An Ideological Analysis of the AIDS Memorial Quilt

By Eric J. Roberson

Prepared for Dr. Tony Chiaviello
ENG 3317 Studies in the Theory of Rhetoric
May 7, 2008
“It’s about different people and different kinds of fabric being sewn together to make something whole. And it’s something that we offer to people. It’s not a shroud. It’s something we give to people when they’re tired, when they’re sick, and when they’re cold. It’s a promise of comfort.”

-Cleve Jones, Creator of the Quilt

At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, gay men made up the vast majority of AIDS cases. Originally, the AIDS Memorial Quilt was meant to assuage the grief and loss of families, friends, and loved ones of AIDS victims. Today, it has become something that raises awareness of the impact that the disease has had on all of society. Because of a lack of public awareness and little medical knowledge of the disease early on, people across the United States feared AIDS and were dying of the disease in epidemic proportions. “The initial pattern of its devastation in the United States… seemed limited, most notably to gay men and people who used intravenous drugs. Existing social stigmatization of these groups combined with and was intensified by a lack of knowledge of the disease’s causes and methods of transmission, creating a nationwide epidemic of fear in the early 1980’s” (Capozzola 93).

The earliest name given AIDS was Gay Related Immune Deficiency or GRID (History 2). This resulted in a stigma being attached to the disease that only gay men were affected by AIDS. Because AIDS spread so rapidly through the gay community, almost all heterosexuals understood the disease to be something that only affected gays, creating additional marginalization and fear of an already misunderstood group of Americans. “Assumed to pursue multiple and anonymous sexual quests, gay men are identified as in violation of all that is most valued within the dominant culture. They are perceived as foreign to the values of family, society and country, and therefore as threats on many levels” (Krouse 70). As a result of
stigmatization and misunderstanding, heterosexual America turned a blind eye to what would become one of the most devastating diseases affecting modern humans.

Heterosexist family values and Christian fundamentalism governed the Republican Party who controlled both the legislative and executive branches of government. “A significant source of [Republican] support came from the newly identified religious right and the Moral Majority, a political-action group founded by the Rev. Jerry Falwell. AIDS became the tool, and gay men the target, for the politics of fear, hate and discrimination. Falwell said ‘AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals’ ” (White B9). AIDS was viewed as a deserved scourge of gays, who were considered a sub-class and disjointed from mainstream society. This helped reinforce the idea that AIDS would never happen to straight Americans and “AIDS deaths were less than tragic” (Capozzola 98).

Ronald Reagan, who was President of the United States at the time, did not publicly acknowledge the disease until 1987. “The role of President Ronald Regan in the political, medical, and cultural history of the AIDS epidemic will always loom large. [He] did not even mention the word AIDS publicly until over 21,000 Americans had already died of the disease” (Capozzola 98). “Following Regan’s lead, conservatives of the 1980s asserted cultural power through their claim on the definition of family. This struck particularly at gay men, who were often excluded from family structures” (Capozzola 98).

Today, the face of AIDS has gone through a metamorphosis. African American women and other minorities are disproportionately affected by the disease. African Americans comprise 13% of the American population, however they account for 49% of all new HIV diagnoses (CDC 2008). The Quilt’s “creation, display, and ultimate meaning were radically inclusive, and its framework of memory was consistently democratic in ways that could encompass its multiple constituencies and their varying definitions of politics” (Capozzola 93).
As the disease demographics have transitioned so has the need to make people realize that AIDS affects us all. Today, it has become something that raises awareness of the impact that the disease has had across the U.S. over time, not just the San Francisco gay community in the mid-1980’s. The imperative has always been to bring AIDS to the forefront and to make people’s interconnections to the disease known. “Supporters recognized early on that the demographics of the AIDS epidemic were more encompassing” (Capozzola 92). The Quilt reflects that today because “the NAMES Project worked throughout the late 1980s to make the Quilt more inclusive of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (Capozzola 92).

This essay will focus on the rhetorical qualities of the quilt and the hegemony that makes it essential to the true impact of AIDS. Hegemony is the dominance of one social group over another. The dominant culture has already been identified as being led by the Moral Majority and Republican President Ronald Regan. Other questions must be considered. Did the Quilt change the perception of AIDS in America? What strategies did the Quilt use to overcome the dominant culture’s view of AIDS in America? Does the magnetism of the AIDS Memorial Quilt still draw people to the cause today?

This will be explored using an ideological method of criticism. In the words of Sonja Foss, “The primary goal of the ideological critic is to discover and make visible the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in an artifact” (Rhetorical Criticism 296). The AIDS Memorial quilt will be analyzed for the qualities that it expresses and how it challenged the status quo of the early 1980’s. The evidence of ideology, or the ideograph, is the AIDS Memorial Quilt itself.

The Context of the Quilt

In 1987, the Quilt was unveiled on the Capitol Lawn in Washington, D.C. Because of mass media, the AIDS Memorial Quilt received national press coverage and the scourge of AIDS entered America’s living rooms. “What transformed an essentially local memorial into something national was an Associated Press feature story in August, which resulted in almost
400 panels being sent to San Francisco [to add to the quilt] from all over the country” (Hawkins 745). For the first time, Americans caught a glimpse of how deadly the disease was. “Laid out in the symbolic heart of American political culture… within view of the White House, the United States Capitol, and the Lincoln Memorial, the Quilt confronted the exclusions of American political authority and argued for the inclusion of people with AIDS into not just memorial, but political structures from which they had been left out” (Capozzola 98).

The first display comprised panels mainly of white, middle-class gay men. The individual panels were “three by six feet, the standard dimensions of a grave” (Hawkins 745). The panels were sewn together in sets of eight to form larger 12 foot by 12 foot panels, resulting in what has become the largest piece of folk art ever created. The size of the quilt panels was the only rule given the quilt makers. Some panels are basic with only a name and dates of birth and death. Still, others use spectacular colors, words of endearment, articles of clothing, or teddy bears and other memorabilia. “Photographs and likenesses abound, giving faces to names” (Hawkins 746). “Some had amazing, intricate, and beautiful designs and artwork” (Dodds 2). “It gives us a new version of the graveyard. This is most apparent during the displays in Washington, when the Mall (if only temporarily) becomes a national cemetery for those who have died of AIDS. The Quilt has no permanent location, and its monuments are not made of unyielding granite but of fragile cloth” (Hawkins 747).

The quilt makers were family members, friends, or significant others of AIDS victims. While some panels expressed sadness, others used humor and camp to articulate the lives of AIDS victims. “The creation of [Quilt] panels is highly egalitarian in nature” (Capozzola 94). “Despite the enormous grief that first inspired the Quilt and that now continues to attend it, so many of its panels are exuberant, tacky, playful, and high (or low) camp. No one dictates what can or cannot be shown; nor is it ‘better’ to cry than to laugh. Invariably, the carnival interrupts
the wake” (Hawkins 746). “Rather than the flattened virtues of the conventional gravestone, the panels delight in idiosyncrasy, in particular pleasures, and most especially in the life of the flesh” (Hawkins 747).

For many building the panels, it was the first time that they acknowledged a loved one’s sexuality publicly or that they lost someone to the disease. “Mourning that might have been private and cultural took place in the midst of an activism that had made personal issues into the stuff of politics” (Capozzola 92).

The Quilt brought attention to a crisis largely ignored at all levels of government. “The NAMES Project voices its claim to national inclusion at a moment in American political culture when the power to define Americanism rested primarily with conservatives who were hostile to all people with AIDS and gay men in particular” (Capozzola 92). It lent support to an effort that would support federal funding for research and treatment of the disease. Its “provocative appearance on the [Capitol] Mall has given AIDS activists a chance to rally for greater attention to the facts of the epidemic” (Hawkins 745). It mobilized the gay community to begin safe-sex campaigns and to discuss consequences of inaction. As the quilt grew, so did the public visibility of many gay men. Gay people left closeted lives with the realization that, if they did not, their lives would be gone. The linchpin of the movement was “silence equals death, action equals life” (Roman 315). “Almost overnight, the purely functional became symbolic” (Hawkins 745).

By the time the quilt was displayed for the second time, the number of panels quadrupled. In addition, signature panels were added to the display for viewers of the quilt to share their feedback. Consequently, the AIDS Memorial Quilt began to make a political statement. As of 2008, more than 91,000 names are displayed in the Quilt, with an overwhelming number of responses on the signature panels (NAMES 2008). The quilt has been displayed on the Capitol
lawn several times since 1987, and parts of it have been displayed in smaller venues like concert halls, art exhibitions, and in school gymnasiums. The quilt has grown so much that there is no venue large enough in size to display it in its totality.

As new panels were added, so were new victims. But gay men no longer made up the majority of cases. Heterosexual whites, African Americans, and Latinos were also being affected. By the 1990s, “the changing demographics of AIDS were impossible to ignore: the disease was disproportionately ravaging poor communities of color at the same time that it continued to spread in overwhelmingly white, middle-class, urban, gay neighborhoods” (Capozzola 99). AIDS was finally no longer a gay disease and the dominant hegemony was being challenged. Cleve Jones, who conceptualized the Quilt, said that he “was motivated to overcome the silence and willful forgetting of AIDS that characterized conventional frameworks of memory in the early years of the epidemic. I was obsessed by the idea of evidence… I felt that if there were a field of a thousand corpses, people would be compelled to act… I wanted to create evidence [of AIDS deaths] and by extension created evidence of government failure” (Capozzola 94). The theme became “America has AIDS”.

**Description of Ideologies**

It is necessary to understand the ideologies behind both AIDS and Quilt making for the correlations to become apparent. The next two topics will focus on each ideology, and then they will be put together in order to appreciate how each shapes the other.

*AIDS Ideology*

AIDS was limited in significance because it was perceived to affect only a small group of people in the beginning. Available statistics were congruent with the political climate at the onset of the disease. Politicians considered it acceptable to ignore AIDS - and what would later become known as an epidemic - largely because available statistics supported their dogma that AIDS was a gay disease. Since gay men were often closeted and unnoticed, it was reasonable to
disregard “their” disease. Mary Fisher, the person with AIDS who addressed the Republican National Convention in 1992, celebrated those who “fought to replace the shroud of stigma with a quilt of justice” (Hawkins 747).

Quilt Ideology

When people think of quilts they think of something maternal. Most quilts in American history have been sewn together by the women in society. Sometimes these were produced in group quilting bees where women gathered together to make quilts. Quilt making was an art and a tradition handed down from generation to generation. Women are also historically viewed as the caretakers of families in addition to being experts at creating quilts.

Quilts offer warmth and comfort. They are soft and supple. In being so, they provide stress relief. People use them when sleeping or resting and as decorations for their homes. Sometimes they chronicle a family’s history, record a person’s accomplishments, or send a specific political message. They are often given as gifts and handed down as family heirlooms.

The American Flag is a result of the art of quilting and is a political symbol recognized world wide (Allan 66). The flag represents power, glory, and strength. Americans pay respect to the flag and find a certain dignity in it. After September 11th, the flag became a symbol of unity across the country. The flag has also been hated, as in the South during the Civil War (Old Glory).

Quilts can even contain secret codes. For example, the quilt patterns included in quilts made by African American women before the civil war often contained secret messages. Patterns such as wagon wheels, the northern star, or a monkey wrench adorned their quilts. When these quilts were hung outside to air, they became symbolic of a safe house for the “Underground Railroad” which helped slaves escape from the South into northern free states (Owens).
Putting It Together

For the NAMES Project founder Cleve Jones, quilts are “such a warm, comforting, middle-class, middle-American symbol. Every family has a quilt; it makes them think of their grandmothers. We need all these American grandmothers to want us to live, to be willing to say that our lives are worth defending” (Capozzola 97). “The symbolic discourse surrounding the nation and the family was reshaped by the memorial works of the nation’s actual families, who created meaningful panels and wrote touching letters showing that the connections of family could—and did—continue to include gay men… and to other people with AIDS whose lives and identities were stigmatized. Makers and viewers of the quilt challenged the hegemony of cultural meaning over the discourse of family, insisting that people with AIDS were part of the national family and pointing out the contradictions of exclusion” (Capozzola 99).

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is a symbol of that today at the dawn of a new generation of HIV cases. People are connected with each panel that is sewn together. It commemorates the lives of thousands of people from many different backgrounds who have succumbed to AIDS, and it challenges the “radical implications given the seemingly un-American nature of the disease in the cultural context of the 1980s” (Capozzola 97). It turned “a gay disease into a shared tragedy” (Hawkins 745). The Quilt decorates the lives of people with AIDS from the most mundane way to the fanciful and artistic. “People memorialized in the Quilt are commemorated as unforgettable individuals embedded in social relationships rather than statistical representations of forgettable risk groups” (Capozzola 96). The Quilt “embraces venerable memorial traditions, but it also plays with those traditions through humor, mischief, indiscretion—through the spilled beans of intimate life. What this amounts to is a reinvention of inherited ways to mark death and cope with bereavement, a discovery of new protocols of grief in the age of AIDS” (Hawkins 746). The AIDS Memorial Quilt offers us relief and comfort.
The Quilt has brought families, friends, and loved ones together just as quilts of the Underground Railroad united escapees with people compassionate to their plight. It joins together victims, their families and friends, and those who are living with the disease. “The metaphor that became a memorial has become a metaphor once again, and one that reaches (as does AIDS) beyond the worlds of gay men” (Hawkins 747). By uniting people, the Quilt brings a sense of warmth, connection, and compassion to AIDS awareness.

The Quilt has become a powerful political symbol that can not be ignored. The Quilt calls people to action by asking them to inscribe responses which may include political statements or feelings. Through the use of signature panels, visitors of the quilt have been able to leave their indelible mark of what the quilt represents to them. These “blank signature panels… allow viewers to write messages and responses to the Quilt… The audience literally inscribes its interpretations onto the monument itself, and these inscriptions become part of the symbolic material that others ultimately use in interpreting the memorial” (Capozzola 95). For others, the message is love instead of hate, understanding instead of ignorance, and compassion instead of indifference. “It refuses to allow the physical ravages of AIDS or the fact of death to sum up the lives of the deceased; it will not equate sexuality with [political] corruption” (Hawkins 747).

As the quilt has grown, so has the belief that AIDS affects all of us. Not only were gay men brought into the mainstream of society, but so was AIDS. Official statistics indicate that at least one in three hundred people are living with HIV today (CDC). People have come to this realization from both the Quilt and from knowing someone with AIDS, such as a family member or other relative, a coworker or classmate, or a neighbor. The Quilt is an effective representation of the history that the epidemic has taken. Panels that once only represented gay men now represent people who have died of AIDS from every walk of life.
Conclusion

“Only gay men get AIDS” was the perception at the beginning of the epidemic, therefore gay men were blameworthy. “Any groups readily stigmatized as ‘other’ in the dominant culture of the U.S., such as gays… become the scapegoats of the epidemic” (Krouse 69). Society deemed people with AIDS as irrelevant because they are not seen as being part of the family fabric of America. However, Quilt panels reveal their community involvement, that they pursue meaningful careers, and that they are part of people’s families. This blame is further countered by the Quilt because it shows that no one is immune from the disease and that everyone’s life counts regardless of their sexual preference.

The Quilt meliorates grief, mourning, and loss. It “drew gay men out of physical and social isolation into a collective experience with the positive reconstruction of gay identity” and it denounces the hegemony that once existed (Krouse 68). “The strategy of taking positive images and identifying them with a predominantly gay population to resist the denigrating constructions of the dominant culture is used in various ways in connection with the quilt” (Krouse 71). According to Krouse, the strategy was to draw people closer to the Quilt thereby resisting the dominant culture’s stigmatizations. At this point people whose lives were affected by AIDS grew to realize what they had in common with others. They did not have to suffer in isolation because the Quilt linked them to shared experiences.

“The Quilt takes perfect strangers and turns them, if only posthumously, into a community. It leaves the dead to rest in peace, but it does not hesitate to disturb the peace of the living, to force everyone to look beyond the illusion of immunity in order to see a catastrophe that affects us all” (Hawkins 744). It calls people to action and compels people to share their thoughts freely through its signature panels. “In a society in which the message is that those dying of AIDS are expendable, the quilt involves the passionate expression that these people matter” (Krouse 74). The Quilt has brought people from all backgrounds to the table and has
inspired many to become caretakers of the message that AIDS affects us all. When people view the Quilt and share their thoughts via the signature panels, they join together to fight the disease instead of ignoring it.

Because people took notice, AIDS research and prevention gained government funding and public awareness. “The growing dimensions of the Quilt, and the fact that it can barely be contained or even experienced all at once, remind us of all that we have lost. But individual panels themselves show what the AIDS epidemic has been powerless to destroy: quirkiness, sensuality, humor, the bonds of relationship, the value of private life, love” (Hawkins 749). The Quilt still draws people to the cause for AIDS awareness and it emphasizes that no one can ignore this devastating disease.

“Before now, AIDS was a distant disease. It didn’t seem real. These quilts made AIDS real—the pain, the love. You are in our thoughts. Veronica”

-As inscribed on a signature panel (Lewis and Fraser 446)
APPENDIX

Above: Cleave Jones, creator of the Quilt in 1987.

Left: Arial view of the Quilt; Above: The Quilt on display in D.C.
Above & Below Left: Details of perhaps two of the most famous Quilt panels. Below Right: Close up of panels.

*All copyrighted photos used for non-commercial educational use.*
BIBLIOGRAPHY


