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# “United We Stand, Divided We Fall”: AIDS, Armorettes, and the Tactical Repertoires of Drag

Jeffrey Bennett & Isaac West

*This essay focuses on the Armorettes, an Atlanta-based drag troupe that has played a critical role in combating HIV/AIDS in the South. While infection rates continue to rise nationally, the syndrome has disproportionately burdened the South both in terms of its spread and the funding allocated for its prevention and treatment. By placing drag in its historical and contemporary context as an activity variably linked to the formation and maintenance of queer identities and activism, we argue that the Armorettes are more than just mere entertainment, continuing a rich tradition of constituting audiences as agentic subjects capable of addressing social exigencies that threaten their ability to live meaningful lives. We employ the concept of “tactical repertoires” to interrogate the Armorettes’ activism and contextualize their vital cultural work.*

For the last three decades, at nine o’clock sharp on Sunday nights in Atlanta, Georgia, the Armorettes have entertained predominately gay male audiences with their provocative drag performances. Originally organized to entertain crowds during the halftime breaks of professional football games at a gay bar named the Armory, the group garnered a reputation for their eclectic and brazen performances. Defining their style as “camp drag female impersonation,” resonant with larger gay cultural flows capitalizing on the appropriation of campy (and often white) trash culture, the troupe combined lip-synching, comedy, and audacious fashion to enliven the sometimes dreary and lonely space that marks Sunday evenings for lesbian, gay,

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bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.<sup>1</sup> They, like their predecessors who have found artistic expression a productive response to HIV/AIDS, “announce camp’s availability in articulating and disseminating” an ethic of queer communal responsibility.<sup>2</sup> Embracing an exaggerated grotesque aesthetic that places a premium on lewd language, bawdy humor, exaggerated (and often prosthetic) body parts and bodily functions, the group was and remains an Atlanta institution.<sup>3</sup>

The onset of AIDS redefined the Armorettes’ mission and secured their place in Atlanta’s LGBT community. As Meredith Raimondo suggests, “it is impossible to point to a moment in which Atlanta claimed AIDS as its own” due to the government and press silence surrounding the issue. Instead, this rich history requires us to locate “moments in the stories of individuals and institutions,” such as the Armorettes, who took it upon themselves to attend to the syndrome’s spread.<sup>4</sup> Galvanized by the impact of HIV/AIDS on their queer kin, the Armorettes began performing with a new pursuit, donating every cent of their tips to combat the encroaching epidemic and the stigmatizing rhetoric that accompanied it. Today the Armorettes, whose members include Sofonda Cox, Wild Cherry Sucret, Bumblebee Toonahead, Knomie Moore, and Mary Edith Pitts, carry on this philanthropic tradition, placing a premium on hyperbolic embodiments and spectacular instances of gender play. Over time, the Armorettes have developed a loyal following that laugh, gasp, sing, and cry along with them. By their own estimates, the Armorettes have performed close to sixty thousand numbers and raised almost two million dollars for charitable organizations.

Rather than rehash a well-rehearsed, and frankly tired, debate about drag and its exposition of gender performativity, an inductive generalization we prefer to place on hold given our interests in the rhetorical concerns of contingency and context, we focus instead on the Armorettes’ narrower range of cultural effectiveness inside and outside of the gay bar.<sup>5</sup> Inside Burkhart’s Pub, their current home, the Armorettes persistently engender tactical repertoires of resistance, reminding patrons of the need to practice safe sex and proactively protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases. Unlike institutionalized public health campaigns that often rely on the biopolitical production of a disciplined individual encouraged to live in fear of a diseased Other, the Armorettes provide a ritualized reminder of the communal obligations created by illnesses that quietly continue to kill men and women in the South. Two present cultural conditions make the Armorettes’ work all the more salient as we approach the thirtieth anniversary of AIDS’ pernicious introduction to gay life. First, the havoc wreaked by AIDS impeded the intergenerational relay of discourses that assist in the formation of alternative forms of kinship to combat the numbing indifference to HIV infections. Second, the paltry resources provided by government institutions to prevent and treat HIV-positive individuals has not kept pace with those who are most in need of care and treatment. In underserved areas such as Atlanta, the Armorettes’ embodiment of communal history and obligation is a necessary and vital resource to resist the indifference, governmental or otherwise, toward HIV/AIDS.

The actions of a drag troupe in Atlanta offer unique insight into drag performances in the South while also providing a window into the localized politics of HIV/AIDS. Located in the heart of the Bible Belt, Atlanta presents unique constraints for AIDS activists given the social mores of propriety and privacy with regard to sex, the articulation of religion and culture, and the metropolitan interactions of various populations.<sup>6</sup> That the South is more tolerant of queers than might be otherwise expected is a well-established narrative.<sup>7</sup> In Atlanta, there are visible gay neighborhoods, businesses, and social organizations. Atlanta is also home to the AIDS Quilt.<sup>8</sup> However, despite the socially liberal urban mindset of many citizens, a relative indifference has stabilized in regards to the threat of HIV/AIDS.

In order to understand better the Armorettes' critical role in combating the erasure of people with HIV/AIDS, both past and present, we develop our argument in the following manner. First, we review the dire situation facing Southern communities battling HIV/AIDS. Infection rates continue to rise nationally, but the syndrome disproportionately burdens the South both in terms of its spread and the incommensurate funding allocated for its prevention and treatment. Second, we place drag in its historical and contemporary context as an activity variably linked to the formation and maintenance of gay identities and activism. More than just mere entertainment, the Armorettes continue this rich tradition of constituting audiences as agentic subjects capable of addressing social exigencies that threaten their ability to live meaningful lives. Next, we employ the concept of "tactical repertoires" to interrogate the Armorettes' activism and contextualize their vital cultural work. In short, tactical repertoires involve the intentional negotiation of sign and symbols to forge politicized connections between individuals in the service of addressing wider publics. Finally, we conclude by reviewing the importance of localized communal responses to combat regional and national insensitivity to vulnerable populations such as persons living with HIV/AIDS.

### **HIV/AIDS in the South**

The discursive mutation of HIV/AIDS from an impending marker of death to a "manageable" disease has been accompanied by its incremental disarticulation from national identity. Once seen as *the* public health crisis to surmount, a perverse side effect of the progress against HIV/AIDS has been the loss of urgency that once characterized its signification. Thankfully, the panic- and fear-animating rhetorics of victimage and scapegoating directed toward gay men, including discussions about the quarantining of people with HIV/AIDS has, to some degree, subsided.<sup>9</sup> The medico-cultural pedagogy of HIV/AIDS awareness alleviated much of the stigma tied to HIV/AIDS, and to queer citizens generally. At the same time, the heralding of medical advances seemingly provides a false sense of security for queer populations. There is little denying that people who are HIV-positive are living longer, healthier lives. A recent study found that a person with the means to sustain intensive therapeutic regimens may now live into their seventies.<sup>10</sup> Between 1996 and 2005 the life expectancy of HIV-positive people rose by 13 years.<sup>11</sup> The unintended

consequence of the circulation of this treatment narrative is the creation of complacency and the dissipation of national attention given to the epidemic. The neo-liberal trajectory from national crisis to personal responsibility and the individualization of disease, resonant with the active assault on government-sponsored social programs, authorizes an indifference that undercuts the inventive resources available to those most in need. This move exerts greater pressure on localized activism, education, and fundraising.

These discursive shifts are especially disturbing when one considers the existing gap between the needed and available resources for Southerners living with HIV/AIDS. As rates of detected and undetected infection continue to skyrocket in the South, the rate of public and private funding has not kept pace with the debilitating consequences of a virus that claimed the lives of almost 200,000 Southerners since the inception of the epidemic.<sup>12</sup> While some might not imagine HIV/AIDS as a prevalent Southern disease, the Southern AIDS Coalition reports that 16 of the 20 metropolitan areas with the highest AIDS case rates in 2006 were located in the South.<sup>13</sup> The South has more adults and adolescents living with AIDS than any other part of the country. The South also boasts the highest rates of new HIV diagnoses, of people living with HIV, and people who have died of AIDS. It is not surprising then that related deaths from AIDS are increasing at a greater rate in the South than in any other part of the country.

These statistics are made all the more alarming by the disparate resources available to Southern organizations wrestling with the syndrome. Although, as a region, the South is number one in new HIV cases, it ranks last in overall funding. Research from the Kaiser network reveals that across the board, in treatment, education, and support for programs to curtail infection, the South is substantially underfunded when compared to other parts of the nation.<sup>14</sup> When factoring in the lag time for implementing curriculum and reaching at-risk populations, the situation is made all the more dire. Overall, the federal government offers about \$400 less *per person* living with HIV/AIDS in the South than they do in the North. The private sector is similarly underresponsive. A study released by Funders Concerned about AIDS concluded the South only receives about 19% of all privately raised funds in the United States.<sup>15</sup> If living a meaningful and healthy life with HIV/AIDS requires access to resources, these statistics highlight the additional roadblocks facing those in the South who are not privileged with employer-provided health care plans or who live in areas with inadequately funded prevention and treatment programs. It is easy to forget people with HIV/AIDS can live healthy and fuller lives, but only to the extent they have channels for receiving affordable treatment.

In addition to the institutional conditions limiting the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS, we are confronting an era of “AIDS Fatigue.” After nearly three decades of AIDS awareness campaigns, some public health officials and activists fear a generation of young people have simply tuned out.<sup>16</sup> The grammar of HIV/AIDS has shifted in the cultural vernacular of young gay men, and the Armorettes understand the potentially important role they play in the lives of their audiences. Tony Kearney (a.k.a. Wild Cherry Sucret), who has been performing with the group

since 2000, notes, “Now I think people are taking it for granted that people are living longer. We’re not losing focus, but the young generation may not know why we’re really there. I mean, we make that statement every Sunday what we’re there for and where this money is going to,” but the focus may be lost on “the average 22-year-old person who has a friend who has been taking one pill a day who is living just as normal as you and I.” Richard Cherry (a.k.a. Mary Edith Pitts), the most senior member of the group with 12 years of experience, concurred with this observation, asserting, “There’s definitely a difference in the perception about HIV and AIDS in the younger people. It seems like, to me, young people today think, ‘Oh, it’s inevitable that we’re going to have a vaccine’ so it’s not such a big deal if I am not safe all the time.” Thus, the Armorettes take as their mission the need to circulate discourses about the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS.

In this way, the Armorettes continue a tradition of cultural labor long performed by drag artists and spectators; labor that has been undervalued as a form of political intervention. On its face, drag can be seen as pure entertainment, spectacle, and/or a marketing ploy to get patrons in the door at a bar. And it may serve all of these functions. Yet, these judgments overlook the ways drag creates the conditions for the constitution of identities, communities, and activism. The historicity of drag and its implication in such activities warrants further consideration to elucidate how the Armorettes operate within discursive circuitries both old and new.

### **Drag and the Constitution of Queer Communities**

Drag has long been associated with gay male subcultures; although it also shares a complicated history with non-gay audiences as well. In the context of Western culture, drag can be traced back to eighteenth century English Molly Houses, and the practice expanded in the nineteenth century to drag balls throughout Europe and the United States.<sup>17</sup> As Verta Taylor and her coauthors explain, as early as the 1920s, drag played a crucial role in providing outlets for gay men to be in public places together. In some of the larger cities of the United States, “gay men of different class and ethnic backgrounds organized public drag balls that brought together hundreds, sometimes thousands, of men who used the masquerade of dressing in women’s clothing to dance with other men.” These balls were “critical to the formation of a shared sexual and cultural identity, and many scholars view early drag queens, because of their willingness to identify themselves as gay in public, as the forerunners of the public performative resistance deployed by the modern gay and lesbian movement.”<sup>18</sup> Historian George Chauncey details the existence of drag balls as one piece of evidence to counter what he terms “the myth of isolation” that “holds that anti-gay hostility prevented the development of an extensive gay subculture and forced gay men to lead solitary lives in the decades before the rise of the gay liberation movement,” as well as the “myth of invisibility” that presupposes “even if a gay world existed, it was kept invisible and thus remained difficult for isolated gay men to find.”<sup>19</sup> Drag balls were popular tourist destinations and vibrant cultural resources for gay men in pre-World War II America. Indeed, “coming out,” the

now popular shorthand for describing one's public declaration of sexuality and other categories of identity, finds its etymological origins in the presentation of gay men at these very balls.<sup>20</sup>

The rich history of drag in the South dates back to the 1920s with records of large audiences for touring drag queens from Dallas to New Orleans to Tampa.<sup>21</sup> Later in the twentieth century, like the drag queens and transpeople in New York who refused police harassment outside of Stonewall, Southern drag queens galvanized audiences into political actors. In Atlanta, which James Sears describes as "the Hollywood of drag," drag performers gave voice to the injustices perpetrated on queers, publicly flaunted their queerness and lent their talents to raising funds for political causes.<sup>22</sup> "The heroes for midseventies southerners," Sears suggests, "were not gay liberationists with queer placards and clenched fists but heroines adorned with roques and rhinestones." Sears continues, entertainment combined with politics as "Southern drag queens did more than imitate Vivian Leigh; they stood resolute against the ravaging of their homosexual Taras. As in Stonewall, divas with attitudes were the vanguard for the gay freedom movement."<sup>23</sup> In Atlanta, the politicization of drag further resulted in the appropriation of one of the most sacred Southern spaces: the evangelical church. In the mid-1980s, a group of drag performers formed the Gospel Hour to provide a safe environment for gay Christians to come together and to worship. The group still meets today in the same bar as the one used by the Armorettes.<sup>24</sup> In many ways, the Armorettes continue this tradition of deploying drag as entertainment and activism in their current stage acts.

### **Tactical Repertoires and the Spectacle of the Grotesque**

Assessing the cultural effectivities of the Armorettes is perhaps best explained as a constellation of "tactical repertoires." As Taylor explains, tactical repertoires are "interactive episodes that link social movement actors to each other as well as to opponents and authorities for the intended purposes of challenging or resisting change in groups, organizations, or societies."<sup>25</sup> Tactical repertoires, then, may be defined as the intentional reworking of signs and symbols, including bodies, to publicly address and thus to constitute a collective identity to motivate them to action. Intended not as an overarching theory of social movements but, rather, as an analytical concept for identifying the articulatory pathways needed for in-group identification, we employ this concept as a lens for understanding how the Armorettes' performances rework dominant and individuating narratives of HIV/AIDS to encourage communal responses in an otherwise unresponsive environment.

So, how does one reverse the tide of apathy and invent new modes of awareness? The Armorettes use any means possible: fake ejaculate, dirty tampons, rubber toys, and invocations and impersonations of Whitney Houston are just some of the favorites. Cherry, whose antics are an over-the-top fan favorite, says that camp drag "gives people an opportunity to laugh. And it takes the seriousness and the edge away . . . because it's hard to swallow things sometimes if . . . it gets pushed in your face so much." Cherry, who was a fan of the troupe long before he joined, originally

became involved after he lost his best friend Barry to AIDS. Despite his personal connections to the epidemic, Cherry has never used the word “activist” to describe himself: “I realize that I have an opportunity to impact a lot of lives. And I’m not the type of person that responds well if someone shoves something down my throat, so I try and approach people the same way.” Jim Marks (a.k.a. Bubba D. Licious) similarly described the impetus for his involvement in the group as one motivated by personal loss: “We were in the height of it. I can remember going to Patterson’s Funeral Home for five consecutive days in 1990. . . . I became an Armorette because of my desire to help. I couldn’t write a check for all I wanted to give.”<sup>26</sup> The Armorettes may not always describe themselves as activists involved in a larger organized social movement, but their actions demonstrate a concerted effort to improve the lives of those around them. A shared ethic of care exists across group members, with an explicit desire to remake and improve queer worlds.

The emphasis on creating a space for reflection and dialogue in the queer community is perhaps nowhere better captured than in the Armorettes’ memory about their group and its grounding in Atlanta. They were there when AIDS first pummeled the city and have been fighting the syndrome ever since. Indeed, a number of the troupe members themselves were lost to the epidemic. Cherry reflects, “We’ve always had the philosophy that once you’re an Armorette, you’re always an Armorette. And our history is really what’s made us who we are. And, there’s also a sense that drag has always been taken as a light thing and there’s a real purpose to what we do. So we take it very seriously.” He continued: “We honor the people that have come before us. It’s not just about what you see on stage, it’s also what we do as a group behind the scenes. We always try to remember the other people and give credit where credit is due.” The Armorettes’ Web site reflects this history, including a gallery of Armorettes past, marking the importance of continuity and memory.<sup>27</sup> Although specific emphasis is placed on their history, the group is careful to adapt to changing needs and attitudes in the queer community. As Cherry relayed, “The Armorettes have been successful fundraisers in the community for such a long time because we continue to reinvent ourselves as well as our fundraising methods.”<sup>28</sup>

Elements of the Armorettes’ identity have changed significantly over the past several decades, including the requirement that performers had to don a mustache. But many features have remained the same. For example, the group has long included in its contracts with HIV/AIDS organizations that 100% of the funds raised by the troupe must be used for services only, not for administrative costs or salary. The means of collecting money, however, have evolved over time. Big fundraisers, which used to play a central role in their work, are less common today. The group now relies mainly on weekly shows that bring in between \$300–\$600. In accordance with the selflessness that motivates these performers to donate all of their tips to charities, some of the performers have started the practice of using their birthdays as a special occasion to raise money. Cherry recently collected \$20,000 in this manner. The events are useful not only for stimulating the audience but for the performers as well. Cherry reflected on this satisfaction, explaining, “During my birthday I would get



very heartfelt about my experience losing friends and the importance of practicing safe sex and to have people come up and tell me ‘wow, you know I’ve lost a friend’ and [for them] to share ‘it makes me want to be safe’ . . . you’ve impacted someone’s life in a positive way.”

Of all of the traditions that continue to inform the Armorettes, the most important is their style. From the beginning, the Armorettes have employed explicitly and intentionally a “camp drag aesthetic.” As one of the founding members, Michael Howell (a.k.a. Ginny Tonic), stated in a 2004 interview: “Some people were more serious in their appearance than others. But the focus was for it to be funny and entertaining and not taken seriously. . . . We’re not a glamour show and we’re not trying to be pretty women. We know we’re men in dresses and we make fun of that also.”<sup>29</sup> In contrast to glamour drag queen shows that rely on imperceptible mimetic performances, the Armorettes refuse these generic conventions in favor of a self-parodic style. The not-quite-right eyeliner and eye shadow, padding to accentuate hips and breasts, clothing that reveals the artifice of their appearance, and the extended dialogues between the emcees and the audience all break with the conventions of most drag shows.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, the performers do lip-synch too, including old standards, current hits, as well as parodies, such as “Oops, I Farted Again.” One recurrent number bears special attention given its appropriation and popularity. For quite some time now, a member of the Armorettes has performed the “Queen of Gospel Music” Vestal Goodman’s “Looking for a City,” a reference to Hebrews 13:14, “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” The first verse speaks of pilgrims looking for purpose, “Here among the shadows/(Living) in a lonely land (with strangers)/We’re a band of pilgrims on the move/(Through dangers) burdened down with sorrows/(And we are) Shunned on every hand/(But we are) looking for a city built above.” The sense of loneliness and the need for something greater than one’s self is easily translated into LGBT people longing for community. The song progressively goes up a key, and the repeated chorus speaks of a city “where we’ll never die” and a place where they will find their Savior and “our loved ones, too.” Often, the audience, along with the performing drag artist, waves a napkin to mimic the performer mimicking Goodman’s trademark hanky.<sup>31</sup> Some other audience members stomp, clap and raise their hands. Whether the audience’s familiarity with the song is rooted in their bar patronage or prior religious experience, the communal nature of gospel is significant. In contrast to hymnal reliance on an individual’s reverence before their Creator, gospels relocate “the locus of authority from church hierarchy and tradition to the individual in his or her interaction with the gospel in song.”<sup>32</sup> The utopic invocation of a more accepting world, represented here by a place where we are reunited with lost loved ones and never die, transmutes the gospel classic into a call to action on the part of the audience.

While the performances themselves are often outrageous, the improvised banter between emcees is perhaps the most provocative and entertaining aspect of the shows.<sup>33</sup> The Armorettes are not averse to controversy, hyperbole, or outrageousness. Their public performance is constituted by their willingness to assert the most

egregious of statements. Jokes about politics, entertainment, and current events carry substantial portions of the shows. No topic is off limits in the space the Armorettes occupy. They joke about the murder of Jon Benet Ramsey, the sex lives of people sitting in the bar, the racism inherent in their religions, the size of one another's penises, the sexual hypocrisy of politicians, or anything else that will arouse the crowd. The troupe will ask bar patrons to remove clothing and playfully harass anyone sitting too close to the floor where they perform. Kearney speaks proudly of this, saying "We try to make it provocative, try to make it timely. I mean obviously we're not politically correct, we're a camp drag show, we're not going to be politically correct." The shows may not be politically correct, but they do inject a politics of communal responsibility with their constant reminders to practice safe sex and who benefits from their tips. By creeping close to the line of good taste, and sometimes crossing it, the Armorettes attract an audience while also, and more importantly, encouraging them to think.

This is not to say that everyone gets the joke. While the Armorettes generally feel the crowds understand the ironic composition of performances, there are people who think the limitless menu of tastelessness is extreme. Kearney, who is African American, recalls one of his most exaggerated moments on stage as one case in point: "Last year at Christmas for the 'White Trash Christmas Party' I dressed as a Klansman and did 'White Christmas.' Well, Lord, for two months people were talking about it . . . that was the first time I really ever did anything in a number that really drove people to either hate me or really love me." He continued: "I'm the only one in the group that could do that. Knomie [Moore, another member of the Armorettes] can't do that, they would kill her." In Kearney's words we find an unusual ethic of care implicit in the risk of these performances. It is the flagrant nature of their act that keeps the crowd coming back, donating money, and contesting the spread of and lack of treatment for HIV/AIDS. The group must keep its show in everyday circulation through word-of-mouth in the gay community but recognizes the discursive precipices they often confront.

The reservations of a few audience members aside, these overstated performances are unquestionably the draw for regulars of the show. Cherry remarks that the group's style is what ensures their success: "I think that one thing that makes the group what it is, is the fact that it is camp drag. I don't think that we would be successful doing what we do if it were a glamour show. I don't know that people would even hear the message if it were just a glamour drag show so I think it's important to keep that going." The scandalous nature of the show ensures that regulars return and new contributors materialize. As Kearney notes, "I try to be funny, I try to be political, with Knomie [Moore] and I, we try to play the race card a lot. Either you hate it or you love it."

We want to suggest that these tactical repertoires enact what Michael Warner terms an "ethics of queer life" to move beyond the reduction of the Armorettes' actions to shocking entertainment or the reification of racial and gender stereotypes. In response to the cultural pressures of stigma, shame, and normalization, Warner argues for alternative modalities of sociability that take abjection as the identical basis of queerness, and this abjection can be instructive on the denaturalization of damaging hierarchies. As he states, "queers can be abusive, insulting, and vile toward

one another, but because abjection is understood as the shared condition, they also know how to communicate through such camaraderie a moving and unexpected form of generosity.”<sup>34</sup> Evacuating the primacy of pride as the source of in-group identification, Warner further suggests the affirmation of abjection as one way in which queers learn the rule “get over yourself” and to “put a wig on before you judge.” It is in this way that we expose the “false morality” associated with discourses hostile to queerness and recognize how we can reconfigure affective bonds. Through their performances and their interactions with the audience, the Armorettes bridge an identificatory divide that might otherwise separate the concerns of bar patrons from other similarly situated individuals who need their help.

Prior to transitioning into their closing song, the emcees remind the audience that the Armorettes began as a cheer squad who were galvanized by cultural indifference, fear, and loss. Far from a history lesson, the group is quick to implicate those in the space of the bar, noting the crowd’s presence is tied both to the traumatic past and the inspired future. Interestingly, the troupe concludes by addressing those in the audience who have never witnessed one of their performances. And while it is possible that there are always newcomers to the show, the inviting of first-time patrons to participate in this narrative also acts as a moment of interpellation for those returning to Burkhart’s. Strangers are invited into the community and the queer communal space materializes a mission and a memory that summons the pub’s spectators to action. Knomie Moore told one audience, “If you weren’t here, we wouldn’t be here.” There are many rounds of applause during the productions, but none are more vibrant, exalted, or amassed than the ones solicited by this final proclamation. When Moore says “it’s because of you we can continue fighting this fight,” the audience is hailed as a collective, encouraged to recognize, even if momentarily, their identity is intimately tied to those around them.

At the end of every show the Armorettes perform Brotherhood of Man’s “United We Stand.” A sappy, if not vacuous, love song, “United We Stand” has a history in queer communities as far back as the era of gay liberation movements.<sup>35</sup> The obvious communal tone of the chorus, “For united we stand/Divided we fall/And if our backs should ever be against the wall/We’ll be together, together, you and I,” is often sung in unison by the group. As they perform the song, a bucket is placed on a stool in the middle of the stage. Each of the Armorettes empties their pockets and braziers of that night’s tips as patrons contribute cash and bar-goers on the second floor crumple up money and throw it down on the performance space. From beginning to end, the Armorettes transform Burkhart’s Pub into a space of collective memory and action to mitigate the effects of HIV/AIDS in Atlanta.

### United We Stand

In 2004 the Atlanta Pride Committee named the Armorettes Grand Marshals of the Pride Parade as an expression of thanks for their dedication to the community and the fight against HIV/AIDS. In an interview about the festivities Cherry told the *Advocate*, “I think drag queens are always the first group that people go to when they

need fundraising. People want to malign drag queens, but when it comes down to it, they are the first to step up to the plate when there is a need.”<sup>36</sup> These words resonate for us not only because of the passion Cherry feels for his cause but because the Armorettes have sometimes been maligned in their fight and suffered abuse in the very communities they seek to aid. Despite all of their efforts, the members of the Armorettes recognize the precarious nature of their struggle, their brethren, and the rainbow coalition that supposedly constitutes the LGBT community. There remain critics of their tactical repertoires and sadly these naysayers are often gay. On occasion, audience members try to discipline their performances with requests that they merely shut up and lip-synch. Those who willingly forget the cultural importance of drag queens in American queer life, from Stonewall to AIDS to annual pride parades, too often dismiss them as simple ornaments of bar life.<sup>37</sup> “The only thing that I could ever say that could possibly be perceived as a negative is if somebody says ‘you’re just a drag queen,’” says Cherry. “Because to me there’s so much more than that. The title drag queen, really, is an honor . . . for me it’s a great term. But to say ‘just a drag queen’ is a little short-sighted.” We mention these occasional struggles not because the Armorettes face constant combativeness from spectators (they are clearly well received) but to underscore the persistent and arduous labor that constitutes being a member of a group that fights unwaveringly against a syndrome that others increasingly wish to ignore. The utopian projections of “United We Stand” is powerful not simply because it inspires hope but because it draws attention to the constant need to reaffirm communal bonds that are always, from the start, volatile.

To be certain, AIDS fundraising is an endeavor that is perhaps more perilous than ever. It is not risky in the sense that people are unwilling to donate money to their campaign, or that the Armorettes feel substantial risk in asserting these ventures, so much as the very stability of AIDS resources hang in the balance in Southern communities. Although AIDS is increasingly off the radar of queer people and unsafe sex practices continue to persist, the Armorettes fill a void left by government and benevolent agencies that underfund and even ignore the needs of people suffering from HIV/AIDS. The Armorettes continue nourishing a number of organizations, including Jerusalem House, the Grady Infectious Disease Program, the BRAC Center, the AIDS Treatment Initiative, and the AIDS Survival Project.

Although the queer community is known for its fetishization of past cinematic and recording industry divas, it is generally not known for the documenting and retelling of its own history. In sharp contrast to these queer erasures, the Armorettes centralize history as an irreplaceable component of their public identity. The troupe reproduces a queer kinship rooted in its own historicity; a historicity divorced from heterosexual notions of paternal and maternal lineage. They are a family, in Cherry’s words a “sorority” of sorts, whose members may come and go, but whose place in the important historical fight against AIDS remains constant. And if you are in the bar, you cannot escape the possibility that you are in their extended family. While the dissemination of this history on their audiences may be fleeting, the Armorettes nonetheless provide a vital link between the historical and present exigencies of HIV/AIDS.

It is compelling that the group actively reiterates a sublime grotesqueness with their own bodies. AIDS, after all, made gay men afraid of their bodies and actively incited a kind of grotesque abjection that continues to permeate the identities of a generation of gay men. The Armorettes embrace this disgust and transform it into a spectacle that engenders a critique of activism that has yet to be spoken. The Armorettes are always speaking a historicity that reengages the spectacle of AIDS that may be otherwise forgotten. They are still searching for that city Vestal Goodman longs for. And that utopic place is a vital inventive resource necessitated by the apocalyptic devastation the Armorettes have witnessed and to which they continue to bear witness.

### Notes

- [1] Karen Krahulik, “A Class Act: Ryan Landry and the Politics of Booger Drag,” *GLQ* 15 (2009): 11–13.
- [2] David Román, “It’s My Party and I’ll Die If I Want to’: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Circulation of Camp in U.S. Theatre,” *Theatre Journal* 44 (1992): 327.
- [3] Here we employ the grotesque as a reference to corporeal presentations that expose bodies and bodily functions for the public to see. These presentations demonstrate that the body is in a constant state of motion and becoming, and sometimes these events can critique social hierarchies held together by codes of propriety. For more, see Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources,” in *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Simon Dentith (London: Routledge, 1995), 225–253.
- [4] Meredith Raimondo, “Dateline Atlanta: Place and the Social Construction of AIDS,” in *Carryin’ on in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 346.
- [5] For our purposes, universalizable claims as to whether or not drag inherently transgresses and/or reifies gender, sexual, and corporeal normativities are beyond the scope of our critique. Critical evaluations of drag as a practice and technology of gender ideologies require contextualized calibrations of the performer, the performance, the audience’s receptions, and the complex codes of gender enabled and constrained by the space of drag. Thus, proclamations about drag’s gender subversiveness are not all that useful in a world where we believe that gender is a performatively produced identity, and an identity that is mobile, tactical, and undone as it is reiterated. Esther Newton’s ethnographic study of female impersonators in the 1960s continues to be a valuable guide to the contextualized evaluation of drag practices. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). Similarly, Peggy Phelan cautions against the acontextual judgment of drag in “Crisscrossing Cultures,” in *Crossing the State: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris (New York: Routledge, 1993), 159. With that said, we are aware of academic critiques of drag. For example, Vivian Namaste questions the uncritical academic redeployment of drag to expose the social construction of gender as it ignores the actual reception by and negotiation of gender norms by the audience in *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 10–15. Steven Schacht and Lisa Underwood are similarly skeptical of drag’s transformative potential given the ways in which they understand its trafficking in sexist, racist, and classist privilege in “The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 46, no. 3/4 (2004): 1–17. Others see the relationship between the consumer relationship between gay male audiences and drag queens as an impediment to forging alliances and

recognizing the commonalities of their gender oppression. Dana Berkowitz, Linda Belgrave, Robert Halberstein, "The Interaction of Drag Queens and Gay Men in Public and Private Spaces," *Journal of Homosexuality* 52, no. 3/4 (2006): 11–32. As should be clear, we are not interested in making generalizations about drag, opting instead to interrogate the Armorettes' performances to refute the assumed incapacity of drag practices to initiate political awareness and action. The particular space of the gay bar demands metrics attuned the cultural traditions of camp operative in queer cultures. The aforementioned studies of drag assume the uncritical importation of hegemonic racial, gender, and class hierarchies. We are more optimistic about queer potentialities of stranger-relationalities enabled by bars and clubs, or what Fiona Buckland refers to as "queer lifeworlds," in *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002): 4–7. One further caveat needs to be noted. We focus here on drag queens thus limiting our abilities to pass pronouncement on drag writ large. Obviously, drag kings complicate the gender dynamics of drag. For some of the best work on drag kings, see Julie Hanson, "Drag Kinging: Embodied Acts and Acts of Embodiment," *Body & Society* 13 (2007): 61–106; Donna Troka, Kathleen Lebesco, and Jean Noble, eds., *The Drag King Anthology* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2003); and Del Lagrace Volcano and Judith "Jack" Halberstam, *The Drag King Book* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999).

- [6] For an historical account of the clash between Southern values and metropolitan Atlanta, including the regulation of sex in public, see John Howard, "The Library, the Park, and the Pervert," in *Carryin' on in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 107–131.
- [7] John Howard's work on gay and lesbian Mississippi is one of the most-cited books on Southern queer culture. *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Luckily, a number of works, cited throughout the essay, have further interrogated the complications intersections of queer lives in the South. Although not employed here, one other work deserves mention because of its extensive use of interview data: E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
- [8] For more on the AIDS Quilt transfer to Atlanta, see Dan Brouwer, "From San Francisco to Atlanta and Back Again: Ideologies of Mobility in the AIDS Quilt's Search for a Homeland," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10 (2007): 701–722.
- [9] The quarantining of people with HIV/AIDS may not circulate as widely as it once did, but a quick Google search yields an alarming amount of articles and Web sites that still advocate this position. The terror invoked by these advocates reminds us of how much work is left to be done. For one particularly egregious example that relies on comparisons to typhoid quarantines in the early twentieth century, as well as appropriating Larry Kramer's rhetoric, see Les Kinsolving, "Why Not Prison-Farm Quarantine AIDS-Spreaders," *WorldNetDaily*, April 5, 2005, [http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=43638](http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=43638) (accessed August 2, 2008).
- [10] Jeremy Laurance, "New Drugs Raise Life Expectancy of HIV Sufferers by 13 Years," *The Independent*, July 25, 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-wellbeing/health-news/new-drugs-raise-life-expectancy-of-hiv-sufferers-by-13-years-876799.html> (accessed July 30, 2008).
- [11] Laurance, "New Drugs."
- [12] Southern AIDS Coalition, "Southern States Manifesto: Update 2008 'HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases in the South,'" July 21, 2008: 4.
- [13] Southern AIDS Coalition, "Southern States Manifesto."
- [14] Kaiser Daily HIV/AIDS Report, "Southern U.S. Not Receiving Adequate Federal Funding to Provide HIV/AIDS Prevention, Support," July 21, 2008, [http://www.kaisernetwork.org/DAILY\\_REPORTS/rep\\_index.cfm?DR\\_ID=53435](http://www.kaisernetwork.org/DAILY_REPORTS/rep_index.cfm?DR_ID=53435) (accessed August 1, 2008).

- [15] Kaiser Daily HIV/AIDS Report, “Southern U.S.”
- [16] Jose Antonio Vargas, “D.C. Gay Group Battles ‘AIDS Fatigue,’” *Washington Post*, August 13, 2006, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/12/AR2006081200948\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/12/AR2006081200948_pf.html) (accessed August 2, 2008).
- [17] Schacht and Underwood, “The Absolutely Fabulous,” 5.
- [18] Verta Taylor, Leila Rupp, and Joshua Gamson, “Performing Protest: Drag Shows as Tactical Repertoire of the Gay and Lesbian Movement,” *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 25 (2004): 108–109.
- [19] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 2, 3.
- [20] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 7.
- [21] James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 76–85.
- [22] Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 153.
- [23] Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 159.
- [24] For an overview of the Gospel Hour, please see Edward Gray and Scott Thumma, “The Gospel Hour: Liminality, Identity and Religion in a Gay Bar,” in *Gay Religion*, eds. Scott Thumma and Edward Gray (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 285–302.
- [25] Taylor et al., “Performing Protest,” 112.
- [26] Bo Shell, “Come Out Swinging,” *Southern Voice*, March 24, 2006, <http://www.sovo.com/2006/3-24/locallife/feature/hs.cfm> (accessed September 15, 2008)
- [27] The Armorettes, “About Us,” <http://www.armorettes.com/aboutus.php> (accessed September 7, 2008).
- [28] Rob Beck, “The Once and Future Queens,” *Southern Voice*, January 18, 2008, <http://www.southernvoice.com> (accessed September 2, 2008).
- [29] Van Gower, “Silver Foxes,” *Southern Voice*, January 16, 2004, <http://www.sovo.com/2004/1-16/locallife/feature/foxes.cfm> (accessed September 2, 2008).
- [30] For an insightful critique of a performer who shares many infinities with the Armorettes, including the explicit refusal of glam drag, see Krahulik, “A Class Act.”
- [31] The popularity and cultural resonance of Goodman’s classic number is demonstrated by the Gospel Hour’s use of the same song and forms of audience participation. The crowds are likely to be similar given that both of these groups perform in the same venue. See Edward Gray, “Looking for a City: The Ritual and Politics of Ethnography,” in *Out in the South*, eds. Carlos Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 173–184.
- [32] Douglas Harrison, “Why Southern Gospel Music Matters,” *Religion and American Culture* 18 (2008): 35. Jeffrey McCune writes about a similar phenomenon at the now closed Biology Bar in Chicago where primarily Black audiences go to see drag artists perform gospel numbers on Monday nights. Jeffrey McCune, “Transformance: Reading the Gospel in Drag,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 46, no. 3/4 (2004): 151–167.
- [33] The emcees do not use a script during their performances. They often touch base with each other about current events to ensure both have heard of the happenings, but the show itself is improvised.
- [34] Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 35.
- [35] According to René van der Drif’s site, the latest incarnation of Brotherhood of Man regularly performs for gay audiences and ends their concerts with “United We Stand” to honor the historical and continued importance of this song for LGBTs. René van der Drif, “Brotherhood of Man—The Facts,” <http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/sunra/953/biograf-.html> (accessed September 2, 2008).
- [36] Lisa Neff, “Leading the Parade,” *Advocate*, June 22, 2004, 76.
- [37] John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 230–237.