

Home

Latinos ACT UP: Transnational AIDS Activism in the 1990s

M. Alfredo González June 29, 2008

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When the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was founded in New York in 1987, it not only introduced a proactive stance into the United States' AIDS crisis, but also united people at opposite ends of the political spectrum.

For some, losing the promise of assimilation to the stigma of HIV infection was an affront. In anger, they dedicated their activism to establishing scientific protocols that would match the urgency of the epidemic.

The author (center), together with the late Luis Salazar (left) and Luis "Popo" Santiago, protests in front of the Argentine consulate in New York to demand legal recognition for Comunidad Homosexual de Argentina, a Buenos Aires organization, in 1991.

(By Lee Snider / The Image Works)

social body. As the organization's membership grew, it became more diverse and so did its priorities, with many people joining who could not help but see the global and historical dimensions of the pandemic.

The rise of Bill Clinton to power, the advent of protease inhibitors, and the combination of several antiretroviral medications in "cocktails" as a new therapeutic strategy spread a triumphalist sentiment vis-à-vis HIV/AIDS in the United States.

Its association with the anti-corporate-globalization movement re-energized it with a new framework for its analyses, new methodologies, new allies, and new horizons—driven in part by the goal of making HIV treatments available in the Global South.

A small group of Latinos working within ACT UP had begun this transnational work in the early 1990s. We faced an uphill battle, not only in fighting for the rights of HIV-positive people, but sometimes within our very own organization.

I joined the Latino Caucus of ACT UP/NY in 1990 and remained active until 1994. Initially, I only attended the meetings of the caucus, and began to participate in ACT UP's general meetings after a few months.

In our meetings, we shared impressions of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Latin American countries we knew best. A common theme emerged: Financial and informational gaps in the region limited the quality and length of life of people with HIV, many of whom did not know about and could not pay for treatments.

In the North, HIV triggered community formation from preexisting lesbian and gay enclaves. From these platforms, people with HIV proactively and even defiantly advocated for their health care.

If this attitude existed in Latin America during the first 15 years of the epidemic, it had been an individual strategy. No social movement could compete with the biomedical establishment, even if immunology was still a young specialization and its body of knowledge limited.

By the 1980s, the politics of social class was at the core of Latin American social struggles, less so the politics of difference. The lexicon and methodologies that U.S. HIV/AIDS activists inherited from the civil rights, feminist, and gay rights movements were practically absent in Latin America.

Our first step was publishing the Boletín de ACT UP Americas, a Spanish-language newsletter offering HIV-related scientific, social, and political news.

Our third, more directly political effort, was a campaign in solidarity with Comunidad Homosexual Argentina (CHA), an Argentine group founded in 1984 that presses for gay rights and access to health care for HIV-positive people.

The Latino Caucus began exploring how to support the CHA in the late months of 1990 and decided to apply international pressure. We picked noon, February 5, 1991, to stage a demonstration in front of the Argentine consulate on West 56th Street in Manhattan.

We were taken to a conference room on the top floor, where the consul greeted us. As soon as we had sat down the he said, "I hope you haven't come to infect us."

As the demonstrators began to chant slogans outside, the general consul insisted that we were responsible for the vandalism and that HIV infection was irrelevant in Argentina.

It was a rare warm, sunny February day. About 60 demonstrators showed up, of whom no more than 20 were Latinas/os.

Our actions for CHA played with time and transnational space. Weeks before our consulate action, we sent CHA a packet of flyers announcing the date, which we hoped they would reproduce and distribute widely.

The following November, an urgent call came from an Argentine activist in San Francisco. Menem—who was touring the United States, promoting Argentina as an industrialized nation with all the features of a modern democracy—was to visit the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University in New York.

When Menem entered the auditorium, we recognized a man we knew as Ricardo among his security detail. We had met him four days earlier at ACT UP/NY's work space.

After Menem's presentation, several hands went up during the Q&A. In the back, one of us stood up with his hand raised and remained standing as the president gave his first reply.

A wave of expressions of surprise and indignation swept through the well-dressed first rows. "Querido amigo," Menem began. Argentina is over the issue of establishing legal recognition for the CHA, he said.

The next day, Buenos Aires newspapers trumpeted the brief exchange in New York with front-page headlines. Less than a week later, the Supreme Court handed down the expected negative decision.

By 1996, the Latino Caucus and the ACT UP–Americas committee did not exist as such. Members of both groups had grown disenchanted with HIV activism under the aegis of ACT UP/NY, were very sick, or had died from AIDS.

The group obtained the support and participation of GNP's, UNDP, GLXP, the World Health Organization, the White House's Office of National AIDS Policy, USAID, UNXO Welcome, the International Association of Physicians in AIDS Care, Latino Commission on AIDS, and the networks of people with HIV in Africa (NAP-), Latin America (AP-), and Asia and the Pacific Islands.

A striking feature of the symposium was the diversity of the voices it brought together. The underlying premise was that the complexity of the task demanded the will and the concerted effort of a diverse collective of stakeholders.

Contemporary social movements draw a great deal of their strength from the combination of multiple voices. As they move forward, they skid in that diversity and acrimony, to the patterns they are committed to change in society.

M. Alfredo González is an anthropologist specializing in health, poverty, cities, and Latinos. As an AIDS activist, he has worked in New York, where he lives, and throughout Latin America. This article is dedicated to the memory of Luis Salazar.

1. There are more reasons underlying the waning of the energy of ACT UP/NY. As the group actualized its inclusive goals and its membership grew more diverse, so did the issues considered urgent, and tension between groups with different aims grew.

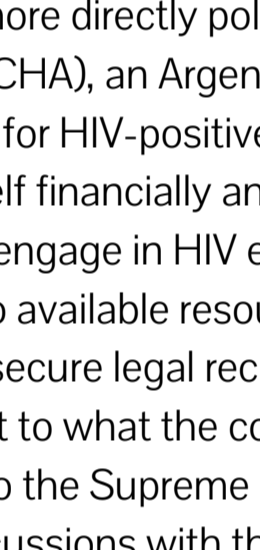
2. During my time as an ACT UP member, the urgency of HIV/AIDS politics in the United States, and its relevance for me, often took priority over such tasks as ethnographic note taking.

Tags: HIV/AIDS, transnational activism, US latinos, ACT UP, solidarity

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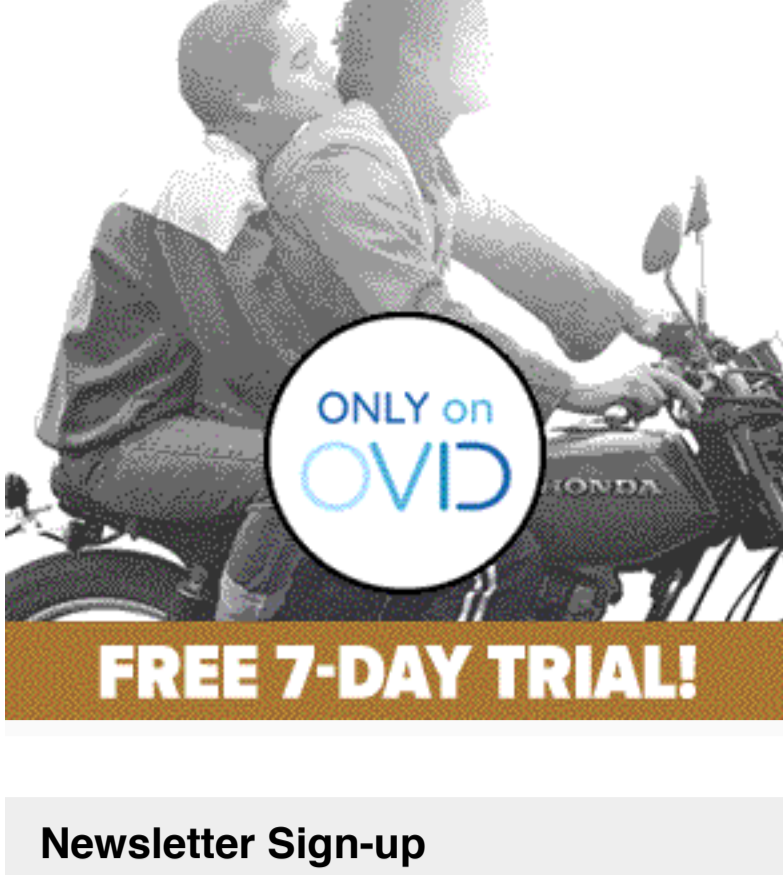
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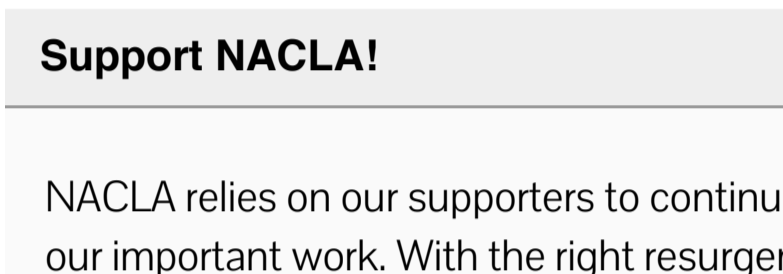
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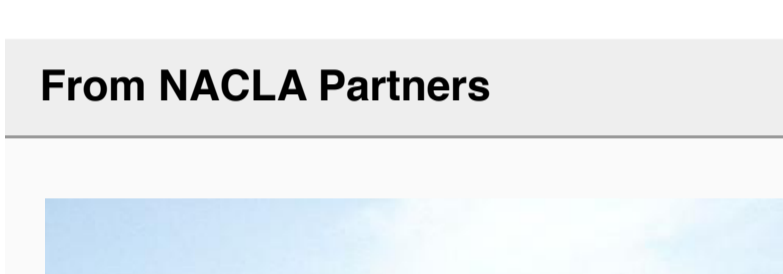
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