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Acting up, Talking Back: TITA, TIARA, and the Value of Gossip

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“To paraphrase Mohandas K. Gandhi [sic], the Mahatma, ‘No movement can survive, no people can be united without some kind of journal, a newsletter, a TIARA!’” (*TIARA*, April 9, 1992). *TIARA*, the “paper that prints it all!” (*TIARA*, n.d.) was the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) Los Angeles’ unofficial internal paper. Like its sister publication, ACT UP New York’s *Tell It To ACT UP (TITA)*, it published in a weekly broadsheet news, suggestions, commentary, complaints, and gossip. Each issue’s contents are a bountiful mixture of the “sublime,” the “smart,” and the “petty” (Dobbs, 2006, p. 38). Through direct action activism ACT UP fought powerfully for legislation, treatment, research, and media attention to challenge the status quo, improve the lives of HIV/AIDS affected persons, and to defeat the virus. *TITA* and *TIARA* disseminated information, provided a forum to those who were unable or unwilling to speak in meetings, and acted as “steam valve[s]” (Ibid., p. 39) for the high-intensity affects of direct action AIDS activism. For their short lives, from 1990 to 1992, the papers were powerful information systems, both producing and reproducing the political and social system in which they were embedded (Fine, 2007, p. 14). Growing archival studies literature on contending with human experiences including affects, sex, and bodily experiences that challenge, defy, and problematize archival capture, theory, and practice opens the possibility for acknowledging and examining gossip. Through a close examination of *TITA* and *TIARA*’s form, contents, and tone I argue that gossip provides unique evidence of affect, sex and sexuality, and the individual and group dynamics that make and unmake social movements.

Gossip presents a challenge to traditional archival conceptions of reliability. However it is a practice worthy of serious consideration in the archival field as scholars and practitioners become increasingly concerned with locating new structures of knowing and alternative practices and epistemologies that take into better account diverse knowledges and subjectivities. Gossip makes overt and external its relations to “subjectivity, voyeuristic pleasure, and the communicative circulation of story-telling” (Rogoff, 1996, p. 58). As a feminized form of knowledge and way of knowing gossip has been ignored as a less- or un- reliable source. *TITA* and *TIARA* offer vital evidence about ACT UP. The exchange of gossip in the papers provides more than its informational content, showcasing the affective as well as subjective and divergent points of view. This article contributes to the study of gossip and rumor, examinations of ACT UP and related social movements, and to archival discourses on reliability. First, I briefly explore the intertwined and gendered constructions of gossip and affect. In the second section I build on studies of gossip to explore the papers in relation to the core archival concept of reliability. Then in the first of two case based sections I analyze *TITA* for evidence of conflict, discord, and their affective import in constructing and deconstructing ACT UP/NY. Finally, I turn to *TIARA* for

evidence of the roles of sex and sexuality in making and sustaining ACT UP/LA. Together these short cases allow for closer examination of gossip's role as a force simultaneously for alliance and community formation, and for derision and division within ACT UP.

Gossip, Affect, and the Production of Knowledge

A handwritten note in an early issue of *TIARA* soliciting submissions begins, "Gossip got you down? Then start some of your own!!" (*TIARA*, n.d.). From the start gossip was central to both *TITA* and *TIARA*'s contents and their affective resonances. Gossip is a practice of social exchange revolving around the dynamic transmission of information regarding a particular person or persons usually within a social group and in the absence of the person(s) in question from the exchange. It is often comparative and evaluative, an exchange of a "point of view" (Rogoff, 1996, p. 63). While not always or even often untrue, it is associated with the circulation of information involving unconfirmed or unreliable detail. From an archival perspective gossip presents particular challenges as a form of evidence in its complicated relations to prevailing understandings of reliability. In spite of these challenges gossip is worthy of serious consideration while it is one of few sources through which to access the affective, and the embodied practices and experiences of sex and sexuality. Affects and sex were crucial components of the dynamics that made and unmade ACT UP as a complicated and influential social group in queer life, and the fight against AIDS.

Addressing gossip requires contending with a complex configuration of human behavior, culture, information, and technology. The study of gossip and associated studies of rumor and legend span numerous disciplines including folklore, sociology, anthropology, psychology, communication, and gender and sexuality studies. The subset of this literature by feminist scholars on reclaiming gossip as a valuable form of social engagement (Rogoff, 1996; Spacks, 1982; Rysman, 1977; Ray 2013) is influential on my analysis. Examining *TITA* and *TIARA* marks a break with most scholarly work that examines gossip as transmitted orally. Scholars often define gossip in contrast to rumor. Rumor, the "transmission of unverified information" usually regarding "important persons" and "current events," is often analyzed as a serious form of social exchange with political, cultural, and social ramifications (Snorton, 2014, p. 124). By defining rumor and gossip in contrast scholars frequently trivialize gossip as merely a diminutive form of rumor or as "idle talk" (Ibid.). Such definitional work is highly gendered, with gossip being used to summon stereotypical images of women relaying trivial information about their neighbors private lives in late night phone calls or around a kitchen table (Ibid., p. 125). Gossip is therefore commonly relegated to the recesses of femininity or feminized masculinity (Rogoff, 1996). The boundaries between rumor and gossip are far more porous

than many scholars care to acknowledge (Snorton, 2014, p. 125). In many instances it is impossible to distinguish them, particularly when their content relates information about members of communities exchanged within those communities. Rumor and gossip also share stakes that pivot around questions of plausibility and credibility to the audience with whom the information is shared and subsequently stalled or further circulated. In addition, both forms are primarily disseminated outside of formal media or organizational authority (Donovan, 2007, p. 61). The trivialization and feminization of gossip demonstrates how sexism “inflects the very valuation of certain knowledges and ways of knowing” (Snorton, 2014, p. 125).

TITA and *TIARA* are situated in a queer culture of gossip. There is a significant literature that examines gossip in relation to the specificities of queer lives, identities, politics, and culture (Butt 2005; Muñoz 1996; Kostenbaum 2001; Doyle 2007; Fackler 2010; Holmes 2015; Snorton 2014). Performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz described gossip as a practice of queerness and of queer worldmaking. He writes that rather than existing in more visible forms of evidence, “queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility” (Muñoz, 1996, p. 6). Building on Muñoz, art historian Gavin Butt (2005) argues that it was gossip that allowed queer artists in New York’s art world to create their own understanding of culture as a queer space. In a similar argument, cultural critic Wayne Koestenbaum (2001) describes the centrality of gossip to his own queer identity formation in writing about opera divas and gay male culture. Gender studies scholar Maria Francesca Fackler when analyzing the import of queer gossip online highlights the role of gossip in establishing and maintaining bonds of friendship, especially for marginalized groups who “most need such bonds of solidarity” (2010, p. 390). I build on the queer and feminist project of recuperating gossip as discourse that produces and reproduces power, politics, values, alliances, and affects.

Affects are those forces that create a relationship (conscious or otherwise) between a body (individual or collective) and the world (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p. 1). Drawing on affect theory, the humanistic examination of affect, emotion, and feeling, I employ affect as a category that includes and reaches beyond feelings and emotions. Marking briefly the distinction between affect, feeling, and emotion clarifies their relation. Emotion is generally used to name that feeling that is given to a function or meaning and is tied to action. In contrast affect is something larger and less formed, structured, and fixed that shares many of the same qualities and may even be of the same kind as emotion (Ngai, 2005, pp. 26-27). It is culturally, socially, and historically constructed. Affect is deeply implicated in how people share or deny one another resources such as knowledge,

power, or agency (Harding and Pribram, 2004, p. 873; Zembylas, 2007, p. 180) and is key to the formation of social relationships, differences, identities, and subjectivities (Zembylas, 2007, p. 180). For the purposes of this document-based analysis it is important to note that affect does not simply circulate between persons; it is also engendered in the encounter of bodies with objects (Ahmed, 2004, p. 4). In a manner very similar to gossip, affect has been devalued as a form of knowledge and as a means of knowledge production in archival scholarship and practice. Gendered notions of knowledge production have led to discourses and a politics of research in which “detachment, objectivity and rationality” are valued and “implicitly masculinized,” while “engagement, subjectivity, passion and desire” are “devalued and frequently feminized” (Anderson and Smith, 2001, p. 7; Kwan 2007, p. 24).

“Will you print vicious gossip? (I hope so!)” writes one *TIARA* commenter (*TIARA*, 1, n.d.). Gossip holds individual and social value. It serves in significant part an affective purpose, people gossip because it is pleasurable to do so (Spacks, 1982, p. 25). This pleasure is the result of contextual factors—friendship, membership, or other intimacy, the opportunity gossip offers to articulate and transmit values, and its affirmation of alliance (Ibid., p. 30). Gossip can also be seen to signify a set of cultural anxieties produced at the very nexus of both “identification and social taboo” (Snorton, 2014, pp. 124-125). Gossip ties a group together (Gluckman, 1963) and can serve as a mark of membership as members must understand the scandals, figures, coded information, and topics of gossip, as well as the group’s unwritten rules of legitimate gossip. Butts analysis of how through gossip a group of gay artists found themselves and identified with it in their “self-fashioning as artists” and in their work through the adoption of “hints, ambiguity, and the undecidable” (Doyle, 2007, p. 517) illustrates this point. It is through gossip that these artists transformed their positions from abject outsiders into insiders (Ibid.). Gossip derives from and depends to a degree upon trust. It can allow for marginalized individuals to “organize their strangerhood into relations of trust” (Fackler, 2010, p. 395). Looking to gossip offers a measure of access to what ACT UP deemed “valuable or harmful,” as well as the “nature of the affective bonds” within the group (Coast and Fox, 2015, p. 229).

Evidence and the Reliability of Gossip

In order to look at gossip as a form of archival evidence it is necessary to examine how the concept of evidence is deployed in archival studies. As information studies scholar Jonathan Furner defines it “evidence” in archives is broadly that “which we consider or interpret in order to draw or infer a conclusion about some aspect of the world” (2004, p. 247). Evidence is commonly used to describe that which brings the past event, that which is now invisible, back into plain view (MacNeil, 2000, p. 40). It is “relational” (Furner, 2004) and “contingent”

(Caswell and Gilliland, 2015) meaning that documentation is a component in making an argument or case. Records therefore do not stand independently, speak for themselves, nor are they inherently truthful (Ibid.). It is through their activation as such that records become understood as evidence.

As noted in the Society of American Archivists' definition of evidence for an archival "record to be accepted as credible evidence" it is necessary for it to be "demonstrated that the record is authentic and reliable" (Pearce-Moses, 2005b). Gossip, such as that printed in *TITA* and *TIARA*, presents a challenge to traditional archival conceptions of reliability. At their core definitions of reliability revolve around the concept that the record is a consistent (Pearce-Moses, 2005c), a full, and an accurate representation of the activities to which it attests (Trace and Francisco-Revilla, 2015). As archival scholar Heather MacNeil writes, the "reliable record is one that is capable of standing for the facts to which it attests. Reliability thus refers to the truth-value of the record as a statement of facts and it is assessed in relation to the proximity of the observer and recorder to the facts recorded" (2000, p. 39). Reliability is often used synonymously with trustworthiness (Pearce-Moses, 2005c). The records analyzed are found at the New York Public Library (NYPL) and the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, archives that adhere to accepted methods and procedures for the records' maintenance and use over time. These issues of *TITA* and *TIARA* therefore present no challenge to the components of reliability that are ensured in the archives and its processes. The papers' content and mode of creation are what challenges standard notions of reliability as there was little to no procedural or technical control exerted over these records during their active lives (Gilliland-Swetland and Eppard, 2000). In fields beyond the archives, gossip has long been reviled in relation to empirical and verifiable trajectories of historical evidence (Rogoff, 1996). Gossip relies on notions of plausibility and credibility, as well as the interest and affective value that it holds for audiences for its circulation and valuation. It does not make a claim to veracity or strict control. In looking to the value of gossip, as Michelle Caswell and Anne Gilliland (2015) write in relation to other challenging records, "veracity may be less important in ascertaining the weight of a document than its emotive capacity to effect particular understandings and outcomes" through its "invocation as evidence in support of a claim."

"Nobody's Friend": *TITA*, Discord, and the Bad Feelings of Activism

"Nobody's Friend: My Name is Gossip," begins an anonymous *TITA* entry. It continues,

"I have no respect for justice. I maim without killing. I break hearts and ruin lives. I am cunning and malicious and gather strength with age. The more I am quoted the more I am believed. My victims are helpless. They cannot protect themselves against me because I have no name and no face.

To track me down is impossible. The harder you try, the more elusive I become. I am nobody's friend. Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same. I topple governments and wreck marriages. I ruin careers and cause sleepless nights, heartaches, and indigestion. I make innocent people cry in their pillows. Even my name hisses..." (*TITA*, March 18, 1991).

This comment displays the dramatic tone and emotionally charged language employed by many *TITA* contributors. In contrast to the commenter's perspective I argue that the "irresistible" (Dobbs, 2006, p. 38) gossip *TITA* published (re)produced a complex configuration of discord and harmony, pleasure and suffering. Gossip offered a much needed and playful forum for processing the difficult affective experiences and emotional labors of direct action AIDS activism. *TITA* is a unique and fertile source for accessing the liminal, in-between, and overlapping rhetorics and affects circulating in ACT UP/NY.

Formed by a group of concerned individuals gathered at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in New York City in March 1987, ACT UP was one of the most powerful and best known AIDS direct action advocacy groups. Their many demonstrations and actions were often visual and theatrical. At a "General Meeting" every Monday night ACT UP/NY members shared announcements, information on actions in development, follow-ups on previous actions, and operational requests. The group was at its peak of activity during the early 1990s. By 1996, ACT UP/NY had serious internal divisions over tactics and its relationship to both the AIDS and lesbian, gay and queer movements. It also faced a declining membership due to death and burnout as well as a series of financial troubles (NYPL, 2008). ACT UP/NY donated their records to the (NYPL) in the midst of this decline. In addition to a run of *TITA*, their large collection contains administrative files; minutes; correspondence; action, demonstration and zap records; financial, chapter, and committee records; subject files; ephemera; photographs; and artifacts.

"A hot read," *TITA* was published weekly from 1990 through 1992. It was ACT UP/NY's internal complaint and suggestion broadsheet (Dobbs, 2006). Bill Dobbs served as its founder and sole editor. Dobbs, a veteran activist, joined ACT UP/NY early on, participating in actions and assisting with their legal work. *TITA* was born after he decided that the group had become big enough to have some kind of internal newsletter. Dobbs' made an announcement at the very next meeting, passed a box around, and set the precedent for the paper that "whatever was put into the box got published" (Ibid., p. 38). *TITA* relied on the Xerox machine that Dobbs' dubs "the most marvelous thing about ACT UP" (Ibid., p. 39). It was a big, fancy, and expensive machine available to all working in ACT UP and on AIDS activism. Technology crucially shaped the transmission patterns of gossip, creating a particular geography of communication in ACT UP. Dobbs describes how it took him anywhere from a couple of hours to three, four, or five

hours to edit *TITA* each week since he didn't have a computer at the time. Instead he relied on a typewriter, cutting and pasting each entry. This work was in his words a "pain," but one that "had its pleasures" (Ibid., p. 40). *TITA* was a forum for ongoing debate, Dobbs would run the entries, then they (and sometimes he) would get attacked, and then he would publish that attack and so on. The result is a record that is "a little more real than the official publications" (Ibid., p. 38).

TITA "took off like crazy," with four to six hundred copies flying off the back table at weekly meetings (Ibid.). That back table offered up in Dobbs' words an "incredible cornucopia of news" that "got stuff out in a way that is almost unimaginable now that we are in the computer age" (Ibid., p. 39). The table was always piled high with stacks of literature, including guides to the New York AIDS community that ranged from updates on clinical trial to new age lectures. There were also personal testimonies, often about friends who had died (Strub, 2014, pp. 202-203). The table was accompanied by another for fundraising that sold T-shirts, stickers, books, posters, buttons, postcards, and mugs (NYPL, 2008, p. vi). Former ACT UP/NY members have described picking up whatever looked appealing from the literature table and then sending the most interesting tidbits to friends around the country (Strub, 2014, pp. 202-203).

While ACT UP/NY meetings had always been the site of heated debate, contention, and strong feelings the emergence and growth of *TITA* corresponded with what scholar and ACT UP/NY member Douglas Crimp describes as a period of only "setbacks" and "disappointments" for the group (1992, p. 3). This came in the wake of a period of significant success in ACT UP/NY's first two and a half years where they had achieved goals including focusing greater attention from the media and the public on AIDS and had made powerful interventions in policy, especially around drug development. These setbacks included significant divisions within the group. Such tensions were often heightened by the group's consensus-based decision-making process (Brouwer, 2006, p. 199). ACT UP/NY's fragile political unity was negatively affected by the increasing knowledge of the breadth and depth of the crisis, in terms of how many populations were affected and the extent of social change necessary to improve survival and lives for such diverse people (Ibid.). The affective intensity of these conflicts was intimately tied to the broader landscape of "despair and desperation" in that moment of the AIDS crisis (Gould, 2009, pp. 349, 392). Conflicts were about focus, strategy, finances, and between groups and individuals with differing identities and priorities. Negotiating such intense conflicts was both "painful and perilous" (Crimp, 1992, pp. 14-15) splitting or dissolving altogether some ACT UP chapters. Gossip as a form of political discourse allows for a critique of the social order and helps audiences to cope with the "ambiguities and strains of an uncertain present" (Fine, 2007, p. 7). The tone, voice, and content of gossip in

TITA underlines both what bound ACT UP together in a common cause and that which underlined conflicts within the group.

There are a few conflicts that played out in the gossip filled pages of *TITA* that point to its evidential power in making the affective accessible. One such conflict took place over the issue of media representation and the associated perception that ACT UP was being pushed into the position of having leaders. There was much critique of those figures that received such attention. One contributor wrote, following the *Wall Street Journal* profile of Peter Staley, “Who elected Peter Staley ACT UP poster boy? Advocate, Rolling Stone, Donahue Show, etc. Anyway, ironically, for a group that goes through such great agony to be democratic there is an air of high school cliquishness and elitism developing within ACT UP. Coordinating Committee = Student Council, Media = Year Book, ACT UP star = Big Man on Campus.”

Dropping the playful tone the contributor continues,

“...we all are valid ACT UP spokespeople, not just the cute, white, middle class, males among us, because we all are ACT UP. Let’s institute a random selection process to handle media request so a more balanced and representative image of us are projected so that none of us become icons. The current process, which I assume is handled by the Media Committee, smacks of old-boy-networking. Come on ACT UP stars (you know who you are), your fifteen minutes are up. Signed, A Plea” (*TITA*, 6, n.d.).

This contributor addresses directly the critique that some of those persons being appointed or appointing themselves “ACT UP leaders” were enjoying the newfound attention too much. As is common in the papers the contributor combines a playful and casual tone with serious critique and suggestion for change. This comment also gestures to the serious divisions in the group over race, class, and gender. Staley took advantage of the back and forth of *TITA* writing in a signed comment, “In response to the anonymously placed rumor about me in *TITA* two weeks ago, it was bullshit....It’s depressing having my commitment to AIDS activism questioned by somebody who spends their time placing anonymous rumors and personal attacks in *TITA*” (*TITA*, January 2, 1991). Staley remained a frequent subject of *TITA* attention and gossip, along with other figures deeply involved in the movement.

It is interpersonal conflicts between members that inspired the contents of much of *TITA*’s gossip. A contested experience of over-heard gossip at an ACT UP meeting, prompted Derek Link to write in, “I was sitting in a crowded room, in front of a group of people I don’t know...[the] group proceeded to offer commentary on me. They were vicious. They ripped me to shreds, clearly audible to me, without mercy. They weren’t attacking my work or my ideas. They were attacking me. The truly remarkable part is that I have never spoke to this woman

or her group...She had no idea who I am or what I do" (*TITA*, February 24, 1992). This experience marked the final straw for Link, he continues, "ACT UP no longer feel like a place for me...Last year saw too many deaths and too many defeats for me to continue in an organization that offers me hostility and malice...I have made the decision to leave ACT UP...its very hard and it makes me very sad to write this..." (Ibid.). Link's comment explicitly names the bad feelings of doing AIDS activism in the face of increasing deaths and a seeming lack of progress in policy, treatment, or widespread social change. His long contribution prompts a number of replies over the following weeks. The tone of these replies is affectively charged, one anonymous contributor wrote, "Derek Link, stop being such a cry baby. With all your arrogance and white male privilege that you take for granted...I have been a witness several times to your outbursts and arrogance and viciousness..." (*TITA*, March 9, 1992). This commenter highlights the tensions that arose around gender in ACT UP/NY. They continue,

"You seem so eager to shimmy up to the AIDS power brokers like Dr. Fauci, Dr. Erin, the pharmaceutical companies, that anyone who isn't your stripe of orthodoxy is not up to your snuff. Are you the enemy or are you fighting the enemy with us? The distinction has long ago become blurred. You act like a child with your temper tantrums, yet when someone criticizes you become even more childish. Grow up. If you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen as Harry S. Truman used to say" (Ibid.).

This conflict also prompts the more succinct, "Derek Link—good riddance to bad rubbish!" (Ibid.). This dialogue points to the personal nature of engaging in such activism and deep investment of activists in the group and their work. It also highlights the affectively charged atmosphere in which they endeavored.

Much of the conflict within ACT UP/NY in this period revolved around the diverse identities, experiences, affiliations, and the closely associated priorities of its members. Conflicts and internal divisions centered on race, class, gender, and health status were particularly acute. For some gay male members personally facing HIV and AIDS, they felt betrayed by what they perceived as ACT UP's increasing and misguided focus on issues of racism and sexism, rather than prioritizing AIDS and finding medical treatments for it. An anonymous author identifying himself only as a "GWM" (gay white male) wrote to *TITA*, "Why is it that our discussions every Monday night are about children, women, prisoners, people of color, etc. with AIDS, yet the announcements of deaths of ACT UP members are, like the majority of ACT UP members, usually Gay White Males?" (*TITA*, July 15, 1991). In a similar vein, Charlie Franchino wrote in the July 1990 issue, "I personally feel more of a kinship with the scientists I met in San Francisco [during an international AIDS conference] than I do with certain members of ACT UP" (*TITA*, July 9, 1990, p. 1). The tone of such comments

points to the deep affective attachments of members to the group and subsequent depth of feelings of betrayal some felt. Class also played a significant role in these tensions and conflicts. One *TITA* commenter wrote, “Dear David Pearl: Perhaps it wasn’t arrogance or oversight that one oft-quoted member of ACT UP did not please the (rent) pumpkin. Maybe it was poverty. Let’s simply ask the poor not to attend ACT UP meetings” and signed only as “A Welfare Cheat” (*TITA*, February 10, 1992, p. 2). The economic status of some ACT UP members meant they did not need to worry personally about access to healthcare or housing, and could choose make treatment their priority.

TITA itself became the subject of controversy. Expressing concern about *TITA* as a forum to circulate anonymous, personal attacks against other ACT UP/NY members, one member, Tony Favis, formally proposed that *TITA* refuse to publish anonymous contributions (Brouwer, 2006, p. 199). It was in all actuality very “easy to make an anonymous attack” in *TITA* as Dobbs had “no requirement about signing items” (2006, pp. 38-39). The promise of anonymity also meant that many things that would not have been discussed otherwise had an outlet. Signatures have been used as “a fundamental test for authenticity” of records. A signature identifies the creator and establishes the relationship between the creator and the record” (Pearce-Moses, 2005a). The option of refusal of such a relationship opened *TITA* as a unique discursive arena for oppositional statements and complicated arguments, as well as petty gossip and ad hominem attacks.

While many of the published entries offer evidence in their wording of emotional responses, together they offer a view into something larger—the affective. By reading the issues, including some of the comments excerpted here, a broader picture of the affective atmosphere emerges. This atmosphere includes that which was not or could not be explicitly articulated. *TITA* marked a rare space for the explicit acknowledgement and expression of affective resonances that can be read through the contributors’ rage, fear, betrayal, non-recognition, mistrust, burnout and anger—the bad feelings of activism. Such feelings were common and there was little outlet for them within ACT UP. The internal conflicts that played out in *TITA* can be read meaningfully as a response to the despair and desperation wrought by growing death tolls and the feeling among many activists that they were not doing enough to fight AIDS. In that climate it is unsurprising that some members turned inward towards the movement in an attempt to figure out what was standing in the way (Gould, 2009, p. 392). The despair also made such internal conflicts unbearable to many, which may have contributed to the decline in membership (Ibid., p. 393). *TITA* allowed space to vent and to validate such negative feelings. However, it was not enough under existing conditions of exhaustion, frustration, desperation, and simply being overwhelmed. It became an impossible task to address and to change the affective

undercurrents shaping the velocity and intensity of the internal conflicts in ACT UP/NY.

“Dear *TIARA*”: Sex and Sexuality in ACT UP

“Dear *TIARA*, I just love your rag, especially when I’m on it. And I read every issue. I look forward to that juicy, destructive gossip...” (*TIARA*, n.d., p. 2). Similar in form, tone, and content to *TITA*, *TIARA* was published weekly throughout 1991 and 1992 and distributed via the literature table at weekly ACT UP/LA meetings. One of *TIARA*’s early issues includes a list of questions and comments about the new publication, with one curious member desiring to know “who is your chief editor in charge of dish?” (Ibid.). That editor was Chuck Stallard. Stallard is better known for his black and white photographs documenting many of ACT UP/LA’s hundreds of actions (Buckley, 2007, p. 1). He moved to Los Angeles in 1987, the same year that ACT UP/LA was founded, became deeply involved in the organization and was its most prolific photographer (D.KR.M, n.d.). *TIARA* does not include on its masthead any information regarding its editor, but it did feature a hotline number for those too eager to wait to share a juicy tidbit or complaint about a meeting or issue by slipping their entries into the box at meetings. That hotline was Stallard’s own home phone number. *TIARA* was not always popular with ACT UP members, surviving threats to its life and to its promise of anonymity. However, I argue that it worked to build community in ACT UP/LA through the communication of alliances, affects, shared values, and language and humor. Here I examine it as a rare source of evidence about the importance of sex and sexuality in these processes.

Activists inspired by the founding of ACT UP/NY and energized by the March on Washington founded ACT UP/LA in December 1987. Four hundred people attended the first meeting in West Hollywood. The group organized hundreds of actions between 1987 and 1995. At its peak in the early 1990s, ACT UP/LA operated a public office, published a newsletter, had a mailing list of approximately 2,200 names, and met weekly (Lacaillade, 1993). By the mid-1990s the group had disbanded amidst discord, death, and declining membership. During this period, ACT UP/LA donated their records to the ONE. Their collection includes minutes; financial records; press releases; membership materials; clippings; fliers; subject files; photographs; and a run of *TIARA*.

Gossip bears an intimate relationship to romance, sexual activity, and sexual identity (Rogoff, 1996, p. 63). It also offers up tantalizing evidence of sexual regulation and containment, as well as of transgression and unruly excesses (Ibid.). Cultural theorist Ann Cvetkovich writes that there is an “invisibility that often surrounds intimate life, especially sexuality” while both “sex and feelings are too personal or too ephemeral to leave records” (2002, pp. 110, 112). While

Cvetkovich makes an important point about how sex, sexuality, and desires have often evaded archival capture, I want to complicate this understanding by arguing that their traces are sometimes present in archives in sources like *TIARA*. It is not just sex and sexuality that evade archival capture—sex, bodies and affect are all mixed up. Sex, that site of intimate and fleshy connection, promises both ecstasy and abjection (Rodríguez, 2014, p. 12). Sex—looking for it, desiring it, having it—can be read as a series of affective gestures that hold simultaneous the potential of impassioned connection and risk of failure (Ibid.). Sex is about feelings, but it is also about bodily gestures. Sexualized bodies and their gestures are both “cultural surfaces” and “material substances” (Ibid., p. 122). The HIV/AIDS pandemic has altered the body, changing how bodies can be imagined (as the site of disease or a potential carrier of it), the ways in which bodies are represented culturally and in the archive, and even how bodies are “‘practiced’ in social and sexual relations” (Keller and Snyder, 2011, p. 110). It is because of the importance of sex, of affect, and of bodies in this epidemic that is urgent that we contend in the archives with their evidences.

“Dear *TIARA*, Is it true that one boy’s weekend activities were so strenuous that his jaws still ached on Monday?” (*TIARA*, 16, n.d.) writes a curious *TIARA* reader. Another writes, “What ‘blonde boy’ with the ‘big arms’ has given new meaning to the term ‘oral history’?” Entries much like these with sexualized content, language, and tone appear in nearly every issue of *TIARA*. Looking to sex in *TIARA* crucially emphasizes that the affects of direct action AIDS activism were not all bad and the bodies that circulated them were not all tragic figures—ACT UP was also the site of ecstasy, erotics, and other queer pleasures. As sociologist Deborah Gould has argued, “By reeroticizing and revalorizing all kinds of sex, ACT UP queers furnished a strong response to the sex-negative early years of the AIDS crisis” (2009, p. 5). Gossip played a key role in setting the tone for sex and sexualized expression in ACT UP.

ACT UP/LA meetings and actions promised a vibrant sexual atmosphere. A certain man generated a flurry of *TIARA* gossip after his appearance at an October 29, 1990 meeting. With one commentator asking, “Who was the blond boy with the erection at the 10/29 meeting and who was watching him?” (*TIARA*, 3, n.d.). The same man appears on the oft-published tally of both serious and humorous events at meetings, under the listing “Big dick in white pants...1” (Ibid.). The flirtatious atmosphere is reflected in innumerable comments about the appearances of ACT UP members such as this one, “Daniel is beautiful, and so is his hair, but I wish he’d stop playing with it and let me” (Ibid., 10, n.d.). In another comment, a “A Mark S. Fan” offers him both a suggestion and a compliment, “Ms. T., Mark S. looks so good with that activist goatee. It makes my heart melt. But why the baggy pants? He’s got a great bum, I saw it one Sunday on Sunset while he adjusted the baggy pants. Why so shy? Got it, flaunt

it!” (Ibid., December 30, 1991). In a slightly more explicit move another commenter asks, “What ACT UP member gets an absolute boner every time Josh Wells stands up to speak??” (Ibid., 12, n.d.). This sexualized climate played a significant role in attracting people to the movement, in caring for them and thus sustaining their participation, and in the movement’s bodily and affective power serving to satisfy individual desires and to build group cohesiveness and community (Gould, 2009, p. 5). Gossip here serves as connective tissue.

Popular discourses of the 1980s and 1990s often had the intended or side effect of making gay men ashamed of their sexual desires and practices, and equated queer sex with fear and death. These overlapping discourses are all tied up in discourses of race, gender, sexuality and disease, and thus create “an important site for understanding” cultural “anxieties about contamination, contagion, and immorality,” as well as sex itself (Snorton, 2014, p. 124). Sexual fear dominated in both the queer and straight worlds making ACT UP’s celebration of queer sexuality a radical and political act (Gould, 2009, p. 194).

One frequent *TIARA* contributor J.T. Anderson used it as a forum to speak back against what they saw as sex negativity in the pages of *TIARA*. In response to an entry asking why there must be so much discussion of genitalia Anderson writes,

“The sex police can suck my dick, lick my clit!! I’m glad *TIARA* has references to genitalia. Here are a few more: COCK, CUNT, BALLS, PUSSY, ASSHOLE, TITS, PENIS AND VAGINA. And that’s O.K. All my life parents, teachers, preachers, religious bigots, politicians, “concerned citizens” have been telling me “Don’t touch that”, “Don’t do that”, “Don’t say that”. Well, FUCK YOU!! I don’t have much, but I proud of every foot of it, and its in your face!!!!” (*TIARA*, 3, n.d.).

Celebratory sexuality was a part of ACT UP’s demonstrations including kiss-ins where protestors gathered in public spaces to engage in passionate kissing amongst same-sex couples (Christiansen and Hanson, 1996, p. 166). Part of what was lost to AIDS according to Crimp was a gay male “culture of sexual possibility...Sex was everywhere for us, and everything we wanted to venture” (1989, p. 11). There were many people in ACT UP coping with an illness that is most often transmitted sexually, so as ACT UP member Maria Maggenti described, “to be sexual in defiance of that, happily sexual, using condoms or other forms of safe sex, was extremely bold. And it was especially bold to say that you were still going to have sex and fuck and be a cocksucker and all of these things when there was so much shame attached to the fact that this disease was sexually transmitted” (Gould, 2009, p. 194).

Embracing safer sex was for many activists an act of defiance, a reinvention of sexual pleasure. It was a form of political resistance and community building that promoted sexual liberation and sexual health. The work of inventing safer sex drew on the women’s health movement and gay liberation

discussions of sexuality (Ibid., p. 66). The discourse of safer sex makes it into *TIARA* with the usual gossipy tone. In response to the question “What kinds of sex are lesbians having?? Please respond soon” posed in *TIARA* number 12, “Dental Dam Dykes” writes “Lesbians have great sex! Satisfying sex! The kind of sex that stays with you for days! Use your imagination, can’t you boys? Figure it out. We make use of everything. We are fucking in the ass (safely)” (*TIARA*, 15, n.d.). While “ADGay” writes “My Dearest *TIARA*, Who was that gorgeous boy who was sitting on Wendell’s right at the 12/23 meeting?? He was wearing a T- shirt that says “love sees no color” and had a cross dangling from his left ear. I want to do nasty (but safe) things with him” (Ibid., December 30, 1991). Safe sex was also a topic for more serious debate in *TIARA*, with Jim McDaniels, writing in

“I think it’s time we address the continuing issue of un-safe sex going on in the ‘backroom’ areas of our benefit parties...I think a line of responsibility is crossed when we provide darkened rooms for sex. The fact that glory holes were cut into the plastic room partitions before the party made the purpose of these rooms obvious. While condoms were distributed, the process was haphazard at best...we should aggressively encourage safe sex!...It seems to me a bit inconsistent that we, who are the vanguard of safe sex promotion, have such a cavalier attitude towards this issue at our own benefits” (Ibid, July 22, 1991).

These small tidbits published in *TIARA* provide crucial evidence of the larger remaking of sex and sexual practice in ACT UP.

Much of ACT UP’s work and political orientations drew on earlier feminist models and sex was no exception. In lesbian feminist discourse sex was often conceived of as an important site in the politics of feminism and female empowerment, and was central in the creation of a “feminist ethos of collectivity” (Musser, 2014, p. 37). In addition to its largest population, gay men, ACT UP had a significant number of women involved, especially lesbians. If only partially and at particular moments, these queers were united in solidarity by their activism, affects, and sexual radicalism. As Gould describes, there was “an openness to learning from one another in the sexual realm” born of challenges to queer sexuality, gay male sexual cultures, and the new culture of lesbian sexual experimentation (2009, pp. 258-259). It is not just the ACT UP men who were the subjects of sexualized gossip, in issue three a member writes in, “IS it true that Ellen and Lauren have actually been using their new vibrator as a NECK MASSAGER?????????????????” (*TIARA*, 3, n.d.). *TIARA* also became an important forum for sexual play across identities and orientations. In one much discussed incident a contributor both admiring and a bit jealous writes,

“Dear T., ...Jenna White, Dyke slut extraordinaire...got hot n’ heavy action with a certain few San Francisco ACT Uppers, male and female!

Oh Jenna, you make us shudder! How come the orgy room at the Omni, #626 (Lee Wild's room) wasn't open to us voyeuristic/playful (sex positive) dykes??!! Huh Lee??!! You wanted that cute SF baby fag all to yourself, didn't you??? And to think he's even wearing a sticker on his chest "BI-QUEER!!!" (Ibid., November 11, 1991).

While "B.I.T.E.N. (Bi-Terrorists Evolving a Nation)" writes of the same incident, "Dear T., POST-GENDER SEXUALITY IN ACT UP?????? Now this is just a rumor, but just how 'Hot-N-Heavy' did Jenna Tailia get with a boy&girl team from ACT UP/SF??...Let's just say that those foxy SF queers have inspired a major bisexual love-trauma revolution!! So if our very own DYKE SLUT EXTRAORDINARE can do it, so can all of you closet case switch-hitters and avowed monosexual queers. C'mon, try it, you'll like it!!!! P.S. Since Jenna is such a baby-boy does that make her a fag now?? (Look out boys)" (Ibid., November 18, 1991).

These comments highlight the playful and pleasurable way in which limited models of sexuality were being challenged. The model of sexuality developed in ACT UP drew on queer sensibilities and sentiments of radical sexuality to practice sex and the sexual as powerful and political acts.

The flirtatious, sexually explicit, and defiant gossip spread through *TIARA*'s sharp tongue worked to build community, alliance, and spread shared values in ACT UP/LA. Queer and HIV/AIDS affected bodies were the focus of other ACT UP actions, but in the pages of *TIARA* the body is exposed as central in another a source of another affect—pleasure. This is a body that practices demonstrating for change, caring for its community, and experiences sexual pleasure in the process. In the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic this latter meaning is profoundly important. ACT UP worked to reframe gay sex and sexuality as a source not just of danger and death, but also of celebration, joy, and community transformation. As a group of mostly marginalized subjects, by virtue of sexuality, as well as race, gender, class and/or health status, these individuals lived in "close proximity to spectacular violence, quotidian violations, and a million minute forms of everyday harms." For such subjects "occupying the space of" the sexual, writes cultural theorist Juana María Rodríguez, "constitutes a particular perilous terrain. That we might consider our pleasure both important and possible constitutes a refusal of all that that has been used to define us as damaged and unworthy, perverse and undesirable" (Rodríguez, 2014, p. 184). *TIARA* offers unique entrée into sex, be it real, imagined, or desired, in ACT UP/LA.

Conclusion

Gossip is a discursive practice that produces and reproduces power, politics, values, feelings, and alliances. Gossip is worthy of serious consideration as

archival studies scholars and practicing archivists become more concerned with locating novel structures of knowing, and alternative practices and epistemologies that can better account for more diverse knowledges and subjectivities. As a form, gossip challenges accepted archival notions of reliability. However its lack of reliability should not lead to its dismissal. The gossip *TITA* and *TIARA* published provides unique and valuable evidence of affect, sex and sexuality, and bodily experience, making a case for the value of reexamining core archival concepts. Affects, conflict, and sex were all crucial components of the individual and group dynamics that made ACT UP a complicated and powerful social group in queer life and culture and in the fight against AIDS. Gossip served an important purpose as a force simultaneously for building alliances and forming community, and as one that caused and was symptomatic of discord and division within ACT UP. In spite of their importance and implications affective, sexual, and bodily experiences and knowledges often defy archival capture. Taking gossip seriously as a practice, discourse, and form of evidence can aid the archival field in contending meaningfully with knowledges and ways of knowing that have been feminized and subsequently devalued.

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