

Sexualities

Primary Source Analysis

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Ron Goldberg, interviewed by Sarah Schulman, 25 October 2003, for the ACT UP Oral Histories Project: <https://www.actuporalhistory.org/numerical-interviews/032-ron-goldberg>. Extract taken from pp. 29–30 of the online transcript.

Source Extract:

Ron Goldberg: We were very much at the point, where – I mean '91, '92, '93, for me they were dreadful in terms of people dying. People who had survived for a while were dying. AZT wasn't working. It was a very tough, tough time. So it was very much about, literally, bringing the bodies of our dead to where we thought the blame lied – where a significant portion of the blame lied. And making that quantifiable. It wasn't just about nice things, here's a dead body – this was someone who we loved, who we valued. And, there was some delays in the car getting down there, and by the time they did we'd been around for a couple of hours or so, so the police were on to us. And there was this whole back and forth between the police not letting us get out of the parking lot. And Tim was in a coffin in the back of a car. And finally we started – never mind that, we're going to take it anyway, and we started to go and lift it, and the police started pushing back, and Tim's brother was there and went crazy – just started screaming and yelling. And basically he got arrested. And I remember Jim Aquino then took the bust I think, because we didn't want him being in jail alone. So someone took a bust just to make sure he wasn't alone. And we weren't allowed out of the parking lot. That was a really tough day.

Sarah Schulman: *So what did you do, did you just stay in the parking lot with the coffin?*

RG: We certainly had onlookers. I think at the end of the day, it was kind of a disempowering event certainly. I think we spoke. We talked about this is what he wanted and what he stood for, and where the blame lied. I think we did actually march around at some point, and there were some weird reactions from some of the cops and some of the onlookers as well. I was more or less in my Marshaling mode there, and we were also very conscious of – since it was so emotional – trying not to have a situation develop because it was so emotional. Some of the cops I think were snickering at one point, and we sort of got all over them. I think the lead cops kind of pulled those guys away.

SS: *What happened to the body at the end?*

RG: The body was taken back to New York.

SS: *Who were the other people in the Marys?*

RG: Michael Cunningham, Joy Episalla, B.C. Craig, Amy and I were honorary. Jim Baggett, Tim Bailey, Mark Fisher. I'm missing some people.

SS: *Did Mark and Tim just stand up at ACT UP and say, 'When we die, we want you' –*

RG: No, they wrote wills. It was in their wills. Actually, they went through a very long process.

SS: *So while they were alive, they –*

RG: Yes.

SS: *And, what was it like to receive that information from a living person?*

RG: It wasn't something we talked about a lot. My memory of it was that it was known, but it wasn't announced until – but that the Marys were planning something like this. These were the first times we were doing this, so there was a lot of concern about it getting out and getting quashed before things could happen. So it was sort of tightly held information. But we talked about, in theory, the concepts of – I mean we'd had a number of political funerals, or certainly, memorial processions – David Wojnarowicz, Jon Greenberg – it goes on and on and on. So there was certainly talk of other ways of activism, about upping the ante – how do you continue to make a point when people get dealt to, 'Oh, ACT UP is in the street, again. Oh, they're protesting, oh, they're stopping traffic.' The challenge from a completely planning point of view is okay, how do you keep engaging the beast?

Analysis

This source is taken from an interview with AIDS activist Ron Goldberg, by writer and fellow AIDS activist Sarah Schulman. It was conducted in 2003 as part of the ACT UP Oral History Project, which sought to capture

the memories of members of the New York branch of the AIDS activist organization ACT UP, which stands for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. The project produced a book, *Let the Record Show*, and a documentary film, *United in Anger*, and all the interviews are available online: <https://www.actuporalhistory.org>.¹

The full interview – like the others in the project – ranges across all aspects of Goldberg’s work in ACT UP. ACT UP was a direct action organization founded in New York in 1987, which held attention-grabbing protests in an effort to raise awareness of AIDS and criticize the government’s lack of action. These included protests outside the US government and the offices of the FDA (Food and Drugs Administration), which was responsible for testing and approving treatments for AIDS. The action described in this extract of the interview was one of ACT UP’s most shocking: political funerals. These began around 1992 and were processions escorting someone’s coffin after they had died, featuring explicitly political speeches and banners calling for action. Often the political funeral targeted a specific key location such as the White House – as Goldberg says in his interview, ‘bringing the bodies of our dead to where we thought the blame lied’, to make it harder to ignore the reality and tragedy of death by AIDS.

In this extract from Goldberg’s interview, he highlights the heightened emotions of the political funerals and the pain and frustration that they could bring. Here he discusses one of the earliest political funerals, held in 1993 for Tim Bailey. ACT UP had wanted to fulfil Bailey’s wish to take his coffin to the White House but was prevented by police from leaving a car park in Washington, DC, leading to the arrest of Bailey’s brother and another ACT UP member. It can be difficult to understand tone and emotion when reading an oral history transcript, but Goldberg’s sadness and anger are evident in his statements: ‘It wasn’t just about nice things, here’s a dead body – this was someone who we loved, who we valued’, ‘that was a really tough day’. When reading the extract closely, we can see how he repeats the phrase ‘it was so emotional’: ‘We were also very conscious of – since it was so emotional – trying not to have a situation develop because it was so emotional’. Repetition is natural in spontaneous speech, but it can also indicate something particularly important to the speaker. In this case, Goldberg’s repetition helps to convey the agony of political funerals which is still very apparent, even when recalled around a decade later.

You can see the video footage of Goldberg’s interview on the ACT UP Oral History Project website: <https://www.actuporalhistory.org/numerical-interviews/032-ron-goldberg> (this extract is from 1:02:41 to 1:07:30), and it can be interesting to compare the emotions conveyed in the written transcript and in the video. Although the written transcript is easier for more detailed analysis, many oral historians now also ensure that the video or audio recording is archived or made available alongside a transcript, to ensure that tone and/or body language can also be understood.

One concern sometimes raised about oral history sources is their reliance on inherently unreliable memory, compared to other primary sources such as speeches or newspaper articles, which can be taken from the same time as the event or very shortly afterwards, when recall is fresher than in an oral history interview recorded several years after the events described. This interview was conducted in 2003, ten years after Tim Bailey's political funeral and sixteen years after ACT UP New York was founded. In this extract we see some of the fallibility of memory – Goldberg *thinks* that it was Jim Acquino who got arrested so he could accompany Tim Bailey's brother to jail, but he isn't sure – 'someone took a bust'. He also can't recall all of the members of the Marys group who organized most of the political funerals. This is an issue that can be alleviated by collecting multiple oral histories on the same topic, as this project did; other people who were also there might be able to fill in some of the gaps in Goldberg's memory and build up a more detailed picture of events. However, it is important to note that most oral historians today agree that the main value of oral histories doesn't lie in confirming or negating specific objective facts. Rather, they can show us people's impressions of and emotions about events, what was important to them and what has remained with them in the time since. Hearing personal narratives can also help us feel more connected to these emotions than more 'objective' sources.

Goldberg highlights the need for political funerals as a way to 'up the ante', to keep people's attention on AIDS at a time when 'people who had survived for a while were dying. AZT [a medication for AIDS] wasn't working' and people were starting to dismiss ACT UP and take their actions for granted. Note that his discussion moves back and forth between the specific details of the event he is recalling and the wider context of political funerals. This could show just how 'political' political funerals were – that ACT UP members were constantly aware of the broader significance and rationale for their protests, even if they didn't always go as planned.

Because an oral history interview is a conversation between two or more people, it is as important to understand the *interviewer's* background and approach as it is to understand the *interviewee's*. Sarah Schulman, who conducted this interview, was herself a member of ACT UP New York between July 1987 and June 1992.² This means that she was an 'insider interviewer', as she already knew most of the people interviewed and had been at several of the events they discussed. This has advantages – interviewees may feel more comfortable talking to somebody they know, and an insider interviewer may know more about a specific incident so feel less need to ask basic clarifying questions.³ On the other hand, too much shared understanding between interviewer and interviewee can make it harder for other historians to use the interview, if they do not have the necessary background knowledge. There is also a risk that an insider interviewer will only capture one perspective, that of people they already like or agree with. Schulman explicitly responds to this issue in her book,

arguing that, 'A number of the interviewees and I had significant political differences in ACT UP, but this did not affect our ability to hold frank, open conversations', although she acknowledges that, 'A tiny handful [of former members] refused to be interviewed', and one interview was conducted by her project partner, Jim Hubbard, because 'I didn't think I could handle the person's manipulations'.⁴

Schulman also says that the primary aim of the ACT UP oral history project was 'not to look back with nostalgia, but to help contemporary and future activists learn from the past so that they can do more effective organising in the present'.⁵ In other words, the project doesn't seek to tell a rose-tinted or nostalgic narrative of ACT UP, which may be why this extract discusses some of the disappointments and frustrations that could happen when protests didn't go to plan. However, its overall goal *is* an explicitly political one that aligns itself with ACT UP's activist objectives.

Schulman also says that she was trying to redress what she sees as the misrepresentation of AIDS in popular discourse and famous art such as the film *Philadelphia* (1993) and the play *Angels in America* (1991). She argues that these ignored political movements like ACT UP, portraying gay men affected by AIDS as helpless and tragic victims.⁶ The project therefore seeks to restore what she sees as ACT UP's central role in the AIDS epidemic, highlighting the importance of fighting back. It tells a specific, activist narrative of the AIDS epidemic that highlights the power of a group of motivated individuals driving change. It is important to remember that the vast majority of people affected by AIDS did not join ACT UP or any other organization. Some – especially those based outside of New York or other major cities – may not even have been aware of ACT UP's existence. Others were aware, but found direct, attention-grabbing activism too forceful, or were concerned that it would do more harm than good. This interview and the others in the project are very useful for understanding the perspectives of those involved in this specific form of AIDS activism during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the specific way they planned direct action and their experiences of it. However, as with all historical sources, it is important to remember that this only tells one part of a much broader story.

Works cited

- Jim Hubbard (dir.), *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (2012).
 Shirleene Robinson, 'LGBTIQ Activism and "Insider" Interviewing: Reflecting on Oral Histories from the Campaign for Australian Marriage Equality', in Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy and Emma Vickers (eds), *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022).
 Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993* (New York: Picador, 2021).

Notes

- 1 Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993* (New York: Picador, 2021); Jim Hubbard (dir.), *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*, 2012.
- 2 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, p. xxiv.
- 3 Shirleene Robinson, 'LGBTIQ Activism and "Insider" Interviewing: Reflecting on Oral Histories from the Campaign for Australian Marriage Equality', in Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy and Emma Vickers (eds), *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), pp. 151–61.
- 4 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, p. xxiv.
- 5 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, p. xvii.
- 6 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, p. xx.

Further reading

Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2016).
 Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez (eds), *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially their 'Introduction'.
 George Severs, *Radical Acts: HIV/AIDS Activism in Late Twentieth-Century England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).
 Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy and Emma Vickers (eds), *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), especially their 'Introduction'.