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"What Should Have Been, But Sadly Wasn't". Commoning HIV/AIDS History in "Pose"

KILIAN SCHMIDT

Introduction

> AIDS, from the beginning, has been a mnemonic pandemic. Remembering and forgetting – from recollection's bittersweet succor to the merciful reprieve of absentmindedness, from poignant commemoration to invidious amnesia, from mourning's militancy to mnemonicide – have reflected and constituted the vicissitudes of HIV/AIDS, its inventions, significations, and transformations in and across time, then and now and into the welter, promise and pitfall, of future and futurity (…) (Morris III 2012, 49).

In 1991, a subgroup of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), the TAG Helms 7 (TAGH7), inflated a large condom-shaped balloon over a senator's house in a small Virginia town to advocate against the stigmatization of people with HIV/AIDS and for practicing safer sex. They filmed it. In 2019, the streaming series "Pose" (2018-2021) – a fictional story about the House-Ballroom Culture, a community created largely by and for queer and trans* Black and Brown people in North American cities of the late 20th century – acts out its own version of the protest in the episode titled "Blow". One striking difference is that, in contrast to the 'original', the bodies in action in Pose's iteration are mostly not *white*.

The possible discomfort – not only my own (King 2019) – induced by the incredibility of this significant change – since the peaceful and joyous unfolding of the Pose action would likely be impossible even today – serves as the departure point for this paper. In their article titled "ACT UP Had a Diversity Problem. Should 'Pose' Correct it?" Mark S. King (2019) poses the questions that inspired this paper: Is the episode a correction of history? And/or is Pose guilty of appropriating past events? In light of the issue of a historicization of trans*- and queerness with its compulsory colonial and racist structuring, I propose *commoning* or the *commons* as more than just a concept to understand what Pose does in this scene and at large. I elaborate on House-Ballroom Culture's 'disidentificatory' (Muñoz 1999) practices as commoning and ACT UP's extensive video work as commons especially in relation to *different/other* temporalities and histories before close-reading the episode that features the condom action. Thus, I suggest these practices of commoning as forms of trans* politics that undo and intervene into binary and linear notions of time, community and subjectivity.

As the introductory quote emphasizes, the HIV/AIDS crisis has to be understood in and across relation(s) to past, present and future entanglements in contrast to a linear understanding of time. It is necessary to reach back into history and enlist its images, narratives and ideas for a future that possibly differs from it and from today, where an alternative for dealing with the conditions of, from and for the virus does not seem

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to exist yet (equally for everyone). Thus, I read Pose as not just an intervention into the *white*, capitalist and cis-heteronormative politics of (historical) representation and remembrance, but as a crucial call to (re-)think collectivity and solidarity across and beyond. In its commoning of HIV/AIDS history, Pose suggests a different way of relating today to the past, the ones that have passed (on) and the ones that were passed over, pointing to "what should have been, but sadly wasn't (sic)" (King 2019) and (still) might come.

House-Ballroom Culture, Disidentification and Commoning

The members of House-Ballroom Culture – "this underground community that exists at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual marginalization" (Bailey 2011, 368) – create spaces to compensate for the social, care and kinship structures from which they have been excluded as predominantly trans* and queer Black and Brown people (ibid.). These practices are often dismissed as essentialist identity politics, but this disregards the precarity of marginalized positions and the strategic nature of their responses (Johnson 2001, 5-6, 12). José Esteban Muñoz describes the quotidian 'performances' – on stages and streets – of Queers of Color as *disidentification* (Muñoz 1999, 4-5, 11-12, 25). What might be misunderstood as assimilation or separatism is in fact a strategy of an intersectionally marginalized community to survive by "working on and against" (ibid., 11) the socio-cultural systems of oppression affecting, but also ultimately constituting them (Bailey 2013, 18, 27, 69, 220; Klapeer/Schönpflug 2015, 171). The complexity of experiences in House-Ballroom Culture can best be described as simultaneous subversion and reification with all their contradictions and pitfalls (ibid.). Disidentificatory practices understand that it is impossible to step out of culture and thus choose to resist through appropriation (Johnson 2001, 5). Disidentification works on discursive and material levels and therefore requires an "active kernel of utopian possibility" (Muñoz 1999, 25). House-Ballroom Culture recognizes that for its members to survive might at times involve strategically performing normative embodiments (passing). The subsequent access to resources can, however, also be read as subversive vis-à-vis the intersectional phobic violence and (physical) erasure that they face.

"Three inextricable dimensions constitute the social world of Ballroom culture: the gender system, the kinship structure (houses), and the ball events" (Bailey 2013, 4). Balls blend pageant-like fashion and drag competitions, life-skill practices, dance battles and a safer space for socializing, creative self-expression and collective empowerment (ibid.). Performance categories at balls and roles in houses are based on House-Ballroom Culture's expansive 'gender' system consisting of up to six distinct subjectivities (ibid., 36). These subjectivities, although being informed by it, operate beyond the essentialist Western gender binary by allowing fluidity and malleability, while simultaneously demanding (material) efforts to be recognized by the community since House-Ballroom Culture realizes that being read as (too) queer and trans*

can lead to violence outside the ballroom (ibid., 5, 24, 31-32). In their houses or 'chosen families', roles and relationships are not stringently based on essentialist notions of gender, sex and age (ibid.). While 'house parents' provide nurturing and teaching to less experienced members, one can assume various roles at the same time and switch frequently (ibid.). The disidentificatory simultaneity of subversion and normativity of the cis-heteronormative nuclear family can be perceived in the at-times patriarchal power dynamics within House-Ballroom Culture houses, feminization of care work, predominance of binary gendered stereotypes, strong consumer culture and objectification of bodies and body parts (ibid.).

Taking all of the above into account, it can be argued that disidentification in general and House-Ballroom Culture in particular neither sustain an assimilationist status quo nor offers a revolutionarily destructive subversion of all normative structures, but can best be described in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's words as "kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic" (1993, 15). It is an anti-binary testament that forces us – and I will attempt this in my close-reading below – to confront the in-betweens and ambiguities, by thinking of the practices, productions and lived realities of communities like House-Ballroom Culture as contextual, contingent and as a set of contradictory effects with various limitations and possibilities (Bailey 2011, 383; 2013, 19, 24, 27, 39-40, 45, 76; Johnson 2001, 5-6; Muñoz 1999, 5). The social configuration of the House-Ballroom Culture house works on and against the cis-heteronormative demand for (biological) procreation, constantly acting out how to kin or build community beyond likeness or blood-relation and queerly across generations and time(s). This is done through *commoning*.

Commons as collectively re_produced – material or not – resources, the practices that re_create them (*commoning*), and the actors – human or not – that co-produce them (*communities*) without individualistic 'rights', are commonly understood to exist beyond the logics and mechanisms of the state and market (Blaser/De la Cadena 2017, 186; Klapeer/Schönpflug 2015, 176; Millner-Larsen/Butt 2018; Özbay/Savcı 2018; 516-517). Diverse communities marginalized within, as well as societies and worlds beyond, beside or before, practiced forms of commoning and continue to do so (Escobar 2015, 338; Millner-Larsen/Butt 2018; Muñoz 2020). A relational understanding of ontology/-ies, where multiple worlds (and not just diverse epistemologies about a singular universe) can (co-)exist, is simultaneously the basis for thinking commons and produced through commoning itself (Escobar 2015, 340). Such binary-breaking ontologies insist on the interconnectedness of all entities and realities where different (in relation to the Western model and to each other) worlds are collectively constituted without exclusive, individualized rights (Blaser/De la Cadena 2017, 186; Escobar 2015, 335-337, 340-342; Hanhardt 2018, 423; Klapeer/Schönpflug 2015, 173-174; Millner-Larsen/Butt 2018, 410-411). Commoning with its anti-capitalist deconstruction of the Western idea of subjectivity is able to enact a distinctly queer and decolonial critique (Blaser/De la Cadena 2017, 186; Cheng 2016, 86-87; Escobar 2015, 335-342; Hanhardt 2018, 423; Klapeer/Schönpflug

2015, 173-174; Millner-Larsen/Butt 2018, 403, 410-412; Muñoz 2020, 2; Özbay/Savcı 2018; 518-519).

Being and having are ontologically tied in the Western imagination (westocentric proprietism), meaning that subjecthood is contingent on (private) ownership – ranging from owning (the) other(s) like property, nature or slaves to a body and one's very self (Escobar 2015, 342; Klapeer/Schönpflug 2015, 163-176; Millner-Larsen/Butt 2018, 404). This "radical rethinking of belonging" (Özbay/Savcı 2018, 520) has consequences for conceptualizing how to relate to the/each o/Other, belong together and build community/-ies (Klapeer/Schönpflug 2015, 172; Millner-Larsen/Butt 2018, 409). To common means to collaborate despite or even because of difference, divergence and disagreement (Blaser/De la Cadena 2017, 187-192; Hanhardt 2018, 423; Klapeer/Schönpflug 2015, 176; Millner-Larsen/Butt 2018, 408-412; Muñoz 2020, 1-4; Özbay/Savcı 2018; 517-20). However, or even therefore, it is a profoundly fragile practice when considering the uneven power relations between its potential parties, histories of exploitation and the constant danger of capitalist enclosure (Blaser/De la Cadena 2017, 190; Hanhardt 2018, 439; Özbay/Savcı 2018; 520). In particular, contemporary discourses on a 'return to the commons' with their (neo-) colonial nostalgia tend to obscure, appropriate and erase Indigenous* practices, their long histories of commoning and the repeated violence of separating Indigenous* people from their common lands (Hanhardt 2018, 439; 441; Millner-Larsen/Butt 2018, 406-407).[1]

It is thus not just "similar life experiences" (Bailey 2013, 116) that are the basis for House-Ballroom Culture as/and commoning, but the continuous labor expended by its members to produce, sustain and transfer itself/its commons, prompting Marlon M. Bailey to speak of *housework* in relation to House-Ballroom Culture's kinship-making practices (ibid., 98). Describing key elements of House-Ballroom Culture like "care, service, competition, and critique" (ibid., 185-186) as 'nonmarket values' strengthens the characterization of this community('s practices) as commoning, even though these too are targets of neoliberal enclosure (ibid., 208-210). House-Ballroom Culture's housework is particularly apparent in their own response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, both today as Bailey describes it or during the 1990s as mentioned by King. Members of House-Ballroom Culture have not only been and continue to be disproportionately affected by this epidemic due to structurally induced high risk conditions like poverty or substance abuse, but also face heightened stigmatization. At the same time, their collective efforts to deal with the disease are either ignored or appropriated without credit (ibid., 184-5, 192-7, 210; Cheng 2016, 74; Hanhardt 2018, 429; Hallas 2021, 85). Bailey deems House-Ballroom Culture's own approach to HIV/AIDS prevention by and for the community itself most "culturally appropriate, sensitive, and effective" (Bailey 2013, 184). The distinctly *intraventive* and creative approach uses House-Ballroom Culture organizational structures, socializing practices and forms of communication to battle the virus and its socio-cultural repercussions. House-Ballroom Culture's commoning is disidenti-

ficatory, as I will show in how Pose works on and against ACT UP's history of HIV/AIDS activism, which itself has a history of commoning.

"ACT UP Had a Diversity Problem. Should 'Pose' Correct it?"

ACT UP – founded in New York City in 1987 – is one of the most prolific and influential activist groups of its kind in the Western world. ACT UP's defiantly spectacular, creatively confrontational, radically sex-positive and distinctly queer activism has not only shaped (representational) attitudes towards people with HIV/AIDS, legislation and (drug testing) policy, but also influenced protest culture worldwide (Cheng 2016, 74; Hallas 2021, 86, 105; Hanhardt 2018, 422, 438; Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 351, 357, 359). As I argue in the following, commoning is at the center of ACT UP's media practices, because it defies normatively linear temporality (Hallas 2021, 88; Hanhardt 2018). The question of how we see ACT UP('s history) today in terms of representation, legacy and erasure is thus inevitable.

Did ACT UP – and HIV/AIDS activism in the West at large – have a diversity problem? Was it (predominantly) *white*? Was it largely by and for cis gay men? Should this be corrected (King 2019)? And what does 'correction' mean in this context? Correcting images? It is quite clear that ACT UP was (and still is) a majority *white* gay male organization, even if it is better understood as a rather loose network of individuals and/in affinity groups (Gould 2012, 59; Hanhardt 2018, 427; Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 350-351). To assume that any structure, institution or association of and in a Western capitalist cis-heteronormative *white* supremacist society would not be steeped in colonial continuities and racist actualities would be quite naive (Gould 2012, 54, 59). Halting the conversation at this point, however, would mean succumbing to "shaming rather than analysis, critique, and dialogue" (ibid., 54). It would most importantly obscure the efforts taken to combat racist and otherwise marginalizing realities within and beyond ACT UP, especially by Black, Indigenous* and People of Color (BI*PoCs) and_or trans* people themselves (Cheng 2016, 76-80; Hanhardt 2018, 421-422, 427, 434; Lewis 2014, 20; Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 353-354; Gould 2012, 54; Horvat 2021, 10). Otherwise, political power, agency and change would still remain only imaginable through the lens and hands of *whiteness* (Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 353).

The cameras – of news media during the height of HIV/AIDS in North America, but also (audio-visual) texts remembering these years – did and do follow privileges (Cheng 2016, 66; King 2019; Morris III 2012, 51; Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 353-354; Gould 2012, 54). This necessitates critical engagement *through, but also beyond* highlighting the achievements of those rarely captured or remembered (ibid.). The urge to fill the 'gaps' and expand the archive seems to be particularly pressing for those that were (intentionally) never recorded or spectacularized because their bodies and practices exceed(-ed) the normative bounds of gender, sexuality, race, ability and class even within their own communities (Lewis 2014, 16). They are (rightfully)

looking for legitimization of their current existence through a proof of a historical one in the face of dominant culture's ostensible zero-sum-game of recognition (ibid., 14-19). Historical 'facts' are imbued with reparative power against a repressive hypothesis of representational invisibility (ibid., 16-17, 20). However, to rely on some kind of 'true(r)' history is to "fall neatly into the binary logic of history"(Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 347) itself.

Moreover, trans*queer archives are simultaneously messy, murky and "extremely noisy" (Lewis 2014, 21). They are bristled with the irrational, the non- and beyond-human, haunted by gaps, ellipses and contradictions, but also brilliant survival and inspiring prosperity in response to this world's hostility (ibid., 15, 28; Emmer 2012, 93; Engel/Lyle 2021, 186; Halberstam 2005, 187; Hanhardt 2018, 422, 439). Simply 'recovering' the bodies and voices of those marginalized by colonial and racist structures in and for a unified trans*queer history seems to be futile beyond a certain point (Halberstam 2005, 187; Hanhardt 2018, 438; Lewis 2014, 15-16, 20, 25, 28). For recovering these bodies and voices might not even be cohesively possible because they exceed historicization itself (ibid.). *How is then a future_present relation to the past, the ones that have passed (on) and the ones that were passed over of trans* and queer in all of their c/Colors imaginable* (Emmer 2012, 93; Lewis 2014, 29)?

When Pose portrays Peter Staley's and other ACT UP members' 1991 protest of covering right-wing senator's Jesse Helms' house in a giant inflatable condom, it is not a mere recreation, retelling or reimagination, violent appropriation or simple dramatization of a 'real' life event, or a false, yet entertaining, misremembering (Engel/Lyle 2021, 192, 202; Horvat 2021, 12). Pose is, as I argue, commoning – commoning HIV/AIDS history, this ACT UP protest in particular, and the images archiving it (Horvat 2021, 8; Lewis 2014, 18; Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 350).

That the sheer amount of recordings and video productions about, but most importantly by, ACT UP itself are still accessible today is not coincidental. The videos of the attention-grabbing in-person protests were not 'just' meant for documentation and 'mere' archiving purposes, but as actions themselves (Cheng 2016, 80; Hallas 2021, 85-86, 90; Horvat 2021, 10; Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 346, 362, 365). While cameras at protests could serve as a safety measure against potential police brutality, much of the video production of (late) 1980s/1990s HIV/AIDS activism tried to do away with misinformation and stereotypes concerning people at high risk of contracting HIV and with AIDS (Cheng 2016, 74; Hallas 2021; Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 362, 364). At the same time, it simultaneously aimed at informing communities about safer sex and (the next) protests and actions (ibid.). This media work was and is capable of communicating a sense of community across time and generations to challenge mainstream media portrayals of HIV/AIDS in isolation and as isolating (Hallas 2021). Besides capturing scenes from protests themselves to create an effect of 'what *really* happened', many ACT UP productions went out "to appropriate, parody, and analyze the mechanisms of television news" (ibid., 78) by constructing

a disidentificatory counter image (ibid.; Cheng 2016; Navarro/Saalfield 1991). Often flipping the dynamics of power and authority at work, like the anchor-interviewee-relationship, ACT UP let the people most affected by the crisis – who often had to go beyond experiential knowledge to become scientific experts on (the) disease (control) – speak in all their polyphony (Hallas 2021; Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 363f). "(D)ecolonizing racial and gender critique" (Cheng 2016, 79) was also directed inwards, for example by ACT UP's own Queer of Color video activists DIVA TV that intervened in the erasure of gendered and racialized diversity within ACT UP and beyond (ibid., 80, 82; Navarro/Saalfield 1991, 363). These HIV/AIDS videos serve another major role within commoning in light of the devastating number of lives lost and the "lack of intergenerational contact" (Horvat 2021, 5) when queer people are segregated from their 'biological' families, form communities among same or close aged peers and in general have lower life expectancies than broader society (ibid.; Halberstam 2005, 153; Muñoz 2009, 41). Rather than simply prolonging lives by capturing them on camera, the videos make it possible to relate across time, run queerly against the linear and thus colonial cis-heteronormative idea(l) while critiquing "the fetishizing of biological longevity as the end goal to all politics" (Cheng 2016, 76). The way that HIV/AIDS videos, their raw footage, but also the underlying motives and narratives have been created, circulated and collectively cared for, as well as how they are coming back as 'afterlives' now, are a form of commoning that builds community over, across and against (linear) temporality (Cheng 2016; Horvat 2021, 3; Morris III 2012, 51).

> The reuse of footage by different video productions contributed to a sense of shared resources in the movement, even if images were often deployed for different ends. Arguably the most substantial reworking of activist footage in the movement occurred in the video memorials for deceased AIDS activists produced by friends and comrades for screening at memorial services, activist meetings, and on public-access television. To reuse would serve to recall (Hallas 2021,107).

By using the shared footage in a collage style, ACT UP's memorial videos are able to critique dominant ideas of linear time and "the chronological structure of a life narration" (ibid. 107). This is, as I argue, also what Pose practices in its commoning. Stephen Engel and Timothy Lyle describe four different levels of how Pose approaches history – retelling specific historical events, subtle historical references, narrative arcs that dive into queer history and the extra textual use of social media to teach queer history (Engel/Lyle 2021, 173, 182-183). They combat an ahistorical, decontextualized and ancestrally severed perspective on queer- and trans*ness by 'recovering' (ibid.). Following Staley's description of Pose as "paying homage (…) through their lens (,) this ballroom community interacting with ours (and) merging the two, into what should have been, but sadly wasn't" (King 2019), I propose commoning as an expansion of Engel and Lyle here. This kind of engagement with history is possible, not just because history and its mediations through, for example,

the HIV/AIDS videos and reworkings past and present, are commoned, but due to commoning's inherently anachronistic character and queer and decolonial resistance to the Western normative structuring of time (Cheng 2016 83; Emmer 2012, 90; Millner-Larsen/Butt 2018, 399, 401, 412; Muñoz 2009, 39). Following Muñoz, we "have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (Muñoz 2009, 1). It requires (re-)turning to the past and past's struggles, to critique an unjust present so that a different future can be enacted (ibid., 1; Escobar 2015, 338; Gould 2012, 55; Klapeer/Schönpflug 2015, 176; Millner-Larsen/Butt 2018, 407). For Pose is neither a simple 'recovery' of the past nor an utterly ahistorical understanding of queerness, whose histories are in fact messy and loud, but a disidentificatory reworking of it through commoning (Lewis 2014, 15, 20-22, 28; Muñoz 2009, 3; Muñoz 2020, 3). Films and audio-visual media at large, as "ritualized tellings" (Muñoz 2009, 35), are and have been especially suited for this kind of world-making: be it in the 'raw' footage of ACT UP's protests, the collage-y memorial videos or the come-backs in Pose (Cheng 2016, 88f; Horvat 2021, 6; Lewis 2014, 14-15; Muñoz 2009, 1, 35, 37-39).

Commoning HIV/AIDS History in Pose

Pose is historical. Its writing and casting practices (albeit in a highly commercialized audio-visual text) that employ, center and appreciate Black and Brown queer and trans* people deserve to be explored in a separate major study. At the same time, as has been established throughout this paper, Pose neither simply recreates the past, nor just inserts its fictional characters into an 'authentic' yet at times fantastical historical context for diversity's sake (Engel/Lyle 2021, 182f, 196; King 2019). In the episode described here, Pose is commoning a specific instance of HIV/AIDS history and its artifact (the TAGH7 video) in a disidentificatory fashion to build community relationships across trans*queer generations (Lewis 2014, 16; Muñoz 2009, 11, 46). This is reflected in the (not so) subtle similarities and especially differences between the two videos. ACT UP's media strategies feature heavily in this decisive scene. While Pose employs shots that imitate the use of hand-held cameras, in many ACT UP/DIVA TV works, including the TAGH7 video of this distinctly joyous scene, the use of news media (style) differs remarkably. The TAGH7 had their own "co-at-and-tie-wearing media spokesperson" (Staley 2008) talk to mainstream outlets contacted in advance, while Pose's Blanca and Pray Tell (two elders of the community) give an on-location interview, where they are praised and taken serious for their knowledge and political message. The space given to these kinds of voices, imbued with agency and not voyeuristically portrayed, is what ACT UP demanded from mainstream media, but rarely granted its BI*PoC members themselves.

An angry neighbor features prominently in both videos. The TAGH7 'neighbor' – ironically in light of commoning as the central theme in this paper – claims 'no respect for private property' as the reason for their furious complaint (Allen 2006;

Staley 2014). In Pose, however, the complainant calls the police *despite* not caring for their neighbor('s property). In contrast to Pose's bodies, it can be assumed that the members of the TAGH7 could more easily gain access to these kinds of neighborhoods due to their *whiteness*. The bodies of Color are clearly 'out of place' and take up space in the quiet suburb. The fact that despite police presence both actions proceed without any (major) retributions is one of the most curious aspects. Pose's protest taking place without any physical violence is something bordering on 'plot armor' because they do not have access to the *white* privilege of the TAGH7. Given the epidemic of racist police brutality and (state) violence against trans* and_or Black and Brown bodies in the USA to this day, replacing the *whiteness* of the TAGH7 protest inevitably evokes a feeling of disbelief (Engel/Lyle 2021, 185-186). This fantastical quality is a critique of the conditions that would have made the non-violence impossible when ACT UP did it, as well as still to this day.

The arrival of the police is something both iterations expect, but only Pose has elders present who are ready to take the fall. Moreover, as Mark Allen describes, the original ACT UP action itself was meant as a rebellion against older members of the community, pointing to a heteronormative generational divide. In Pose it is the elders themselves that propose this kind of 'caper' protest. The kinship and guidance structures presented in Pose suggest a way to new generational relationships and how to relate differently to time and temporality. The two scenes bracketing the protest illustrate how House-Ballroom Culture breaks with the traditional model of generational relationships as linear and involving the progressive transfer of power from older to younger: the one where Blanca and Pray task 'their' children Damon, Ricky and Lulu with planning the condom action and the scene where everyone gathers at Blanca's dinner table to celebrate the protest's success.

The assignment is very much an intraventive one. Pray and Blanca emphasize the non-market values (self-respect, responsibility, motivation, purpose, experience) that the task will teach the children, who rightfully complain about the missing monetary compensation. Without romanticizing unpaid labor, the elders insist on the imperative of learning skills connected to this protest's design and execution. It is decisively not meant to be an easy task as neither the racist, cis-heteronormative world will greet them with open arms, nor is House-Ballroom Culture's housework an easy one. Blanca is reminded of this in her initial talk with Pray about the assignment. She did not become a community leader through her age, but due to her experience and hard work to survive as a trans* Woman of Color – a 'blessing and a curse' as Pray says. When the three children brainstorm the condom action, they too talk about the value of the lessons learned from simply surviving as intersectionally marginalized bodies and thus are able to tap into their community's inter-generational practices to lead them to success. When they celebrate, the children flip the script of elder-student relations and cook (instead of the usual Blanca) and cut off Pray's speech to give their own. They express their gratitude for helping them to survive. According to the three children, not only is it their turn to lead the community, but they want to start

right away by 'schooling' the elders. In fact, if read closely, the children have been giving to and 'teaching' their elders the entire time as well.
First off, the protest itself was, besides its (intra-community and outward) educational and media-attention purposes, also directed against Blanca's racist, trans* and serophobic landlady whose house they covered with the condom. The condom is therefore quite literally a protection for their mother. The relationship of Pray and Ricky is a highly complex one that inevitably goes beyond this episode and the scope of this paper. Being aware of the generational loss and absence of role models inside the community due to the ravages of the HIV/AIDS crisis, Pray offers Ricky not only guidance on health, history and social relations, but most importantly emotional support in the latter's process of discovering and dealing with his positive HIV test result. Ricky answers with romantic and later sexual affection for which the elder had deemed himself as undeserving due to his age and HIV status. Even though this relationship is rightfully problematized by the community in later episodes due to the power imbalance at play, it also leads to Pray rediscovering his sexuality in a groundbreaking and visually stunning scene.
Finally, it is Lulu who secures the funding for their protest by intelligently deploying her knowledge about Elektra, another house mother who at several points in the story acquires considerable amounts of money through 'illegal' means. Lulu thereby gives Elektra the opportunity to simultaneously restore glory to her name and do her community dues after being shamed publicly for not sufficiently supporting her kind ("Acting Up"). The things that Elektra had to endure as a dark-skin Black trans* woman to acquire her alleged position of wealth and power that Pose has repeatedly been kind enough to remind her and us of, is a very fragile one, can only be assumed. She seems hard, cold and harsh at first encounter, but steps up for the community that she helped to build and ultimately uses her resources and skills to sponsor the condom protest. It is, however, not a simple donation, in contrast to the TAGH7 (Staley 2008). Elektra does not just provide temporary relief, but hands Lulu the tools to sustain herself more safely by employing her in the BDSM business at which she also works. While this job and other types of sex work are often the only ones accessible for trans*femme BI*PoCs like them, it can be argued – and this too deserves much more space than can be provided in this paper – that it also serves as a moment of transgressive empowerment, using the fetishization of their identities to earn more than a living while playfully taking control and punishing their oppressors with every beat of the leather paddle.[2]

Conclusion

This paper started with a feeling of discomfort: the discomfort that societies still feel about HIV/AIDS, the people most affected by the disease and the actions they take to affirm their lives even after death. It also started with a discomfort with the (potentially futile) endeavor of correcting 'history' with more details and better 'facts' to

recover those that possibly cannot be recovered as that would perpetuate the violence they lived in and under. This paper and/through Pose propose(s) a different way of relating today to the past, the ones that have passed (on) and those who have been passed over with the practices of commoning explored in House-Ballroom Culture's disidentification, ACT UP and Pose's cinematic world. The way that Pose enacts the (in-)famous TAGH7 condom action was and most likely is still impossible, but it points to a future that nonetheless requires considerable work to put into being. Pose demonstrates how to do this without disregarding the burdens of histories or being burdened by an imperative of impossible historical accuracy. It thus invites us to rethink the way we make community. History (and its artifacts) are commoned by Pose to relate differently. Pose is a merging of the two worlds of House-Ballroom Culture's disidentificatory and quotidian practices and the defiant video activism of ACT UP. This is necessary because neither HIV/AIDS nor the conditions that have made the virus so devastating, especially to those on the intersections of colonial continuities and binary ideals of body and desire, are things of the past. What will our politics with and across time – our trans* politics – be?

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Notes

1 For a thorough critique see Kauanui (2015) as referenced in Hanhardt (2018, 441).

2 For a thorough discussion on Black femininity, kink and sex work in the US see Cruz (2016).