenge dominant constructions of who could and should have access to healthcare (Cohen, 1997, p. 104). Those moments of unity in which marginalised people took on the status quo demonstrated, according to Cohen, the potential of ACT UP to embrace radical queer politics, rather than politics occupied with addressing solely gay male issues.

Ultimately, ACT UP was a major force that ruptured the invisibility of queer oppression rooted in narratives of deviance. It also exemplified how queer activists fought

and resisted institutional and political homophobia, making it a prime example of how queer activists today can enact effective activism and resistance. However, in recent years, the movement has fallen from public memory. This study argues that today, queer oppression experienced during the height of the AIDS crisis has continued, but is no longer as salient nor as apparent to mainstream society as it was during the time of ACT UP. A key reason for this argument is that queer oppression has been obscured through the mainstream consumption of queer culture in Western society.

The Mainstream Consumption of Queer Culture

Before ACT UP, queer culture and expressions were mostly underground. By advocating for queer rights and facing challenges brought on by the AIDS crisis, ACT UP brought queerness from the fringes of society into mainstream cultural awareness. Since then, there has been some progression in queer rights and many of the challenges faced in the early days of the AIDS crisis have come to be (perceived as) resolved. However, as stated earlier, the AIDS crisis continues to affect queer populations disproportionately. Moreover, queer people currently face extreme-Right hostilities, yet the radical voices that once brought such issues to the forefront have since dispersed and/or been eclipsed by mainstream representations that give the illusion of inclusion. This section offers insight into key issues identified in academic scholarship that obscure present-day forms of queer oppression.

The mainstream consumption of queer culture by Western society first gained scholarly attention in the early 2000s, responding to legibly queer mainstream television shows such as *Queer as Folk* (2000) and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003). Previous research had established that Western marketing industries homogenise traits associated with marginalised cultures to promote the consumption of stereotypes (Hebdige, 1979). Later, bell hooks (1992) recognised how modern depictions of marginalised populations were being

transformed by consumer cultures to profit off perceived differences. From her understanding, Michael Yaksich (2005) argued that the visibility of the queer community has since come to somewhat depend on the exploitation of stereotypes as a marketing technique. For instance, he found that *Queer as Folk* only depicted queerness through the lens of white, middle- and upper-class men and that *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* re-inscribed and validated (instead of dispelled) stereotypes of gay men as having "an obsession with fashion, cultural trends, and overt expressions of femininity" (Hennessey, 1994, p. 66).

Although queer cultural visibility is essential for positive portrayals of queer individuals, stereotyping and commodifying queerness perpetuates reductive and monolithic narratives that can render invisible sexual inequalities. These early instances of queer media produced "imaginary middle-class gay subjects" who were only defined in terms of "style, textuality, or performance" (Hennessey, 1994; Yaksich, 2005, p. 26). These representations privileged middle-class, gay, white people and rendered invisible the divisions of class, labour, and race/ethnicity that have always existed within the queer community, such as gay men who are manual workers, unemployed, or incarcerated (Valocchi, 1999; Yaksich, 2005). These representations also obscured many issues faced by the queer community such as the overrepresentation of queer youth in the Child Welfare System (Yaksich, 2005; Galst, 1992).

Harmful portrayals and representations of queer culture have also been found to occur in Gay Pride, the largest contemporary celebration of queer rights. Throughout Pride, capitalist systems profit off commercialising aspects of queer culture that align with hegemonic understandings of what 'queer' is. To combat these neoliberal and assimilationist aspects and politics of Pride, the Gay Shame movement arose (Halperin & Traub, 2009; Rand, 2012). As Jennifer Moon (2006) conceptualised, Gay Shame is a "queer radical, anti-assimilationist, anticorporate, antiglobalization, pro-sex movement committed to exposing the hypocrisies of the mainstream gay and lesbian movement" (p. 77). Moon (2006)

argued that Pride had become disconnected from its origins as a site of queer rights activism and resistance, meaning that although Pride provided space for queer celebration and self-expression, it also obscured issues faced by the queer community.

Additionally, the mainstream consumption of queer culture by non-queer audiences can also be understood as a form of exoticisation. Exoticisation occurs when individuals from privileged and dominant groups focus on what they perceive to be the "fun" and "exciting" aspects of marginalised cultural groups, seeking ways to participate with members of the group through knowledge accumulation (Nadal et al., 2010). Individuals who engage in exoticisation have the privilege of "celebrating" cultures without having to acknowledge or take on the burdens associated with the devalued and marginalised aspects of that group (Nadal et al., 2010). Since the 2000s, studies have recognised and problematised the exoticising nature of queer media consumption (see, for instance, Linné, 2003; Ma & Juhasz, 2012). The exoticisation of queerness works to both promote the mainstream consumption of queer culture and suppress voices of queer resistance (Cowan et al., 2005).

For example, anti-queer policies and legislation have been on the rise. In 2022 alone, U.S. state governments filed 315 bills; although 90% were not signed into law, the sheer amount of bills filed signals a drastic shift from previous years (only 41 such bills were filed in 2018) (HRC., 2023; Lavietes & Ramos, 2022). Anti-queer legislation stigmatises and disempowers an already marginalised community, "demarcating [queer people] from broader society as dangerous and deserving of exclusion and condemnation" (Bush, 2023, p. 1). Scholarship surrounding this phenomenon finds that contemporary forms of anti-queer policy focus mainly on youth and gender identity, such as attacking gender-affirming healthcare and limiting discussions of queerness in public schools (see, for example, Johns et al., 2020; ACLU., 2023; Clarkson-Freeman, 2004). Additionally, increases in anti-queer policy correlate with increases in experiences of violence for queer people, such as hate crimes and

self-harming (Bush, 2023). Evidently, there are mechanisms at work that both marginalise queer people and influence the extent to which that marginalisation can be recognised by mainstream society.

In sum, scholars researching the mainstream consumption of queer culture recognise how it demonstrates both progress towards queer acceptance and mainstream (hegemonic) culture's ability to exploit marginalised populations under the guise of tolerance (Yaksich, 2005). More so, these scholars recognise how these processes can obscure and render invisible intersecting inequalities that oppress queer identities. For example, despite the growing mainstream consumption of queer culture, queer people continue to face harassment from increasingly vocal Right-wing movements (Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2010).

The Obscuration of Queer Oppression

This study argues that mainstream queer visibility in media gives the illusion that traditional forms of queer discrimination have in many ways been resolved and that queer rights have already been won (e.g., same-sex marriage). Additionally, this study argues that although the mainstream consumption of queer culture could be construed as a marker of queer acceptance (e.g. queer characters in TV shows suggest positive steps towards sexual equality), such consumption can potentially conceal the reality of queer oppression. As noted earlier, over half a million people continue to lose their lives annually due to AIDS-related illnesses and queer communities continue to face disproportionately high rates of HIV/AIDS, discrimination, and violence.

These processes that obscure queer oppression may, in part, be driven by the lack of attention historical forms of queer resistance have received. An example of this can be seen in how hooks (1995)—in drawing on Anita Cornwall's essay *Three for the Price of One: Notes from a Gay Black Feminist* (1984)—critiqued white feminism's refusal to focus on

experiences of racism. Even when approached with sincere concerns about racism, white feminist methodologies suggested that "[white women] are not yet free of the type of paternalism endemic to white supremacist ideology" (hooks, 1995, p. 279). This study illuminates a similar trend within the context of growing anti-queer concerns in an era of supposed queer acceptance. For this reason, the intellectual and political activism of ACT UP is of increased relevance in contemporary discussions of queer liberation, oppression, and rights.

AIDS activist Sarah Schulman (2021) contextualises this obscuration and how it relates to ACT UP in her book, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993*. In this oral history, Schulman shines a light on the remarkable influence and legacy of ACT UP and its relevance today. As she highlights, "[ACT UP] were the people least likely to make substantive change, participating in the broadest possible coalition, most of whom, in some or all aspects of their lives, were excluded from basic rights" (Schulman, 2021, p. 5). Additionally, Schulman contends that "[i]n recent years the representations of [ACT UP] and AIDS activism in popular culture have narrowed, almost to the level of caricature" (p. xiii). Erin Rand (2012), in reflecting on the 25th Anniversary of ACT UP, also recognises that contemporary mainstream portrayals of queer culture appear to disconnect queer culture from its origins in queer activism and resistance.

This phenomenon can be described as social cryptomnesia, the failure of an unconvinced majority to give credit to minorities for their role in provoking social change (Butera et al., 2009). This study argues that ACT UP has undergone a type of social cryptomnesia because any privileges ACT UP brought about through direct action, protest, mischief, disruption, and struggles—such as women being recognised as HIV positive and being allowed treatment, and changes in how drug research was done in the U.S.—have subsequently been undervalued by mainstream society. Additionally, with the emergence of

internet culture, ACT UP was left behind and most of its materials were not digitised or searchable. As a result, a vast amount of ACT UP's work and influence was undocumented and has since seemingly been forgotten (Schulman, 2021, p. xv). It is important to capture the factors at work that obscure a continuity of queer oppression because such knowledge and understanding are necessary to mitigate old and new social harms afflicting queer communities.

Study Objectives

As discussions of queer oppressions advance in an era marked by extreme-Right hostility, hate crimes, and disproportionately high AIDS-related deaths for queer men, historical forms of queer resistance, such as ACT UP, deserve renewed and critical attention today. This study will employ an exploratory case study evaluation of ACT UP, using the text, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993* as the primary source. A particular focus of this case study is to provide theoretical insights into ways the mainstream consumption of queer culture has perpetuated and obscured a continuity of queer oppression. Additionally, this analysis will devote special interest to the ways contemporary masculinities influence configurations of power both within and outside the queer community.

This study will address the following research questions: (1) If and how was mainstream media used to perpetuate and obscure queer oppression throughout the AIDS crisis, and (2) If and how did masculinities influence how men in ACT UP accessed and navigated power?

To answer these questions, this case study evaluation will be guided by the sociological and Black feminist frameworks of intersectionality and the matrix of domination, with a particular focus on controlling images. This evaluation will also draw from

masculinities studies, with special attention devoted to hybrid masculinities. Lastly, this study will conclude with an investigation into epistemic violence, and queer blindfolding, a relatively recent concept used to understand how queer oppressions are silenced. This research is important because it will draw on historical accounts to expand our understanding of an under-researched, contemporary queer issue, as well as honour the people who put their bodies on the line for queer rights.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section provides a brief overview of the key concepts and frameworks that undergird and guide this study. First, given the focus on queer populations, queer theory and Black feminism and their intellectual trajectories within the U.S. academic and social contexts are defined. In particular, this section provides a brief account of ways primarily queer and Black feminist scholars have articulated, theorised, and resisted various forms of violence; understanding how marginalised populations face violence is necessary to analyse how specifically queer men resisted violence in ACT UP and today.

Defining Oppression

In discussions surrounding the oppression of queer populations, it is important to first outline how this study conceptualises oppression. Young (1990) defined oppression as "the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society" (Young, 1990, p. 41). Additionally, Young posited that oppression was "embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (Young, 1990, p. 41). In this way, this study conceptualises oppression as issues stemming from structural and symbolic barriers that work in tandem to limit the agency, potential, and freedoms of marginalised people. These barriers include explicit policies that deny and restrict opportunities and inconspicuous social norms that dehumanise and "other" marginalised groups (Young, 2008; Chin, 2004).

Young (1990) proposed that underpinning mainstream (hegemonic) society's oppression of queer people was cisheteronormativity: systemic processes that operate to advantage cisgendered heterosexual individuals and disadvantage those who identify with queer identities. Cisheteronormativity operates through social structures and cultural norms to

guide policy-making and position the desires of heterosexual (mainstream) society above that of queer communities. This is done through the use of cultural messages in localised practices and centralised institutions to position heterosexuality, heterosexual relationships, and cisgender identities as fundamental and "natural" within society (Smith & Shin, 2014; Cohen, 1997). As a result, cisheteronormativity provides social power to those who subscribe to dominant sexual and gender norms while devaluing, marginalising, and making invisible individuals who transgress those norms (Heldke & O'Connor, 2004; Smith & Shin, 2014). Consequently, anti-queer beliefs become widely disseminated, laying the foundation for anti-queer policy to frame the values, experiences, and goals of heterosexual people as more deserving than queer people (Heldke & O'Connor, 2004).

Paul Farmer's (2006) concept of structural violence is useful here as it speaks to the ways policies, social structures, and institutions cause harm to individuals (Galtung, 1969). For Farmer, structural violence occurs within "social axes," arguing that "gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status may each play a role in rendering individuals and groups vulnerable to extreme human suffering" (p. 21). He continues, "[s]imultaneous consideration of various social "axes" is imperative in efforts to discern a political economy of brutality … Such social factors are differentially weighted in different settings and at different times" (p. 21).

Using Farmer's (2006) understanding, this study recognises social identity factors (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class) as working simultaneously to make people vulnerable to oppression. Crucially, however, this study recognises that within those systems of oppression, different identity factors hold different marginalising power. When discerning oppression, one must consider how each of an individual's social identity factors intersect to result in (or protect against) being made vulnerable to oppression. Farmer's understanding of

structural violence, coupled with his emphasis on the "interconnectedness" of identity factors, lends greatly to intersectional perspectives.

Intersectionality & Interlocking Oppressions

Over the past quarter of a century, sociological research on HIV/AIDS in the U.S. has explored intersecting social inequalities across various contexts, focusing on three main areas: the demographics of the AIDS crisis and the dynamics of structural-, neighbourhood-, and individual-level risk; the lived experiences of PWA; and the collective response to HIV/AIDS through community-based services, political activism, social movements, and public policy (Watkins-Hayes, 2014.) With these foci in mind, sociologists have advanced the implicit and explicit use of approaches that reveal the embedded power relations surrounding the AIDS crisis. This research culminated in the argument that the AIDS crisis is an "epidemic of intersectional inequality that is fueled by racial, gender, class, and sexual inequalities at the macro-structural, meso-institutional, and micro-interpersonal levels" (Watkins-Hayes, 2014, p. 431). Taken together, intersecting social inequalities significantly influence the likelihood of acquiring HIV, the realities of living with HIV/AIDS, and the responses of medical, programmatic, political, and social-scientific institutions.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) conceptualisation of intersectionality and Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) concept of interlocking oppressions were key frameworks used in explorations of these intersecting social inequalities. Like Farmer, Collins (1990) understood identity categories as enabling interlocking systems of oppression, proposing that people should be viewed holistically regarding the categorisations that (dis)empower them. In these ways, intersectional perspectives provide ways to discuss how people's multiple social identities interact and how those interactions manifest in specific advantages, disadvantages, and privileges for people in "everyday" life (Collins, 1990).

To employ intersectional perspectives, studies pay particular attention to a given individual's or group's history and social location: the relative amount of privilege and oppression one holds in a particular sociocultural context based on identity constructs such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability status, and faith (Hulko, 2009). Intersectional perspectives consider how an individual's or group's position in matrices of power interact to produce various degrees of access to services, protections, and ultimately, different lived experiences.

Although one's social location shapes one's experiences across different sociocultural contexts, social locations are context-contingent (not static or fixed) and can change in various spatial and temporal settings (Collins, 1990; Hulko, 2009). For instance, in Hulko's 2009 study *The Time- and Context-Contingent Nature of Intersectionality and Interlocking Oppressions*, Hulko theorised that "processes of racialization vary in different locales" (p. 59). One example Hulko highlights is how a participant of their study felt they were treated as a "Black person" in Canada but as a "white person" in Trinidad, their home nation. Their whiteness (or perceived whiteness) afforded them privileges in one setting and ostracised them in another. This example illustrates what Collins (1990) describes as context specificity. From this understanding, one can begin to see how individuals can benefit from expressing certain identities in some contexts (e.g., queer identities) but not in others, and vice versa.

As this study begins to explore differences in access in ACT UP due to social identity factors like masculinity and whiteness, one will see this process replicated throughout ACT UP's action; certain types of people were able to leverage aspects of themselves and their social identities in differing contexts to access and garner social power where others could not. This process is described by Chen's (1999) concept of the hegemonic bargain, describing how individuals in marginalised positions sometimes leverage other aspects of their identity

to elevate those under threat (Chen, 1999). How men in ACT UP employed hegemonic bargains to gain access and power in ACT UP will be explored later in this analysis.

Queer Theory

This review now turns to queer theory, an important site of early queer theorising. Coined by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991, queer theory was conceived of as a way to study gay and lesbian sexualities not as deviations of heterosexuality, but as "forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses" (p. iii). The first canonical works of queer theory were produced by Judith Butler, Eve Sedgewick, Teresa de Lauretis, Diana Fuss, and Micheal Warner (Cohen, 1997). These early iterations of queer theory were based on intersectional analyses that challenged norms that reproduced inequalities. By identifying and contesting norms found within dominant institutions, queer theory recognised how numerous systems of oppression interacted to regulate and police the lives of most people (Cohen, 1997).

Following their works, queer theory evolved into an interdisciplinary mode of thought in the ongoing debate about empowerment issues, with scholarly research focusing on equity, social justice, and the deconstruction of power (Minton, 1997; Love, 2017; Lugg & Murphy, 2014). At its best, queer theory, within the U.S. context, sought to understand how sexuality intersected with gender, race, class, and other social identities to maintain social hierarchies that prescribe and reify "hetero-gendered" understandings and behaviours (Cohen, 1984; Amory et al., 2022). Queer theory thereby highlights how power is distributed unequally and to varying degrees across all categories of sexuality, making it useful in discussions surrounding queer oppression.

The emergence of queer theory also denoted an important paradigm shift across various academic disciplines (most notably in Women and Gender Studies) and was the

beginning of an academic space for inquiry, activism, and methodology on gender and sexual inequalities. However, this is not to say that queer experiences were not captured and theorised before the emergence of queer theory. For instance, the writings of Black lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual feminist authors (such as Kimberle Crenshaw, Barbara Ransby, Angela Davis, Cheryl Clarke, and Audre Lorde) have always been at the forefront of addressing the intersectional workings of queer oppression (Cohen, 1997).

The Combahee River Collective—now renowned for its Black feminism and lesbian activism in the late 1970s—was another such site of theorising, with intersectional analysis at the forefront of many of their statements. For instance:

> The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. (Combahee River Collective, 1977, p. 272)

Additionally, queer activists have long theorised the use of state-sanctioned violence as a tool of oppression. Founding member of the George Jackson Brigade, Rita Bo Brown (2003) (who identified as a poor-white-butch lesbian) drew from her experiences as an AIDS activist and political prisoner to explore how systems of incarceration prevented queer people and PWA from educating and mobilising themselves within prison walls to resist state-sanctioned discrimination. Taken together, both intersectional research and queer theory call attention to the barriers and inequities affecting historically marginalised communities (e.g., queer communities, Black communities) and play a prominent role in this study's analysis of queer oppression being obscured today (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kincheloe et al., 2017). Similarly, concepts such as the matrix of domination and controlling images are also apt for this study.

The Matrix of Domination & Controlling Images

In her 1990 book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins introduces the matrix of domination, a framework used to describe the hierarchical power relations in organisations that govern our society. Through a Black feminist lens, Collins conceptualised four domains of power that operate within public systems and organisations to influence how individuals experience oppression: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal (Collins, 1990).

She describes the structural domain as the laws and policies of social institutions, deeming what is legal and illegal in society. Next, she describes the disciplinary domain as the bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance techniques employed by institutions to moderate and control the extent to which individuals can move through society and enact change. Thirdly, she describes the hegemonic domain as the ways normalising systems justify power that advantage and disadvantage certain groups of people. Lastly, she describes the interpersonal domain as the experiences of discriminatory practices between individuals (Collins, 1990).

Alongside this conceptualisation, Collins put forth that a key way the matrix of domination operates to oppress marginalised groups is through the use of controlling images. Collins (1990) identified four interrelated controlling images of Black femininity: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel. She posited that these controlling images were used by those in power to invoke certain ideas surrounding Black women's bodies, motivations, behaviours, appearances, and achievements. She argued that ideas created by controlling images across all levels of the matrix became "potential sites of domination and resistance," outlining the extent to which Black women could be understood as suitable lovers, wives, mothers, daughters, workers, leaders, and citizens (Collins, 1990, p.

70). By understanding how people in power use controlling images to control marginalised groups, the broader workings of political domination and resistance can be illuminated (Collins, 1990).

Concerning queer oppression, research has identified processes similar to controlling images exist for queer men. Hoke's (2017) inquiry into the inner workings of gay nightclubs, for instance, notes the presence of a hierarchy of queer gender expression. White, athletic, masculine-presenting queer men are more commonly supported and seen as desirable in queer spaces than non-white, fat, and femme-presenting men. These findings align with the overrepresentation of white and athletic male bodies in queer media, such as in the previously explored shows *Queer as Folk* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Yaksich, 2005). Mainstream society's consumption of controlling images for select queer and masculine gender expressions—and their dismissal or vilification of others—reinforces this hierarchy. Yaksich (2005) surmised that expressions of marginalised cultures endorsed by media become normalised and more socially acceptable in mainstream culture, while expressions that are not normalised do not become more socially acceptable.

Therefore, identities represented in mainstream media by controlling images garner and uphold disproportionally more social power (in queer and non-queer spaces) than underrepresented identities. In other words, queer men are not only constrained by controlling images, but also risk facing social backlash, discrimination, and structural denials (e.g., difficulty accessing healthcare, finding/maintaining employment, etc.) if they do not adhere to expressions of queerness hegemonic culture endorses (Hoke, 2017). This backlash can occur intersectionally along racial, sexual, gendered, and classed lines, meaning some queer bodies are more vulnerable to oppression due to intersecting marginalised social identity factors than others (Heldke & O'Connor, 2004). However, it is important to remember that all queer people, no matter their expression of queerness or gender/sexual identity, are positioned

below heterosexual and cisgendered individuals under cisheteronormativity (Heldke & O'Connor, 2004). In a time where queerness has seemed to move from an underground scene to have gained (some) acceptance in Western society, this study contends that the influence of the matrix of domination and controlling images are harder to detect today.

Masculinities Studies

This literature review now turns to masculinities studies and their relevance in examinations of ACT UP. Additionally, this section captures and explores extant scholarship and theories related to the diversity and nature of contemporary masculinities. Special attention is devoted to defining hybrid masculinities, specifically how such masculinities are discussed in relation to the obscuration of queer oppression.

Masculinities studies emerged in 1987 with the foundational texts *Gender and Power* (1987), by Raewyn Connell, and *The Gender of Oppression* (1987), by Jeff Hearn. Prior to this, the study of masculinities (at the time primarily known as 'men's studies') was a relatively small field, largely considered to be an offshoot of Women and Gender studies (Gottzén, 2018; Hobbs, 2013). Interest in masculinities arose from the notion that although women had been obscured from research by being "too much in the background," men had been obscured by being "too much in the foreground" (Brod, 1987, p. 40-41). In other words, because past sociological research tended to focus on the experiences of minority groups (especially in Women and Gender Studies), analysis of the experiences of those in dominant positions in society (e.g., men) had been lacking; the ubiquity of men in sociological research worked against a critical understanding of men's experiences. Masculinities studies arose to fill these blanks, exploring fields of interest such as the body, sport, sex, family, military service, culture and art, violence against women, and masculinity in institutions (Hobbs, 2013).

In *Gender and Power*, Connell introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity, a culturally idealised form of masculinity that perpetuates gender inequality. Due to the far reach of Western colonial ideals, hegemonic masculinity is most commonly understood today as being masculinities that adhere to white, heterosexual, and middle- or upper-class ideals (Connor et al., 2021). These ideals are socially constructed and promote hegemonic cultural notions of gender connected to marginalisation around body type, sexual position/role, race/ethnicity, class, age, and gender performance (Crenshaw, 1989). Homophobia and differentiating gay men from straight men are also core factors in the production of hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1987, 2005; Diefendorf & Bridges, 2020; Mishel et al., 2022).

Connell's initial formulation of hegemonic masculinity concentrated on how historical and society-wide settings discursively legitimised unequal gender relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschimdt, 2005; Messerschmidt et al., 2018). More recently, Jewkes and Morrell (2012) defined hegemonic masculinity as:

> A set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organise society in gender unequal ways … [involving] a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy. (p. 40)

This means a central aspect of hegemonic masculinity is that gender inequality is perpetuated through the domination of other compliant, complementary, and accommodating forms of femininity and masculinity. As Connell (1987) highlighted, hegemonic masculinity is "always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women" (p. 183), legitimising men's dominant position in society by subordinating women

and marginalising men with non-hegemonic masculinities (e.g. queer masculinities, non-white masculinities). While Connell has since expanded her initial conceptualisation, she lays important groundwork identifying four main types of non-hegemonic masculinities: complicit, subordinate, marginalised, and protest masculinities.

First, complicit masculinities do not embody hegemonic masculinity yet realise some of the benefits of upholding patriarchal relations. Second, subordinate masculinities are constructed as lesser than or deviant to hegemonic masculinity. Third, marginalised masculinities are trivialised or discriminated against, or both, because of unequal relations in class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and/or age. Fourth, protest masculinities are compensatory hyper-masculinities formed in reaction to social positions lacking economic or political power (Messerschmidt et al., 2018). Hegemonic masculinity only remains legitimate by encouraging all to consent to, unite around, and embody unequal gender relations. This means it relies on dialectical relationships with non-hegemonic masculinities (and femininities) to withhold power and maintain unequal gender relations.

Although not all men embody (or can embody) hegemonic masculinity, many still adhere to the unequal power structures it perpetuates because they can, in some ways, still benefit from it. For example, even though queer men embody a form of marginalised masculinity, they may also benefit from perpetuating the systems of power that oppress them to gain social power, such as patriarchy. At intersections of race, class, nationality, and gender, some queer men find that their social locations allow them to leverage certain social identities to protect against discrimination. This process is akin to Chen's (1999) concept of the hegemonic bargain and can be seen in a 1992 study by Connell. In this study, Connell found that gay men commonly rejected hyper-masculinity but also disliked queens i.e., effeminate gays. By undergoing a hegemonic bargain (e.g., gay men leveraging their masculinity to elevate their queerness), hegemony secures the consent of the oppressed in

their own oppression. Thus, queer people can act as accomplices to their own subjugation and the subjugation of others (Chen, 1999).

Taken together, Connell's conceptualisations meld well with intersectional perspectives as they take into account how social identity factors intersect to form different experiences of power and inequality. Consequently, hegemonic masculinity has seen long-standing use as an analytical tool to identify attitudes and practices among men that perpetuate gender inequality, involving both men's domination over women and the power of some men over other (often minority groups of) men (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012). Crucially, masculinity studies, in tandem with queer theory and Black Feminism, has long been used as a site for exploration into the ways queer people have navigated oppression. Therefore, this literature is useful here to contextualise and tackle the complexities of past and present queer oppressions within sites of resistance, like ACT UP. This study now draws attention to two forms of contemporary masculinity that are useful in understanding how queer men today navigate oppression.

The Emergence of Hybrid Masculinities

The increased mainstream consumption of queer culture in Western society occurred alongside numerous shifts in gender norms. One key shift was the emergence of hybrid masculinities, forms of gender expression wherein men selectively incorporate elements and performances ("bits and pieces") associated with marginalised masculinities, such as queer masculinities, into their gender identities (Demetriou, 2001, p. 530; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Although the term 'hybrid' is not universally adopted among masculinities scholars, it is used here to address processes and practices of cultural mixing and highlights bodies of work that seek to understand the consequences of contemporary masculinities (Burke, 2009; Bridges, 2014).

Past research has found the masculinities of many different groups of men to be in a continuous state of change (see, for example, Kimmel, 1996; Segal, 2006). However, hybrid masculinities have primarily emerged among groups of young, heterosexual, white men (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Bridges (2014) noted that the over-representation of these kinds of men in masculinities literature spoke to the "flexibility of identity" afforded to individuals in privileged groups (Anderson, 2009). Intersectional perspectives would attribute this "flexibility of identity" to the powerful social locations white heterosexual men have historically occupied.

The social power of privileged men allows them to incorporate elements coded as "feminine" (Messerschmidt, 2010; Messner, 1993), "gay" (Bridges, 2010; Demetriou, 2001), or "Black" (Hughey, 2012; Ward, 2008) into their masculine gender identities without fear of facing marginalisation. Again, this hybridisation process evokes Chen's (1999) hegemonic bargain, with these men leveraging their whiteness and heterosexuality to incorporate queer identity markers in ways that maintain a "masculine" distance from homosexuality (and associated social stigma) (Bridges, 2014; Chen, 1999). Marginalised groups of men, however, such as those who are non-white, working class, and immigrants, craft hybrid gender identities with very different consequences and concerns than privileged men (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). The over-representation of young, white, heterosexual men in hybrid masculinities literature therefore speaks to the lack of critical attention less privileged groups of men have historically received in such studies of masculinity.

By co-opting elements of style and performance from less powerful masculinities, the hybrid masculinities of privileged men often obscure the symbolic and social boundaries between groups, perpetuating existing systems of power and inequality in new ways (see, for example, Demetriou 2001; Messner, 1993, 2007). An example can be seen in how men have embraced personal grooming styles. Kristen Barber (2016) explored how class-privileged

men's embrace of the previously feminine-coded consumption of personal grooming styles enhanced their positions of privilege over women and men marginalised by class. She outlined that while on the surface hybrid masculinities may signal the emergence of "new" less rigid masculinities, in reality, gender, race, and class inequalities are reproduced and concealed when they garner widespread consent (such as from multi-million-dollar men's grooming industries).

In other words, hybrid masculinities describe the ability of privileged men to adopt marginalised masculine and/or feminine styles and displays into their identities in ways that simultaneously secure and obscure their access to power and privilege (Messerschmidt et al., 2018). Bridges (2014) argued that the primary motivation for white heterosexual men to (somewhat counter-intuitively) adopt marginalised aspects into their gender identities is because white heterosexual identities feel dull and meaningless. As hooks (1992) surmised, white people desire "a bit of the Other" to help fill the emptiness of the white identity. Additionally, by relying on gay aesthetics, these men distance themselves from the negative stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity (Bridges, 2014). As one participant of Bridges' 2014 study surmised, "[i]t's basically impossible to be homophobic if people think you're gay" (Bridges, 2014, p. 70-71).

It seems that men who adopt hybrid masculinities benefit from existing systems of power and inequality, often along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and class (see, for example, Demetriou, 2001; Messner, 1993, 2007, Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Consequently, Bridges (2014), and later, Bridges and Pascoe (2014), position hybrid masculinities as expressions of—rather than challenges to—gender hegemony. Bridges further states that, "[i]t is not that inequality no longer exists or that masculinities' relationship with homophobia is disappearing, rather it is part of a hybridization of masculinity that works to obscure contemporary inequality" (Bridges, 2014, p. 74). Hybrid masculinities therefore illustrate

changes in how gender hegemony is reproduced and demonstrate how men today have adapted new "identity projects" to navigate contemporary social changes (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Tensions that exist between consumption, exploitation, and invisibility of queer oppression reveal the ever-shifting nature of masculinity that scholars endeavour to conceptualise. Hybrid masculinity expands our understanding of how mainstream (cisheteronormative) society consumes queerness without acknowledging or confronting queer oppression. Interestingly, this form of queer consumption through masculine identity is not reserved solely for heterosexual men; queer men can also adopt hybrid masculinities in ways that perpetuate queer oppression. Canton Winer (2023) advanced Miriam Abelson's 2019 concept of goldilocks masculinity to explore this phenomenon. As a subtype of hybrid masculinity, goldilocks masculinity emphasises the hazards of both 'inadequate' and 'excessive' masculinity in groups of queer men.

Exploring Goldilocks Masculinity

Typically, research into hybrid masculinities has been from the perspective of dominant groups, such as focusing on how white heterosexual men co-opt aspects of marginalised masculinities. However, research into goldilocks masculinity examines how groups of non-dominant marginalised men (e.g., queer men) perceive and participate in crafting hybrid masculinities. In particular, this area of research explores how queer men internalise and reproduce ideologies that oppress them, symbolically distancing themselves from hegemonic masculinity whilst simultaneously upholding gendered exclusion and inequality surrounding body type, sexual position/role, race, class, age, and gender performance (Chen, 1999; Winer, 2023; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

This research has found that queer men engage in gendered appearance practices to avoid risks of appearing both “too gay” and “too closeted” (Clarke & Smith, 2015). As previously outlined, queer men have historically faced marginalisation for being legibly queer, yet queer men who are not legibly queer “enough” also face backlash from within the community (Winer, 2023). For instance, although proximity to dominant normative masculine ideals elevates queer men’s position among heterosexual men, a lack of feminine interests de-legitimises their claim to a queer identity. As Winer (2023) wrote, “[s]kepticism of excessive masculinity is tied to suspicions that those who are “excessively” masculine are victims of internalised homophobia and are not truly “out of the closet” (p. 1066).

In grappling with dimensions of internalised oppression, goldilocks masculinity speaks to a bi-directional bounding of idealised masculinity for queer men. Queer men face duelling pressures to both claim masculine privilege and to be readable as authentically queer. Winer (2023) explains that the “ideal queer man” is socially expected to appear effortlessly masculine, but not so entirely invested in masculinity that he is “unwilling to engage in minor gender transgression” (Winer, 2023, p. 15). However, it is important to note that the purpose of this transgression is not to subvert cultural norms or challenge hegemony (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschimdt, 2005; Messerschimdt et al., 2018), but instead to symbolically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity and gain subcultural capital and safety (Thornton, 2016; Bridges, 2014). Because of this, whiteness is implicitly situated in this idealised middle zone of masculinity because white men are privileged in both their political visibility and the invisibility of their racial and gender specificity (Ward, 2008; Hobbs, 2013). This is especially true when a man is oppressed by one identity (e.g., queer) but privileged by another (e.g., white) and is trying to relate more to their oppressed identity.

These duelling pressures to fit a certain type of masculine expression are most observably present in discussions among young men (Pascoe, 2011). These discussions,

termed ‘fag discourse,’ work to establish clear boundaries between what is considered “gay” and “straight,” regulating masculinity and promoting gender inequality. Through these discussions, young men socialise each other into normatively masculine behaviours, practices, attitudes, and dispositions (Corbett, 2001; Kimmel, 1996). Although fag discourse operates to cement the (anti-queer) ideals of hegemonic masculinity, it also occurs in conversations between queer men. For example, in fag discourse between queer men, Black men are hyper-sexualised and hyper-masculinised (Collins, 2004), and Asian men are hyper-feminised and emasculated (Eng, 2001). Additionally, older men are feminised (due to associations with lower strength, libido, and testosterone) while simultaneously sexualised as ‘daddies’ and perverts (Goltz, 2007). Moreover, long-standing hegemonic associations between penetration and dominance stereotype the sexual positions of men, with feminine men being pigeonholed as “bottoms” (receptive) and masculine men pigeonholed as “tops” (penetrative) (Kowalski, 2016; Bersani, 1987). Lastly, working-class men are hyper-masculinised (Vokey et al., 2013) and men with toned, muscular bodies are often framed as more masculine and (therefore) more sexually desirable than men with other body types (Brennan et al. 2013).

Because of goldilocks masculinity (perpetuated by fag discourse), queer spaces can act as sites of queer oppression. For example, participants of Winer’s 2023 study described Gay Pride as “toxic,” explaining that the queer men chosen to represent the queer community are not representative of the actual community and instead perpetuate unrealistic standards for “how to be queer.” As one participant said:

> You have these go-go boys and hot men in next-to-nothing on floats, dancing around promoting what we should look like. And it’s just kind of like these are the people that have been chosen to be on the float, so obviously these are the top-tier of our

> community. These are the people that you should aspire to be… I've never seen, you know, three Leather Bears [i.e., large, hairy men] on the float at LA Pride. (p. 1066)

Moreover, even though some men can recognise and critique how their preferences and prejudices reproduce inequality, this does not stop the inequality nor protect themselves against their own subordination. For example, another participant said:

> It's complicated because I kind of get it [the preference for "masculine" men], but I don't want to. Like, I really want to be really opposed to it. I don't know, like, I'm really thankful that that's not how I, umm, feel. Like, that's not who I want to be hooking up with exclusively? Just like masculine men? But I do see myself put off by men who I think are too feminine, umm, sometimes. (Winer, 2023, p. 1067)

Another said:

> I still make jokes about it with my partner. As if the bottom was less than. And even as I'm making it, to this day I still think 'This doesn't make any sense. Why is this even funny?' But it's 'Ooh, she's got a secret'. (p. 1061).

Taken together, queer men face pressures from both outside and within the queer community to adhere to a specific type of queer masculine expression. Those who do not adhere to this goldilocks zone of queer masculinity risk facing social backlash (Hobbs, 2013). These duelling pressures lead some queer men to legitimise gender inequality and their own sexual marginalisation (Messerschimdt, 2010), a phenomenon reflected in the matrix of domination: a system of oppression those within are aware of and are pressured to navigate, yet ultimately, cannot escape. Additionally, hybrid and goldilocks masculinities outline how different social identities (dis)empower different types of men. Within this context, this study will use contemporary understandings of masculinity—in tandem with the previously explored sociological frameworks—to understand how masculinity influenced power configurations within ACT UP.

Chapter 3: Methods

As previously stated, the research questions of this study are: (1) If and how was mainstream media used to perpetuate and obscure queer oppression throughout the AIDS crisis, and (2) If and how did masculinities influence how men in ACT UP accessed and navigated power? To address these questions, this study will undergo an exploratory case study evaluation using the social movement/activist group ACT UP as the unit of analysis. ACT UP was the largest movement that arose to combat political homophobia and protect queer people (particularly queer men) during the AIDS crisis. Consequently, ACT UP makes for an ideal case study to explore various facets of state-sanctioned violence and how those in power have since perpetuated and obscured a continuity of queer oppression.

The primary source to investigate ACT UP will be the aforementioned book, *Let the Record Show*: *A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* by Sarah Schulman. In this text, Schulman calls attention to patterns of queer silencing in the context of the historical experiences of HIV/AIDS and penetrates this silencing by engaging in a radical act of truth-telling. By drawing from interviews with 188 people involved in the ACT UP Oral History Project and from Schulman's own experiences as a member of ACT UP, this text acts as one of the most comprehensive texts on ACT UP of all time. This text includes the transcripts of each interview, combined with information about ACT UP's history, activities, and internal politics all into a single volume. As stated earlier, current critical queer issues are being obscured by the mainstream consumption of queer culture. Given this, this present study argues that such first-hand accounts and testimonies captured in Schulman's work are of increased value and importance today.

Schulman explained that the purpose of compiling this text was "not to look back with nostalgia, but rather to help contemporary and future activists learn from the past so that they can do more effective organising in the present" (p. 17). This present study responds to

this call laid out by Schulman, highlighting how we can learn from queer activism of the past to inform present-day initiatives. As Shaughnessy and Zechmeister (1999) posited, the scientific benefit of employing case study methods lies in its ability to open the way for discoveries and serve as the breeding ground for future insights. Therefore, by drawing from first-hand accounts of members of ACT UP, these explorations will lay out how activists of the past successfully combated institutional and political homophobia.

To address the research questions, this study will utilise the previously introduced Black and feminist sociological frameworks and concepts of intersectionality and the matrix of domination, with a particular focus on controlling images. Additionally, this study will use an understanding of contemporary masculinities to explore how masculinity arose in ACT UP. Specifically, this study will denote instances of mainstream media being used to oppress queer populations and instances of masculinity influencing power configurations in ACT UP. Delineating these instances will help capture and theorise ways in which queer people were oppressed and silenced.

This study will use a coding scheme based on Collins' (1990) matrix of domination. Recall that Collins conceptualised four domains of power within the matrix of domination that influence how individuals experience oppression: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. Every instance of oppression identified in the text will be coded according to which domain(s) that oppression falls under. For example, instances involving laws and policies will be coded 'S' (structural), bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance techniques will be coded 'D' (disciplinary), normalising process will be coded 'H' (hegemonic), and discriminatory practices between individuals will be coded 'I' (interpersonal). Additionally, instances that involve the use of controlling images will be coded 'C,' making analysing the findings for the use of controlling images in obscuring oppression easier. Coding instances of oppression in this manner will uncover key themes/subthemes in the text. These key

themes/subthemes will then be presented in the findings to address the research questions and expanded upon in the discussion.

Chapter 4: Findings

Given this present study's focus on ways queer oppression is perpetuated, minimised, and obscured through the mainstream consumption of queer culture, it was imperative to first examine how various media outlets covered the AIDS crisis and ACT UP's response. This study found multiple instances of mainstream media perpetuating and obscuring queer oppression by drawing on controlling images to espouse harmful narratives (e.g., deviant sexualities, immorality, fear for safety). In particular, this study found that narratives espoused by mainstream media perpetuated and obscured queer oppression in three key ways: spreading misinformation surrounding AIDS and the AIDS crisis, misrepresenting PWA, and mis-historicising ACT UP. This information is important because it establishes the political and social climate in which controlling images were used to frame the crisis and provides a foundation to understand how tools of oppression have or have not changed since the inception of ACT UP. All citations refer to 'Schulman, 2021,' unless stated otherwise.

Misinformation surrounding AIDS & the AIDS Crisis

Many journalistic works failed to accurately report on and capture the reality of AIDS and the AIDS crisis. For instance, *The New York Times*—the largest print newspaper in NYC—would repeatedly under and misreport the realities of AIDS research, prevention, and harm; not use the term 'gay' in their articles about AIDS, nor mention gay partners in obituaries of people who died from AIDS; and would only disseminate shallow understandings of the scientific and social issues related to AIDS.

Additionally, the *Times* would spread false narratives about the AIDS crisis. For example, on the 10th of November 1996, the cover story of the *Times* was "When Plagues End," denoting the beginning of a trend of white male journalists proclaiming "AIDS is over." In reality, the AIDS crisis has never been "over" and continues to be an ongoing public

health issue for millions of people today. Conversely, a more recent 2017 exposé by the *Times* found that Black gay men in the U.S. South had higher rates of HIV infection than in any country in the world. Truly, AIDS was only ever "over" for select white men who could access the (inadequate) standard of care (p. xxii). The spread of misinformation about AIDS as having ended perpetuated queer oppression because it minimised the severity of the AIDS crisis and obscured the harm that was occurring to marginalised communities. More distressingly, this misinformation has since been cited in PhD dissertations and books, cementing inaccuracies about the AIDS crisis in professional literature.

Misinformation about AIDS was also prevalent in magazines and television programs during this time. Schulman states that:

> The message coming from the mainstream magazines and television at the time was, *"AIDS is not your concern because you're straight. …AIDS is very stigmatizing, so much so that we cannot show you this person. We are going to show them in silhouette, because if they show their face they are going to be subject to extreme discrimination. Plus, they are just so humiliated at their situation, why would they want to be on TV?"*. (p. 379)

Schulman continues:

> In an issue of Cosmopolitan magazine … Dr. Gould dangerously claimed that women were not at risk for AIDS. ACT UP was just starting to take on the defense of women with AIDS and running campaigns to show that safe sex saves women's lives, so this article was the final straw in mass media's lies about women's lives and HIV. (p. 385)

The narrative that straight populations could not acquire AIDS worked three-fold to perpetuate and obscure oppression. First, it excused straight populations from having to care about the AIDS crisis and the lives of PWA; second, it under-informed straight populations of the actual risks of HIV transmission, making them more vulnerable to AIDS and rendering

invisible the experiences of non-queer PWA; and third, it cemented associations between queer populations, AIDS, and discrimination, purporting that anyone associated with AIDS would and should experience extreme discrimination. These narratives also perpetuated racist rhetoric, such as the assertion that:

> women in Africa were getting AIDS at such a higher rate because *men in Africa take their women in such a brutal way* … Dr. Gould was claiming—*that really healthy vaginal sex wasn't going to put you at risk, that basically the women who were getting sick were ass-fucking and not telling the truth*. (Schulman, p. 387)

Together, these false narratives dissuaded and pressured many from supporting ACT UP and PWA. As Schulman described:

> There were literally thousands, if not millions, of people who wanted AIDS to end who never could imagine themselves in a state of overt, physical, and public opposition to the police, the mayor, the president, *The New York Times*, science, government, art museums, and pharmaceutical companies. (p. 8)

The fear of opposing these institutional forces by being associated with AIDS activism was so salient at this time that even queer men with AIDS did not come to ACT UP. As Schulman surmised, "The thought of being handcuffed and arrested on television—publicly associated with AIDS, drugs, and anal sex—disrupted [gay men's] image of their futures, which were never going to happen, but, in fantasy, depended on being appropriate" (p. 8).

Lastly, with the spread of misinformation also came the lack of information. Schulman describes how the growth of the AIDS crisis brought about increased efforts from the church to influence public education. For instance, The Catholic Diocese forbade public schools in NYC from teaching about same-sex relations, safe sex, and AIDS. The Church also opposed sex-education classes, condom distribution, and the "Rainbow Curriculum"—a long-gestating plan to update New York Public School education to include queer people and

people of colour in classroom curricula (p. 138). In this way, The Catholic Diocese did not honour the separation of church and state, allowing for stigma against homosexuality and PWA to proliferate whilst preventing life-saving information from reaching youth—especially young queer men, one of the most vulnerable groups for acquiring HIV. In sum, mainstream media spread misinformation about AIDS and the AIDS crisis through various mediums to produce false narratives that perpetuated and obscured oppression.

The Misrepresentation of People With AIDS (PWA)

Another way mainstream media perpetuated and obscured queer oppression was by misrepresenting PWA. For instance, Schulman described how the media preferred to depict PWA using imagery (i.e. controlling images) of very sick and dying people. For instance, in 1988, an exhibition of photos at the Museum of Modern Art only used photos of people in the late stages of wasting to represent PWA (e.g., photos of people in bed, covered in Kaposi sarcoma lesions, and surrounded by supportive family members). As Schulman surmised, "[The exhibition] only showed all these limp, sad, *I'm-about-to-die* people with AIDS" (p. 374-375). Journalistic works also preferred this depiction, continuously referring to PWA as 'victims' and using images of sick PWA rather than healthy PWA to represent the community. Schulman argued that representing PWA in this way constrained their agency and minimised their voices of resistance. As she wrote, "Using these words (e.g. 'victim') telegraphed bias and did not acknowledge the point of view of PWAs. ACT UP preferred the term *people with AIDS*" (p. 127).

Subsequently, this representation of PWA became entrenched in creative works of the time, such as in the Oscar-winning film *Philadelphia* (1993), and in the Pulitzer-winning play *Angels in America* (1991). In these works, gay men with AIDS were depicted as being weak and alone, having been abandoned by their community and with no political movement to

protect them. These men were then saved when a white straight man "heroically" overcame his prejudices to obtain treatment for them. In reality, the opposite was true: gay men with AIDS were abandoned by most straight people (including their families, neighbours, and government) and were defended by their community, who they often shared a lack of rights and representation with. Moreover, this "treatment" that represented hope in *Angels in America* was the drug azidothymidine, which, by the end of the year of the play's opening, was considered lethal by many AIDS activists. Moreover, creative works that more accurately depicted PWA, such as the play *Normal Hearts* (1985), were subsequently pushed to the sidelines until the 2010s, "when the world was finally ready to see a heroic (although still white) gay man" (Schulman, p. xxi).

Because these works were highly lauded, the controlling image of PWA as victims and as straight people as the saviours of the AIDS crisis became cemented in mainstream understandings of AIDS, obscuring the work of AIDS activists and misrepresenting the lived experiences of PWA. Schulamn states:

> [These works] shifted the burden of guilt away from the powerful social and governmental institutions most at fault in abandoning queer lives … These films also omitted the work AIDS activists like ACT UP did, which were the real forces that transformed the crisis. (p. xx-xxi)

These representations thereby shifted focus away from the important issues AIDS activists were addressing: that PWA were dying due to political homophobia and institutional and corporate negligence. Therefore, ACT UP confronted mainstream media that misrepresented PWA in this way. This fight for proper representaion is exemplified in AIDS Activist Vito Russo's 1988 speech entitled "Why We Fight," delivered in Washington D.C.:

> You know, for the last three years, since I was diagnosed, my family thinks two things about my situation. One, they think I'm going to die, and two, they think that my

> government is doing absolutely everything in their power to stop that. And they're wrong, on both counts. So, if I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from homophobia. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from racism. If I'm dying from anything, it's from indifference and red tape, because these are the things that are preventing an end to this crisis. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from Jesse Helms. If I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from the President of the United States. And, especially, if I'm dying from anything, I'm dying from the sensationalism of newspapers and magazines and television shows, which are interested in me, as a human interest story—only as long as I'm willing to be a helpless victim, but not if I'm fighting for my life.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. (p. 114)

Evidently, ACT UP was acutely aware of how PWA and the queer community were being misrepresented by mainstream media in ways that not only constrained their agency but also obscured their oppression and presented those perpetuating harm in a positive light.

Therefore, Schulman emphasised the importance of ACT UP combatting misrepresentation. As she explained:

> The media distorts the experiences of people who need change by presenting reductive or wrong renditions of their experiences or by ignoring them altogether. The media also appoints mainstream people to explain points of view that they actually do not understand. By the time a "feminist" or gay person or person of color or trans person—and all the overlaps therein—finally makes it into mainstream media, that chosen person's perspective is often years behind the movements they claim to speak for. The history and range of ideas that produced these movements is never acknowledged or referenced[…]We had to fight to make them understand that

> pictures of people on the front lines of opposition were also images of people with AIDS. (p. 17, 27)

A key way in which ACT UP confronted misrepresentation via controlling images was by getting more accurate representations of PWA and ACT UP into mainstream media. For instance, ACT UP presented PWA in a new light at the sit-in at the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA). As Schulman described:

> for the first time, [the FDA sit-in] presented a different vision of what a person with AIDS is. And I can't stress enough how important that was. We were victims; and we were vectors. We were bad guys and victims. And through the work of the people involved in Denver, creating the Denver Principles, through the work of ACT UP and others, we developed a different vision of the person with AIDS as hero. And that really was personified at the FDA. (p. 133)

Through this work, ACT UP created a new aesthetic for PWA, one that distanced queer men from the devastating imagery associated with AIDS. She continues:

> ACT UP was the queer East Village, the clean-shaven face, short hair, white T-shirt, tight black jeans, and stomper Doc Marten boots advertising the sexy, powerful, healthy-seeming PWA, in defiance of a media saturated with images of decline and death. (p. 318)

Even though many of these men were for no better word, slowly dying, they came together to show that "gay men were not sickly and weak, but strong and fighters" (Schulman, p. 16). In sum, combined with misinformation that stigmatised PWA and the queer community, mainstream media worked to further oppress queer people by using controlling images to misrepresent a population dying from institutional neglect.

The Mis-historicisation ACT UP

Thirdly, mainstream media perpetrated and obscured queer oppression by mis-historicising ACT UP. Schulman posited that because national media misrepresented ACT UP repeatedly as being exclusively, instead of predominantly, white and male, ACT UP has since been wrongly placed in the trajectory of white gay male history. For example, a review of major media coverage of ACT UP from the 1980s to 1990s found that the majority of media coverage consisted of white male newscasters interviewing white male ACT UP members, or depicting white male protestors. However, ACT UP was more than a solely gay male movement and as previously stated, ACT UP's first initiation had its roots in Black liberation and Women's civil rights movements. Additionally, many members from other social movements where gay male sexuality was not at the forefront joined ACT UP. This included members from the Congress of Racial Equality, radical student movements in Central America, anti-Fascist movements in Latin America, U.S. labour movements, sectarian Left parties, and the Communist Party.

Consequently, ACT UP flourished into a diverse social movement that incorporated members from a wide variety of backgrounds, each bringing unique strategies to resist institutional oppression. In particular, ACT UP identified, internalised, and learnt much from images of Black resistance. Therefore, by homogenising and whitening ACT UP's history as exclusively white and male, the complexity of the ideologies, values, and demographics that served as the foundation of AIDS activism have been obscured.

However, Schulman does recognise why links have been drawn between ACT UP, AIDS, and gay men. Gay men were (and continue to be) very significantly victimised—individually and collectively—by the indifference of the U.S. government and private pharmaceutical companies during the AIDS crisis. Additionally, gay men were at the forefront of AIDS activism, they made up much of ACT UP's rank and file and leadership,

ACT UP's meetings were held in gay-controlled and -funded spaces, and gay media was who most accurately reported on the AIDS crisis.

As Schulman notes, "[i]t was obvious to many of us at the time that the media favoured images of white males, and in this way gave the wrong impression of the dimensions of ACT UP's actual activities" (p. 377). ACT UP member and photojournalist, Donna Binder, also found that her images of white men being arrested made for bigger news to people in power than her images of people of colour and women. Schulman proposed that this was because AIDS was sold, initially, as "tragic" to the media. After all, the "young, robust, white male body was reduced to rubble." This framing allowed straight audiences to feel sorry for PWA while simultaneously being "comforted by the weakness and punishment of the queer" (p. 16).

Consequently, ACT UP later played on this narrative and opted to use white men at the forefront of their actions to garner attention from those in power. At this stage, ACT UP recognised the value of playing to what the media wanted to see if it meant AIDS was getting attention. As Schulman surmised:

> the empowered image we fought so hard to achieve, combined with the whitening, male eye of a homogenous media corps further obstructing the representation of people of color, women, children, and poor people with AIDS, were ultimately co-opted to mutual service of pharma and patients. (p. 529)

Unfortunately, it seems that present-day mainstream media continues to mis-historicise ACT UP. For example, the 2012 documentary *How to Survive a Plague*—in addition to continuing the narrative that "AIDS is over"—only included the testimonies of wealthy white male members of ACT UP. When the director, David France, was interviewed about the lack of representation in his documentary, he replied that the focus was on white men because they "were able, perhaps more than other people … to work full time for years to fulfil their

political work" (p. xxiii). However, repeatedly throughout *Let the Record Show* we learn of the many women, people of colour, and low-income ACT UP members who dedicated their "entire waking lives" to ACT UP (p. xxiii). As Schulman surmised:

> The mainstream approval France received for his film, which relied heavily on footage others had archived, was depressing to us, not only because the impression it gives of how change is made and who makes it is false, but because the "heroic individuals" myth, aside from being inaccurate, could mislead contemporary activists away from the fact that—in America—political progress is won by coalitions. (p xxiii)

Moreover, *How to Survive a Plague* also failed to address key aspects of ACT UP's operation such as housing issues, IV drug use, women's issues, and issues around race. Works such as this meant to document and educate about the AIDS crisis did not accurately represent the caucus of members in ACT UP nor the lived realities of PWA.

Another example of present-day media mis-historicising ACT UP, albeit differently, is seen in an episode of the television series *Pose* (2019). In this episode, a Black trans character from the series goes to ACT UP's demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral, performs civil disobedience, and is arrested by police. However, in reality, only one trans woman was arrested at the St. Patrick's action and they were white. ACT UP alumni, Robert Vázquez-Pacheco and Moisés Agosto-Rosario have both expressed anger that a present-day corporate representation of ACT UP inserted a nonexistent person of colour into the history of ACT UP whilst ignoring the people of colour who were there and did the work. Evidently, ACT UP still has little control over its own representation even three decades after its founding. Taken together, historicisations of ACT UP that omit the complexity of the movement and the interacting social and structural issues PWA faced have rendered invisible experiences of oppression and resistance.

Masculinities Influence on Configurations of Power

In addition to the ways mainstream media perpetuated and obscured oppression, this study found instances of masculinity influenced power configurations in ACT UP. In particular, this study found hierarchies of influence, access, and power in ACT UP mirrored the hierarchies of wider society. Because of this, white queer men in ACT UP, although oppressed by their queer identities, could leverage their masculinity and whiteness to access coveted privilege and social power both within and outside ACT UP.

For example, ACT UP's activities could be generally split into two categories: "inside" actions, referring to activities done within the proper channels of institutions (e.g., organising interviews and meetings with people in power), and "outside" actions, referring to activities performed outside the proper channels of institutions (e.g., street protests, sit-ins, ZAP actions, and picketing). Schulman described how white men in ACT UP commonly leveraged their masculinity and whiteness to undergo "inside" actions. Conversely, women and people of colour were seemingly relegated to performing "outside" actions due to their lack of privileged identity factors. As Schulman surmised:

> While street activists came in all genders, races, class backgrounds, and ages, the Inside players, working with reporters and government officials, tended to be more like the journalistic contacts they were trying to win over: white and usually male, industry-based and trained. (p. 128).

She posited that because the racial and gender identities of white men in ACT UP closely aligned with the racial and gender identities of those in most positions of power (i.e., white men), white men in ACT UP could more easily garner the attention and respect of institutions than women and people of colour could (p. 87). In this way, white men in ACT UP held more negotiating power than others and could more easily navigate bureaucratic red-tape and

organise getting what they wanted from those who oppressed them. This privilege also influenced how soon white men in ACT UP could access new medications, treatment programs, and state housing. As Schulman surmised, "Any crumb that was seized went first to the privileged, even if that privilege was relative … Once a resource was forced into existence by activists, its distribution depended upon sometimes infinitesimal degrees of difference of relative privilege" (p. 35-36). Therefore, the privileges afforded to white men in ACT UP due to their masculine and white identities advantaged them over members with other social identities.

Additionally, despite their queer identities, white queer men in ACT UP could further their privilege by benefiting from patriarchal systems. As Schulman described:

> The sexism of white gay men in this period reflected complex combinations of supremacy and oppression. The closet, whether a punitive, isolating, and diminishing personal experience or a reality of private networks of gay men in power, enabled some gay men to access the full privileges of straight men, and sometimes more. (p. 21)

This sexism was extended further by generational disdain queer men have had of women due to the "humiliating and constant imposition of women candidates for intimate relationships by parents, bosses, and general society" (Schulman, p. 22).

However, any privileges white men in ACT UP gained by leveraging their masculinity and whiteness did not shield them from the ravages of AIDS. For instance, Kapasi sarcoma, commonly known as 'gay cancer,' was first diagnosed in 1981 among gay men who were privileged enough to have general health-care practitioners notice a pattern of disease. Although their gender, race and class privileges allowed their illness to become noticed, theorised about, and reported, this did not protect affluent white men from intense suffering, nor from being stigmatised by homophobia that recklessly construed a certain

cancer as “gay.” AIDS was therefore a sudden reality check for many white queer men who, for the first time, found themselves completely left behind by institutions, the government, and their families. As a result of feeling this oppression and extreme marginalisation, many men initially came to ACT UP outraged because it was the first time in their life that they felt ‘othered.’ Being white and male did not carry currency in this new era of AIDS and their status as PWA and/or queer placed them on par with others whom the government ignored or considered a threatening, undesirable population. Schulman contends that these men couldn’t believe that other people didn’t think their lives were worth taking extraordinary steps to save. As she claims:

> gay white men thought they had privilege in this country and were shocked to find out they didn’t, and that people in power were prepared to let them die. And when they figured that out, they got very angry about it—a lot of them. (p. 121)

Therefore, any privileges gleaned from leveraging whiteness and masculinity were mediated by the overwhelming detriment of AIDS and associated stigma.

Ultimately, however, these hierarchies of privilege and differences in how white men operated within ACT UP versus how other members operated fuelled the dissolution of ACT UP. Division grew within ACT UP along the basis of social identities, culminating in many white men splitting off from ACT UP to form a separate movement in 1991 called TAG (Treatment Action Groups). Schulman summarised that this split occurred on the basis that there were “people who were interested in immediately saving their own life versus those who had a bigger vision” (p. 588). White men in ACT UP wanted (understandably) to focus their efforts on getting treatment that would most immediately improve their health. However, other members of ACT UP, mostly women and people of colour, had already experienced oppression before the AIDS crisis and saw the potential of ACT UP to change the health system as a whole (e.g., obtaining universal healthcare). In sum, masculinity

influenced power configurations in ACT UP and played a role in the movement's dissolution, but ultimately, the ravages of AIDS mitigated much of any privileges men in ACT UP acquired.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In summary, to answer the first research question, this study found evidence that mainstream media had been used to perpetuate and obscure queer oppression during the AIDS crisis. This was predominantly achieved in three key ways: spreading misinformation about AIDS and the AIDS crisis, misrepresenting PWA, and mis-historicising ACT UP. In particular, this study found that controlling images in media disseminated narratives that suppressed voices of queer resistance. By drawing from stereotypes that incited nationwide fear of AIDS, these narratives presented queer people as abnormal deviants undeserving of care. These narratives were then espoused from the nation's highest offices and amplified by ill-informed and pernicious media, ultimately stopping thousands of PWA from reaching out for support and dissuading millions from supporting AIDS activism. Moreover, these narratives framed straight people as the saviours of the crisis, contributing to the erasure of queer activism, intellectualism, and gritty grassroots confrontations with power structures. The construction of the benevolent heterosexual male saviour also served to further emphasise the subordinate status of queer male identities. From these findings, this study contends that mainstream media enacted epistemic violence against queer populations during the time of ACT UP.

Theoretical Implications: Epistemic Violence

Coined by Spivak (1988), epistemic violence describes the process of routinely silencing the voices of marginalised groups. She first uses this term in her text, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), to mark the silencing of "general, nonspecialists," "the illiterate peasantry," "the tribals," and the "lowest strata of the urban sub-proletariat" by dominant, often Western, social structures (Spivak, 1988, p. 282-283). As Spivak discussed, epistemic violence is enacted by damaging a group's ability to speak or be heard, resulting in the

silencing of their suffering. This study contends that these narratives espoused by mainstream media and the lack of critical attention given to ACT UP delegitimised and erased voices of queer activism. Primarily, this was achieved by damaging their ability to speak, be heard, and be recognised as producers of knowledge.

Dotson (2011), in drawing on Spivak's conceptualisation of epistemic violence, speaks to these processes of silencing marginalised groups. She operationalised epistemic violence with the concepts of testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering. Testimonial quieting occurs when an audience fails to acknowledge a "speaker" as a "knower" (Dotson, 2011, p. 242). An example of this process is seen in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), in which Collins claims that Black women are systematically undervalued as knowledge holders in the U.S. by virtue of being Black women. When Black women are not recognised as possessing knowledge, the oppressions experienced by them are silenced and rendered invisible to the social powers that be. Conjointly, testimonial smothering occurs when marginalised voices, such as those of Black and queer communities, are pressured to truncate their testimony to ensure it is palatable for their audience. This limits the marginalised groups' ability to express experiences of inequality and oppression to those in power (Dotson, 2011). This understanding of testimonies, especially from those whose bodies were sites (and remain sites) of anti-Black politics and state violence, enhances our understanding of how and why some voices are not included in processes of knowledge production.

More recently, scholars have applied Spivak's and Dotson's conceptualisations of epistemic violence to understand how queer populations are silenced (see, for example, Hagen et al., 2024; Rithotz, 2024). For example, Kjaran and Gudjonsoon (2021) explored forms of epistemic violence in Icelandic schools, finding that epistemic violence towards queer students is sustained and committed both physically (e.g., in the classroom) and non-physically (e.g., in the school curriculum). In schools, particular

knowledge/epistemologies are (re)produced, often in line with the dominant hegemony of society (Kjaran & Gudjonsson, 2021). Due to cisheteronormativity, heterosexuality and cisgender identities are constituted as legitimate and made visible in schools, while queer identities on the margins are silenced and othered.

In line with this budding area of research, this present study argues that queer populations throughout the AIDS crisis were subject to both testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering. For instance, controlling images of PWA as weak made it so they were not taken seriously as agents of change (i.e., testimonial quieting). Likewise, when ACT UP was mis-historicised as a solely gay male movement, ACT UP had to adjust its presentation to fit the white male image the media had ascribed to them to do effective activism (i.e., testimonial smothering). In this way, Schulman's book *Let the Record Show* not only illuminates these instances of epistemic violence but also restores the credibility of her interviewees as expert knowledge holders.

Additionally, to answer the second research question, this study found that masculinities did influence how men in ACT UP accessed and navigated power. This was predominantly achieved by men making a hegemonic bargain: leveraging their masculine and white identities to gain privilege and mitigate discrimination associated with their queer identities. This study contends that contemporary masculinities of hybrid and goldilocks masculinities are useful in explaining how men in ACT UP underwent this leveraging process. Due to the political homophobia, harmful narratives, and government negligence at the time, queer men appear to have been pressured to use anything at their disposal in order to garner the resources necessary to live.

Through a contemporary masculinities lens, we see that the men in ACT UP adopted hybrid masculinities that incorporated aspects of their marginalised identities (queer) and aspects of their dominant identities (white and male). Doing so allowed them to work as

inside players in ACT UP's action and to get priority access to treatment, whilst simultaneously retaining membership with their queer community. Likewise, these men experienced duelling pressures to both adhere to their queer identities and to adhere to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

Taken together, a prominent theme emerges: dichotomies in how queer men were treated. For instance, queer men were both weak and in need of care, but also dangerous sexual deviants undeserving of care. Likewise, white men faced oppression and found support in ACT UP, but they also fawned over straight male privilege and oppressed other marginalised groups. These paradoxical dichotomies in how queer men were treated is akin to how contemporary mainstream society engages with queer culture today, consuming it at growing rates whilst simultaneously allowing for anti-queer policy to proliferate. This discussion now turns to queer blindfolding, a recent attempt by scholars to contextualise why heterosexual people commonly display positive dispositions towards queer people while also harbouring implicit prejudice and (covert) discriminatory attitudes towards them.

Theoretical Implications: Queer Blindfolding

Coined by Smith and Shin (2014), queer blindfolding describes a form of difference blindness in which "well-intentioned" heterosexual individuals frame queer identities as "no more or less noticeable, greater or less conspicuous, and provoke no more or less of an emotional or behavioural response" than heterosexual identities (p. 949). While on the surface this framing seems to promote sexual equality (e.g., queer identities are equal to heterosexual identities), in reality, it minimises and denies sexual inequalities faced by queer people, resulting in the "disappearing" of queer identities and the silencing of queer oppression(s) (Smith & Shin, 2014, p. 940). Queer blindfolding thereby minimises

heterosexual privilege, eschews the negative effects of cisheteronormativity, and reinforces the invisibility of queer identities (Smith & Shin, 2014).

Heterosexual individuals are able to employ queer blindfolding due to the social invisibility afforded to them by cisheteronormativity. Additionally, Smith and Shin (2014) proposed that a key motivation behind queer blindfolding is that heterosexual individuals do not recognise how their actions obscure queer oppression. As Farmer (2009) wrote, “The suffering of individuals whose lives and struggles recall our own tends to move us; the suffering of those who are distanced, whether by geography, gender, "race," or culture, is sometimes less affecting” (p. 19). Because queer people are distanced from cisgendered heterosexual people by sexuality and/or gender identity, it is perhaps difficult for non-queer people to recognise the suffering of queer people—let alone how their actions may perpetuate that oppression. Queer blindfolding thereby highlights how even though some heterosexual individuals may consider themselves queer allies and express positive dispositions towards queer people, they often also display implicit anti-queer prejudice and (covert) discriminatory attitudes (Smith & Shin, 2014).

As displayed throughout this present study, queer people have faced and continue to face oppression; stigmatising stereotypes (e.g., queer identities are abnormal/deviant) proliferate and continue to fuel anti-queer policies that cause harm, such as failing to protect queer youth (Kjaran & Gudjonsson, 2021). Framing queer people as no longer experiencing discrimination nor unequal treatment delegitimises queer voices angry and dissatisfied with their status in society (Cowan et al., 2005). Queer blindfolding somewhat speaks to processes of harmful discourse used to reinforce hegemonic culture over marginalised ones and is therefore apt in understanding how mainstream society presently obscures a continuity of queer oppression (Smith & Shin, 2014).

Although there are parts of queer culture that are consumed and made hyper-visible by mainstream society, queer consumption is driven by capitalist interests (profit), and the challenges ACT UP fought against in the past have continued into the present day. The consumption of queer culture may therefore be amplifying/generating/facilitating queer blindfolding because it suppresses a continuity of queer oppression(s). This suppression disconnects mainstream understandings of queer culture from its radical intersectional history of resistance and oppression, possibly making it easier for heterosexual people to perform queer blindfolding. Consequently, this study proposes that queer blindfolding can be understood as a form of epistemic violence, giving language to and contextualising a unique way heterosexual individuals can silence queer voices.

It is important to note, however, that this paper finds some aspects of the concept lacking. First, queer blindfolding only explores the obscuration of oppression through a sexuality lens and does not explore how multiple social identities of queer individuals play into processes of difference blindness. Second, the concept is presented through a heavy psychological lens, positioning the queer blindfolding heterosexual participants as regretful about their prejudice due to "intra-psychic" dissonance. This research centres more on the disrupted internal environment of privileged heterosexual individuals rather than the harmful effects of queer blindfolding on queer populations and/or other societal factors at play. Presenting queer blindfolding in this light also gives the impression that it should be viewed as a phenomenon occurring by accident, in good faith, and as a fully unconscious act, something completely disconnected from political homophobia. To the best of our knowledge, queer blindfolding has not been critiqued nor has it been conceptualised as a form of epistemic violence. Therefore, this study extends the language and concept of queer blindfolding by fleshing out how it occurs at various intersections of privileges and oppressions. Through this study's findings, this study extends the language and concept of

queer blindfolding by showing how it occurs among queer populations located at various intersections of privileges and oppressions.

Strengths & Limitations

A key strength of this study was using *Let the Record Show* as the primary source. The author, Sarah Schulman, is regarded as one of the leading authorities on ACT UP and was personally involved in ACT UP. Additionally, this almost 800 page text drew from a large volume of queer voices and took on a multi-faceted approach to exploring various dimensions of ACT UP and the surrounding socio-political state. Therefore, I believe it was a highly reliable and trustworthy source to rely on to capture the complexity of oppression of this era.

Conversely, however, a fair critique and limitation of this case study evaluation is that it relies on this sole text. Additionally, my positionality as a white, queer-identifying, non-immigrant, cis man in my 20s may have biassed my coding. For instance, because of my positionality, I may have over captured instances of oppression that pertained to white queer men and/or under-represented the oppression of other groups because I more closely align with the experiences of white queer men.

Future Research

Future Research should continue to expand the concepts of epistemic violence and queer blindfolding to explore ways in which queer populations are oppressed and silenced. As this study has outlined, providing critical and scholarly attention to historically under-researched groups can be useful in informing present-day activism and harm-reduction initiatives. Additionally, to address a limitation of this study and to improve the validity of future findings, future research into this area should employ a larger range of texts and

sources to create a comprehensive understanding of intersecting oppressions. Lastly, formulating specific controlling images of queer masculinities (like how Collins (1990) formulated controlling images of Black femininity) could be useful for recognising trends in how media depicts queer men.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In conclusion, this novel study brought renewed attention to a historic era of queer resistance in order to inform present-day understandings of queer oppression. By viewing ACT UP through a Black feminist and masculinities lens, the perpetuation and obscuration of a continuity of queer oppression has been illuminated. These lenses revealed how present-day mainstream society has evolved to be more implicit and subversive than its historic counterparts in how it privileges cisheterosexual identities and obscures queer identities and oppression(s). Additionally, through these lenses, this study has revealed the larger role masculinities have played in shaping messages and initiaions of queer resistance. To the mainstream world, it seems that the AIDS crisis was more than a health epidemic: it was a crisis to Western masculinity. Queer men were depicted as threats to the cisheteronormative way of life and punished because of it. Today, whilst the fight for queer rights and proper representation continues, we now have a plethora of tools at our disposal to expose and interrogate these systems of oppression.

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