

# Angry Initiatives

AIDS is a war, not only of politics and medicine, but also of representations. While the mass media's response to the health crisis has been anything but uniform, the results have nevertheless, in spite of "good intentions," been lethal. In stark contrast, a subculture of alternate media is fighting back. From the front lines of the battlefield, artists, community activists, and cable-access producers have launched a counter-offensive against such deadly discourses.

Each evening of the *Angry Initiatives*, *Defiant Strategies* benefit for AIDS Action Now! was designed for active participation with speakers from various groups "bringing the issues back home." The series defied the notion of geographic representation, since the majority of the tapes are from the epicentres of the North American war, New York and San Francisco. The schematic "special interest" nature of each evening demanded, "What speaks to you, and what doesn't? What tapes do we need in our specific contexts and communities? What issues are still not being addressed?" AIDS is a war and demands that our responses be complex and critical. This is no time to be passively entertained. Remember, this is a war.

John Greyson



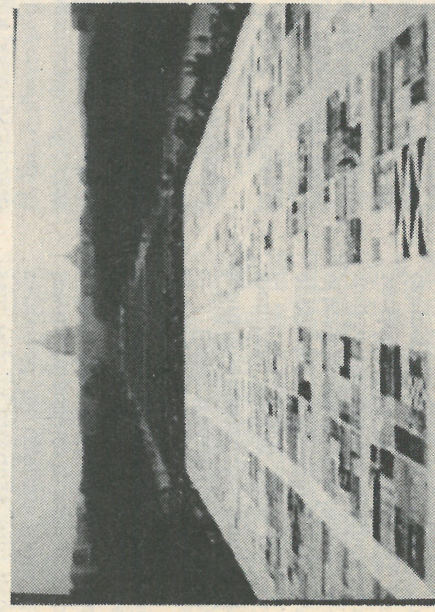
Isaac Julien's unabashed promotion of desire in "This Is Not an AIDS Advert."



Ruth Rodriguez [Hispanic AIDS Forum]. Testing the Limits



Unraveling of the Names Quilt from David Thompson's "The Names Project."



# Defiant Strategies Challenging AIDS on video

## AIDS and the Latin American Community

Reviewed by Michelle Albert

In the United States, Hispanics account for 14% of all AIDS cases, yet they constitute only 6% of the American population. A Latina woman is 11 times more likely to get AIDS than a white woman and 91% of the infants with AIDS are children of colour. These are shocking statistics yet they have been largely ignored by the mainstream media. There is very little race-specific information available on AIDS because very little research has been done in this area. An attitude of "colour blindness" leads researchers to focus only on high risk behaviour. As Evelynn Hammonds points out in her article "Race, Sex, AIDS: the Construction of the 'Other'" (*Radical America*, Volume 20, No. 6), this "colour-blindness" "buries racism along with race."

At the Centers for Disease Control, epidemiologists have revealed that Blacks and Hispanics have a higher relative incidence of AIDS in almost all transmission categories. They account for the majority of cases involving heterosexual sexual activity, children born to infected mothers, and IV drug users.

Why has so little research been done on AIDS and race? What do these statistics mean? And why haven't they attracted media attention? How has the Latin American community been coping with this reality?

During the week of the AIDS ACTION NOW! benefit, *Angry Initiatives*, *Defiant Strategies*, two videos were shown that dealt specifically with AIDS and the Latin American community. Made in San Francisco, they are both educational tapes designed to reach the Latino community. *The HIV Anti-Body Test for the Latino Community* (in Spanish with English subtitles), directed by Jose Vergelin and Jose Gutierrez, is a 20 minute introduction to the test. Dramatized scenarios explain the test and discuss who is at risk of getting the virus. The audience response was negative. Around the time the video was made, the U.S. declared amnesty for illegal refugees (many of whom are from Central America) which required them to take the HIV anti-body test. In this context, the video falsely stressed that the test was anonymous. It also encouraged people to take the test. The second video, *Ojos Que No Ven*, directed by Jose Gutierrez Gomez in collaboration with the Latino AIDS Project, received a much more positive response. This very accessible 52 minute video is in soap opera format. Following the lives and predicaments of the main characters, culturally specific issues are covered, such as: the impact of AIDS on the Latino community as a whole and the community's response to it; IV drug use (including how to sterilize needles); cultural attitudes toward gender roles, mothers, and pregnancy; the incidence of married men who don't consider themselves gay yet have sex with other men; and the stigma of being gay in a macho culture. The video also explains the HIV anti-body test and how it works.

Ever since the first documented AIDS cases in North America, the media have portrayed AIDS as a disease of white gay men and drug addicts. Because of this there is an incredible stigma attached to AIDS, especially among the Latino community where homosexuality and drug use are taboo subjects. This situation has contributed to some unfortunate results: people who do not identify themselves as gay or as drug users have not considered themselves at risk; people have not wanted to address the issue of fear of being labelled gay.

The AIDS-related discrimination endured by Haitians resulted from them having been seen as a high risk group. Fearing similar targeting, Latino community leaders, centres, agencies, and churches have been reluctant to discuss AIDS within their communities. They also face cultural obstacles in communicating risk reduction information, such as the passive role women are encouraged to take in sexual matters.

Over the past two years there have been a number of initiatives within the Latin American community to deal with AIDS. The community has responded by making culturally specific, accessible educational material. In Atlanta in August of 1987, the Federal Centers for Disease Control held its first national conference on AIDS and minorities. However, as Dooley Worth and Ruth Rodriguez wrote in their article "Latina Women and AIDS" (*Radical America*, Volume 20, No.6), "In order that the Latino community will adopt AIDS prevention measures, the message must be delivered by the existing Hispanic leadership and communication network. Decisions and education campaigns

cannot be relevant if they do not originate within the Latino community." Further, "To be successful, AIDS risk education among Latinos must be culture-specific. This means taking into account both familial and cultural values and dynamics that have an impact on both sexuality and drug use."

In order to accurately perceive the relationship between AIDS and the Latin American community, it is necessary to look at the issue of AIDS and minorities in general. It is essential to put the present situation in its proper social, historical, and political context. There are many factors involved, including poverty, high rates of un- and under-employment, and lack of access to proper health services that warrant further study in light of the AIDS crisis.

Michelle Albert works with the Latin American Working Group.

## More pleasure/danger: Women & AIDS

Reviewed by Tannis Atkinson

The tape is stuck, intentionally. A woman is sitting on the stage of a talk show in front of the all-male panel. She and her fellow protesters object to the fact that *Cosmopolitan* magazine published an article that claims women are not at risk of contracting AIDS if they have heterosexual intercourse without a condom. The article was written by a psychiatrist, a friend of Cosmo's publisher, a man who is at least one year out of date on AIDS research and information. The talk show host accuses these women of thwarting frank debate and discussion. The woman on the stage is saying, "I have spent three years researching women and AIDS." The tape repeats and repeats her sentence. The talk show host asks, "Yeah, but what are your credentials?"

## Women react to AIDS

The evening of videos on women and AIDS was titled "More Pleasure/Danger." It included three documentaries and three "art" videos. While not showing us much pleasure, the tapes did present images of women taking action against AIDS. They also showed us the obstacles women face when we try to take action.

At the end of the evening, my mind was full of the faces of women who do AIDS work—paid and many, many unpaid. Women who work within existing groups and institutions. Women who have started groups to fill a particular need or to react to a specific event. Women taking action.

While several different women made the point that Black and Latina women have been hit the hardest by AIDS, the majority of women portrayed in the videos were white. In one video, *Too Little, Too Late*, "we saw mothers of people with AIDS, who have joined into a support group in California. It was obvious that this group was valuable for these women—providing support for their grieving and for their acceptance of homosexuality. But the fact that most of these women were white and middle class made it obvious who has the luxury of time and money to indulge this need. It should, of course, be no surprise that the majority of volunteers continue to be white, middle class women..."

In *Women and AIDS* we glimpsed several American television commercials promoting the use of condoms; wealthy white heterosexual couples snuggle in front of cozy fireplaces. We also saw an interview with a woman who described the difficulties of safe sex education: among women who have not been allowed to acknowledge that their bodies continue below the waist; among women whose male sexual partners would punish them for taking an active role in initiating safe sex, or in defining their sexuality in any way.

*Doctors, Liars and Women* drew an inside portrait of the reaction by the New York ACT UP! women's group to the *Cosmo* article. The video documented the planning that went into a demonstration against *Cosmopolitan* and followed the media's distortion and interpretation of this event as a dangerous activity of unpredictable, hysterical women.

This was a fitting end to the evening, reminding us of the forces that—despite our continued efforts—persist in silencing women, disallowing us to name our experience, refusing to give us power over our lives.

Still, when I think about the videos, my mind echoes with the voices of women describing how their understanding was changed by their experience of AIDS, how their lives have been and continue to be moved.

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