

“What Should Have Been, But Sadly Wasn’t“. Commoning HIV/AIDS History in “Pose”

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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 mnemonicicide – 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