Make This Real?

AIDS and Terrorism in "Realist" Fiction from Reagan/Bush America

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Abstract

This thesis explores three novels published between 1990 and 1993 -- *People in Trouble* by Sarah Schulman, *Afterlife* by Paul Monette, and *Tim and Pete* by James Robert Baker -- that deal with AIDS as experienced by gay and lesbian characters in the United States. Their authors identified their work as social realism, but their plots include incidents of terrorism intended to protect people with HIV/AIDS from an oppressive society even though history records no such occurrence.

"Make This Real?" understands these texts' claims to realism by reading them against a coeval activist discourse that compared "the AIDS crisis" to a war zone. It also examines the texts' use of fantasy and satire, which destabilizes the category of realism in a way similar to the books' metatextual analysis of the importance of art in a crisis. The thesis suggests that using terrorist imagery creates an emotional authenticity that assists the authors' activist attempts to undermine mainstream ideas of AIDS.

Résumé

Ce mémoire analyse trois romans publiés entre 1990 et 1993, soit *People in Trouble* de Sarah Schulman, *Afterlife* de Paul Monette et *Tim and Pete* de James Robert Baker, qui abordent le sujet du sida tel que vécu par des personnages gais et lesbiens aux États-Unis. Les auteurs desdits romans ont affirmé ou identifié leurs œuvres comme représentant du réalisme social ou des vérités de la réalité contemporaine. L'intrigue des romans comprend toutefois des actes de terrorisme à l'encontre d'une société oppressive, lesquels ont pour but d'avancer le statut des personnes atteintes du sida.

"Make this Real?" situe ces trois textes dans un discours d'activisme contemporain qui compare la "crise" du sida à une zone de guerre. Dans le mémoire, ce discours sert à élucider à quel point ces romans peuvent être perçus comme réalistes. Sont explorés également dans ce mémoire les liens qu'ont les textes avec des genres tels que la fantaisie et la satire, remettant ainsi en question la lecture de *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife* et *Tim and Pete* en tant que textes purement réalistes, un effet qui saurait également s'accomplir par une analyse métatextuelle de l'importance de l'art en période de crise. Au lieu d'argumenter que les textes sont strictement réalistes, ce mémoire suggère que les romans achèvent une authenticité émotionnelle par le biais d'imagerie terroriste qui soutient leurs efforts activistes pour ébranler les idées dominantes à propos du sida.

Table of Contents

Abstract..........page 2

Résumé..........page 3

Acknowledgments..........page 5

Introduction..........page 6

Chapter One: How to Have Realism in an Epidemic..........page 14

an "epidemic of signification," realist fiction, and war imagery in AIDS activism

Chapter Two: Avengers in America..........page 48

fantasy, satire, and the longing for heroes

Chapter Three: Make This Real?..........page 82

the purpose and meaning of art in a crisis

Conclusion..........page 113

Works Cited..........page 118

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Introduction

Any project that purports to discuss realism should probably also demonstrate a grasp of reality. This proves difficult in an analysis of three novels -- Sarah Schulman's *People in Trouble*, Paul Monette's *Afterlife*, and James Robert Baker's *Tim and Pete* -- whose narratives unsettle conventional images of what AIDS meant to people in the US during the late 1980s and early 1990s. All three novels foreground gay and lesbian perspectives, frequently in opposition to what they represent as a straight or mainstream understanding of crisis. They also work against some popular conventions in writing about HIV/AIDS, particularly ones that evoke the imagery of "victims" or automatic death sentences. An analysis of their historical situation must acknowledge the novels' efforts to challenge some attempts to assign a definitive meaning to what they most commonly called the AIDS crisis or epidemic.

Schulman's *People in Trouble* (1990) describes the early days of a New York City activist group that she modeled on the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). Monette's *Afterlife* (1990) and Baker's *Tim and Pete* (1993) both are set among circles of gay, mostly white male friends in Los Angeles, but Monette's L.A. is more privileged than Baker's. *Tim and Pete* sneers at Monette's social world – Monette's partner's brother is the subject of a character's lengthy diatribe against "Mr. West Hollywood" (148) – with nearly as much anger as it shows towards rightwing politicians. Despite the novels' disparate vantage points, all three understand AIDS to be intrinsically linked to questions of homophobia, governmental inaction, oppressive expressions of Christianity, and racism. They are also notable for bringing narratives about AIDS terrorism, which were otherwise confined to science fiction or fantasy, fringe gay presses, or small references in better-known works, to more mainstream audiences of literature. All three books feature the planned or committed killings of homophobic public figures in the name of

progress for people with AIDS and/or queer people. Through reference to real incidents of homo- and AIDSphobia, real death tolls, and actual governmental statements (or lack of statements) about AIDS, the novels explicitly tie their characters' belief in the utility of assassination to anger over the lack of American concern for the fates of people considered to be outside of the "general population." Hence all three construct a narrative about AIDS that blames the systemic devaluation of queer people and people of color for political indifference to adequately meeting or even acknowledging these communities' needs for better and widely available medication, caretakers, housing, or a less hateful environment.

The cultural climate that evoked this kind of narrative was influenced to a certain degree by Randy Shilts's book *And the Band Played On: People, Politics, and the AIDS Epidemic,* which he published in 1987. Based on the articles on AIDS that he had written for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, his book traced a fairly straightforward narrative: AIDS, spread through rampant gay "promiscuity," became an epidemic because of bureaucrats' homophobic reluctance to consider it an issue and gay liberationists' inability to understand that the party was over. Responding to *And the Band Played On*'s portrayal of gay men, art critic and theorist Douglas Crimp commented,

> that this book is pernicious has already been noted by many people working in the struggle against AIDS. For anyone suspicious of "mainstream" American culture, it might seem enough simply to note that the book *is* a bestseller, that it has been highly praised throughout the dominant media […]. But we cannot stop at condemnation. Shilts's book is too full of useful information, amassed in part with the help of the Freedom of Information Act, simply to dismiss it. ("How to Have Promiscuity" 238-240)

Crimp's objections to *And the Band Played On* included its lack of time for people with AIDS who were not white gay men, its tendency to blame the gay community, its assurance that an AIDS diagnosis equaled death, and its reliance on a bourgeois novelistic form that allowed him to create the character of Patient Zero, the man accused of spreading HIV throughout North America, to "embody everything that the book purports to expose" ("How to Have Promiscuity" 245). Crimp comments that "bourgeois writing would seem to represent a strange choice indeed for the separation of fact from fiction" ("How to Have Promiscuity" 244). Shilts's "strange choice" makes it less strange that the authors of *People in Trouble, Afterlife,* and *Tim and Pete* would use the novel form to make varying efforts to correct a definitive mainstream account of AIDS, which as Crimp notes was created with reference to the "journalistic truth" of *And the Band Played On*. Their levels of sympathy with the bourgeois also vary – gay activist Michael Lynch once commented that Paul Monette only cared about people with AIDS who also had Jaguars (Silversides 206) – but the novels demonstrate a familiarity with the activist approaches to AIDS that Crimp preferred. In the passage quoted, his usage of "we" – by which he meant AIDS activists – to indicate people with purposes sometimes distinct from those satisfied with Shilts's kind of narrative illuminates the activist component to the novels' attempts to counter more accepted perspectives. Crimp was a member of ACT UP/NY at the same time as Schulman and Monette, and all three novels show familiarity with ACT UP's positions and demonstrations. The history of AIDS activism should not be read as only the history of ACT UP, but the authors' acquaintance with the group indicates that ACT UP influenced their views of activist possibilities.

ACT UP formed in March in 1987 in New York City and grew to nearly eighty chapters by 1993. As Peter F. Cohen analyzes it, "ACT UP/New York's initial focus was quite simple:

drugs. The cure was out there somewhere, and homophobic politicians, profit-obsessed pharmaceutical companies, and an antiquated federal bureaucracy were preventing it from reaching the people who needed it" (16). Its focus widened in following years in an attempt to, among other things, counter sexism, classism, and racism in health care and insurance. Cohen notes that despite its large numbers of financially stable white male members with an interest in maintaining at least some of the status quo, ACT UP/NY and other cities' chapters developed a reputation for radicalism and militancy due to their attention-grabbing street demonstrations. Randy Shilts, for instance, claimed that "ACT UP's methods are becoming so confrontational that they are beginning to backfire" (qtd. in Cohen 21).

The level of the characters' belief in ACT UP's or other activism's efficacy becomes expressive of the gap between the first novel and the last. *People in Trouble* begins in 1987, six years after the first newspaper article appeared about cases of Kaposi's Sarcoma in gay men (Shilts 78). The first AIDS medication approved by the FDA, AZT, had become a more common treatment for people with AIDS who could afford it and nearly 17,000 Americans thus far had died of AIDS-related causes ("AIDS"). The novel pragmatically contends with feelings of burnout and despair, but places its faith in community-level organization and direct action. By 1992, the year in which *Tim and Pete* is set, that number had risen to roughly 200,000 (Schulman, *My American History* 236), and AZT, despite its myriad failings, remained the main option offered by mainstream medical science. The continuation of governmental indifference to the need for research funding, safer sex education, and public health resources compounded the frustration caused by the inadequacy of treatment possibilities. This frustration had powered activist responses ranging from the AIDS Quilt, which memorialized people who had died with homey fabric, to political funerals that involved throwing the ashes of people with AIDS at the

White House gates. *Tim and Pete* acknowledges that ACT UP tried to do good work, but its characters reject the idea that it could precipitate life-saving changes. *Tim and Pete* is also the least ambivalent in advancing the possibility that terrorism could have a positive side if people with AIDS practiced it. This should not be read as a demonstration of a linear shift in mindsets; *Afterlife*, published in 1990, complicates that reading by most judgmentally depicting the least ambiguous assassination. It is also worth emphasizing that, despite the authors' claims of "truth" or realism for these novels, this shift cannot be read as historically faithful because no one actually killed a public figure to advance the rights of people with HIV/AIDS.

However, characters' growing lack of faith in non-violent activism in *Tim and Pete* and *Afterlife* can be read as reflective of the rising levels of anger in some real-life AIDS activist circles in the early 1990s. Others had associated ACT UP with violence; gay columnist Richard Mohr called its protests "acts of terrorism" in 1992 (qtd. in Cohen 21), but the apparent calls for assassination had started coming from inside the organization itself. When Vito Russo, a pivotal member of ACT UP, died of AIDS-related causes in 1990, a group calling itself "3 Anonymous Queers" circulated a flyer at his memorial service that read in part "I believe [politician Jesse Helms] is a threat to my very existence and I have every right to defend myself against him with any amount of force I choose" (qtd. in Crimp, "Right On, Girlfriend!" 302). In 1992, ACT UP/NY participant David B. Feinberg published a humorous but mostly quite practical list titled "100 Ways You Can Fight the AIDS Crisis" in the program of a concert fundraiser. The ten suggestions that some, such as a columnist at the *New York Native*, found reprehensible were ten methods of killing Jesse Helms, the US senator whom Douglas Crimp once described as the "arch homophobe" (*Melancholia* 278).

This is not to assume that Feinberg, 3 Anonymous Queers, or others making similar

statements seriously expected their readers to kill Jesse Helms or anyone else. However, the connections between some AIDS activism and a discourse about terrorism seems worth exploring in light of the authors' insistence that their novels were realist ones.

This thesis considers *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* against this background of activism and the debate over the "actual reality" of AIDS. The first chapter discusses realism, both as a literary style and what it means when authors claim the status of realism for novels written about a terrorist social movement that never occurred. Paula Triechler's theorization of cultural responses to AIDS as "an epidemic of signification" destabilizes a more traditional definition of realism, which would attempt to understand AIDS as a straightforward narrative that can be rendered with hierarchies of fidelity. I examine the novels' situations in landscapes based on current events and populated by easily recognizable figures from "real life" in context with a discourse of militancy and/or terrorism that surrounded ACT UP and its affiliates' approach to activism.

The second chapter discusses fantasy and satire. Considering Steven F. Kruger's analysis of science fiction and fantasy novels that deal with terrorism, it particularly attends to the ways in which *People in Trouble*, *Tim and Pete*, and *Afterlife* construct narratives about real and spiritual journeys, heroism, and happy endings that resemble tropes from fantasy and myth. This chapter also looks at how the novels' uses of satire and humor both resembles terrorism and prevents readers from taking either the realist or the fantastic elements of these novels too seriously.

The third chapter explores the position of art in the novels, as *People in Trouble*, *Tim and Pete*, and *Afterlife* all challenge the importance of art in a crisis. This tends to undercut attempts to see these novels as activist products or to read the books as straightforward encouragements of terrorism. *People in Trouble* even includes a "political" art installation called "People in Trouble"

that contributes to the death of a character satirically modeled on Donald Trump, but its fame makes its creator complicit with the capitalist who profited from others' suffering. To what degree, then, do these novels qualify or validate their own enterprises as socially critical realist fictions? As an exasperated James Robert Baker once told a reporter, “[i]t's a novel, not a position paper" (Grzesiak).

Even after acknowledging the constraints that art imposes on activism and representations of reality, the authors' belief that their projects remained works of realism, immediately concerned with matters of life and death, suggests the uncertain position of the writer in creating perceptions of reality. If the cultural discourse on AIDS can be understood as an epidemic of signification as Triechler argues, what does it mean when people who were actively involved in expanding definitions of AIDS wrote books on a subject contrary to the social realities of AIDS and called them realism or "true"? While realism as a genre is not expected to adhere to standards of historical accuracy, a topic as outré as AIDS terrorism would seem to indicate that these writers were misinformed on classification guidelines were it not for the shifting nature of what people understood to be true in a time of crisis.

When Sarah Schulman described *People in Trouble* as participant-witness fiction, she emphasized how her writing detailed the ways that her actions, among those of many other people, influenced and changed the reality that she saw when she observed her subject, New York's East Village in the late eighties. *People in Trouble*, as well as *Afterlife* and *Tim and Pete*, can also be understood as participant-witnesss fiction in the sense that while they defiantly bear witness to the day-to-day lives of people ignored by dominant cultures, the books also participate in an argument about the possibilities offered by activism and/or terrorism. The books did not create the argument, since they can be read as responses to hateful conceptualizations of people

with AIDS as polluters and murderers. They also respond to an activist subcultural dialogue about the effectiveness or satisfaction of killing people such as Jesse Helms. This cultural recording is their "witness" function. Their "participant" function provides more leeway in defining the role of the texts in relation to realism, since it can be argued that they are helping to create perceptions of reality, even when they make recourse to the conventions of genre fiction. For example, when Schulman satirizes Donald Trump, she might help to establish the "reality" that he is laughable. However, the power to change reality is a huge expectation to hold for a novel, and these texts also argue that art is potentially powerless against an epidemic. Fitting with the image these novels create of AIDS as a societal battleground, issues of reality, art's role in a crisis, and escapism in humor, romance, or fantasy are highly contested ones in *People in Trouble*, *Tim and Pete*, and *Afterlife*.

Chapter One: How to Have Realism in an Epidemic

In *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, Paula Treichler argues that that "the AIDS epidemic has produced a parallel epidemic of meanings, definitions, and attributions. This semantic and cultural epidemic [is] an *epidemic of signification*" (315). These meanings compete to establish the "reality" of AIDS; some meanings are more widely heralded than others. Treichler suggests that more entrenched meanings, such as a liberal-humanist perspective on AIDS as "a massive human tragedy demanding charity, compassion, and care" (316), often worked against an understanding of AIDS as an epidemic perpetuated by structural and societal inequality, a view she attributes to AIDS activists who worked so that "'the massive human tragedy' of Western humanism was strategically rewritten to produce an activist account and encourage collective, political action" (318).

Treichler's identification of strategic rewriting could also illuminate *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete*; they construct reality in opposition to the other social narratives they reference. By spotlighting people whom the straight white male character does not understand, *People in Trouble* challenges his presumption that he possesses a universal perspective. *Tim and Pete* reverses a Christian narrative of sacrifice and judgment in favor of gay men. *Afterlife* portrays AIDS terrorism and New Age approaches to sickness as negation of self or denial of reality. In keeping with their efforts to re-frame AIDS, all three authors described their work as somehow related to contemporary truths. Baker rejected an ending of "cheap, violent catharsis" for *Tim and Pete* because he felt it would be "incredibly false" (Grzesiak), Schulman described *People in Trouble* as "social realism" (*Stagestruck* 23), and Monette told an audience at the Library of Congress that he situated his work in his reality as a person with HIV because "[i]f you live in political times [...] then all art is political" ("Politics" 2).

In places, the novels' strategic rewriting of some of AIDS' entrenched meanings also appears to rewrite history; the societal forces they depict have so far not produced the AIDS terrorists shown to be their result. Despite their authors' claims that the novels reflect reality, they either signal their own construction or use narrative conventions in which realism is traditionally discounted even as they undermine competing narratives of AIDS reality. *Tim and Pete* borrows and twists the structure of Hollywood roadtrip movies while its characters compare their lives to films. A similar postmodernism also appears in *People in Trouble*'s criticism of an artwork called "People in Trouble," even as Schulman crosses into satire in her use of a grandiose Donald Trump stand-in to approach questions of social and economic inequality. Peter F. Cohen labels *Afterlife* a romance and describes Monette as "[c]ommitted to writing a novel faithful to the experiences of HIV-positive men, but simultaneously committed to his 'happily ever after' ending" when he wrote *Afterlife* (73).

What, in an epidemic of signification, can be described as realism? In her study of the genre, Pam Morris notes that realism's traditional definition, which draws on concepts of mimesis and verisimilitude, implies that truth is a verifiable quantity (5). She argues that this optimism about the possibility of objective knowledge "cannot logically survive an acceptance of the constructive function of language" (27). Yet, despite showcasing their sense of this constructive function, Monette, Schulman, and Baker still described their work as realist. For an era that tends to reject a positivist view of reality, the academic Morris Dickstein uses Stendhal's image of the novel as a mirror carried along the road to set terms for how fiction can be called realist. He suggests that the image "points not to simply seeing but to the tricky ways of seeing through art" because the mirror is not a passive reflection of the world (7). It is instead a dynamic, moving reflector carried by an individual. This subjective position is "no mere

distortion but itself a vital piece of historical evidence, shaped by the time and place as well as the formative experiences of the author" (14). By challenging the idea that the world can only be distorted in its artistic reflection, Dickstein underscores the separation he draws between "reality" and "realism." The latter is a set of literary styles and conventions; Dickstein explains that "[a] novel comments on the world we know by verbally reconstituting it, and it aims to be consistent and credible rather than strictly faithful to that larger world" (6). The former can be approached through styles other than realism; he cites James Wood's observation that surrealism, magic realism, and dreams also derive from the real. Although *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* employ satire, romance, and apocalyptic elements that might only derive from the real, these books remain more closely aligned with realism than other fictions about AIDS terrorism.

In his 1996 book *AIDS Narratives,* Steven F. Kruger identifies a subset of fiction about AIDS that he calls an "epidemiological narrative" (206), a story about plague and apocalypse. These texts, he says, "mainly ally themselves not with the 'serious' fictional genres but with […] 'genre fiction' – (dystopian/utopian) science fiction, political thrillers, detective stories, erotica and pornography" (206). They tend to be publications from small presses, but "several novels […] from larger publishers – for instance, Sarah Schulman's *People in Trouble*, Paul Monette's *Afterlife*, and James Robert Baker's *Tim and Pete* – share certain features with books of this subgenre" (206). The texts he chooses to elucidate the epidemiological narrative deal with massive governmental conspiracies, concentration camps for people with AIDS, organized genocide, and terrorist responses to these developments. Kruger analyzes apocalyptic narratives' evocation of the "stricter sense of [apocalypse] as involving a process of uncovering or revelation. The 'truths' revealed in these fictions pertain not only to a projected, world-threatening future but also to the present and past of the AIDS crisis" (207). Despite the

similarity between this meaning of apocalypse and the three novels' attempts at strategic rewriting, the futuristic sweep of Kruger's examples emphasizes the ways in which *Tim and Pete*, *People in Trouble*, and *Afterlife* remain realistic texts. While we may quarrel with Dickstein's terms – what conservative politician Jesse Helms considered a credible treatment of AIDS did not impress AIDS activist Larry Kramer – it remains far easier to map these novels onto perceived historic reality than the ones that depict armed tanks roaming the Castro or people fleeing to outer space. The terrorism that *People in Trouble*, *Tim and Pete*, and *Afterlife* depicts may not be, as Dickstein puts it, "strictly faithful to [a] larger world," but the novels root it in a landscape consistent with one, supporting their claim to realism.

In *Novels from Reagan's America*, Joseph Dewey notes that the Reagan era saw a noticeable increase in realist fiction despite its previous decline in favor of postmodernism and explains that "it is a critical commonplace that this flowering of realism in the 1980s was a corollary of Reagan's conservative nostalgia […]. Yet it will be argued here that this efflorescence of the realistic novel occurred not so much *because* of Reagan's America but rather against it" (9). Drawing on Reagan's past as an actor, Dewey reads the man and the years of his presidency as postmodern texts that the authors he studies write to undermine, a goal similar to the ambitions of Schulman, Baker, and Monette in writing their novels. When discussing Robert Ferro's *Second Son*, Dewey claims that while AIDS narratives tend towards the postmodern, which he attributes to the effect of theories such as Treichler's epidemic of signification, with postmodern fiction "we risk losing touch with the less inventive, less elaborate realities of the disease itself, the anxious humanity at the dark heart of the illness – patients who no more want to be language theories or word games than they want to be medical statistics or political buzzwords or religious metaphors" (147). Baker, Monette, and Schulman would have most likely

rejected the word "patients" and the expression "the dark heart of the illness" in favor of "political buzzwords," but Dewey's analysis does illuminate the function of their work as witness fiction and the importance of witness fiction to the genre of realism. The satire in *People in Trouble*, the romance in *Afterlife*, and what David B. Feinberg called the "nihilistic joyride through post-apocalyptic L.A." of *Tim and Pete* continually bump against the day-to-day of memorial services, hospital visits, positive diagnoses, and diminishing T-cells (qtd. in Baker, *Tim and Pete*).

In his analysis of what he called testimonial writing, Timothy F. Murphy suggests that "this kind of narrative is nothing so much as a will to preserve in ink and paper the virtues of people who are lost in the more evanescent medium of flesh" (319), and uses Monette's account of his lover's last years of life, *Borrowed Time*, as an example of such will. A similar impulse can be seen in Monette's fiction; *Afterlife* bears witness to the deaths of two characters while others betray a wistful concern with how history will remember them:

> "Will anyone understand what it was like?" It was curiously easy, perched on the mountain of death, to speak about the future when all of them would be gone.
>
> "Maybe the gay ones will."
>
> "Yeah, but they'll have to see through the lies. 'Cause history's just white folks covering their ass." (264)

Afterlife writes against the possibility that "white folks" could impose their own, self-serving gloss on the AIDS crisis by explicitly presenting a gay viewpoint that will presumably be preserved by readers and libraries. As Amy Kaplan remarks in *The Social Construction of American Realism*, realism can function "as a strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change -- not just to assert a dominant power but often to assuage fears of powerlessness"

(10). *Afterlife* also uses fiction as a chance to expand the limits of witnessing; like *People in Trouble* and *Tim and Pete*, it remembers the living as well as the dead. By scrutinizing their living characters with the same or deeper attention that testimonial fiction accords to dying people, these books testify to a broader conception than death of what it means to have HIV or AIDS or know people who do.

Sarah Brophy argues in her study of first-person testimonial writings about AIDS that "personal testimonies written in response to HIV and AIDS attempt to intervene in cultural memory by rewriting the story of the body and its locations, thus significantly altering how readers receive and respond to these imaginings and re-imaginings" (5). While *Tim and Pete*, *People in Trouble*, and *Afterlife* are not first-person accounts, along with their witnessing they share a deep sense of the personal with the writing that Brophy examines; they root themselves in landscapes where their authors could be expected to demonstrate "authenticity." All of the novels are set in the authors' hometowns and contain vantage points nominally similar to their own. Peter F. Cohen refers to Monette as the real-life counterpart of his character Steven Shaw (70). After Jonathan Larson cribbed from *People in Trouble* to create the musical *Rent*, Schulman stated that much of her frustration with Larson stemmed from how he stole an account of what actually happened to her, only to present a narrative about AIDS and New York's East Village that she felt was fundamentally non-representational of either (Thomas). Baker gave his character Pete a back story with some key similarities with Baker's own biography (Rivenburg). The novels remain far from memoirs, but their grounding in their authors' lived experiences demonstrates the work of the mirror in the roadway, reflecting a reality transformed by the mirror's own structure.

In his analysis of realism in contemporary American fiction, Kris Versluys claims that

"[r]ealism is concerned with life as felt -- to modify a famous Jamesian saying -- not life as deconstructed or deciphered" (1), but in these books, the two concepts are not separate. Their interventions in cultural memory raise voices not always heard: Monette, writing as someone with HIV during a period of virulent AIDSphobia; Schulman, a lesbian who continually struggles, most recently over a ten year period of rejection, to find publishers who will consider her novels "universal" enough to sell; and Baker, who managed to bring an anarchoqueer viewpoint to Simon & Schuster. By raising their voices, and calling attention to other ones in their novels, these authors use the personal and deeply felt to question the record that claims that AIDS has an easily quantifiable meaning and place their own interpretation on "the facts." The realities they present in exchange contradict themselves as well as each other, but generally, they use images of terrorism to contend with significations that did not reflect their perspectives on the epidemic and thereby hold a mirror to what AIDS theorist Simon Watney in 1989 called the "Terrorist Model" of HIV transmission (*Taking Liberties* 20).

Watney describes the Terrorist Model as one of the two most common approaches to HIV/AIDS education as noted through public discourse. In it, "HIV is regarded as an external invader, an illegal immigrant shinning up the white cliffs of Dover, a dangerous alien subversive slipping into the country unnoticed" (*Taking Liberties* 20), and so HIV testing becomes a way to protect "an imagined uninfected 'general public', with little or no concern for infected individuals" (*Taking Liberties* 20). This image of HIV has some pointed similarities with the portrait Randy Shilts drew in *And the Band Played On* of Patient Zero, whom he described as a lecherous, vain monster uncaring of whether or not he infected people. With fear inflamed by this imagery, quarantine becomes a "logical" solution to the AIDS crisis because people with HIV (who are usually conflated with gay people) are seen as threatening to the general population, to

which they, by definition, cannot belong. Understanding HIV as an "illegal immigrant" is tantamount to understanding people with HIV as illegal.

For people repeatedly compared to terrorists, two very obvious options appear: rejection or identification. All three novels work with the Terrorist Model's raw material; against the specter of concentration camps for people with HIV, characters contemplate what to do with their societally enforced illegality. *Tim and Pete* defiantly chooses identification with terrorism; some of its characters thrill to the chance to "shoot[] crypto-fascist fish in a barrel" (236), and even its most hesitant characters decide that assassinating the right people is a positive good for the U.S. political landscape. *Afterlife* and *People in Trouble* hedge more. *Afterlife*'s decision to make its terrorist an actual "illegal" immigrant from Mexico named Dell Espinoza works to distance the novel's central concern, the romance between wealthy Mark -- the "Ivy League WASP when it came to casting, despite being a lapsed Jew" (68) -- and the more "authentic" WASP Steven from an identification with terrorism. Mark at one point realizes that he "had a certain admiration for Dell's forays into urban mayhem, and wished he could do the same sort of damage [...]. But having acquired so much power himself, even if it all meant nothing now, he couldn't imagine himself being so far from power, learning an alien tongue in order to be a servant" (244). His musings about power discrepancies end when he transmutes his admiration for Dell into a conviction that Dell was his servant too. "If [Mark and Steven] ever needed a bit of serious revenge, the knees of their enemies whomped with a baseball bat, Dell Espinoza was their man. It was such a comfort to have your own terrorist" (244). Similarly, Steven has the pleasure of seeing a homophobe he despises wiped out without the necessity of involvement; he can maintain a moral distance from which to pass judgment on Dell.

In the case of *People in Trouble*, the character who instigates the capitalist Ronald

Horne's death carries a lot of baggage: a shaky commitment to feminism and lesbian/gay community, self-serving politics, and a curious assumption of male privilege. When Kate begins to dress in suits and ties, her girlfriend Molly has difficulty understanding Kate's attire as drag or part of a recognizable female masculinity.[1] The first time she sees Kate's new clothes, she thinks "Kate was a man" (89), and Molly's feelings seem part of her sense that Kate has too much difficulty in separating herself from her husband's self-centered value system. While the text also refers to Kate as resembling "a beautiful faggot" (41), which would seem to place her within a queer paradigm that Molly elsewhere loves and respects, Molly admits that "I have no idea at all" as to who Kate was when she saw Kate dressed in a suit (90). Because Molly is the most ethical protagonist, her doubts about Kate's purposes have the effect of distancing Kate, the most important character to be identified with assassination, from ethics. Because Kate insists on remaining attached to straight white male politics, she reads as Dell's counterpart: "foreign" in Molly's world of leftwing queers and ultimately unable to remain part of it.

It is significant that in each of these novels, it is never one of the main protagonists who does the killing.[2] This reflects the desire for someone else to take care of the situation that Schulman and Baker betrayed when discussing their novels or contemporary politics. Baker fantasized about his readers "throw[ing] down the book and march[ing] right out to a gun store because they wanted to see the finale [of *Tim and Pete*] so bad they [sic] realize the only way it'd happen is if they make it happen in real life!" (Grzesiak). Schulman told an Outwrite panel in 1992 that "[t]wo hundred thousand Americans have died of AIDS and not one of them committed

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1 I realize that in *The Queer Renaissance*, Robert McRuer understands this moment as the birth of a new queer identity for Kate. I do not think that is an "untrue" reading, but I also think that he underestimates Schulman's cynicism.

2 I exclude Kate, a main protagonist, from this assessment because her role in Horne's death remains ambiguous. The only certain assassin in *People in Trouble* is unnamed. In *Afterlife*, Dell's story is not as focal as Steven's.

a political assassination. If they all had America would be a better place today for those of us who have been left behind" (*My American History* 236). Monette, the only author to identify as HIV+ and thus closer to Baker and Schulman's "someone else," never publicly called for assassinations.

The suspicion that America would be a better place if only someone else would commit a political assassination has its roots in an analysis of the AIDS crisis as a war zone in which blame could be assigned to specific individuals. In an essay that discussed Vito Russo's memorial service, Douglas Crimp explores the significance of the flier distributed by a group called 3 Anonymous Queers as people arrived at Russo's service. Crimp described the flier as a "rhetorical answer" to the question of "who killed Vito?" ("Right On, Girlfriend!" 302), a question also and differently answered by the notorious gay activist Larry Kramer during the eulogy. According to Kramer, "Vito was killed by 25 million gay men and lesbians who for ten long years of this plague have refused to get our act together" (qtd. in "Right On, Girlfriend!" 301). In contrast to Kramer's indictment of his own community, 3 Anonymous Queers turned the blame for Russo's death outwards. The flier read in part, "I believe with all my heart that Jesse Helms killed Vito Russo. And I believe without question that when I was queer-bashed, Helms was as responsible for my injuries as if he had inflicted the wounds with his own hands" (qtd. in "Right On, Girlfriend!" 302).

Crimp sees these two answers as examples of two prominent "debates in contemporary queer politics, debates about 'outing' and 'bashing back'" ("Right On, Girlfriend!" 302). He contextualizes the anger expressed in the flier as part of a loss of hope in queer activism, because Russo's death "was a great symbolic loss to ACT UP" ("Right On, Girlfriend!" 302). He had maintained a strong presence in the organization while advancing a rhetoric of living with AIDS,

and so when 3 Anonymous Queers came to the memorial service to say, "Vito is dead and everything remains the same. I thought I might go to sleep the night after his death and wake up to find the city burned to the ground" (qtd. in "Right On, Girlfriend!" 302), Crimp connects this shock and fury to the emotions elicited by the recognition that ACT UP, after a few initial successes, had "experienced only disappointments and setbacks" ("Right On, Girlfriend!" 302). There were no new drugs to fight AIDS; local, federal, and state spending on AIDS had shrunk; and a new kind of indifference, namely the normalization of AIDS as an irretractable problem, had replaced the previous indifference to those outside the "general population." Against this backdrop, the death of "a long-term survivor, [...] a resolute believer in his own survival, and [...] a highly visible and articulate fighter for his and others' survival" could spur what Crimp termed a "fantasy" from 3 Anonymous Queers ("Right On, Girlfriend!" 302-303). But as he notes, it was a fantasy based on historic occurrences such as the riots that happened after the murders of civil rights leaders in the 1960s.

The concept of "based on" is the crux of the difficulty of assigning these texts to the categories of realism or fantasy. As a character in *Tim and Pete* protests, "Everything *starts* as a fantasy!" (240), and novels in particular begin there. If these books are realism, they derive their realism from their "credible" interventions in a discourse of terrorism that some of its speakers and listeners thought of as fantasy. Within a world attuned to "reports from the holocaust" and ACT UP talking points (Kramer), this discourse had developed such strength that Crimp, an alert analyst of the culture around AIDS activism, saw it as a significant answer to a question that could be personalized as "who killed Vito?" That question could be broadened to ask "who is responsible for the AIDS crisis in the US?" If it is decided that it is Jesse Helms or Ronald Reagan or any of the other prominent politicians who behaved badly towards Americans with

HIV/AIDS, then the following question is "what do we do about it?"

In his memoir *Close to the Knives,* David Wojnarowicz, whose art influenced many members of ACT UP, explored the formation of a desire to see a violent response to AIDS. He wrote

> you get these self-righteous walking swastikas claiming that this is god's punishment and Buckley, in the daily newspaper, asking for a program to tattoo people with AIDS and LaRouche in California actually getting a bill up for vote that would isolate people with AIDS in camps and when I react with feelings of murder I feel horrified and tell myself that it is fascist to want to murder these people and in my horror at these feelings I attempt to rationalize them by going further saying but in this culture we accept murder as self-defense against those who try to murder us and what's going on here but public and social murder on a daily basis and it's happening in our midst and not very many people seem to say or do anything about it. (107).

In his musing, Wojnarowicz identifies the tenor of many discussions about the possibility of violence in the name of AIDS activism: certain names are irretrievably linked with fascism and violence against people with AIDS, and so activists' violence is figured as a response appropriate under the social code of a country founded on the principles of "live free or die" and the right to bear arms. He also exposes the public non-recognition of the damage AIDS was doing to individuals and communities by emphasizing that his view of the AIDS crisis as one in which people in power "try to murder us" was not the common one. Any attempt to equate violent activist retaliation against William Buckley or Lyndon LaRouche with their roles in creating a hostile social environment struggles against the general unwillingness to see the lack

of governmental or straight communal response to the AIDS crisis as anything but business as usual. The essence of activist rewriting in the U.S. lies in reshaping traditional American views about the role of government. In a country that still does not offer universal health care, arguing that its failure to respond to a health crisis is tantamount to murder needs to reconfigure the average perspective strongly. Intense rhetoric, such as the comparisons of Reagan with Hitler and AIDS with genocide, became a technique calculated to shake people from their comfortable assumptions. In Wojnarowicz's analysis, however, violence is not necessarily the solution to these equations; he identifies these comparisons as rationalizations born from a gut feeling of rage at what was happening to him, his friends, and his community.

Not everyone considered the argument Wojnarowicz outlined a rationalization. In 1994, Kiki Mason released a manifesto, later turned into a video by ACT UP affinity group DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activist) TV. While the pamphlet was first disseminated a year after the publication of *Tim and Pete*, I mention it because it remains the least ambiguous and best-known call to arms directed at AIDS activists. It also demonstrates the growing reach of the themes explored in these novels; by 1996, the manifesto had appeared in *POZ*, which remains one of the most mainstream "lifestyle" magazines to focus on HIV/AIDS. Mason first wrote "By Any Means Necessary" at the behest of the Marys, an ACT UP affinity group, for distribution at the 1994 Gay Games in New York. It invokes the concept of genocide, blames government inaction and sell-out activists and community leaders, and discusses the possibility that because "everybody's afraid of [people with AIDS] anyway" that fear could be used to save lives. It exhorts, "this is my message to everyone with AIDS: If [sic] you think the end is near, take someone with you" and suggests a list of tasks such as taking Big Pharma CEOs hostage ("By Any Means").

The list culminates with examples similar to acts depicted in *Afterlife* and *Tim and Pete:* "[s]platter your blood across the desk of a politician [...], spit in [a reporter's] face. Call the police and tell them you've put LSD in the water supply in retaliation for our genocide. Do it so they'll know what it's like to have your life ripped apart" ("By Any Means"). In *Afterlife*, Dell deluges a popular Christian pundit's office with turkey blood and tells the media that he's put HIV+ blood in the water supply. In *Tim and Pete*, Pete frequently claims that "if he ever got it, he'd take someone with him" (180), and his friend Joey argues in favor of terrorism against innocent people because "*[w]e've* died and *we're* innocent! Let the slime who let it happen see what it's like!" (226).

I do not mean to argue that Mason was necessarily influenced by Baker or Monette, though Mason once wrote about how Monette's memoir, *Becoming a Man*, "saved [his] life" ("My Mother"). I also do not think it is necessary to prove that Baker or Monette were familiar with Mason's activist work. The similarities among "By Any Means Necessary" and the novels under consideration are interesting because they point to a discourse about terrorism so honed that the same phrase -- "take someone with you" -- appears across a gap of years, geographical distance, and forums. After immersion in this discourse, producing realist fiction seems a question of how best artistically to render a community practiced in arguments about violent retaliation. To return to Dickstein's terms of realism, to have characters actually perform acts of terrorism instead of talking about them seems faithful to the spirit of the real world the novels seek to commit to fiction, though it may not be strictly true to history as it unfolded. Baker directly connected the terrorism in his novel to the talk he had heard from AIDS activists when he said, "I think I've heard enough talk over the last 10 years about people going much further [than ACT UP's actions] that it interested me as a subject for a novel" (Grzesiak).

In his analysis of AIDS terminology and metaphors, Michael S. Sherry notes that "the language of war was ubiquitous in the discourse on AIDS during the 1980s" and argues that its repetition constructed models for "understanding [AIDS'] devastation or for taking action against it" (40). The use of military metaphor allowed the sphere of AIDS to be divided into enemies and warriors, both of whom had battle plans. The precise identification of who or what constituted the enemy or warriors depended on the political beliefs of the speaker. As Sherry mentions, the politician Patrick Buchanan could announce that "the poor homosexuals [...] have declared war upon Nature" even as members of the queer community described Buchanan and his ilk as declaring war on them (qtd. in 41). Sherry points to Larry Kramer, who receives credit for founding ACT UP, as a notable user of war and Holocaust imagery; in 1987, Kramer declared that "AIDS is our holocaust and Reagan is our Hitler. New York City is our Auschwitz" (qtd. in 42). Sherry analyzes Kramer's language as a way to describe "what was being done *to* gay men, less by the disease itself than by a homophobic society and its genocidal leaders" (42). As evidenced by Kramer, war metaphors facilitate a certain slippage in identifying the enemy, setting up a scenario in which someone could claim that if AIDS is killing him and Ronald Reagan refuses to allot funding to fight AIDS, then Ronald Reagan is killing him. If Ronald Reagan is killing him, he has the right to kill Reagan in self-defense. Sherry emphasizes that "the language of war-and-holocaust highlighted human causation and the state's agency -- for human responsibility and state power are central to the experience of war -- and it justified extreme action to challenge or shape state power" (44).

Among the three novels under consideration in this thesis, *Tim and Pete* most strongly capitalizes on the moral conventions invoked by war references to present a case for killing rightwing politicians. *Afterlife* remains squeamish on the subject despite Steven and Mark's

admittance that they could see the appeal of terrorism, and *People in Trouble* maintains a certain distance, characteristic of Schulman's writing, from the language of war. In *People in Trouble*, people are "watching the war movie on television (1)," which imparts a certain unreality to the watchers' experience of AIDS as well as the presentation of AIDS as a war. Sherry comments that women were less likely to use or like war metaphors because they referenced a male-dominated sphere, an observation that may or not apply to Schulman's attitude but underscores the eroticism and machismo that *Tim and Pete* ascribes to "fighting back." Each novel, regardless of its standpoint on terrorism, acknowledges the pull of culturally popular war imagery and its role in shaping its characters' beliefs about the effectiveness and emotional satisfaction of killing homophobes or otherwise violating societal strictures.

Kramer's speeches, in their usage of war and holocaust imagery, frequently delineated binary roles for gay men, calling them either activists or "by your own passivity, actively participating in your own genocide" (163). In "The Mirror and the Tank," Lee Edelman explores this creation of binaries in activist literature by examining Monette's poetry collection, *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*, Edelman argues that one of the poems, "Manifesto,"

> participates in the ongoing campaign to refashion the gay subject in terms of an "AIDS activist" identity that deploys, on occasion, as the mirror image against which it would call itself into being, a contemptuous depiction of non-"activist" gay men as narcissists addicted to pleasure, resistant to struggle, and therefore themselves responsible for the continuing devastations of "AIDS." (105).

Edelman reads "Manifesto" as defining the proper gay subject as someone who, "by tossing bombs at FDA labs and pelting the limousines of bureaucrats [...] displays his command of the aggression needed to elbow his way into the 'political' world" (108). Kramer and Monette's

imagery, which Edelman sees as exemplary of a widespread discourse, reformulates the more expected attitude that holds that throwing bombs is an immoral or socially destructive behavior. For the gay man, life-affirming action is what others might call terrorism, since Monette has identified aggression as the successful route to halting the AIDS crisis. "The Mirror and the Tank" discusses the losses present in this construction of reality: the loss of a refusal to delineate "passivity," with all its sexual overtones, with anything but a homophobic narrative of scorn; the loss of a gay identity that does not reflect dominant culture's eagerness to describe queer sexuality as narcissistic; and the loss of "the legitimacy and value of the innumerable ways in which lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and their allies can participate in the continuing resistance to 'AIDS'" (110). The strategic rewriting of AIDS reality worked to reveal untold aspects of the crisis, but it also obscured its other facets. In Edelman's conclusion, he pleads, "we must recognize that 'our' 'activist' discourse is only a mutation of 'their' 'master discourses' and that its effect on them, though certain, is also always unpredictable" (111).

That Edelman found it necessary, in an essay first anthologized in 1992, to investigate the underpinnings of Kramer and Monette's imagery and remind his readers that an activist discourse would not necessarily destroy all that activists found hateful -- that it might, in fact, reinscribe homophobia -- indicates the extent to which the language of war and belief in the efficacy of strategic rewriting had taken hold of some activist imaginations. Activists' faith in rewriting seems at least half-merited; an angry poem written by a grieving man tends not to merit analysis beyond ascribing his politics to the "irrationality" caused by loss unless his politics are embraced by or emblematic of larger movements. The danger to the queer community that Edelman finds in Monette's poetry implies that he does see it as part of an influential narrative, at least at a subcultural level. To what extent does this narrative create the perception of reality as a place

where the most appropriate and effective action possible for people affected by HIV/AIDS was throwing bombs... or killing Jesse Helms? *People in Trouble, Afterlife,* and *Tim and Pete* begin with the premise that some people do see reality that way. From an avowedly personal vantage point, they work their way through the reasons for understanding the world in a way that directly challenges most common presumptions about ethical behavior, sometimes echoing an activist discourse of their time.

People in Trouble opens with the statement that "[i]t was the beginning of the end of the world but not everyone noticed right away" (1). This sentence easily could introduce a science-fiction thriller, but *People in Trouble* exposes the ingredients of world's end to be ones that its characters consider part of daily life: homelessness, AIDS, lack of health insurance, limitless capitalism, and the human self-absorption that prevents unaffected people from caring about others' problems. The novel treats this as a largely unheard view; when Molly, the most activist of its main characters, feels despair over another friend's AIDS-related death, she realizes that she could neither escape AIDS discourse nor hear anything about it she found true in mainstream media. She notes that escapism

> wasn't like turning to another channel on the TV because AIDS was on all of them, but only in the most idiotic terms. Everyone on television who died of AIDS got it from a blood transfusion. Or else it was a beautiful young white male professional with 'everything to live for,' and even then the show focused on his parents and not him.
>
> *Why can't they just say it? Why can't they just say "ass-fucking" on Channel Four?* (73)

The traditional sources of information do not speak to Molly in a language that she

understands; her frustration over what TV found unspeakable matches her anger at the "idiotic terms" that it does use, both of which erase queer specificity and terminology along with the people of color and/or lesbians with AIDS whom Molly knows. When she and Justice, the organization modeled on ACT UP, attempt to say with public protest what the media did not, they quickly discover that their attempts at correcting the record are reported to the public in the same terms that they find objectionable. Their sit-in at the grandest hotel of Ronald Horne, who schemes to evict people with AIDS from their rent-controlled apartments, becomes the headline "AIDS Victims Riot in City" (209). The accompanying article, instead of focusing on Justice's reasons for protest, reassures a presumed heterosexual and HIV- audience that they are not in danger because Horne, in announcing a run for mayor, promises to personally fund barge internment camps for "all those infected with the deadly AIDS virus" in order "to show his love for the people of New York" (209).

The media output in *People in Trouble* reflects, sometimes satirically but often faithfully, the kind of reporting done by mainstream sources in 1987 about AIDS. Along with other activists and researchers, members of ACT UP repeatedly expressed their irritation with such scientifically meaningless phrases as "AIDS virus," the unquestioned assurance that a positive diagnosis meant death, and the separation of people with AIDS from the "general population," a distinction Horne makes when he loves "the people of New York" by planning to send some of them to internment camps. Horne, who modeled his hotel on the "motif [of] Early Modern Colonialism and required its staff to "dress in loincloths with chains hanging from their wrists and ankles" (119), becomes a way for Schulman to discuss American inequalities in access to power and the threat posed to marginalized groups by willful or unconscious ignorance of their needs. The call for internment barges reflects the "public" discussion about AIDS, a public

discussion in which most people with AIDS were unlikely to be heard over the more powerful voices of Jesse Helms, William F. Buckley, or Lyndon LaRouche. Their privileged positions as politicians or "public intellectuals" contrasts with ACT UP's street level sphere; as Schulman captures the disparity, the media calls members of Justice victims even as it represents Horne as a potential savior, not of people with AIDS, but of the "general population" who fears contamination. By writing *People in Trouble*, Schulman controls a piece of the public conversation about AIDS long enough to affirm that the people who need saving are the ones who are actually in trouble. Furthermore, these people in trouble can be their own saviors. By identifying, or re-identifying, the actual threat that mainstream discourse had glossed over -- that straight and white indifference to the need for effective medication and care for people with AIDS was the real killer, not sharing drinking glasses with gay men -- *People in Trouble* becomes part of the resistance movement that it records occurring. When a key organizer of Justice dies, Molly's lover Kate reads his obituary in the *New York Times*, which notes that he was survived by a wife and children in Kansas City as well as his parents and sister. She then finds "a privately placed notice at the bottom of the obituary page" that reads "Scott Yarrow died in the arms of his lover, James Carroll, with whom he shared a vision of freedom for lesbians and gay men" (219). Despite the *New York Times'* attempts to heterosexually sanitize Scott's story, the truth sneaks into the public record.

People in Trouble's engagement in strategic re-writing goes further than a simple reversal of narratives in favor of the (middle-class) queer community. Molly expands what it means to talk about internment camps when she tells Kate that "our city is so stratified that people can occupy the same physical space and never confront each other. New York is a death camp for thousands of people, but they don't have to be contained for us to avoid them" (113). Horne's

proposal of internment barges, so threatening to AIDS activists, obscures the reality that people live and die on the street without the power to leave it, in part because, as a member of Justice notes, Horne schemes to drive up rent prices and deliberately leaves buildings empty while people are homeless. Molly underscores that despite her marginalization as a lesbian, she still enjoys relative privilege when she points out that "[h]ere we are trying to have a run-of-the-mill illicit lesbian love affair [...] [a]nd all around us people are dying and asking for money" (113).

The difficulties of maneuvering in the world detailed in *People in Trouble* at first seem insurmountable. Molly wants straight, white, and powerful people to care about the AIDS crisis, but she and other characters struggle to be consistent and understand their limits to caring when confronted with people who need from them more than than they can give. By finding a mostly workable balance of caregiving and self-preservation and achieving small victories with Justice, Molly helms a story line in which individuals banding together can make qualified advances. "[B]ecause there are a lot of people in Justice," Molly says, "a lot of little bits is a lot" (196). *People in Trouble* reflects a world that holds the possibility of future expansion of justice to more people despite the apocalyptic effect of societal indifference to anyone not heterosexual, male, white, or financially secure.

People in Trouble's idea of hope is non-traditional. It first hints that the "solution" to the problems posed by the AIDS crisis will involve rewriting conventional ethical standards when two members of Justice rob a bank, but without guns or masks. Instead, they give the teller a note that says "[w]e have AIDS. We have nothing to lose. This money will go to sick people who have no health insurance" (74). The teller complies and tells reporters that "my brother died of AIDS [...]. So why should I send the police after those poor brave men?" (74). This incident resembles one reported by Shilts in *And the Band Played On*; in 1983, a man robbed ten New

York City banks by passing notes to tellers that told them he had AIDS. He made $18,000 because of the tellers' fear. He also did not have AIDS or HIV (352). When *People in Trouble* transforms this story so that the robbers are activists who unite with a teller presumably disadvantaged by the same capitalist system that denies some people healthcare, it underscores the advantages for people in breaking the rules that deny them chances in and for life. Justice goes on to organize Credit Card Day, which is simultaneously a funny depiction of direct action techniques and a blueprint for ways in which dying single people's credit cards can be used to benefit people without houses or enough food. In both cases, activities of questionable legality or obvious unlawfulness indicate a larger truth about fairness and privilege.

When Kate kills Ronald Horne, she kills the novel's ultimate symbol of gross, indifferent wealth and racist homophobia. At Scott's political funeral at an opening of one of Horne's renovations, Kate realizes that Horne is using her enormous collage, "People in Trouble," to decorate the health club he made out of the New York Public Library. Justice simultaneously starts a riot in which "they trample[] the press section, throwing the cameras into the street and stomping on them. There would be no observers this time" (221). This means that when Kate ignites the collage, there is no actual record of what happens next. *People in Trouble* delivers the news of Horne's demise through the transcript of an inane report from "Channel Z News" in which one anchor claims that "Ronald Horne [was] murdered in [a] Forty-second Street melee" and the other states that "Ronald Horne met a fiery death today when a freak accident occurred during a riot by AIDS victims" (224). Kate's perspective vanishes from the novel after she burns the collage, and so, because Molly says only that she saw Kate in the collage's vicinity, the media has the final, confused word on the subject.

This ambiguity plays against the comment made by Scott's lover James before the riot

begins: "[i]f you instigate chaos, [...] make sure that it is to your advantage or that you have no other choice" (221). The chaos that ends in Ronald Horne's death is of questionable advantage. Molly notes that "after his death the bulk of Horne's holdings had been purchased by the president of a major chemical company who was himself assassinated by a man dying of cancer" (226), and the final pages of the book reiterate the seeming endlessness of the misery that people in power visit on those without it. James also voices the novel's last remark by a character: "[w]e are a people in trouble. We do not act" (228). His words would appear final, except that the novel's concluding sentence concerns action; James and Molly and their friends leave for a protest at the hospital.

Likewise, even though just yet another schmuck replaces Ronald Horne, the subsequent assassination of the schmuck also counts as taking action. Breaking the law of the land through assassination partakes of the same chaos that James invokes at the riot, and if its advantages are questionable, the argument that people in trouble have no other choice is stronger. When Kate sees her artwork used to the exact antithesis of its purpose, she "pushed harder than she had ever pushed" to reach it (228). For Kate, a character whose activist peers hold doubts about her sincerity and commitment, this represents her most honest moment. The action she takes to destroy her work, to stop at least some of Ronald Horne's appropriation and enjoyment of other people's suffering, appears the only right option. That her behavior results in his death seems only fitting in the novel's moral scheme, part of the "no other choice" that James describes; Horne primarily functions as a symbol of the system that needs to change to save the lives of people with AIDS, and so ending him is activism's ultimate goal. Still, the novel casts doubts on the meaningfulness of Kate's action by remarking on the art-world attention that killing Ronald Horne gained her. She winds up spending "six months working on a blazing sculpture in honor of

the people in Cambodia" (226), but she does this work safely from Amsterdam. *People in Trouble* underlines the necessity of what James calls chaos, but it has no great faith in the effectiveness of any chaotic gestures unless undertaken by a coalition of marginalized people on their own behalf.

Afterlife is also concerned with questions of racism, classism, and homophobia, but its approach to them differs from *People in Trouble*'s. Instead of focusing on these quantities as systemic, *Afterlife* tells three individuals' stories and keeps much of its focus on the character of Steven Shaw, a well-to-do WASP who after losing his lover to AIDS falls in love with an arrogant and privileged TV executive named Mark. The other two major characters, Dell Espinoza and Sonny Cevathas, are as likely to be called "the gardener" or "the Greek" as by their names. The issues of primary importance to *People in Trouble* become a backdrop that Steven only occasionally notices, as when he looks around a support group for people with HIV and sees a Black woman who "was the thirdest world among them by a long shot, however disenfranchised the [white] militant gay ones felt" (152). The narrative that *Afterlife* most intently coaxes out of its interactions with the present is that meaningful lives remain possible for people with HIV if the right steps are taken. Monette positions this conclusion as more fraught than escapism by acknowledging "the war" -- the AIDS crisis -- as an explicit part of a romantic resolution in which Steven decides that he and Mark "had all they needed. Only to lie like this between the bombs, dreaming away and not alone, because time was very short" (278).

Dell and Sonny are less successful in navigating between the bombs that the text presents as part of life in L.A. for gay men around 1990: the death of lovers, positive diagnoses, politicians attempting to make quarantine a "solution" to the AIDS crisis, and the torrents of homophobia expressed by public figures through the media. Sonny ignores the appearance of

lesions on his body because of his New Age insistence on not "thinking sick." Dell, meanwhile, becomes obsessed with a prominent Anglo Christian leader named Mother Evangeline who preaches homophobia to predominantly Filipina/o and Latina/o audiences. He carries out an escalating series of what the text describes as terrorist actions despite his awareness that his lover Marcus would have considered Dell's behavior a detriment to the gay community organizing Marcus used to do. Dell ends his narrative by killing Mother Evangeline and himself, actions the book portrays as thoughtless and unproductive because their intended message is immediately garbled by the media. By focusing on the anger Dell shared with a significant number of people who wrote and talked about AIDS in the late 80s and early 90s, Monette challenges such anger's productivity. His strategic writing, with Dell's character and with Sonny's, works against subcultural "realities" even as Steven's story targets a mainstream equation of HIV with swift death.

Just as Ronald Horne stands for capitalistic indifference in *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife* uses the figure of Mother Evangeline to discuss the role of religion in propagating the sort of homophobia that understood AIDS as a just punishment for the sin of gayness. Mother Evangeline, whom *Afterlife* sums up as "evangelism, [...] Neiman's vestments, and [an] enemies list" (137), instructs her followers to "[t]hank God for AIDS" (136). Religion had received a large amount of attention from ACT UP and other witnesses to the crisis. ACT UP's Stop the Church action, in which 5000 protesters disrupted a service at St. Patrick's Cathedral to denounce the Catholic Church's anti-AIDS education, anti-abortion, and anti-condom policies had elicited strong reactions from both the queer and straight-identified media (Cohen 21). According to the internal memo ACT UP distributed before the action, "OUR GOALS are to stop the interference of the cardinal [sic] and the church [sic] in politics and our lives and thereby TO SAVE LIVES"

(qtd. in Blasius and Phelan 624). In this estimation, stopping the Church is tantamount to stopping AIDS, or at least some of AIDS's devastation. Significantly, Cardinal O'Connor operated as a stand-in for the entire Catholic Church in some of ACT UP's literature and signage for the protest, a slippage similar to the one that figured Ronald Reagan as the source of governmental AIDSphobia as opposed to an example of it.

In *Afterlife*, Dell shares the opinion of some members of ACT UP that religion spread the hate that permitted mainstream indifference to the needs of people with AIDS. Monette himself wrote in his autobiography that "organized religion is the school of hate, and never more exultant in its righteous indignation when it talks about gay and lesbian" (*Becoming a Man* 32). This plays out in the novel without the hopefulness that marked *People in Trouble*, which featured a scene of protest at St. Patrick's. When Dell dumps gallons of turkey blood in Mother Evangeline's office, he does so to help wipe out her "master plan of hate" (141). A significant portion of AIDS discourse involved blood, both literally and as a metaphor. In *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic*, David Gere analyzes ACT UP's use of red paint in

> transforming the prevalent signification of AIDS. By smearing this supposedly tainted blood all over themselves, the protestors were able to transmute it into a sign not of gay contagion but of government guilt. This was no longer the HIV-tainted blood of gay men but rather the blood of hate, a red stain on the "hands" of the government. (65)

The transmutation Gere notes also functions in *Afterlife*, but Dell walks away from Mother Evangeline's office with unclean hands. A page after Dell writes "death" on the office walls to describe Mother Evangeline, the text affirms that he "stunk like Death itself" from the blood (143). In contrast to the theory behind ACT UP's action, Dell cannot involve himself with blood

without being negatively marked by it; the text states that throwing blood around "gave him the deepest satisfaction [in] acting like a gorilla" (142).

Dell's effort partially fails in reclaiming the meaning of blood because Dell cannot organize or control his protests. Prompted by an anger that he cannot manage, he acts alone and seemingly against rational thought. Even though he acknowledges that "the last thing the gay community needed was another criminal" (135), Del finds himself unable to stop his illegal activity. This coincides with the novel's stereotyping of Mexican people. Dell "wasn't sophisticated" and "did not expect to understand the scholarly side" of his Anglo lover's research of Mayan history (3), which places Dell out of his league when he attempts battle with the forces of homophobia. He finds himself unable to influence public perception of his righteous anger; the police and media decide that the "Castaic terrorist" was "a gay hispanic [sic] man in his mid-thirties, probably dying of AIDS, probably in the last stages of dementia" (134). Instead of undercutting hate, he gives people a chance to express more of it when the police chief limp-wrists and lisps in response to questions about the terrorist. ACT UP might assume that they can rewrite the significance of blood through protest, but Dell's story deflates this hope even as it sympathetically describes the purpose behind reclaiming blood symbolism. Even as Dell stands in Mother Evangeline's blood-soaked office, he realizes that his action had "only made the smallest dent in the bureaucracy of hate, a single truck line bombed as the engines roared to Dachau from every capital [...]. Dell was seized by hopelessness, thinking about [activists] against this army of intolerance, a children's crusade in a thousand churches" (141). Dell's momentary vision of Mother Evangeline as a fraction of the forces arrayed against him and other people with HIV both questions the impact of activism and Dell's tendency to conflate Mother Evangeline with all of AIDSphobia.

Dell ultimately does not profit from this realization of Mother Evangeline's place in the system, but this moment underscores the problem in seeing Mother Evangeline or Cardinal O'Connor as more than examples of systemic hatred. When Dell kills Mother Evangeline, he does not stop her Church. He loses his life, "really almost as an afterthought" (272), because he could not conceptualize the step to take after killing her and so resorts to suicide. The only real effect of his action is another deluge of theorizing from talking heads, all of whom are ill-equipped to discuss AIDS outside of the simplest and most obvious narratives. Steven, who thinks that Mother Evangeline's death "at least seemed to have some social value" (277), finds himself unable to watch the TV coverage on it. "*No thanks*, thought Steven, tuning out" (277). By managing his options "better" than Dell or Sonny, Steven has the choice to tune out of Dell's reality and into his romance with Mark, which has the effect of depicting the AIDS crisis as a place where the individual can exercise a good deal more control than in *People in Trouble*, though the novels similarly note that white/Anglo privilege and wealth offer advantages to some people affected by HIV/AIDS.

Tim and Pete returns to many of the same themes that animate *Afterlife* and *People in Trouble*, but its later publication date means that Monette and Schulman's work appears part of the entrenched meanings of AIDS that Baker unsettles with a mix of shock and black humor. Tim finds it impossible to channel his anger into ACT UP's activism, reporting that "I'd given money to ACT UP, but resisted direct involvement, put off by all the bickering and in-fighting I'd seen" (10). Pete, who works at a garage, emphatically rejects the West Hollywood social world that included Monette, which Tim describes as "[a] too-tasteful apartment on Hayworth, Firbank/Virginia Woolf chitchat, you know the scene" (148). Like *Afterlife*, *Tim and Pete* is about a romantic relationship, but its romance is between two presumably HIV- men who, unlike

Monette's characters, tend to equate a positive diagnosis with speedy death. Pete, who "used to say that if [he] ever got it, [he'd] take someone with [him], some vile pig who deserves to die" (226), glosses over the possibility that he would not die necessarily soon. Instead of Pete sacrificing his life in a terrorist action, his friends with HIV move to sacrifice theirs, in part to ensure Pete's happy future. In Baker's words,

> the issues the book deals with [are] questions of whether it's moral or not to wipe out a whole church full of people in order to get Ronald Reagan. The text essentially concludes it's not moral to do that. But if you're assassinating specific individuals, the text essentially concludes there is nothing wrong with that, it would be a really cool thing to do. (Grzesiak)

To reach this conclusion, *Tim and Pete* carefully assembles evidence of a war waged against people who are queer and/or of color by those in power. It tracks the blatant homophobia of the US Representative for whom Pete's mother works, Gerald Bryer. Bryer is closely modeled on Senator Helms and Congressman William Dannemeyer; Tim describes him as "*the worst pig in America*" who "*wants* people [with AIDS] fired and thrown out of their homes. He wants them to lose their insurance" (40-41). Tim and Pete consider this part of the Reaganism that helps make L.A. a city of inequality and provoked the 1992 Riots. The novel's history of L.A. forms a backdrop for the seeming lack of progress that non-violent AIDS activists had made in a decade of crisis, which Tim and Pete contrast with the political effectiveness they attribute to historical incidences of political assassination. The combination creates a narrative in which killing Ronald Reagan could be an effective way of frightening people into dismantling Reaganism while allowing gay men to assert that they were not victims or passively acceptive of their own demise. This narrative plays out against a disgust shared with *Afterlife* and *People in Trouble* for more

dominant renditions of AIDS reality; Tim and Pete bitterly joke about "'AIDS Land,' where family people could safely experience such attractions as Rock Hudson's Closet" (120), and resent "these fucking AIDS vultures like Louise Hay [who suggest] '[h]ug a teddy bear, boys, and visualize Bambi'" (143). Pete rewrites Hay's place on the AIDS landscape, where she was frequently portrayed as a compassionate ally to gay men, by ranting that her motivational speeches encouraged people with AIDS to be weak. Instead of helping, she engineered what Pete describes as "a better containment plan" than George Bush could orchestrate (143).

Tim, who works as a film archivist, and Pete, who fronts an art-rock band in his spare time, are both exceptionally versed in pop culture. As they travel through L.A., they make repeated reference to movies and music to explain the circumstances in which they find themselves. For instance, Compton after the riots "had a weird *designed* look, like a soundstage street for a Janet Jackson video" (92). However, they find themselves without much popular media that explicitly expresses gayness, and so they jokingly construct movie scripts with titles such as *The Day the World Went Queer* and *To Fuck and Die in L.A.* (144; 72). Their jokes play against theories popular at the time both on a street level and in academia; in an essay about Queer Nation, the ACT UP-spinoff activist group, Lauren Berlant claims that the 1990s were marked by a camp aesthetic that "understand[s] that to operate a travesty on the national travesty is to 'dissolve' the frame that separates national fantasy from ordinary bodies" (165).

Tim connects their jokes, which appear in the worst taste, to their recognition that the true obscenity was the mainstream media's treatment of incomprehensible tragedy and singles out TV movies that "sanitize the Holocaust" and "end up making it thinkable again" (120). When Pete writes a song called "Date Night at Dachau," which sarcastically castigates people who play tourist on the site of others' misery, Tim explains that "it *was* a joke and therefore also completely

serious" (13). Their serious jokes, which sometimes literally rewrite dominant media, become a method through which they reshape their personal interactions with a public discourse they find oppressive. They also fuel the development of a 'new' take on terrorism. Glenn, the leader of an anarchoqueer gang, calls terrorism "a new vaccine [...] that stops HIV dead in its tracks" (241), and tauntingly tells Pete that "[y]ou've shaken us out of our catatonic grief with your inflammatory call to violence. I predict network sound bites of your Baader-Meinhof song over grisly visuals of our escapades" (221). By linking Pete's 'serious joking' to his own mission, Glenn suggests that Pete and Tim's attempts to clear space for an angry queer reading of contemporary American life have the potential to help reverse traditional definitions so that murder equals life, at least for queer people.

Tim and Pete counters the argument in *Afterlife* that killing a symbol of hatred such as Mother Evangeline is politically ineffective by outlining the multiple, "rational" reasons for killing an entire conference's worth of rightwing politicians instead. Pete's friend Glenn, with his gang of seropositive terrorists, plans to blow up an entire church to wipe out former President Ronald Reagan. Glenn proposes this despite knowing that Reagan no longer shapes policy. He says, "[t]he damage is already done. This is payback. An object lesson. That not all queers are going to mince off to the hospice or be content to carry signs and blow whistles. That passive genocide earns aggressive retribution" (213). Neither Tim nor Pete challenges the essentials of Glenn's position. They also believe that Reagan deserves death, that quietly dying of AIDS does nothing to stop it, and that activists -- the sign carriers and whistleblowers -- do not accomplish enough. Their reservations concern the impracticality of Glenn's plan, the possibility that innocent people may be hurt, and in their lingering traces of what gang member Mikey calls "Gandhi queen" scruples (214). When Glenn tells them, "[t]he next time a hetero pig gives you

some shit, talk back in *their* language: blow their fucking brains out" (214), Tim objects by asking '[i]s that the kind of world you want to live in?" (214). Pete, meanwhile, nitpicks the plan because "[y]ou'll never get near [Reagan]" (214). He then convinces Glenn that the gang, instead of blowing up the church, should instead open fire on a political conference being held by the American Values Foundation in La Jolla. The conference attendees are well-known political types: two presidential hopefuls, a defense contractor, "the anti-abortion guy" who said "you fags are next" (234), a thinly disguised Jesse Helms, and Gerald Bryer. Pete argues that "I have serious reservations about Joey throwing his life away on what's basically an incredibly sloppy vendetta [...]. Especially when you can do something else that will affect the *future* in a very profound way. These are the people who *invented* Ronald Reagan, and now they're setting the agenda for what's to come" (235). Pete, in shifting the gang's focus from payback to the future, also suggests that he has a vision for one. As Tim puts it, "[i]t was a rare opportunity to decimate the right wing and thereby affect the course of American politics, the state of humanity, in an incalculably ecstatic way" (237). The future they imagine after the ecstasy is never clearly stated; it appears to be a matter of faith that "assassination *does* change things profoundly" (237).

Still, Pete has a grander plan for the future than *Afterlife*'s Dell, who had not contemplated the moment past assassinating Mother Evangeline. Pete suspects that the gang might even survive the attack on La Jolla, and he intends to rekindle his romance with Tim. *Tim and Pete* offers a happy ending for its titular characters; most likely seronegative, they embrace while Tim describes their affection as the last link in a succession of gay lovers, some of whom were at that moment charging the AVF conference to ensure that Pete and Tim could, as gang member Joey said, "stay together and all of that [...]. Play house, fuck a lot [...]. I hope someone lives into the next century" (244). This is more than *People in Trouble* or *Afterlife*, however

politicized their insistence on life and possibility, quite dare to envision.

Happy endings are not implausible or beyond the limits of realism. Twenty years after publishing *People in Trouble*, Schulman credits ACT UP with saving the queer community, the same ability that she suggested Justice could possess (Thomas). Like Steven Shaw, Monette found happiness with a new man after his first partner died. From the vantage point of 2009, we recognize that Baker was right; many gay men would survive what we now call the early AIDS crisis and learn to manage the pain and losses incurred during those years. Still, the future-gazing in all three novels has the potential to shift them into the category of fantasy. While their stories are consistent with the anger and dialogue emanating from ACT UP and some other queer commentators, and credible in light of the potential for violence created by desperate circumstances and people's awareness that they were in crisis, the novels' insistence on reading the future takes some of their focus away from detailing the 'actual world' as they presently saw it.

When approached through the rubric of realism, these novels reveal the limits of activist rewriting. Their uses of real life or thinly veiled real life characters such as Ronald Reagan, Mother Evangeline, or Ronald Horne betray the way that these characters function as symbols for larger social issues. In using such symbols, the novels run the same risk of obscuring realities that they accuse mainstream narratives of taking. Casting Ronald Reagan as the Hitler of the AIDS crisis has the same facile ring as blaming the spread of HIV on Patient Zero. In both cases, the figure of one monster-murderer overshadows the multiple reasons why AIDS could kill so many members of marginalized social groups without causing much outrage outside of these groups, and the authors become trapped in the mirror/tank binary that Lee Edelman feared that some activists were imposing on the queer community.

Recognizing their tactics' limits does not ignore the ways in which in Schulman, Monette, and Baker were able to turn hurtful narratives inside out: the authors succeeded in underscoring the role of the media in perpetuating stereotypes and misinformation, pushing lesbian and gay perspectives to the forefront to oppose to mainstream assessments, and emphasizing the importance of the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS. Their success in promoting their own narratives within their novels owes much to their emphatic stress on the immediacy, authenticity, and "realism" of the stories they told, proof of their ability to testify to "the facts" of life during crisis. Their claim to realism, then, is stronger and more important than a simple question of literary classification, something important to remember when moving on to a discussion of the anti-realistic elements of these novels.

Chapter Two: Avengers in America

Even as *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* establish credible bases to be read as realist, they also undermine attempts to do so by incorporating tropes more usual to other kinds of fiction, particularly fantasy and satire. Evoking these genre conventions casts a different light on the terrorism in the novels; instead of (or in addition to) depicting the attitudes of a politicized subculture struggling with feelings of anger, the terrorism can also be read as a sustained and bitter joke, or the action of heroes who fight on a legendary scale.

The first chapter mentioned Steven Kruger's connection of *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* to AIDS novels written in fantastic, non-realist genres. Comparison emphasizes the differences between these three books and Kruger's examples of apocalyptic fantasies: *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* are not set in the future, do not feature political landscapes more repressive than the historic record, and do not depict the discovery of an "AIDS cure" or a government plot to wipe out queer people. Despite this, attention to the genre illuminates the ways that these novels engage in some practices more common to fantasy. Kruger explains that apocalyptic fantasies

> depend[] crucially on an "epidemiology" of AIDS -- a narrative of origin, transmission, "risk groups," accelerating "spread," epidemic, pandemic, and "plague," and of the social and political consequences of epidemic. Each novel moves towards an ending that is definitely an end -- of gay men, or the world as we know it -- even as each, more or less pessimistically, explores possible ways of intervening against, resisting, the epidemic and its effects, ways of derailing the narrative to avert its projected end. (207)

While *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* do not posit origin narratives for

AIDS in the sense that they do not explain the North American crisis as the result of some African disaster or, as in Geoff Mains's *Gentle Warriors*, of a government plot involving "two homo agents who had unknowingly been pumped full of [HIV] and sent to pig out at the Mineshaft and the St. Marks Baths" (89), they do outline less specific analyses of AIDS epidemiology that also insist on the possibility of world's doom. As Erika Gottlieb notes in her analysis of dystopian novels:

> if [...] we listen to postmodern criticism, relying on thinkers like Foucault, for example, any society functioning at the present time [...] could be regarded as such a "bad place." [...] In other words, there are historical phenomena that create societies that should be described as dystopic, societies where the literary imagination refuses to envisage a world worse than the existing world of reality. (5)

In these books, AIDS's spread in marginalized communities is both dystopian and real, and it originates in society's existing racism, homophobia, misogyny, and/or classism. All three texts articulate the view that James, speaking from his position as a femme Black gay man, expresses in *People in Trouble*: "America will never be healthy as long as it exists in a state of advanced hypocrisy. And fate has chosen us to right this wrong" (118). A character who makes a similar argument in *Tim and Pete* explicitly connects it to the realm of fantasy when he claims "[AIDS is] [t]he waves of hate aimed at us for so many years finally manifested on the physical plane [...]. The same people who want us [gay Americans] dead want to clear the Third World. But in the process they're going to kill the planet and themselves [...]. But it's not too late [...]. The power of white magick is still infinitely stronger" (123). Along with their horrific depictions of a world in chaos, *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* share with Kruger's examples a sense that the world possibly could be saved.

In order for "white magick" or righters of wrongs to operate, the AIDS crisis must be understood as a field of operations in which people can behave heroically with certain positive results. This means that *Tim and Pete* and *People in Trouble* are narratives about the quests of their main characters to prevent the end of the world as they know it, and that *Afterlife* focuses on salvaging as much of that world as possible after positive diagnoses. These novels remember life before AIDS in ways ranging from *Afterlife*'s insistence on its perfection for (wealthy, white) gay men to *People in Trouble*'s wry observation about "distinguished homosexuals with white-boy jobs, who had forgotten that they were queer until AIDS came along and everyone else reminded them" (158). However, all of them agree in the desire to preserve queer community and queer ways of being against the threat of AIDS, even when the texts, particularly when compared with each other, reveal uncertainty as to what this entails or how it could be accomplished. With a happier past behind them and hopes for a better future, these novels set the AIDS crisis on a linear scheme perfect for the use of journeys as metaphors for the search for justice and romance in the midst of an epidemic. These journeys borrow standard plot elements from fantasy; our heroines and heroes battle the greedy pretender to the throne Ronald Horne, the witch Mother Evangeline, or the evil stepfather Gerald Bryer in order to save the queer kingdom and find love. As Joseph Campbell outlines a correlative quest tradition in many cultures' mythologies and literature:

> the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely familiar forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator

> (father atonement), his own divinization (apothesis), or again -- if the powers have remained unfriendly to him -- his theft of the boon he came to gain [...]. (246)

These standards seem inadequate from the queer perspectives of these novels. Molly and Kate in *People in Trouble* are the only characters who would contemplate having sex with goddesses, and most of the characters are actively opposed to receiving the blessing of the patriarch, though Mark achieves it as a byproduct of his growing maturity in *Afterlife*. For Mexicans in a bigoted L.A., for working class mechanics, and for anti-bourgeois lesbians, the only remaining possibility may be affronting the powers with theft and disobedience. Consistent with their outlaw loyalties (or, in *Afterlife*'s case, its outlaw sympathies), the novels hedge their use of traditional quest elements with knowingness and ambiguities -- Tim only finds white magick and the occult "interesting from an intellectual point of view" (124), and Dell receives no boon for killing the witch -- but their use of this common heroic structure illuminates the wistfulness and desire that animates the texts.

Much of these novels' wish-fulfilling appeal lies in the empowerment of their characters. Even though these characters often feel despair, many of them also manage to achieve heroic statuses in their confrontations with hostile forces. *Tim and Pete* even figures Pete as Jesus Christ, but one who lives. These characters may be the larger-than-life answer to the longing that coursed through HIV/AIDS activist discourse of the time. As Larry Kramer asked and threatened in 1987:

> how many dead brothers have to be piled up in a heap in front of your faces before you learn to fight back and scream and yell and demand and take some responsibility for your own lives? [...] I am going to go out screaming so fucking rudely that you will hear this coarse, crude voice of mine in your nightmares. (173)

The intensity of Kramer's desire for gay men and lesbians to exert control over the AIDS crisis nearly converts reality into a fantasy, namely the fantasy that people *could* take responsibility for their lives. Without undermining the real and tremendous good accomplished by AIDS activists, we should also remember that this exhortation placed an inordinate amount of responsibility and blame on individuals who had found themselves deeper in crisis precisely because of their relative powerlessness in the US social system. Because of the seeming impossibility of taking control, Kramer's hope that systemic unfairness and science would answer to the coarse, crude voice of a nightmare figure evokes the image of a savior, one prepared to take any journey to accomplish his/her goals. According to Kruger, this desire propels apocalyptic AIDS fantasies even as it exposes the contradiction behind it:

> [s]uch a view clearly responds to a real experience of the AIDS crisis, where we wishfully desire a quick and easy "cure," a quick and easy elimination of homophobia and racism, a quick and easy restructuring of medical, scientific, and political institutions, but where, as well, action against those seemingly monolithic institutions, as against a seemingly inexorable epidemic, often seems simply futile. Of course, "real-world" politics conforms neither to the wishful ease or full futility of intervention that the novels simultaneously depict. (249)

Schulman and Baker both betrayed the desire for a savior who would restructure the political paradigm even as they tethered the concept to the realms of fantasy and imagination and admitted its contradictions. When explaining why he preferred to end *Tim and Pete* before readers experienced the catharsis of a shoot-out in La Jolla, Baker said "to be honest … semi-facetiously put, my fantasy was to leave readers so infuriated and dissatisfied they'd throw down the book and march right out into a gun store because they wanted to see the finale so bad they

[sic] realize the only way it'd happen is if they make it happen in real life" (Grzesiak). In the same interview, Baker admitted that he would be "elated" were someone to kill Patrick Buchanan though he thought the backlash would probably be severe. This is not unlike Steven's reaction when Dell kills Mother Evangeline in *Afterlife*: "[w]ith one fell stroke, it seemed, Dell Espinoza had set things back a generation, all the making nice and the coalition-building [...]. [T]he killing didn't bother [Steven]. That part at least seemed to have some social value" (276-277).

In Baker's case and that of his character Tim, the "necessity" of assassination scenarios give way to their emotional satisfactions; these fantasies are about punishment, though a punishment visualized as resultant of the workings of a justice previously denied to marginalized people. Still, the pleasure that Tim, Pete, and Baker take in visualizing a queer uprising is not absolute or entirely unabashed; it's "semi-facetiously put," hedged with humor and the note of absurdity that accompanies the idea of readers who actually care enough about a book to consider it a direct action blueprint.[3] However callous this may sound, I need to note that Baker did not take someone out with him when he killed himself in 1997 despite his comment to a reporter that "I think I'm capable of acting out some of the scenarios described in the book" (Rivenburg).

With even less hedging than Baker, Schulman told an Outwrite panel in 1992 that "[t]wo hundred thousand Americans have died of AIDS and not one of them committed a political assassination. If they all had America would be a better place today for those of us who have been left behind" (*My American History* 236). After this opening, she went on to announce that

3 In Baker's unfinished next novel, posthumously released under the publisher's title choice of *Anarchy*, the police call a narrator named James Robert Baker to mediate at a situation caused by a homely gay teenager who read *Tim and Pete*. Instead of killing Jesse Helms, the boy takes a ringer for Pamela Anderson hostage and demands to receive a sexually willing Brad Pitt in return. James Robert Baker talks him out of it by pretending to be Morrissey, demurely reconsidering his asexuality for the hostage-taker's sake. Publication of *Tim and Pete* appears to have left Baker with few illusions about the inspiration his writing could offer.

“[f]or gay people today, imagination is our secret weapon” (*My American History* 239). She was talking about developing the ability to see ourselves outside of heterosexual norms, but she also echoed a talk she gave at Outwrite two years previously. While discussing the protest at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in *People in Trouble*, she said, “I imagined forty nervous men cautiously standing up to disrupt a religious service. By the time the book was published, there had been a real life demonstration of seven thousand angry men and women confronting the Cathedral. In this case, the community I was writing for and about made the boundaries of my imagination obsolete” (*My American History* 194). Considering that, her proclamation about the desirability of people with AIDS committing political assassinations holds an undertone of “from my imagining mouth to a real terrorist’s ear.” This is only an undertone; she is, after all, talking about fiction and the imagination, which she connects to fantasy and mythology by mentioning that “[w]e have constructed expectations for AIDS literature based on [the] myth of transformation [...], holding it to a standard based on the model of religious conversion” (*My American History* 237). *People in Trouble* unsettles the AIDS myth that contracting HIV could offer spiritual transformation to people, but it, like *Tim and Pete* and *Afterlife*, also employs elements from other myths and fantasy.

Despite the seeming unsuitability of the legendary archetypes outlined by Campbell, these authors' savior-heroes nonetheless embark on quests. In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn defines the classic quest fantasy as possessing "encounters with various peoples, miniadventures, the search for information, and a clear sense of moral justice, which results in success and which allows the protagonists to return home as heroes" (58). Such fantasies frequently have narrators who suddenly find themselves in a strange new world which they must comprehend in order to obtain their goals. Fantasy, Mendlesohn underscores, "relies on a moral

universe: it is less an argument with the universe than a sermon on the way things should be, a belief that the universe should yield to moral precepts" (5). Because of this reliance on morality, the quest-portal narrative has difficulty in accommodating multiple meanings; the universe must be understood in a way that emphasizes the rightness of the quest. While *People in Trouble, Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* share an arguably postmodern insistence on alternate realities when they try to unsettle common readings of the AIDS crisis, they can also be read as morality tales that try to nominate the effective and just responses to AIDS to be the ones chosen by their heroes.

People in Trouble has three narrators, but it is only Molly who ultimately accepts the quest; her girlfriend Kate and Kate's husband Peter also try to understand the "new" world created of New York by the AIDS crisis, but they abdicate their responsibilities to other people to meet their own wants. The novel undercuts the individualism of the traditional quest narrative by countering Kate and Peter's self-focused ambitions with Molly's commitment to Justice, a community of activists in which "a lot of little bits is a lot" (196). Diminishing an individualistic reading of the AIDS crisis is crucial to the novel's development of an ethical response to it; *People in Trouble* develops a reading of the AIDS crisis as an arena in which deaths are part of wider problems and not mostly felt as private losses. As James tells Kate, "[t]he challenge is to turn [AIDS] from an overwhelming personal void into a group effort, to try to help others avoid the same fate. But this kind of extraordinary response means agitating against the grain of the habit of human reaction" (147). Becoming part of this extraordinary response requires a journey from a sense of self as a lone individual to the recognition of one's membership in a community. The hardships are such that Kate and Peter fall along the wayside.

Molly's awareness of AIDS deaths as a manifestation of systemic bigotry grows slowly.

She attends a memorial vigil in which she, along with the rest of the crowd, releases balloons inscribed with the names of dead friends and lovers. "It made her feel something very human; a kind of nostalgia with public sadness and the sharing of emotions. But then what?" (44). Her dissatisfaction with the calmness she feels at the vigil magnifies her realization that "she could really only see the sea [of balloons] after losing sight of her own" (44). Seeing the magnitude of her community's loss causes a shift from dissatisfaction to "enormous anger. These were her friends. These were her dead friends. [...] Were their lives worth less than the lives of heterosexuals?" (46) Her anger helps Molly understand the place of her grief in a larger scheme. Immediately after accomplishing this, she becomes aware of two men recruiting for Justice, whose fliers read, "Do you think it's right? That people are dying and the government does nothing? If you do not think this is right, then do something about it" (47). While arguing for an understanding of the world as one in which shared humanity demands shared sorrow and access to the means of ending this sorrow, Justice practices a form of activism called direct action. To behave morally, Molly must pragmatically and realistically effect change in the world.

Despite this, Molly's actions evoke common tropes of genre fiction. Her first assignment for Justice, using her job as a movie theater ticket taker to collect eviction notices served to gay men by Horne's realty company, also feels filmic. Mysterious men slip forms under the booth's transom that Molly surreptitiously collects; it is only later that she understands the significance of the papers she gathers. What Kruger calls the "spy-novel atmosphere" quickly fades into Justice's practical agenda (281), though traces of the outlaw remain in Justice's theft of credit and phone card card numbers. When engaged in this action, Kate's "skin was tingling. She'd never done anything like this" (165). The roguish bravery demanded by participation in Justice is the bravery to see the world otherwise; Justice does not steal, they redistribute wealth stolen from the people

in the first place. As James tells reporters when Justice invades Horne's Castle, "[T]he hotel was built on tax rebates. [...] We've already paid [for damages]." Robin Hood and his merry (wo)men ride again, though this time the sheriff comes for them with yellow rubber gloves to ward off "contagion."

People in Trouble's back cover promises encounters with "Sam, a sexy cowgirl who lives in Chinatown, and [...] Fabian, the ex-leather queen who now dresses in khaki" (qtd. in Schulman). As on a quest, Molly, Kate, and Peter know they have left their old lives behind when they begin to meet distinctive characters such as Sam and Fabian, though the novel exercises more complexity in characterization than its blurb's breathless typifying suggests. For the straight-bourgeois Kate and Peter, the characters they meet are not ones whom Molly finds remarkable. During Peter's first encounter with "extraordinary" people, he crashes an AIDS funeral where he "stayed in the back because he was a tourist and had learned from traveling in Mexico that when you are watching another culture in church it is best to stand in the back" (33). Peter never gives up his seat in the back; throughout the novel, he reiterates the same distaste he feels toward the "two young men, overdressed in fashionable new wave suits [...], whin[ing] like two suburban matrons" who unintentionally alert him to the enriching spectacle of a nearby gay funeral (29). His one real attempt to be more than a tourist in "another culture" -- marginalized New York -- ends in failure. A man who lives on the street approaches Peter and asks for his help in finding a pharmacy that will fill a painkiller prescription given him by a hospital staff too swamped to be of more assistance. Peter thinks that "*[i]t's really important that two men from different circumstances can communicate like this*" (139), and he tries to find an open drug store with the man. When he cannot, he panics at his inability to easily dismiss his responsibilities towards the man, which he eventually relieves by foisting them on a passing Molly.

Peter's thwarted communication "between two men of different circumstances" echoes in his encounters with James. Watching Justice's invasion of Horne's Castle on television, Peter recognizes James as the man he had noticed at the protest at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Peter had then decided that "*[t]hey shouldn't have let him be the spokesman [...]. They should have picked someone more masculine, so people would be more sympathetic"* (58). Peter's rejection of James, who actually founded Justice instead of Peter's shadowy "they," clashes with Molly's view of James's leadership at a Justice meeting. Despite Molly's admiration for James, the text closes off some predictable readings of him: "[h]e was actually a short man although he had a lot of presence. But he wasn't a preacher and he wasn't a rock star and he wasn't a con man or Prince or our next president. He basically knew how to dress and had clarity" (118). This enunciation of wrong and right ways to read James demonstrates Peter's failure to see the world correctly, and finally Peter's reaction to James as a gay Black AIDS activist underscores the ludicrous hypocrisy of his ultimate refusal to engage with AIDS activism: "[h]omosexuals don't have a monopoly on morality [...]. I mean, I care more about Nicaragua than I do about a group of rich white gay men" (217). Molly finds inspiration in her time with Sam, Fabian, James, and the rest of Justice; Peter never becomes enough involved to truly know any of them.

Kate straddles the division between Peter and Molly. When her agent asks, "You don't mean to tell me that both you and Peter voyeur on AIDS funerals?" (97), she accepts their joint identification as tourists by saying "[y]es, we're ambulance chasers" (97). However, she finds it impossible to remain merely an ambulance chaser because Molly involves her in lesbian and gay communities; the corpse, about whom neither she and Peter appear to have previously thought, becomes a man she liked. James's lover, Scott Yarrow, is the first person with AIDS Kate ever visits in the hospital. Scott, well-aware that for Kate he constitutes "an experience," places the

visit on his own terms. "'You know,' Scott said, 'it's much easier having visitors who are used to seeing their friends sickly and weak, because there's no expression of shock on their faces when they walk in and see me'" (148). When Scott throws down the gauntlet, Kate manages to get her behavior under control. Later, when her thinking shifts away from tenets she previously considered bedrock, Kate shares her realization with Scott, who was a large component of her wake-up call: "[s]ometimes a person has to stop talking about art for a moment and take a look around" (166). But *People in Trouble* does not present an easy narrative about learning lessons from the Other that help the heroes on their journey; Scott insists on his reality as someone on his own journey instead of the victim whom Kate initially sees, and Kate finally chooses art over direct action activism.

The complications that the novel imposes on the traditional quest narrative express the difficulties in organizing in *People in Trouble*'s world. On one hand, characters such as Scott, unwilling to let other people define them as victims or otherwise use them in self-serving narratives, insist on their individual needs and personalities. On the other hand, it becomes necessary to submerge a certain level of independence in order to take part in the community that the novel indicates has the potential to save lives. The novel is wry about the contradictions it embodies -- a character asks Kate "but then what?" after she comfortably announces that "contradictions are what let us know we are fully human" (13). The question of "but then what?" animates Molly's journey from individual mourner to part of a heroic collective; it is the impetus for developing an ethical standpoint from which a quest to stop AIDS becomes not only feasible but a moral imperative. It also influences Kate, who becomes heroic in the moment she takes action against Horne's appropriation of her artwork. Righteously furious in the face of the gun Horne pulls, Kate claws her way towards him, where "she looked back at the chaos behind her.

Each gesture was too large and so unusual that the action passed before her like a high-speed silent film. Only there was no silence" (222). In this "unreal" environment, she presumably then torches the art and Horne. Though *People in Trouble* later implies that her action was not meaningful without qualification in the fight against AIDS, it also figures Kate's action as a moment of triumph. Justice -- and justice -- are in ascendency during this scene, and it reads as a moment of satisfaction of the desire for bold, successful action that Kruger noticed in apocalyptic AIDS fictions.

Afterlife, in which AIDS figures as a scourge that might end only after all its characters with HIV are dead, is less concerned about stopping AIDS than it is with salvaging happiness for people with HIV. *Afterlife* depicts a range of the journeys and stagnations possible for gay men with HIV and throws its support behind Steven Shaw's path by giving him more narrative space and a happier "ending" than it affords for other characters. Steven owns a travel agency, but "for Steven travel was over" (9). He associates vacations with his lover Victor, with whom Steven spent years enjoying trips abroad and other aspects of the good life. After Victor's death, Steven sticks closely to the house, eats junk food obsessively, and leaves his business in the hands of his long-suffering fag hag because "Shaw Travel mocked him now with all its promise of freedom, the paradise beaches and Gold Card souvenirs" (9). Only after Steven meets Mark does he return to the agency and begin a journey out of despair to find himself happily in bed with Mark in an ending that could be the more bourgeois mirror image of *Tim and Pete*'s: two men embrace in bed while carnage executed by terrorists with HIV rocks L.A.

Part of the "peoples" from whom the hero Steven can learn lessons, Dell and Sonny afford the chief points of contrast to Steven's choices. Dell dies in a terrorist mission, demonstrating how anger, an alternative path to the one Steven chooses, does not offer the

benefits -- such as living longer -- that love can. As discussed in the previous chapter, both Mark and Steven envy Dell's "freedom" to be violent and angry, but for various reasons -- some about morality, some about bourgeois comfort -- they are not prepared to emulate him, though Steven does allow Dell to sleep on the sofa when the police locate Dell's home. The journey metaphors surrounding Dell are frequently quite literal. He crossed the Mexico-USA border, and *Afterlife* plays with Gloria Anzaldúa's formulation that borderlands, physical and metaphorical, are inhabited by "[*l]os atravesados* [...]: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato [sic], the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (3). On Dell's final journey, the bus ride to kill Mother Evangeline, his kinship with *los atravesados* becomes pronounced. Dressed in a work shirt, fatigues, and a bandana that is "a trifle inner-city" (268), Dell finds himself using his last dollar to take a bus for which he "didn't have the exact schedule, having lived a notch above his immigrant brothers who had no wheels" (267). His crossing-over imbues him with tragic outlaw status, as when he turns to a "gaunt, exhausted Latina" on the bus and "fixe[s] her with a helpless look [...]. 'Pray for me, *madre*,' he said" (268, 269). Dell is not a hero -- his actions are too ambiguously coded -- but as an antihero he temporarily achieves something tangible in wiping out a woman Steven calls "a pig" (277), though *Afterlife* considers it one of the deceptive easy solutions that actually do not result in anything meaningful. Ultimately, as Peter F. Cohen notes in *Love and Anger*, "because Dell is Chicano and a manual worker, he is unable to participate in the recuperative ending that Monette envisions for men such as Mark and Steven" (76).

Sonny Cevathas chooses a different path than Dell in *Afterlife*, but it yields equally problematic results. Because of his interest in New Age philosophy, Sonny frequently employs journey imagery to understand his life. The youngest child of "the Greekest man in Fresno" (23),

Sonny runs away from home at the age of seventeen after his father discovers him in a clinch with his brother-in-law, and "even as he took to the open road, to wander the next ten years, Sonny never lost the feeling of being a hairsbreadth away from getting torn apart" (25). Even though his lover died of AIDS, Sonny refuses to be tested for HIV and ignores his growing number of symptoms while he looks for a sugar daddy. He also runs away from his roommate when the roommate develops all the signs of AIDS. Throughout the text, Sonny justifies his behavior and his need to keep running with recourse to a romantic self-view in which he was a Pharoah's cousin in a past life: "[h]e was the crux in which desire became pure spirit. [...] Once more he had proven to himself that he wouldn't be sick. He was too much a moving target. No wonder he needed no permanent home and no baggage, even now, ten years after he'd run from Fresno" (104). He ultimately decides to leave L.A., a move that has the potential for utter disaster. If Sonny gets sick while traveling, he will not have Steven, who would most likely take care of him as long as he could. Steven feels a grudging sense of responsibility as a fellow gay man and a fellow AIDS widower to Sonny, but this is not an attitude that Sonny can bring himself to share. In preparation for his journey, Sonny decides that he is not gay and decides to abandon sexual relationships with men:

> Off the path, out of the cycle -- the point was to break loose from all destination. [...] There wasn't a man in L.A. who would truly mourn his leaving. What startled him here was the stab of longing, wishing he had a brother. He understood he wasn't ready. It might take years, perhaps until the end of his wandering, before another man could clasp his hand as a friend. And then, cleansed of the rot of passion, his blood clear as a mountain stream, he would come to love at last. (253-254)

Obviously, Sonny exhibits a tragic level of denial, and it contrasts poorly with Steven's

recognition that his life will be short and therefore he must accept love as he has found it. The text implies that Sonny's journey is doomed: "[h]is bare feet left beautiful vanishing prints on the cold slate paving stones" (251). The only sign of hope for him is that he relents enough from his lonely-wanderer pose to bring the dog he loves with him.

Monette's choice to make Sonny of Greek heritage reflects on the gay community in general, or at least part of it. Monette was interested in the homoerotics of ancient Greece (*Borrowed Time* 20), and that connection emphasizes his description of Sonny as appearing very West Hollywood, so to speak. "[S]omebody snapping Sonny's picture from the curb would have carried away a totem souvenir of the place. Twenty-eight and in a 380 convertible, fresh from a Bruce Weber locker room, Sonny was as richly surfaced as the run of billboards looming above the Strip on either flank" (5). The text makes clear that this is mostly an illusion, but Sonny remains identified with a segment of gay life that the text finds bemusing when not the subject of some condescension. His attempts to find spiritual wellness coincide with the hours he spends chasing health and sex at the gym, but both are running out for Sonny. In *Borrowed Time*, Monette suggests that the same is true for Sonny's real-life counterparts: he spies men at the gym who replaced sex with food, and in the process wrecked their formerly cherished good looks (53). If, as *Afterlife* poses, the carefree days of beauty and sex are gone, then the challenge to gay men is to carve out a life path independent of the routes that are no longer possible. Dell fails to live, let alone find a solution to any of the problems that enraged him. Sonny cannot leave his old way of being; all his talk about "getting off the path" shields the fact that he is mostly repeating the same behavior pattern he developed when he ran away from Fresno. The only difference is that he has denied himself the possibility of membership in a gay brotherhood, and this potential betrayal lingers over all of West Hollywood: will gay men grow up and accept the

responsibilities associated with membership in a threatened community, or will they live alone in denial?

In contrast with Sonny, a positive diagnosis helps Mark become less selfish. Steven could never stand Mark and his self-involvement before, but Mark finds himself helping Steven with the responsibilities connected to the AIDS-related death of one of Steven's employees, Ray Lee a.k.a. "the Korean." *Afterlife*'s journey narrative relies on the tension between the necessity of "growing up" and the uncomfortable knowledge that most of its characters recognize that they will have much shorter lives than they expected. Mark, the self-described "shallow queen" to whom "two, three months .... that's like forever" (68), finds it difficult to break out of his old habits, and a hook-up with Sonny reads like a rejection of the adult relationship that Steven could offer him. Sonny, with nowhere else to go, lives in Steven's guesthouse. Steven spies on him and Mark one night and, a bit wryly, moralizes about the pornography the other men are watching: "leave it to Steven to feel the emptiness at the heart of it -- the Pauline Kael of porno. Far from feeling left out, he was relieved not to be watching it with the guys. It might have engaged him if the scene had been two men kissing" (125).

Steven's failure to find an emotional connection in the porn or the sex between Mark and Sonny works as a condemnation of Mark, but Mark tells Steven that "[t]he man I used to be [...]. I mean, that's over. It's like that video" (129). But still stuck between stages of evolution, he then says, "[t]his is the kind I'm used to [...]. I don't know how to do the other kind" (129). Sonny, of course, continues to represent the shallowness and vapidity that *Afterlife* considers the pitfalls of gay life, but Mark's confession to Steven creates an intimacy between them that eventually allows them to have a relationship that is not empty at the heart of it. As a sign of his newfound maturity, he encourages Dell and Sonny, those takers of wrong paths, to leave Steven's

house so he and Steven can have more space to be a couple. Sonny even admits their contrasting roles when he gives Steven and Mark his blessing: "Stevie, there's only a a minute left -- a second. [...] Me and the spick, we're the last two lonely guys. We got nothing to lose" (231). When Steven and Mark decide to dedicate that last moment to love, they win a victory over the AIDS crisis that feels none the less heroic for its admitted temporary nature. In *Afterlife*, if a character tries hard enough, stays off false paths such as terrorism and delusionary narcissism, and is not as unlucky as "the Korean," he can, like many heroes of fantasies, successfully complete his journey to greater self-awareness in the arms of a lover. If Campbell is to believed, this may even count as a symbolic victory over AIDS and death because "the boon of love" as won by the hero "is life itself enjoyed as the encasement of eternity" (118).

Like Monette's Steven and Mark, Baker's Tim and Pete also journey towards a previously unknown harmony together, but that harmony does not preclude the anger that Steven and Mark ultimately reject. Baker wrote *Tim and Pete* from Tim's first-person perspective. Born into a family who belonged to the La Jolla country club that Glenn and his friends decide to attack, Tim describes himself early in the novel as "look[ing] fairly conventional [...]. Part of this may be a WASP legacy [...]. But I'm not conservative" (18). While Tim's unapologetic raunchiness and his hatred of Republicanism support his claim of non-conservatism, he occasionally struggles to match Pete's radicalism. Tim's ex-boyfriend Pete, a mechanic who ran away as a teenager from his homophobic home in a working class part of Anaheim, feels comfortable expressing more queer rage through art and jokes than Tim, despite his mordant sense of humor, finds tasteful. Pete also tends to be smarter about xenophobia and classism than Tim, who spends much of the

novel dealing with his fear of Black and Latino men.[4] As Tim and Pete take a trip through various neighborhoods in L.A. and encounter gay Black men, a "sweet old" Latina woman (135), frothing homophobes, a former Manson girl, two lesbians split by their differing adherences to separatism or queer coalition politics, and finally Glenn's gang of anarchoqueers, Tim comes closer to sharing Pete's way of thinking, which clarifies upon renewed contact with Pete's friend Glenn.

In addition to engagement with various "peoples," Tim and Pete's journey involves constant comparisons of the world in which they currently live with Tim's memories of the 1960s and 70s. Pete is too young to remember the early gay liberation period, and Tim wistfully tells him that "[t]here was a different energy then [...]. I'd say it was a lot of people feeling good about themselves for the first time in their lives [...]. The end of repression. Making love in the sun-drenched ruins of the church" (142). Their conversation quickly returns to AIDS, and Pete begins to rant about ACT UP, saying that "[t]hey should have gone into Saint Patrick's with sub-machine guns. Here in L.A., they should kidnap Mahoney and gut him. They should go into the Vatican, remove the fag art, and dynamite the place. Douse the pope with gasoline, set him on fire" (143). In the 80s, the Church is not in ruins; the repression Tim thought dead instead has intensified to drive Pete to near-hysteria because he is tired of being told to "[b]e a good little faggot and mince on off to the hospice and pay the price for your sins" (143). In this new world, Tim needs to learn the rules of engagement before he can become involved in finding any kind of solution to the AIDS crisis. As Pete tells Tim, "Glenn would say that if Rambo's coming through your door with a flamethrower, you'd better do something besides hold up a volume of Proust" (195). Initially,

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4 Despite its technical accuracy, I cringe each time I read this claim because I imagine readers assuming that I think that Pete's "smartness" about inter-racial/ethnic relations was on display when Pete chased his Chilean ex-boyfriend through a UCLA study hall while screaming, "You sick beaner slime!" (152).

Tim does not accept the logic of this comparison and defines it as a kind of fantasy that he could counter in equally fantastic terms. In response to this whimsy, Pete amusedly "erases" the more realistic consequences of Tim's suggestion:

> "It's a comic book situation," [Tim] said.
>
> "So?" [Pete asked.]
>
> "So, I *would* hold up Proust. The flameproof volumes. Then, once Rambo had used up his fire, I'd rip out an extralong sentence and hog-tie him with it. Then I'd fuck him."
>
> "He'd probably like that." Pete did a grunting Rambo impression: "*Yeah!* Fuck my greased ass! Slam that cock right up there! Don't worry about hurtin' me! You can't hurt Rambo!" (195-196)

Tim ultimately finds this answer less satisfying than the prospect of assisting in the assassination of people "whose narratives blatantly urged violent closure" (237).

This decision means that Tim, like Glenn, concludes that politicians' stalling of government funding for AIDS treatment and other acts of contempt towards gay men[5] are tantamount to committing a home invasion with a deadly weapon. If gay liberation's "end of repression" is home to Tim, than politicians' homophobic legislation has invaded it, and in order to ever return home, he must help banish the politicians instead of raging at them in the privacy of his ex-boyfriend's car. He needs to abandon the fantasy that he can simultaneously deny his urge for violence and wreak his sexualized wrath on Rambo, the epitome of brutal male heterosexuality, without the moral consequences of hurting anyone and instead take a more "realistic" approach

5 Unlike in *People in Trouble* and (to a lesser degree) *Afterlife*, AIDS is mostly portrayed as gay male problem in *Tim and Pete*'s United States.

to solving the problem. Tim protests that he does not want to live in a world where this is his option, but Baker weights the text towards the conclusion that the necessity of violence -- of "talk[ing] back in *their* language" (214) -- is the moral reading appropriate in a world modeled closely on contemporary life. At the same time, the prospect of storming the La Jolla country club also functions as intense wish-fulfillment, the culmination of the fantasies Tim has shared with Pete about "a wantonly excessive Peckinpah slaughter scene" (164). When Tim decides to cooperate with the gang, he admits "[t]here's no point in pretending that I didn't find the prospect exhilarating, that I didn't also long to see the right people die for a change" (237).

Even as the novel structures itself around a literal journey encompassed by Tim and Pete's queer version of a Hollywood roadtrip, their journey into further radicalism recreates them as outlaw heroes. Glenn, who initially mocks Tim as a yuppie, offers him a parting blessing that makes Tim and Pete part of Glenn's desperado epic: "[h]appy trails, Tim, with your throbbing 327. You've got a good man riding shotgun now" (244). The incorporation of western film tropes into these assassination fantasies -- "*The Good, the Bad, and the Buttfucked*" (171), Pete jokes -- underscores the cowboy/outlaw mythos evoked in Baker's depiction of gay men "forced" to take the law into their own hands. Frontier justice may be a matter of practicality for those who live on the frontier, which by 1992 was a more recognized gayborhood than any geographical location for those border-crossing, heteronormativity-defying queers of academic and popular theory, but the text also connects it to "luminous big-screen sublimating" and whimsies such as "after [killing politician Pat Buchanan], we could go to Spain and play gay lovers in a Pedro Almodovar film" (173). While challenging mainstream narratives about AIDS and gayness by depicting a reality closer to the author's own experience, the novel also reveals --- and revels in -- the outrageousness of constructing elaborate revenge scenarios. The pleasure involved in creating

heroes appears in the text as well. *Tim and Pete* reaches a sublime height when Tim compares Pete to Jesus Christ and Pete's mother believes it. In order to get Mrs. Schindler, who works for Congressman Bryer, away from the conference the gang intends to shoot up, Tim pretends to be "Doctor Genet" with an urgent message about her son.[6] As Mrs. Schindler relates to Bryer, "[s]omething's happened to Pete [...]. They're saying he was crucified" (253). At first, Tim does not think they'll get away with this story and wishes they had "come up with something more 'realistic'" (253), but Bryer swallows it and even suggests that the medics should have left Pete there until "all the goddamn AIDS blood ran out of his body!" (253)

By stealing Jesus from Bryer and his rightwing Christian ilk, Tim converts an image of great power to his cause. If Pete is like Jesus, he has the power to judge the living and the dead, a role that Pete co-opts when he chooses to save his mother -- but not Bryer -- from the impending assassinations. More importantly, if Pete (and by extension, all gay men martyred by callousness like Bryer's) is like Jesus, he will ultimately triumph over all the hatred and violence directed at him to save the world. After rejecting the "realistic" in favor of a power fantasy that helps accomplish his plan, Tim comes to feel the peace that allows him to share a moment of affection with Pete that closes the novel on a note of hope.

Nevertheless, despite their borrowings from the traditional structure of fantasy novels and their semi-apocalyptic insistence on the devastation created by AIDS, *People in Trouble, Afterlife,* and *Tim and Pete* remain easily distinguished from works most readily associated with the genre of fantasy. None of these novels employ magic or create new worlds, and comparing the roles in fantasy novels of non-humans such as hobbits or elves to those of people with AIDS

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6 In Tim's story, some young Latino gang members nail Pete to the side of a doughnut shop in Sylmar when he tries to prevent their torture of a dog. Apparently, Tim's meetings with the "peoples" of L.A. only went so far in breaking down his racial/ethnic paranoia.

and/or Latina/os in these books only drives home the impoverishment of the "liberalism" animating some of these novels' depictions. Tim's fiction about the murderous Latino kids, a footnote in Pete's ascension to Christlike status, is probably a fitting epitaph for a conceit that always held the potential of sounding some ugly colonialist overtones.

If we accept Gottlieb's contention that dystopian novels need not only describe what could be, for a dystopia can also be a sociopolitical environment that already exists, the greatest point of similarity between canonical genre fantasy and these novels remains their shared emphasis on heroes questing to save the world or their happiness from ruin in accord with a moral code that may, in the tradition of an outlaw justice mythos, include terrorism.

However, this partial resemblance to fantasy unfolds amid the novels' habitual satirization of conventions, including those of fantasy. These books rarely miss a chance to deflate pretensions in service of a world view in which the status quo would be ludicrous if it were not so sick... or is ludicrous because it is sick. The satire and humor in these novels are sometimes aimed at the very idea that heroism could be possible. Other times, they supplant the role of terrorists with their own brand of destruction against targets that the authors seek to destroy.

In *People in Trouble,* the character whom Kate ultimately kills is also deflated by the novel's relentless caricaturing, which clearly sets its sights on Donald Trump. His ludicrous stand-in, Ronald Horne, represents a substantial threat to characters that the novel takes care to personalize. As Scott announces at a Justice meeting,

> [t]his is the man who has warehoused thousands of empty apartments while ninety thousand people live in the subways and stairwells and public bathrooms of this city. Now we have learned that he has purposely bought buildings with more than fifty percent gay tenants in the hope that we will drop dead and leave him with empty

> apartments. He files these eviction notices anticipating that some of us will be too ill to contest. (118)

The threat is realistic; ACT UP hosted a demonstration called "Trick or Treat at Trump" in 1988 in order to publicize a similar list of charges against Donald Trump (ACT UP). As Schulman wrote in her preface to *Rat Bohemia*, a later novel also dealing with AIDS in New York, this kind of capitalization on AIDS intersected with how "gentrification was a deliberate policy decision made by the coalition made up of New York City planners and real estate interests" (9). *People in Trouble* uses Horne to represent that entire coalition, and escalates Trump's already-absurd image to new heights (or lows) in Horne. His hotel, Horne's Castle,

> was renowned, not only for its lavishness, but also for the transplanted tropical rain forest that had been re-created inside the lobby to serve as a symbolic moat with actual crocodiles. The guests could feel like authentic aristocracy instead of the robber barons that they really were [...]. The men's room didn't say Men on the door. It said Bwana. The bathrooms were designed to look like diamond mines with black attendants wearing lanterns and pulling paper towels out with pickaxes. Chicken salad on rye cost twelve dollars. (119).

The unbelievable awfulness of Horne's Castle indicts Horne/Trump and his guests on a scale that disturbs attitudes of "business as usual." The undeniable privilege of celebrating diamond mines and the obvious servitude exacted from the attendants emphasizes what could otherwise be obscured: the ubiquity of racism and classism in the United States, and the gulf between the "robber barons" with overpriced sandwiches and the people forced into humiliating jobs in order to eat. Likewise, the moat with real crocodiles roots Horne's Castle in an international context of exploitation, as Robert McRuer explores in *The Queer Renaissance*: "a

'transplanted tropical rain forest' places the crisis in an even larger, global system, since actual rain forests in the Southern Hemisphere are being, in effect, 'transplanted' North, as the South labors to support the North's consumption habits" (193).

In keeping with the theme of interconnectedness, the vicious absurdity of the Castle reveals other absurdities. When confronted with "a blustering red-faced gentleman wearing a grass skirt and fuchsia lei, carrying a six-foot bullwhip" (123), a reporter merely inquires if the hotel manager always wears this attire and hears without remark that "Mr. Horne prefers that all management dress like tropical overseers so the guests can feel more comfortable and secure" (123). The bankruptcy of a media that could meet this menacing lunacy with quietness casts their coverage of HIV/AIDS in a new light. The gay man who with Peter watches Justice protest at Horne's Castle on a bar TV seems vindicated in his frustration when he screams "you breeder" at the "persistently plastic" reporter who never asks the right questions (124).

The proliferation of absurdity mirrors and marks the proliferation of Horne's image. He invades every aspect of the other characters' lives: he owns their homes, he finances Kate's art, he even invades Peter's supposed sanctum of the theatre. Peter's new intern announces, "I want to get a job on the new Horne musical opening on Broadway, *Ronald's Dream*. They've got lasers" (63). It's funny, but not really. It is not a coincidence that the cliches attached to the sort of satire that Schulman employs in her depiction of Horne are violent ones: she skewers him, she roasts him, she eviscerates him. The "real" terrorism in these books might be found in their ability to destroy targets with prose, and one of the great moments of activist victory in the novel revolves around a camp joke that Schulman borrowed from actual demonstrations at the time. When the police come to arrest the demonstrators at Horne's Castle, they wear yellow rubber gloves to ward off "contagion." "The demonstrators, being in top form, took immediate advantage of this

new situation by chanting, 'Your gloves don't match your shoes'" (126-127). A simple joke renders the police and their groundless fears as ridiculous as Mr. Smith, "who had climbed up a coconut tree for safety" (127). Shown to be as ridiculous as the caricature-overseer, the realistically rendered police also look powerless; they do not arrest anyone because "they clearly had no idea of where they could put three hundred prisoners with AIDS anyway" (127).

Schulman's satire can also be gentle. When Justice organizes Credit Card Day, a day on which they use credit cards lent by people dying of AIDS to purchase food or tickets out of New York for anyone who needed it, the description of the event is wry and affectionate. After some frantic moments, the organizers at the supermarket conclude that "they had no right to tell people what to eat. They could only make suggestions and immediate happiness was not a negligible goal [...]. Bob couldn't let go completely though, so he sat by the freezer section yelling out 'Häagen-Dazs, Häagen-Dazs!' hoping to have some influence" (199). Attempting to save the world has its ridiculous side, and Bob's love of Häagen-Dazs composes a moment of gaiety in the middle of a novel that is frequently painful to read. But even as *People in Trouble* pokes fun at attempts of heroism, it also enshrines the heroes: the laughter they provoke only emphasizes the camaraderie, something lacking from the lives of most of the other characters, they share in the name of justice. As Bob exuberantly tells the crowd, "remember that this supermarket sweepstakes is brought to you by none other than the friendly faggots and dykes of Justice" (197). Bob's joy can be read as part of the fabulousness that the playwright Tony Kushner claimed was "a battle cry of a new queer politics, carnival and camp, aggressively fruity, celebratory and tough like a streetwise drag queen: '*FAAAAABULOUS!*' (qtd. in McRuer 169) Intrinsic to that tough and celebratory laughter is a shared camp aesthetic, one that theorist Michael Bronski argues protects queer people who use it to deploy a "a first-strike wit. Wit and

irony provide the only reasonable modus operandi in the American Literalist Terror of Straight Reality" (46). While these novels recognize the potential reasonableness of other modus operandi such as queer counter-terrorism, Bronski's comment demonstrates the role of satire and its softer cousin camp in a war fought by queer people under attack.

Afterlife develops a similarly campy response to terrorizing -- or simply terrifying -- straightness. While the novel retains an ironic perspective on most of its characters' behavior, it reserves its strongest satire for Lou and Angela Ciotta. Lou is an actor on a popular sitcom, and "Mark's job was to graph the national turn-on that Lou evoked" (38). His wife Angela is a former Miss Arizona runner up. The scene in which the previously closeted Mark introduces Steven as his boyfriend to Lou and Angela nearly veers into farce, as Mark had not informed Steven that they were boyfriends. Mark disrupts an incongruously formal tea with this announcement:

> "Oh, he treats me real good," Mark put in, turning a fatuous gaze on Steven. "He fucks me and everything" [...].
>
> Steven choked slightly on a bite of scone. Lou Ciotta nodded gravely. "We don't have no problem with that. Do we, Angela?" (112)

While Lou, who sounds like Rocky Balboa, flashes his "34-share smile" and promises to have Mark's back forever (111), Angela takes Steven on a tour of the house that ends in her closet, which is "bigger than the master bedroom" (116). She and Lou are utterly out of place in their own house; they sit "on a Louis XIV settee, in bilious matching sweatsuits" (110-111), and their bedroom is a study in bad taste juxtapositions.

> The ducal bed was hung with oceans of brocade. The dressers and fat armoire were country French, burled and honey-colored. In contrast, one entire wall was stacked with video equipment high-tech enough to launch a Trident missile. [...]

> Every surface in the master suite was filled with baroque-framed pictures of Lou and Angela in a thousand lovebird poses. (114)

Angela models a dress for Steven, whom she seems to hope will be what he is not, "the sort of gay man with drop-dead taste who would know instinctively how she should look" (117). She also shows him her tiara, of which she says, "[t]his is not my Miss Arizona crown. It belonged to a Russian princess. We're not talking rhinestones [...]. Why does it look like rhinestones on me?" (117)

Steven finds the question howlingly funny and it becomes one of his and Mark's pet phrases. Despite not being the kind of gay man Angela pictured, he takes a good deal of campy delight in dishing her with Mark. At the same time, Steven is also saddened by Angela, who seems lonely and unsure of herself in the midst of her sudden wealth. Because Angela is so "pathetically eager" (119), she comes across as more human than all the humorous description of her initially suggests she could be. In fact, Steven acknowledges that

> he felt sorry for her, even a bit protective. This was curious, for three months ago he would've been spitting with rage, to think that these decadent hets could abuse themselves, squandering years [with cocaine], while men like Victor clung to their last days, sweet and clear and wasting no drop of time. These were the ones who deserved to die, he would have been thinking. (116)

Steven's protectiveness does not completely lose its edge; he and Mark later "shriek[] with glee" about "the details of the boudoir" (120), and Mark accuses Steven "of being simply perverse, Steven who was such a misanthrope, especially about the overfed and unplagued straights of the Westside. Steven stood his ground and kept insisting that, despite being a moron, [Angela] was sweet and had a certain intuition" (121).

This is probably not a defense that Angela would recognize as supportive, but Steven's flashes of hostility amid his new softer attitude pointedly reveal the purpose of *Afterlife*'s satirization of the Ciottas. Lou and Angela are absurd, but Lou also appeals to the U.S. in a way that suggests he represents it, particularly in how it excludes gay men and/or people with HIV/AIDS. Mark describes Lou as "Lou Ciotta, the current national mascot, [who] radiated health" (42). It is difficult not to read Lou as speaking for mainstream America when he tells off a recently diagnosed and thus snippy Mark by saying, "if this is some kind of fag shit, I don't got the time" (43). This is the man whose poster sold seven million units in two years in the States and whose show Mark's father watches religiously. Steven might defend Angela and even forgive some straight people, but Lou becomes indefensible when he, despite the promises born of his terror of AIDS, fails to help Mark get the disability settlement that would help him maintain his affluent lifestyle after leaving his job. "Lou screwed me" (153), Mark announces, puncturing with some gay overtones Lou's *Godfather*-style claims that Mark is part of the Ciotta family. The over-the-top luxury of the Ciottas' mansion becomes even more grotesque in contrast to Mark's fears that he will die without health insurance, but in *Afterlife*, grotesquery is the hallmark of straight male America, which continually rejects gay men. Steven's best female friend loses her boyfriend because he fears that he will contract HIV from the turkey at Steven's Thanksgiving dinner. Lou remains the darling of primetime despite of -- or even because of -- his stupidity, callousness, and thoughtless privilege. As Mark notes about Lou, "this one happened to have won the lottery. Happily he was also a moron, so he never lost sleep wondering if he deserved it" (42). When Angela leaves Lou, joking with serious intent that she plans "to clean Angela up and clean Lou out" (197), it reads as justice.

Of course, Angela remains ridiculous despite being superior to Lou. Perhaps nowhere is

this clearer than in her kinship with Sonny, which serves to make his spiritual beliefs appear even more ludicrous. "Angela turned to Sonny with a last Cleopatra smile. Wisdom poured out of her like musk. 'Be free of things and be free with men,' she said. 'The path never stops.' And then ducked into the back of the cab like a queen entering a golden coach [...]. [A]s they lurched away she called back over her shoulder like the scarf of Isidora [sic]: 'I'll be home for Christmas!'" (227)

The scarf reference is both a campy joke and an ominous one; Isadora Duncan's scarf ended her path soon enough, and though the novel ends shortly after Thanksgiving, two of the dinner guests have already died long before Christmas. AIDS humor such as the banter frequently employed by Mark and Steven -- "'Please describe your general health.' 'Dead'" (67) -- was enough of a literary genre by 1987 that Edmund White, one of gay literature's royalty, felt it necessary to inform the audience of *Artforum* that it was "grotesquely inappropriate" (qtd. in Feinberg 84). David B. Feinberg, author of the darkly humorous novel *Eighty-Sixed*, responded by saying that "[h]umor is a survival tactic, a defense mechanism, a way of lessening the horror. I would probably go literally mad if I tried to deal with AIDS at face value, without the filter of humor [...]. Once you joke about something, you appropriate it, you gain a certain amount of control over it" (87). If Feinberg is right, the impetus behind AIDS humor functions similarly to the longing for a hero; both are motivated by the desire to exercise some kind of control over the epidemic.

Violence and humor as methods of seeking control over AIDS intertwine in *Tim and Pete.* Tim best expresses the purpose of the shock humor in the novel when he tries to explain Pete's artistic output, which includes songs with titles such as "What This Country Needs (Is a Baader-Meinhof Gang)" and "Date Night at Dachau" (130, 13). Speaking of one particularly

prissy acquaintance, Tim says it was "[e]asy to imagine how Victor would react to the song title, without even caring to hear the song. 'Oh, dear. If that's a joke, it's in dreadfully poor taste.' There'd be no way of explaining that it *was* a joke and therefore also completely serious" (13). Tim and Pete's anger turns their jokes vicious. Tim thinks of "the 'giggle factor,' Bush's admission in '87 that there was still a 'giggle factor' in the administration concerning AIDS. Imagined cutting off Barbara Bush's head with a chain saw [sic], setting it on a stake. I'd giggle at *that*" (9-10). Pete and Tim's anger is real and serious, and the question propelling the plot remains whether or not their jokes will also become "real." They treat murderous fantasies as bon mots: "'Dannemeyer with his brains blown out at a Sizzler salad bar,' Pete might say. 'Smashing the Gipper's head with a sledgehammer, and Nancy's reaction,' [Tim would] respond, and [they'd] convulse with laughter" (179).

At first Tim and Pete remain aware that a significant number of people would find their jokes appalling, and Tim admits to sharing some of their compunction. He finds himself unable to stomach *Diseased Pariah News*, "the 'HIV humor' 'zine, where the pus-and-retinitis jokes reached critical mass and collapsed back into horror again" (110), and other similar attempts at humor, something his filmmaker friend Kevin remarks with disapproval. "Oh, no, Tim. Don't tell me that you've lost your sense of humor. That's become a major problem [in San Francisco]. [...] All this shit about positive gay images. [...] [My movie] was a black fucking comedy, not a goddamn training film" (110).

It is hard not to read Kevin's comment as one on *Tim and Pete*, especially considering that Baker once similarly snarled that "it's a novel, not a position paper" (Grzesiak). Part of the relief Tim experiences when he decides to aid Glenn comes from squelching the voice, which he and Pete have named after the actor Sam Waterston as the exemplar of an appalled liberal-humanist,

that calls for "positive gay images" and worries about the political ramification of expressing anger or making awful jokes. Tim's Waterston impression is really funny, and serves to destabilize objections one might make to the plan to assassinate a bunch of Republicans. As Glenn jokes in a layered rejection of both Waterstonian ideals and closeted academics, Nightline will need two experts to discuss the gang's deeds: someone to talk about terrorism, and "Susan Sontag, author of *Notes on Camp,* the seminal study of homosexual humor" (229). When Tim points out that it is unlikely that anyone would mistake assassinations for camp, gang member Mikey replies, "You never know" (229).

The attitude of "you never know" spices most of the humor in *Tim and Pete:* have they gone too far? Will they go too far? Sometimes they do go too far. Pete feels that part of the reason he and Tim broke up was because Tim is "always kidding. [He] has this way of turning everything into a cheap, ironic joke [...], *using* the moment to make this big, campy, jaded-fag comment" (76). As R. Jay Magill examines in *Chic Ironic Bitterness,*

> for those on both sides of the political aisle [...], irony poses a social problem. It reflects the ambivalence inherent in our ethical relationships with fellow citizens -- our promises, political responsibilities, civic duties [...]. The ironist, the oft-repeated argument goes, is fundamentally a bad citizen. He is as well to some, a bad American. (8)

Since the need to develop ethics capable of withstanding and ending the AIDS crisis animates *Tim and Pete*, the novel interrogates the humor the characters use. Glenn, the campiest of them all, irritates Tim into calling Glenn a "snide, demented queen" (220). Tim also regards some of Glenn's "humorous" artwork as "genuinely sick [...]. Not to say meanspirited" (178). The tension fueling the jokes in *Tim and Pete* comes from the limited choices on offer: does one

defiantly accept that to be gay is to be a bad American or does one insist that Congressman Bryer is actually the bad American? It seems that both are possible when Glenn, strapped and still joking about giving Republicans what they deserve, leaves for La Jolla. Perhaps, as Magill argues, irony permits "the subject to cohere a lived experience, a lived morality (or entire lack thereof) that is not eternally coherent or widely shared, that assails the self with contradiction and a feeling of invasion. Ironic detachment [...] is a way to cohere the tumult of the modern experience" (56). Or perhaps Glenn just feels good because he took speed. At any rate, his sense of humor seems inseparable from his hunger for violence; as he sarcastically predicted, both Susan Sontag and "experts" on serious issues would have a field day.

Magill's theory of irony echoes Brian Attebery's take on the postmodern fantastic novel, which claims that "by adopting a playful stance towards narrative conventions, [it] forces the reader to take an active part in establishing any coherence and closure within the text, thereby strengthening the conventional contract. But the same may be said about many other kinds of fantastic literature" (53). The greatest argument for the non-realistic natures of *Tim and Pete*, *People in Trouble*, and *Afterlife* may be the coherence they impose on the AIDS crisis through the use of humor and structures resembling the quest narratives of fantasy. This is not a phenomenon unknown to books generally classified as realism, and as Douglas Robinson reminds in *American Apocalypses*, when we "commune in the realm of fiction, [...] the realm we inhabit *is* a fiction, not a reality" (164). But *Tim and Pete*, *People in Trouble*, and *Afterlife* acknowledge a larger gulf between reality and their plots; the terrorism they describe is not ripped from the headlines, though it may be simmering beneath the surface. Schulman and Baker acknowledge as much when they talk about the absence of AIDS-related assassination attempts from the political landscape.

Like so much of HIV/AIDS activism, the novels look towards the future, however limited its conceptualization, in order to understand the meaning of the present day. Prediction worked as a powerful incentive to activism; as one of ACT UP's posters, created by the activist art collective Gran Fury, read, "By July 4, 1989 over 55 thousand will be dead. Take direct action now. Fight back. Fight AIDS" (Crimp and Ralston 108*).* Likewise, in predicting that the pressure of being queer and/or living with HIV in Reagan/Bush America will lead to terrorism, these books could also function as calls to action, though that call to action seems ambiguous in intention. Do they mean to incite people to assassinations or encourage people to stop AIDS before the worst happens? In painting these scenarios, *Tim and Pete*, *Afterlife*, and *People in Trouble* join with apocalyptic/dystopian fiction in formulating warnings for society through the use of elements not strictly true to life.

At the same time, the longing for political agitation and for heroes that underlies the three novels does not go unchallenged in them, whether through the use of humor or through critical examination of the role of art in a time of crisis. The next chapter discusses the ways in which the authors seem to reject the possibility of their writing bringing about the change that they also seem to hope it can accomplish.

Chapter 3: Make This Real?

The previous two chapters discussed *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* as activist or escapist texts, but these novels also demonstrate a critical self-awareness about the limits on their ability to offer social commentary or find emotional satisfaction in seeing AIDS as a vanquishable enemy. Main characters in *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* are artists or have connections to high or low art worlds. Through these characters, the novels often betray frustration with art's possible meaninglessness to people affected by HIV/AIDS, which complicates any tendency to read these texts as fantasies or straightforward attempts at activist intervention in the epidemic. The uncertainty these characters or the novels express over the purpose of art in AIDS activism and/or living with HIV reflects a prominent, many-sided, and sometimes rancorous debate that took place in the 1980s and 90s among artists, activists, and critics as to the value and meaning of art about AIDS. This debate also provides the grounds for considering terrorism a logical tactic in these novels; calling art's power into question implies that activists need more forceful means of resistance.

Art critic Douglas Crimp threw down the gauntlet in the Winter 1987 issue of *October* when he criticized Richard Goldstein, a writer for *The Village Voice*, for saying, "[i]n an ironic sense, I think that AIDS is good for art. I think it will produce great works that will outlast and transcend the epidemic" (qtd. in *Melancholia* 30). Crimp saw Goldstein's sentiment as a symptom of "the intractability of the traditional idealist conception of art, which entirely divorces art from engagement in lived social life" (*Melancholia* 30-31). While Crimp had a long record of examining the politics of art in the pages of *October* and elsewhere, he credited his new membership in ACT UP with influencing his approach to art and AIDS in this article (Takemoto). In solidarity with ACT UP's generally more collectivist worldview, Crimp asserted that "*art* does

have the power to save lives, and it is this very power that must be recognized, fostered, and supported in every way possible. We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it" (*Melancholia* 32-33). While Crimp's approach would potentially champion one-note art along with Goldstein's "traditional" art theory, in practice both men embraced an assortment of responses to AIDS that dealt with these extremes and their middle ground in varied ways. Crimp later commented "I [...] regret that my polemical views came off to some as doctrinaire, uncharitable, and proscriptive [...]. I took these early criticisms seriously and tried to make my arguments more nuanced" (*Melancholia* 24-25). Goldstein, likewise, considered Crimp's demand for cultural practices actively working against AIDS and ACT UP's artistic output against Edmund White's "elegant stories about AIDS" and concluded that "[b]oth these responses are functional [...]. [G]rief and reconciliation [...] are as much a product of the epidemic as are anger and action" (314).

The debate over art and HIV/AIDS still continues and obviously cannot be condensed into the back-and-forth between two art critics, but Crimp and Goldstein touched on many of the questions about art and its politics that appear in *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete*: can art be of activist use? What constitutes activist art, and are expressions of grief less useful than expressions of anger? Is it callous to place value on art that might outlast the epidemic despite the artists' deaths, and do we do that at the expense of the lives of people with HIV?

Sarah Schulman has weighed in on the debate on many occasions through essays and articles in various publications, and a talk she gave on "AIDS and the Responsibility of the Writer" in 1990 addresses her intentions in writing *People in Trouble*, which features a collage called "People in Trouble" that offers a platform for some self-reflexive criticism. Schulman

wanted *People in Trouble* to "express a precise political idea -- namely, how personal homophobia becomes societal neglect. That there is a direct relationship between the two and that this nation needs to confront this configuration in order to adequately address this crisis" (*My American History* 195). Despite the novel's central and acknowledged political agenda, and Schulman's accompanying frustration that it would not necessarily be heard or absorbed because "there does not yet exist a way for lesbian and gay male writers to address the straight male character and his societal power without being subjected to [...] dismissal" (*My American History* 195), she also undercuts any expectations her listeners may have that *People in Trouble* alone functioned as an adequate response to the AIDS crisis:

> [r]eading a book may help someone decide to take action, but it is not the same thing as taking action. The responsibility of every writer is to take their place in the vibrant, activist movements along with everybody else. The image created by the male intellectual model of an enlightened elite who claim that its artwork is political is parasitic and useless for us. At the same time I don't think any writer must write about any specific topic in any specific way -- writers have to be free of formal and political constraints in their work so that the community can grow in many directions. But, when they're finished with their work, they need to be at demonstrations, licking envelopes and putting their bodies on the line with everybody else. [...] The way we get justice is by confronting the structures that oppress us in a manner that is most threatening to those structures. That means in person as well as in print. (*My American History* 196-197)

Schulman's statement is both a useful reminder of a novel's relative immateriality -- writing a book in which someone assassinates a robber baron is neither the same thing as

assassinating him nor encouraging someone else to do it -- and a reaffirmation of the power of print. She argues for freedom from constraints for writers, but not in the name of art for art's sake; she does it in the name of community, a term particularly weighty in this context because she is giving a talk to a presumably queer crowd about a topic of particular interest to queer people. The desire to encourage community growth in this context runs parallel to the expectation that it is every writer's responsibility to become involved in activist communities, and together they coalesce to affirm for both print and people the possibility of confronting oppressive structures. While Schulman's expectations for writers are clear, the value of their work in activist terms remains uncertain. She did not claim for it the purpose that Crimp suggested when he said that art had the power to save lives. In fact, she argued its opposite when she said "[t]here are people in this room, many people, who would not be alive today if it weren't for ACT UP. There is no book that got any drug released, any drug trial opened, or any service provided" (*My American History* 196). Activism, then, remains separate from artist output, though she does not reject art. Part of Schulman's unwillingness to entirely dismiss the activist potential of art, despite her distrust of the "male intellectual model of an enlightened elite," may derive from her identification with and shaping of ACT UP's maverick aesthetics and ethos. As she acknowledged, "there [cannot] be any conclusiveness since the crisis and our responses to it change radically and daily" (*My American History* 194). She also had the example of Gran Fury's AIDS art, though mostly graphic and not literary, as a radical, activist response to the AIDS crisis: art that was not separate from demonstrations, but instead crucial to them.

Schulman's acknowledgment of the uncertainty inherent to being a community in crisis may be why her novel *People in Trouble* allows Kate to grow and revert as an artist and an activist without defining her as either a hero or a villain. When the novel begins, Kate is a visual

artist who, along with her set-designer husband, understands herself as "a poor artist [...]. [N]ot a powerful person in this society" (114). For Kate, being an artist counts as living a politicized life; as she tells Molly, "I'm an artist. That's political. Form is content" (114). But through contact with Molly and other queer people, she begins to re-form her understanding of what it means to be radical and how to accomplish radical goals with one's artwork. She also retreats from the stance she took earlier when she told Molly (whom Kate insistently positions as "the younger lover"), "Listen, Molly, when I was your age I was a lot more radical than you are, so don't lay [the imperative to recognize inequality] on me. That's your trip" (114). Her involvement with Molly, which leads her to an involvement in Justice, brings Kate closer to understanding Justice's agenda as her "trip," too. Her art changes; on the same day that Kate realizes that she cannot stop thinking about the mourners at an AIDS funeral, her dealer comments that "I sense a new level of seriousness in you, a new level of investigation" (98). When Kate breaks with portraits, her previous means of artistic expression, to instead create a big messy collage installation that she plans to position outside on the streets, she also breaks with the notion of permanence in art. The photos and clippings Kate uses in her collage are

> black-and-whites of young Negro men being bitten by American police dogs. There were colored images of acknowledged heroes lying in swamps of their own blood. She searched each one for the particles of physicality that captured the fear, the pain, and especially the willingness of some individuals to enter into it. This was one aspect of what she meant by *chaos*. At times the sum of her collection drew such a repulsive conclusion that she couldn't imagine anything worse. But, looking out her window at the unprotected bodies, she considered that this worse thing was somehow present there. (16-17)

In examining the juxtaposition of these images, Kate can only draw conclusions about fear and pain when she ignores what happens outside her studio's windows, where fear and pain continue without conclusion.

In the absence of surety in her collage's meaning, Kate turns to the famous *Life* photo of the Buddhist monk who set himself on fire in Saigon. "What Kate retained from the photo of a collapsing human flame was a flash of light that put its faith in smoke and ashes" (17). In other words, human life remains temporary despite all efforts to freeze it through art in *Life* magazine; even though the photo had endured for 25 years by the time Kate examined it, it still gives her the impression of a fleetingness that confounds permanence because its subject put his faith in smoke and ashes. This impression draws on a reading of the photograph that positions the monk and not the photography first.

While Kate never makes a show-stopping vow to put people before her career, she does admit to Scott that "sometimes a person has to stop talking about art for a moment and take a look around" (166). As discussed in the second chapter, her relationship with Scott is integral to her ethical reordering, and after he dies, Kate hears the news and quite literally looks around: "She walked outside and noticed everything. The buses had been painted a new color. There was a new song on the radio. All the kids were singing it. She passed two parks filled with street people drinking or sleeping or smoking Coke [sic] or cigarettes or crying or talking to themselves and to others or dying" (217). Although Kate frequently comments on the street people surrounding her, this is the first time she seems to really see them; she sits in the park with them and "smell[s] their urine and sweat" (217), gives them money, buys drugs she will not use, and pays attention to a crying sex worker.

When Kate finally returns home, she encounters Peter, who still wants her to recant on

her new life and attitudes. He emphasizes the divide between them by returning to the growing split in their beliefs about art: "I understand you feel a need to be politically active but I think that is something we can do together. Homosexuals don't have a monopoly on morality, you know. We have always agreed that our artwork is our political work. We have always agreed that challenging form is more revolutionary than any political organization can ever be" (217). This kind of self-excusing speech sounds particularly gross in light of Scott's death and Kate's new awareness of suffering in New York, and it motivates Kate to an anger that presages the destruction of her own collage: "She placed her fingers flat against his chest. It was a wall. It moved. [...] She wanted to dig her fingernails in and tear him apart" (218). This description is a furious, vicious, and oddly hopeful; Peter's views on art and "homosexuals" seem immobile, fixed in a thought loop that always prevents Peter from really seeing anyone but himself, but Kate can move him. But can she only successfully move Peter if she "destroys" him?

Kate seems to answer that question by emulating the Buddhist monk and putting her faith in smoke and ashes. At her collage's unveiling, her artistic, political, and social concerns intersect with the art practices and wider economic issues that she had previously avoided considering. Her collage, instead of being on the streets for the people's enjoyment as her dealer claimed, is instead part of the tycoon Ronald Horne's privatization of New York; it is the backdrop to his renovation of the New York Public Library into a health club to be patronized by businessmen. When the procession for Scott's funeral arrives at the former library, their presence emphasizes the obscenity of offering a health club to people who do not need health as much as do people with HIV/AIDS, people living on the street, or anyone exiled from the privilege connoted by the phrase "business*men* working in midtown [emphasis mine]" (220). Kate's collage, "People in Trouble," functions as decor for a place to which people in trouble will not be admitted. In this

context, "People in Trouble" becomes a spectacle to entertain more privileged people instead of an activist artwork, similar to the process that performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz describes when he talks about the decontextualization and sanitization of queer images for mainstream consumption as "a liberal-pluralist mode of political strategizing [that] only eventuates a certain absorption and nothing like a productive engagement with difference" (99).

Faced with the inappropriateness of seeing Horne use her images just as the activist group Justice begins to riot, Kate realizes that "there was very little time left for someone to act in a large way" (221). She choses to do so, "push[ing] harder than she had ever pushed [...], crawling on the dirt and garbage over wires, rags, cans of paint, and turpentine. She watched her own hands turn black and her arms cake with dirt and blood [...]. Dragging the cans and power lines to the base of the collage's wooden frames, she looked back at the chaos" (221-222). Kate is fully present in this moment; she is invested to the point of bloodshed and not just an observing artist. She puts her faith in smoke and ashes, just as the rioters affirm their faith in the revolutionary power of chaos by distilling it from their grief at Scott's death. When Kate destroys months of work in a matter of seconds, she seems to do so out of the purest necessity: Horne is wrong, Scott's death is wrong, and allowing the truths she tried to express in her work to be used as window-dressing in a scheme that does not recognize these two great injustices is so wrong that her work cannot continue to exist in this context. She acts in a large way, breaking with all notions of decorum or the artist's appropriate role, and that action so fractures business-as-usual in New York that the fire she starts to destroy "People in Trouble" also kills Ronald Horne, excessive symbol of Reaganomic excess.

This level of artist engagement propels Kate's action into the realm of art itself and not just the destruction of art. It appears to be a statement so powerful that it does what Douglas Crimp

argues art can accomplish; theoretically, Kate has saved some of the lives that Horne's policy of exploiting marginalized people around the world would take. The art world in the novel immediately seizes on Kate's artistic statement: "Kate developed a high profile as a result of Horne's death and could be read about in an essay by Gary Indiana in the *Village Voice* and one by Barbara Kruger in ArtForum. In fact, Kate began working extensively in burning installations and quickly got commissions from a number of Northern European countries to come start fires there" (225). This is a quick transition from the passion that drove her destruction of "People in Trouble"; invitations to start fires are hardly the same thing as the assertion of her power to burn despite Horne's gun, his armed goons in brownface, and the cops arriving to arrest members of Justice. Kate's removal from New York serves to decontextualize her fire-setting as much as Horne's use of the "People in Trouble" installation reduced awareness of people in trouble. Without Justice rioting in the background, her anger's specific source in the AIDS crisis erodes until her artistic project seems more about Kate's creativity in changing art forms to incorporate fire, a return to the attitude that content is revolutionary. Thanks to her rise out of the scene that nourished her artistic development, Kate's activism may be one of the fire's causalities. With her sardonic invocation of the *Village Voice* and ArtForum, Schulman suggests that Kate's behavior was a common path for at the time for artists in the East Village, supposedly an environment of multi-ethnic, multi-sexual, and mixed-class cross-cultural inspiration. As Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé comments in his book about the artist Keith Haring's arguably exploitative relationship with the former NYC street kid Juan Rivera/Juanito Xtravaganza, "[s]uccessful artists and gallerists, whether they had planned it or not, had all to varying degrees deployed the myth of the East Village as leverage to enter the mainstream. And predictably, once they had done so, some of these artists would disavow the impact of their East Village experience on their artistic career and

work" (136).

Perhaps Kate's success and subsequent abandonment of the place in which her success happened is less surprising than her attainment of a moment as "pure" as the impulse to destroy "People in Trouble." Her relationship with her dealer, Spiros, is founded on the rationalizations that Kate makes, despite her discomfort with him:

> [w]hatever contradictions were posed by Spiros, the old drunk who had made millions in the old country and stolen hundreds of thousands from the new one, he had changed her life. Opening up his world to her had brought Kate the necessary prestige and cash to live the way she wished. No more sets for bad plays. No more earnest art students. No more commercial sign work. (97)

While the novel does not suggest that starving in a garret is more noble for artists -- in fact, *People in Trouble* posits the desirability of a world in which no one starves -- it does imply that Kate's sense of comfort is somewhat inflated in comparison with Molly's. Kate's need/desire for the mental space and financial stability to focus on her art to the exclusion of some other concerns manifests frequently. As Molly's ex-lover Pearl says about Kate's relationship with Spiros, "So you can reap the benefits and remain morally pure at the same time. We all need someone to do that for us" (185). Immediately afterwards, Pearl breaks the news, of which Kate had remained oblivious, that her installation would lead the people regarding it straight to Horne. "He's making the dedication of the new building, didn't you know? [...] It was on the front page of the Arts and Leisure section last Sunday" (185).

Kate retreats in a panic to call Spiros after Pearl delivers the news about Horne and a few hard truths about heterosexism and Kate's fear of being called gay. She asks Spiros if he thinks of her as a lesbian, and he responds by saying "Absolutely not [...]. You're an artist. You need a wide

range of perverse experiences. No, absolutely not. Peter has been very busy with his work lately and you haven't been getting enough attention. But he'll take a vacation soon and I'm sure everything will go back to normal" (188). Spiros' insistence that Kate is not lesbian underscores the commercial art world's need for artists to be fundamentally "normal" -- straight -- despite dabbling in the "perversities" that can spice their art.

Spiros transitions into talking about the kind of artists he considers Kate and Peter to be: "[t]he world has not fully recognized the quality of the work that the two of you produce because you are both speaking the truth and the world is stupid. All of the world's great artists were first ignored because they were too far ahead of their time" (188). This is ridiculous. Kate is a grown woman who cannot properly acknowledge her girlfriend because she is afraid of the implications, Peter refuses to admit that he is actually quite staid, and neither of them are as cutting edge as the dullest member of Justice. The only truth Kate speaks in this scene is unconscious: the revelation that she cannot acknowledge the truth of Molly's importance in her life or how her career choices have implicated her in Horne's evil empire.

By abolishing a romantic notion of the artist's role in society in favor of examining the ways in which it can abet injustice, sometimes despite the artist's nobler intentions, Schulman questions the ethics and motives of her novel. Giving it the name of Kate's installation makes the connection between the two projects explicit. Both attempt to bear witness to communities' misery. In *AIDS Narratives*, Steven Kruger writes, "Clearly Kate intends her piece somehow as an intervention in the world's 'sadness' and Schulman perhaps suggests, in her depiction of Kate's work, the development of a certain activist aesthetic" (297). Kruger links this aesthetic to Schulman's by comparing the frenetic disorientation of Kate's collage to Schulman's fragmented prose style. However, both "People in Trouble" and *People in Trouble* remain individuals'

statements with the potential to bring more attention and acclaim to the individuals than to the causes their art espouses. But I think the similarities between the two artworks might end there; after all, Kate is a woman who refuses to call herself a lesbian, and Schulman has said that "I spent my entire career facing huge professional obstructions because I refused to repress or code the lesbian content of my work" (*Stagestruck* 29). This means that the novel, as Kruger notes, "remains deeply skeptical of the political efficacy of art except when art stands in intimate connection to a vital political movement" (300).

The suggestion that art becomes successful at the expense of the full expression of queerness also runs through *Afterlife.* The novel thinks about the importance of art during crisis but it never dwells on it, perhaps because it seems so firmly convinced that at least some forms of it are of little value. This may be the result of the difference in circumstances among Monette, Schulman, and Baker; unlike the latter two, Monette had taken care of his lover throughout his illness and anticipated a similar death. Monette's novel is the only one to present characters with HIV at the center of the text, and the hypothesis that art could save lives seems beside the point since they do not expect to live much longer. Meanwhile, Schulman and Baker could imagine actually seeing the end of AIDS, perhaps brought about with the help of their own actions. However, this should not be read as Monette's manifesto against the importance of art; he was a writer, after all, and his memoir portrays a man who, at least while at Yale, "believed that Art would give [him] entry to a no-man's land where the laws of straight no longer applied" (*Becoming a Man* 122). Perhaps the problem in *Afterlife* is that Mark's connection is to lower-case art.

In *Afterlife*, Mark has a loosely defined job as a television executive. This only seems important because it establishes that he is wealthy and powerful with a corresponding selfishness

and superficiality in his life, which he fills with a rotation of beautiful men and female dates to shore up his closet. After he tests positive, one of his first steps is to spectacularly quit his job, despite his reliance on it to provide quality health insurance. This move offers him some deep satisfaction, since it involves telling his obnoxious star client Lou, "the prince of the Wednesday lineup" (42), that he does not "really give a fuck" about catering to Lou's ego or making money. The text posits Mark's break with Lou as a moment of transition into something more meaningful, a new and more expansive life that includes living openly as a gay man: "[t]he lists of names on Mark Inman's desk would never be cleared, but for once he was unencumbered by all his previous lives. For a dying man, in fact, he moved with a marvelous stride" (44).

This transition runs counter to some concurrently common activist wisdom, which posited that ad executives and workers in television had access to the means of packaging and spreading information about HIV/AIDS that could significantly intervene in the epidemic. As Patrick Moore observed in a retrospective interview about his participation ACT UP, its members had "this incredible sophistication. Because that was the thing about ACT UP, there were these incredible graphic designers and – you know, people who were very professional in their lives, and who brought with them that whole world that they had learned outside of ACT UP" (6). Mark's rejection of his profession and the entire medium of television demonstrates a lack of faith in the ability to change his circumstances through staying mundane as opposed to being romantic, which is where he finds his personal salvation. The decision to reject television as non-useful to people with HIV -- especially gay men -- is affirmed throughout the text. Lou, television's exemplar, proves himself an untrustworthy ally whose AIDSphobia overwhelms what might have been a genuine desire to consider Mark as family. All of the media coverage of Mexican migrant worker Dell's terrorist activities composes a debased discourse: xenophobic,

homophobic fearmongering that obscures any intellectual or empathetic examination of the reasons that could motivate a person with HIV to resort to assassination.

Mark's rejection of television as a technique of salvation cannot be read as a simple rejection of socially conscious involvement in the wider world in favor of finding personal meaning, because after quitting his job Mark uncharacteristically becomes involved in a support group for people with HIV and part of a dying character's care-taking team. The dichotomy this poses places television on the other side of an ethos of caring, and dismisses the possibility of art's effectiveness as readily as Steven's grief rejects artworks as simply possessions. The art Steven and Victor collected on their travels becomes meaningless to Steven as soon as Victor is gone, and it returns to his new life with Mark as merely a punch line about Steven's snobbishness: "'Victor and I would never stay in a place without a concierge,' said Mark, draining the last word of its full pomposity. 'You must come over and see my pretentious collection of masks'" (236). Art, whether high, low, or folk, is a dead product instead of being the cultural practices that Douglas Crimp espouses in his activist criticisms of art.

As in *Afterlife*, *Tim and Pete* does not place much faith in the revolutionary power of art, but art remains vital: an integral part of characters' lives, and possibly more practice than product. Tim, a film school graduate who longed to make "art or cult films [...] that usually got good reviews and barely broke even" but found it impossible to do in the studio system (117), settled for artistic neutering via his job as a film archivist, though he continues to entertain notions of intervening in the AIDS epidemic with art. He asks Pete, "Would you mind if I used some of our fantasies? [...] I've been thinking of doing a comic book with Todd [...]. A kind of satiric, surreal story about two guys -- you know, boyfriends -- who have all these different adventures" (80). The parallel with *Tim and Pete* is obvious, though the novel is a more

"serious" exploration of what it means to hold these fantasies than Tim seems to intend as he elaborates on "the Chile adventure [...]. We'd fly down to Santiago dressed as poofy hairdressers [...]. And we'd botch Señora Pinochet's perm [...]. And then we'd gut Augusto" (80). On reflection, Tim sobers and comments that Todd, his friend who is very active in ACT UP, has "gotten so serious lately. I'm not sure if he'd consider [the comic book] political enough, or political in the right way" (80).

While Tim remains unsure that the kind of fantasy that helps him cope with reality would be ACT UP-approved, Pete struggles with his own confusion about art and politics. Pete, who carries a lot of emotional baggage from a painful adolescence, needs the release and attention that fronting his art-rock band, Drunken Boat, provides. His lyrics take on most of the institutions of the mainstream US -- religion, homophobia, government, sexual hypocrisy, and patriarchal father figures -- as well as allowing him to dwell on past breakups in what his bandmate Pablo describes as typical "affair queen" fashion (113). Despite Pete's sense of humor about his membership in Alcoholics Anonymous, he seems to be using the band as a form of self-expression akin to the therapeutic culture supported by AA. However, his attitude towards his role as an artist appears to be changing, as Tim notes when he realizes that Pete has added a new verse to one of his songs, "What This Country Needs (Is a Baader-Meinhof Gang)," "which did make it hard to believe he didn't mean to incite" violence (130). Even though Pete previously defended the song as "a catalog of fantasies a lot of people had but usually censored, a suppressed rage that the wrong people were dying" (131), the new verse states that the narrator's desire to drench the Reagans "[w]ith AIDS-infected blood" is not idle fantasy (130). Instead, it claims that "[t]his isn't therapy / This isn't art / Make this real / Go out and start / Pick up a gun / Kill a right-wing pig / Kill as many as you can / Kill someone big" (131).

Pete is in state of limbo at this point in the text. He recently tested negative for HIV, but he remains angry, framing his situation as one in which he still might seroconvert and be faced with the decision of whether or not to make a kamikaze assassination attempt as he had threatened to do. The possibility that he might kill someone seems fairly real; he already has assaulted the hideously homophobic Congressman Bryer after walking in on his tryst with Pete's mother, the Congressman's secretary. Tim, watching Pete perform "What This Country Needs," admits that the lyrics troubled him in the past, but now he owns to an ambiguity of feeling about the song that corresponds with the mixed signals Pete sends. Contemplating the possibility that Drunken Boat could make it to MTV, Tim comments that "[t]his was not the safe 'anarchy' of 'Smells Like Teen Spirit.' This was not anarchy as marketing hype. Then again it was no more inflammatory than rap songs like 'Fuck tha Police,' was it? Or *was* it? Who knew what could happen? American culture had proven many times that it could absorb almost anything" (131).

Tim's uncertainty as to whether or not Pete could be so artistically terrifying that his songs could not be domesticated implies a lack of conviction that art could intervene effectively in the political landscape. Neither "Smells Like Teen Spirit" or "Fuck tha Police" had brought about profound social change, and expecting Pete Schindler's small band to function as a form of resistance seems an exaggeration of its importance. When Pete's friend Glenn suggests that Pete's songs had inspired him and his friends to commit mass murder, he says it tauntingly, both horrifying Pete with the idea that he actually could be responsible and implying that it was not possible.

The question of inspiration is an important tie between Glenn and Pete. Glenn is a former professor at Cal Arts who lost his job after he contributed an extremely controversial piece to an Art for AIDS benefit. He rigged a rubber Jesus doll to explode during the gallery show to splatter

blood over the attendees, at which juncture he yelled, "You've all got it now! Now you can *really* empathize! 'Cause you're going to die too, you smug [expletive deleted in the *L.A. Times*]!" (162). Tim suggests that this is the inspiration for Pete's attack on Bryer, in which Pete "smeared his bloody fingers across Bryer's mouth" and screamed "I've got it and now *you've got it, too!* See how it feels, you vile fuck! You're gonna *die*! *You're gonna rot in an AIDS ward surrounded by fags!*" (43). This is one of the more clear-cut examples of art giving shape to violent impulses in the novel, but art does not motivate Pete's attack; his mother's betrayal in consorting with one of the most televised homophobes in the United States enraged him.

Mapping an easy interpretation onto the kind of inspiration that Pete affords Glenn is also difficult. Tim freaks out after his first encounter with Glenn's terrorist gang and their hoard of weapons -- which includes seeing a painting depicting the assassination of "a well known conservative senator" captioned with Pete's lyric "MAKE THIS REAL" (179) -- and he accuses Pete of sharing their terrorist jokes with the wrong person. Pete responds, "Before you get carried away with this simpleminded guilt trip, I think you should know that far from *me* inspiring *them*, if anything, it was the other way around. I wrote that song *about* Glenn. *He's* been a terrorist buff for years -- albeit on a kind of camp, ironic level" (199). In three sentences, Pete manages to describe worrying about the influence exerted by one's art as "simpleminded," disavow his artistic responsibility on the grounds that another artist inspired him, and emphasize that a discussion of terrorism can operate on different levels. His defensiveness betrays his fears about his role in what he now realizes is a terrorist conspiracy beyond the scale of the fantasies he shared with Tim. As Tim says, "It all seems so Neanderthal. I mean, *imagining* something violent as a kind of cinematic fantasy is one thing. But to actually start fooling around with weapons -- it's so dim-witted and heterosexual" (195).

But Glenn refuses to allow Pete to stay on what Glenn considers the safe ground of militant fantasy without militant action. Pete, commenting that "[y]ou could have had years" (221), tries to convince Glenn that he should not commit suicide by trying to kill Reagan, which launches rounds of thesis and antithesis between them:

> "[Years] [t]o do what? Die slowly? Make art? Perhaps a little of both?" [...]
>
> Pete looked at Glenn. "I believe art can affect things [...]. People. How people perceive things."
>
> "What people? Where? Jesse Helms? I know a better way to affect him."
>
> "You've certainly shaken people up with your work, Glenn."
>
> "So have you," Glenn said. "You've shaken us out of our catatonic grief with your inflammatory call to violence. I predict network sound bites of your Baader-Meinhof song over grisly visuals of our escapades."
>
> "Glenn, I wrote that song so I wouldn't have to do it!"
>
> "Oh, I see," Glenn said with stagy British gravity. "The depressingly chickenshit truth comes out. Art as catharsis. Art as therapy. Give the mental patient some clay. Let him make an ashtray. Well, I like your ashtray, Pete. I like it just fine. Let me pick it up and use it to batter in Ronald Reagan's skull." (221)

Glenn rarely expresses any emotion besides anger without ironic remove. As discussed earlier, his claim that Pete influenced him is made facetiously, but his frustration with the "chickenshit truth" suggests that Pete disappoints him because Pete's songs meant something different -- perhaps something more -- to Glenn than they do to Pete, who finds himself retreating from his more radical proclamations when confronted with their potential actualization. Glenn's implication that Pete is part of the condescending establishment that would

recommend making art -- a therapeutic ashtray -- in the face of "incomprehensible loss" echoes the sentiment behind Crimp's assertion in his criticism of Goldstein that queer people needed to end the epidemic instead of transcending it (229).

Glenn's boyfriend Joey, also an artist, is furious with Pete for suggesting that art could affect things because he feels that Pete does not hold the moral high ground. Pete is suspect because he is privileged. Joey tells Pete, "You used to say a lot of radical things, Pete. You used to say that if you ever got it, you'd take someone with you, some vile pig who deserves to die. Well, I guess you've kind of lost interest in that now that you know you're negative. You're into expressing your anger through art now. *Well, I don't have that luxury!"* (226).

Pete's privilege extends further. As Glenn pointedly remarks, Pete obviously longs for someone to kill Jesse Helms and takes pleasure in imagining Ronald Reagan dismembered. Because he does not have HIV and Joey does, Pete might get to see his vindictive fantasies filled and then go on to live a happy life with Tim. After Joey's outburst, Glenn speaks with unmitigated sincerity for the first time to tell Pete, "I love Joey [...]. I'd like nothing more than for us to go on being bad for each other, fighting and fucking and making art, for the next thirty years -- but it's not happening" (226). Art, then, belongs to people living without HIV, the massive unfairness underlying Crimp's outrage at Goldstein's comments about AIDS being good for art, and a motif that returns in *Tim and Pete* on its last page. As Joey presumably raids the country club, Tim thinks about himself and Pete in relation to one of Joey's paintings, which featured a teenaged Joey with his boyfriend Gary, since dead of AIDS. Tim was very moved by the love he saw between Joey and Gary, which the painting had managed to preserve and convey, and his awareness that he and Pete look similarly in love links the dead, the dying, and the living through art. But the peace and contentment Tim feels lying next to the man he loves while

thinking about art are emotions that the artist can no longer share; if Joey escapes death at La Jolla, his low T-cell count presumably will ensure, as Glenn says, that "*this* is Joey's last summer" (225).

The parallels between Pete's position and that of the author James Robert Baker are unmistakable, at least when Baker's fantasy about his novel's non-ending inspiring readers to march into gun stores is considered a possible outcome of publishing *Tim and Pete*. However much this fantasy overestimates the book's impact, which served only to derail Baker's career, Pete's situation draws attention to the ethical questions fueling the production of *Tim and Pete.* While the novel emphasizes that Glenn and Joey have inspirations and thoughts that have nothing to do with Pete and that Glenn exerts a good deal of influence over Pete by virtue of being an older man who once hurt him romantically, traces of Pete's thoughts are all over the conspiracy. Joey wears a Drunken Boat t-shirt, the gang listens to the band's tape while driving to the church where they plan to kill Ronald Reagan, and Glenn stops his friends from threatening Pete by saying "there's no way we could nail sweet little Pete's hands to a Protestant church cross [...]. Why, he's written our anthem" (212). The novel eventually dismisses most of its concerns about morality of killing rightwing politicians in a moment of resignation; Tim admits that "I had exhausted my appalled-humanist response. I thought of something that Todd had once said, even though he opposed violence. 'Assassination does change things profoundly. You can't say it doesn't'" (237).

This moral exhaustion does not mean that Pete's responsibilities as an artist evaporate, but the novel's emphasis on ethical responsibility does not rest only on the more obvious issue of terrorism. The novel, at different junctures, keeps returning to Joey's angry point about Pete's serostatus. After Tim and Pete witness the gang sharing needles and having unprotected sex, Tim

flashes back to

> the afternoon I'd driven up to Griffith Park during the celibate years and watched three men having extremely unsafe sex in the bushes [...]. The unsafe nature of the sex had appalled and terrified me [...] but I'd told myself that they'd obviously made their own decision about it and would no doubt have been doing the same thing whether I'd been there watching or not. But suddenly the man who was getting fucked in the ass had looked at me -- like a porno actor shattering the screen -- he'd looked straight at me with utter contempt, as if to say, how dare you cop a cheap, vicarious thrill when we're actually risking (sacrificing?) our lives to do this? I'd slunk away, feeling small and guilty, but still glad I hadn't let anyone touch me. And I'd still used what I'd seen, projecting myself into the action, when I'd thought about it jerking off at home later. (189-190)

Strong grounds exist for an argument that Glenn would have led his friends into terrorism even if he had never met Pete. This argument offers a similar vantage point to the one Tim occupies in Griffith Park, where he may bear no responsibility for others' choices but remains ethically contemptuous because he stays safe while others absorb the risks. Suggesting that Pete or Baker or other artists could be fully responsible for inspiring terrorist strikes is too reductive -- "simpleminded," as Pete puts it. Still, the image of "the porno actor shattering the screen" in Tim's voyeur experience demands recognition for the man in question as a human being, not part of an art project or someone else's fantasy or cannon fodder in the war against AIDS, and underscores the sliminess of wanting people with HIV to commit kamikaze assassinations. The sexualized excitement Pete and Tim feel at the thought of someone killing their enemies only seems to make it worse; their brothers' suicide missions arouse them.

While Tim recognizes problems in the nature of his voyeurism, he also feels compelled to use the park encounter in his fantasies. This compulsion echoes Tim and Pete's inability to talk much about anything but AIDS and revenge; despite feelings of guilt and discomfort, they repeatedly return with barely disguised titillation to the possibility that someone -- not them -- actually might do it. In relation to the broader context of art's social function, Pete's quandary recalls debates about authorial legitimacy and AIDS narratives somewhat similar to the ones that animate *People in Trouble*, which questioned who profited from AIDS art and concluded, like Glenn in his fierce contempt for the art benefit voyeurs he splattered with "Jesus's" blood, that it was not necessarily people with HIV/AIDS. David Feinberg, a writer who had HIV, addressed some of the concerns animating these debates in characteristic style when he said, "[s]ome may say that only HIV-positive writers can deal with AIDS, and they are beyond criticism. How can someone personally unaffected by the epidemic accuse a writer with AIDS of acting inappropriately, disrespectfully, and without dignity? This argument is absurd. As if identity can authenticate work" (88).

Feinberg's dismissal is funny, but authors schooled in lesbian and gay politics seemed to find it difficult to entirely delegitimize the politicized claims of identity. In *Tim and Pete*, Glenn and Joey insist repeatedly on their greater right to interpret AIDS, a position that neither Tim nor Pete feel comfortable challenging. Though he was "personally affected by the epidemic" on an emotional and communal level, Baker did write a book that some readers interpreted as inappropriate, disrespectful, and undignified, and he did so without the "mitigating factor" of facing a positive diagnosis or AIDS-related illness (Rivenburg). Despite Baker's frequently expressed exasperation with "political correctness," a position he shared with Feinberg (who, incidentally, approvingly reviewed *Tim and Pete*), the novel's repeated reiteration of the disgust

towards voyeurs as expressed by the man in Griffith Park indicates doubts about the "rightness" of Baker's position as a seronegative author who writes a book that suggests that "it would be a really cool thing" to kill Republicans (Grzesiak). The implication of course remains that it would be a cool thing for people with AIDS to do.

Despite being novels in which major characters admit to feeling triumph at the thought of killing people, *Tim and Pete*, *Afterlife*, and *People in Trouble* demonstrate a tremendous concern with ethics and morality. In *Tim and Pete* and *People in Trouble*, this concern localizes in its artist characters' anxiety about the purpose of their art, which indicates a profound engagement with -- though not necessarily wholehearted belief in -- the theory that art matters on a human level that demands certain responsibilities from the people who make it. Schulman and Baker sometimes rebelled against this stricture; as previously mentioned, Schulman believed that authors were not required to write about any topic in any particular way, and Baker told his questioners that *Tim and Pete* was "a novel, not a position paper" (Grzesiak). Of course people have always argued about the political and ethical implications of creating art, but it remains difficult not to read these novels in relation to the life-or-death intensity dominating discourse about HIV/AIDS before protease inhibitors provided some people with a greater sense of security. As Gregg Bordowitz, an activist working in video art, recalled in 2002,

> I remember I wrote my first essay, called "Picture A Coalition," which was a kind of theoretical essay about the [activist documentary] *Testing the Limits* experience. I wrote it for *October Magazine*, and I remember writing in it that armed resistance would be a justifiable response to quarantine. I remember thinking through those problems, and what would be a legitimate response. How could we defend ourselves from being put into camps? I remember thinking aloud

> that perhaps armed resistance would be one justifiable means. Now, I've never shot a gun, and I don't plan on shooting guns. I have since become very much involved with the politics of non-violence. But that's how serious the threat seemed to me [in 1987]. (31)

While Bordowitz probably does not speak for most of the people who experienced the epidemic in the late 80s, the way he connected his artwork to his thoughts about armed resistance indicates art's ability to provide the space for working though ethical problems as well as the impetus for thinking about them. Such "thinking aloud" influences the aesthetics and plots of *Tim and Pete*, *People in Trouble*, and *Afterlife*, in which characters painfully come to tenuous conclusions about how best to proceed in a crisis.

In her essays and articles written during these years, Schulman frequently referenced a communal willingness to do nearly anything, however unconventional, if it might help end the epidemic or assist people with HIV/AIDS, a creative ethos that derived its some of its inspiration from the knowledge that people's understanding of the epidemic was ever-evolving. In this context, pronouncements about which kinds of artistic expression were helpful in AIDS activism would seem premature and didactic. However, it might also follow that artists did not yet know what forms of art could be damaging, if art could be destructive. In other words, if people such as Crimp postulated that art could save lives, did that mean it also could wreck them? Since much of AIDS activists' work depended on seizing control of the discourse around HIV/AIDS, artworks in their various forms became highly contested battlegrounds with stakes that seemed higher than "simple" artistic expression.

Allying art and activism presumes several points: 1) that, as Pete claimed in *Tim and Pete*, "art can affect things [...]. How people perceive things" (Baker 221); 2) that people can

determine, however imperfectly, the direction of the influence art exerts over people; and 3) that a piece of art has real meaning in the real world. None of the authors examined in this thesis fully ascribed to these theories -- perhaps no activist ever wholeheartedly and without doubt believed all of them -- but their books grew from environments in which contact with these ideas was unavoidable.

All of these issues coalesced when ACT UP held a protest at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1988 against the exhibition of Nicholas Nixon's photographs, which, with near uniformity, showed people with AIDS as sickly, isolated, and depressed. One of ACT UP's flyers demanded to see depictions of people with HIV/AIDS as "vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back" (qtd. in Watney, *Imagine Hope* 101). Critic and theorist Simon Watney connects this to LGBT politics that call for "positive images" of LGBT people "in order to counter 'negative stereotypes'" (*Imagine Hope* 101), and comments that "[t]his approach to imagery tends to be rooted in a rather crude theory of representation, which regards pictures out of context as inherently either true or false, helpful or harmful" (*Imagine Hope* 101). He then agrees with Douglas Crimp, who weighed in on the demonstration from his position as an art critic and an activist, that single photographic images possibly were not enough to convey AIDS in its complexity, and hence argues for "the significance of the work of a number of New York based artists who address the AIDS crisis with a keen awareness of the role that representation has played in the epidemic, in establishing many misconceptions, from questions of individual risk perception, to treatment issues and health promotion" (*Imagine Hope* 102).

Despite eagerly and repeatedly reading Watney's work, I do not know where to find the dividing line between utilizing "a crude theory of representation" on one hand and "a keen awareness of the role that representation has played" on the other. I suspect it resembles the

supposed line between "legitimate" art and pornography: you know it when you see it. Watney's ambiguity seems necessary, since activist artists were in the difficult position of knowing that AIDS was "their" problem because they held identities, whether claimed or forced upon them, as members of marginalized communities, and hence found themselves underrepresented and misinterpreted by people in power. At the same time, their understanding of the complexity of audience reception and the possible futility of identity-based authorial claims to meaning implied that using artwork as an activist vehicle was an uncertain proposition.

The late 80s "avant-garde" art world unwittingly opened the grounds for a huge blowout on issues of identity, political meaning, artistic responsibility, and governmental homophobia when Senator Jesse Helms singled out Robert Mapplethorpe as one of the reasons to ban NEA funding to "obscene" artwork. A reprise of most of that blowout will not appear here, but I want to draw attention to the theorist Kobena Mercer's second, post-Helms reaction to Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* because it speaks to the deeply tangled impulses and beliefs that both inhibited and inspired the creation of art by people cognizant of these issues. While Mercer's response is that of a "reader"/viewer and not an artist, I find his troubled exploration of others' reactions to Mapplethorpe somewhat akin to the way that *People in Trouble* and *Tim and Pete* circle around various points about Kate and Pete as artists, without being able to find conclusions about the meaning of their roles.

Briefly and reductively, Mapplethorpe was a white, gay male artist who died of AIDS and became famous outside of art circles when Helms lost his limited composure over Mapplethorpe's photographs of naked children, gay BDSM scenes, and Black male nudes. Mercer responded twice to Mapplethorpe's photographic collection of Black men. His second response modified some of the frustration he previously expressed with Mapplethorpe's

fetishistic tendencies, which had irked Mercer for reasons that included the context of the photographs' display: a white man presenting images of naked Black men with stereotypically large penises in settings predominantly controlled by white people. However, Mercer commented on his second go-round that

> [i]f I am now more prepared to offer a defence rather than a critique of Mapplethorpe's representations of race, because of the changed ideological context, it is because the stakes have also changed. I am convinced it was not the death of the author so much as the cause of his death that was a major factor in the timing of the Helms campaign against the NEA. Almost all the discourse surrounding the furore noted that Mapplethorpe died of AIDS. The new-found legitimacy of political homophobia and the creation of new folk devils through the mismanagement of the AIDS crisis has proven fertile ground for the spread of popular authoritarian tendencies across the left/right spectrum. (107)

Much of Mercer's new defense includes considering Mapplethorpe as a gay male instead of solely as a white male, which means that his work could be read as one marginalized person offering visibility in an exclusionary arena to other marginalized people. Obviously, this defense relies on ignoring "the death of the author" à la Barthes in order to focus on the "real" meaning of Mapplethorpe's death. Mercer argues that "[w]ithout returning to a naive belief in the author as a godlike figure of authority, it is necessary to argue that it really does matter who is speaking whenever artists, because of their sexual, gender or racial identity, are assigned 'minority' status in the arts and in culture at large" (106). Mercer's new reading also relies on submerging his initial feelings of outrage -- what he called his "anger at the aestheticizing effect of Mapplethorpe's coolly 'ironic' appropriation of racist stereotypes" and his dismay at "the way in

which I felt identified with the black men depicted in the photographs [...] by sharing the same 'categorical' identity as a black man" (103-104) -- in order to dodge the appearance of being in cahoots with Helms.

But Mercer's anger, which insists on recognition of the dominant culture's exile of Black men into "minority" status, does not quite dissipate even though he questions the assumptions in interpretation that underpin that anger. I see a similar affect in Schulman and Baker's novels. Respectively an East Village playwright and a graduate of UCLA's film program, both these authors were, like Mercer, familiar with and made use of theoretical positions that decried fixed identity categories, censorship, and unsophisticated readings of audience reception. However, anger predicated on their "fixed" identity and their longing to define homophobia in order to combat it pervades the texts. In *People in Trouble*, some of Kate's complicity with Horne seems part of her refusal to see herself as lesbian; she has frequent recourse to counter-identity terms such as "polymorphously perverse" as shelter against seeing herself as part of the lesbian community she considers ghettoized. This means that her art cannot or will not benefit the people her agent suggests can provide her with a variety of perverse experiences. In other words, Kate might be queer but not a lesbian, just as Mapplethorpe may be marginalized but not Black. The confusion of contradictory claims about the necessity of forming coalitions and the necessity of recognizing difference leads to texts that cannot make conclusive proclamations about what these artists are (or are not) accomplishing with their work.

In *Tim and Pete*, Pete's outrage at his mother's relationship with Bryer is fueled by his claims to consideration as "her buttfucking, cocksucking son" against a man who rules by inciting homophobia (43). Claiming a marginalized identity as grounds for political consideration, though, requires respecting others' claims to one, which leaves Pete in an

uncomfortable position when Joey and Glenn point out that, as people with HIV, they find his songs to be hypocritical because he does not live them.

In Mercer's argument and in *People in Trouble* and *Tim and Pete*, it "becomes necessary" to claim identities that people seem to feel on a gut level however much they may deconstruct them later. Mercer has an emotional first reaction to the *Black Book* that he later half-rescinds, Kate really hurts Molly each time Kate insists that she "like[s] cock" even though Molly later gives Kate a book of male-to-female trans porn that shows penises (85), and Joey later apologizes to Pete for exploding at him for being bourgeois and therefore incapable of understanding Joey's position. The pressure of AIDS solidifies these instinctive reactions into insistence that it must be recognized that gay men and lesbians are people labeled and marginalized by a dominant culture (including its art) that has a real impact on their lives, though discovering where this real impact begins and ends remains an uncertain proposition.

If the composition of the dominant culture includes its media, and if in the name of gay, lesbian, and/or AIDS activist politics Baker, Monette, and Schulman accept art/media as a battleground with real stakes, then publication means that the authors step into an echo chamber in which people question the ethics of their novels and they cannot defend themselves by claiming that art has no impact on real life. This problem becomes a little less academic when we consider that these authors wrote books in which they either recommended or sympathetically dealt with a LGB-identified desire to kill homophobes. Obviously, these novels failed to win GLAAD awards.

The authors approach the potential moral quandary posed by writing about queer terrorist characters in different ways. In *Tim and Pete*, Tim rejects actual participation in an assassination plot until he is handcuffed and without much choice. *People in Trouble* keeps Kate's role in

Horne's death ambiguous; readers do not know whether or not she intended to kill him, though one of my theories is that his death is simply the fictional-logical conclusion to preventing him from co-opting her artwork. In *Afterlife*, Steven makes it clear that he thinks that Dell's actions were those of a fool with anger-management problems. But however deliberate an approach some characters or the texts take to imagining the complexity of terrorism and its fallout, the allure of the angry and simple reading lurks beneath more nuanced, multi-faceted ones. The angry reading insists on identities such as "gay man" or "person with HIV" that others have directly harmed by shooting off their bigoted mouths in the press or Congress or church or boardrooms, and then insists on finding a kind of pleasure in the deaths of these bigots. Steven is the epitome of the "bourgeois humanist pussy" whom terrorist Mikey loathes so much in *Tim and Pete* (210), but like Mikey, he sees some social value in the death of homophobes.

Even in Mercer's well-reasoned and "reasonable" assessment of Mapplethorpe's work, the anger of an outraged identity never quite vanishes. Therefore, in *Tim and Pete* and *People in Trouble*, Kate and Pete's need to navigate their own and others' claimed identities while attempting to be provocative artists means that some of the problems intrinsic to these attempts remain unresolved. While neither of them (nor their creators) ever give full credence to the art critic Crimp's dictate that AIDS art must be in the service of people living with HIV/AIDS, they also cannot claim to be free of political responsibility while being creative without other characters objecting.

Despite the quandaries inherent to insistence on "meaning," these novels remain ambitious works with grand expectations, whether it be the half-facetious hope of gay uprising or what Kruger's *AIDS Narratives* calls Schulman's use of *People in Trouble* to "recruit" new people to ACT UP's causes (301). In one light, they resemble Joey's painting in *Tim and Pete*, which

depicts a "well-known conservative senator's head [...] exploding at a barbecue" (179). Beneath it, "MAKE THIS REAL the messy text read" (179). Like Joey's painting, these novels seem to posit that art can work as a blueprint that offers readers suggestions to pursue activism and/or terrorism. At the same time, these novels point out how crude a reading that would be by scrutinizing their characters' art, which has contradictory meanings and contradictory effects. However, despite the doubts the authors express about art's purpose in confronting Reagan and Bush's America, they continued to write and thus demonstrated some "practical" use to the process. Reflecting the uncertainties felt by communities affected by AIDS, *Tim and Pete, Afterlife,* and *People in Trouble* use their textual space to work through possible solutions, coping strategies, and ways of living. At least in providing this space, these novels demonstrate a way in which art could work in the service of communal survival and thriving.

Conclusion

The last chapter left us in uncertainty about the point of fiction, which is always an awkward place to begin when drawing conclusions. However, the awkwardness feels apt in writing about books that might be called hybrid. These three novels are realist, fantastic, romantic, and satiric all at once, and sometimes the joins show.

Because of their makeshift aesthetic, *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* remind me of the die-ins that ACT UP and other activists staged in public spaces. When feigning death to draw attention to the existence of people dying from AIDS, these activists relied on a construct that signaled its own created nature -- in this case, the theatricality of performance -- to make a point about reality that they hoped would make a difference in the world. Die-ins can also function as predictive assertions, as when Paul Timothy Diaz performed a dance called "One AIDS Death..." outside a department store in 1990. Police interference propelled him to turn the dance into a die-in, which resonated against Diaz's awareness that, as a person with HIV, he could be another AIDS death in the future. David Gere writes about Diaz's die-in that "[o]ne could call this response homo truculence" (204). He continues to say that "this is only one example of this vividly tactical phenomenon. The ACT UP die-ins are a close cousin, made more truculent by their frequency and unpredictability" (205-206).

I think about die-ins in relationship to these books because their authors wrote them with a similar homo truculence and a similar search for tactics against the unfairnesses of society, a broad concept often symbolized by the police, as in graffiti that instructs its reader to fuck them. With a deliberately angry eroticism, *Tim and Pete*, *People in Trouble*, and *Afterlife* use terrorism to make statements about the reality of suffering caused by AIDS, even though their depictions of the emergence of AIDS terrorists are actually conjectures about the result of continuing

governmental and societal indifference to the epidemic. Like die-ins, they are partly "true statements," partly make-believe, and partly ominous predictions. They also share a passionate purpose and sense of commitment with the die-ins' participants.

When discussing her anger that the Broadway musical *Rent* had borrowed some of its plot from *People in Trouble* only to create, without attribution, a story about AIDS that she did not find truthful, Schulman commented that "when *Rent* opened, there were still a few works being performed that directly addressed AIDS from a truthful, historical, and emotionally authentic perspective. They were created either by people with AIDS or participant witnesses" (*Stagestruck* 52). Her emphasis on emotional authenticity is striking, since that might be, more than the "social realism" she claims for *People in Trouble*, the category most descriptive of what these three novels attempt. At least it encompasses the "yes, but..." reaction to arguments that would claim that these texts cannot be realist because they are satiric or fantastic. Obviously Ronald Horne is a grandiose exaggeration in *People in Trouble*, but the excess in his depiction tells a story about Donald Trump, and by extension capitalism, that rings true on an emotional level that might supersede historical accuracy in accomplishing an activist rewriting of messages that understood Trump as business-as-usual.

It remains important to remember that *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* are emotional texts. I say this not to de-emphasize their craft or the possibility of authorial detachment, but to place them in their context as novels written before medical advances made HIV more manageable for many people with health care. These novels were written in a time of great loss and pain, by people who struggled to maintain faith in futures better than the present. Baker was right; these texts are not "position papers." They are grappling attempts to comprehend what AIDS had done to the authors and their friends' lives, to process feelings of

anger and grief and despair, and to shape all these things into plots in which people had the chance for a happy ending or the possibility of finding one at a later date.

In "real life," one of the dominant narratives that posited a possible happy ending to the AIDS crisis was an activist one, as encapsulated in *People in Trouble* by the activist group Justice's exhortation to "do something about it" (47). *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete*, inspired by actual chatter about the possibility of people choosing terrorism as their means of doing something about AIDS, explore what that would mean. This is why Schulman's identification of "participant witnesses" is so important to understanding these novels. She uses the term to emphasize the agency and contributions of people such as Diamanda Galas, a musician who might be ordinarily understood as "merely" a witness to her brother's death from AIDS. I want to borrow the term and use it so that it also describes the function of these novels, regardless of their authors' serostatuses. Because AIDS was (and is) what Paula Treichler called "an *epidemic of signification*" (315), *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* do not just reflect AIDS history or fantasies derived from it. By virtue of their publication, they also participate in the cultural debate over the meaning of AIDS. When these novels write about terrorism, they help define the grounds on which to consider its potential role in the epidemic. Part of this venture includes determining whether or not terrorism was a good way to fight AIDS. More complexly, these books also examine anger over AIDS through the conceit of terrorism. This anger is a demonstrably accurate depiction of some members of the queer and/or HIV+ community's feelings when the books were written, which gives the novels a patina of truth despite their assimilation of genres usually considered unrealistic.

Genre classification is not beside the point here -- distinguishing between the social realism in the books and the elements of fantasy or satire that they employ is interpretively

important -- but, to borrow Douglas Crimp's vocabulary of art criticism, the cultural work these novels do hardly rests on presenting a view of AIDS that exactly corresponded to contemporary record, as the example of Ronald Horne as a symbol of capitalistic excess shows. Still, it remains necessary for *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete* to at least stay close to the concept of social realism. Schulman explains that she "chose[] social realism for [*People in Trouble*]" because she "needed a smooth surface texture to explore the complex idea at the root of the novel" (*Stagestruck* 23). A similar effect is at work in *Afterlife* and *Tim and Pete*. In order to have the ring of emotional authenticity that gives these novels their power, their authors need them to seem "real" no matter how much Monette, Baker, or Schulman may have longed to impose on the AIDS crisis the coherence of a quest narrative, with an ending achieved by an individual's actions, or to wield the control afforded by cutting enemies down to size through satire. These novels are not works of unqualified social realism, but they approach the classification.

I keep returning to the image of a die-in in relation to these books because that phenomenon encompasses the contradictions, the anger, the activism, the participants' doubts that their actions will be meaningful and their determination to try anyway, the qualities of fabulous make-believe, and the insistence on the truth that the die-in purveys that I see in *People in Trouble*, *Afterlife*, and *Tim and Pete.* Gere, writing about the chalk outlines drawn around bodies during a die-in theatre piece, says "once the outline is completed, the body shape quickly enters the realm of the metaphoric, becoming a visible metonym for the statistical recitation [of AIDS deaths] that caps the prologue" (159). These books use the images of terrorists to outline the same insistent reality, that of deaths and anger, even though they simultaneously question the activist efficacy of working in this medium. The chalk outlines they leave behind are perhaps

ungainly, perhaps not exactly in the shape of the social realist commentaries they are "supposed" to be, but these outlines still bear defiant witness to their attempts to trace the AIDS crisis as it occurred to them, "truly" and in metaphor.

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