

5. Rites of Belonging: The AIDS Memorial Quilt¹

Each year in Australia, and throughout the Western world, candlelight memorials are held in remembrance of people who have died from AIDS. These memorials are solemn and silent processions followed by a vigil are often accompanied by a public reading of names of people who have died from AIDS.

Inaugurated in this country by AIDS activist Phil Carswell and a nurse at the Melbourne Communicable Diseases Centre, Tom Carter, the first Australian candlelight memorial was held in 1985 when these two men stood silently with lit candles in a Melbourne city square. From this, the event grew in magnitude and scope to the point where, 10 years later, the estimated attendance at candlelight memorials across the country had grown into the tens of thousands.

Memorials have been an important part of AIDS activism. Indeed, candlelight memorials and the AIDS Memorial Quilt today form part of the most iconic imagery of the AIDS era.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is a series of cloth panels—each produced in memory of a person or persons who has died from AIDS—stitched together in the format of a traditional ‘comfort quilt’. When laid side-by-side, the panels of the quilt can carpet literally hundreds of square metres. Each panel is 1.8 x 0.9 m (6 x 3 ft) in size—deliberately the average dimensions of a grave plot and the size of a human body.² The panels are sewn together in groups of eight.

The first Australian AIDS Quilt was launched in Sydney on World AIDS Day in December 1988 in a ceremony hosted by well-known media personality, and former NACAIDS Chairwoman, Ita Buttrose. When the Australian quilt was first launched, it had 35 panels. Today there are well more than 700, each of which has been produced by the family, partners, friends or carers of people who have died from AIDS.³ Personal items are often stitched into the panels: old theatre tickets, favourite T-shirts, soft toys, photographs, jewellery. The ‘Quilt Project’ holds regular workshops at which volunteers assist people with the technicalities of producing their panel. Many panels include personal statements about, and dedications to, those who have died:

1 A version of this chapter has been published previously as: Power, Jennifer 2009, ‘Rites of Belonging: Grief, Memorial and Social Action’, *Health Sociology Review*, 18(3), pp. 260–72.

2 Fuchs, E. 1996, ‘On the AIDS Quilt: The Performance of Mourning’, in E. Fuchs (ed.), *The Death of Character, Perspectives in Theatre After Modernism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

3 Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt Project 2004, *History of the Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt Project*, Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt web site, viewed 2 December 2005, <<http://www.AIDSquilt.org.au>>

I could read it quite clearly in his palm. There would be a terrible tragedy. My love could not protect him, DM.

[He] loved the Australian lifesavers, the Iron Man competitions and the world's most beautiful, yet dangerous, beaches.

Mr Cha Cha Heels. Teardrops on the dance floor.

The Quilt invites its viewers to wonder about those to whom each panel is dedicated. The details of the textiles, the images, words and personal objects provide enough of a glimpse into the life of an individual to lead one to reflect further about who they were and how they lived their lives. In this way, the Quilt is both memorial and storyteller. As former coordinator of the Quilt Project Terry Thorley describes: the panels 'just say, "That's him" or her, and it just becomes like a portrait really. It just becomes a little time capsule of those people and who they were, what they were, what their character was like.'⁴

The Quilt was originally an American project that drew on the long tradition of quilting as a folk art: quilts are traditionally passed through generations, symbolising heritage, family loyalty and connection to place. The American AIDS Quilt deliberately sought to tap into (and perhaps subvert) a sentiment of nostalgia, reminiscent of nineteenth-century sewing bees, community and rural tradition.⁵ While textile work finds its way into some Australian traditions—most notably, the rich history of painted trade union banners—a quilt does not hold the same symbolic position in Australian culture as it did in the United States.⁶ Despite some initial criticism of the Quilt being an American import, however, both the Quilt and candlelight memorials became rallying points for people who had been directly affected by HIV/AIDS.⁷

When new panels are revealed, this is the most moving thing. One time there were 15 people walking out with their panel all crying, sometimes it is the mums and dads, sometimes lovers handing over the panel. It is the most emotional, moving event. It is the epidemic happening (growing) in front of our eyes. Apart from someone dying, which most people outside the gay community don't see, all the news stories and articles are lifeless. The Quilt makes it real. It has a heartbeat.

— Phil Carswell (2005b)

4 Terry Thorley, Interview with Diana Ritch, 25 August 1993, Oral History Project: The Australian Response to AIDS, TRC 2815/54, National Library of Australia, Canberra [hereinafter NLA].

5 Hawkins, Peter 1993, 'Naming Names: The Art of Memory and the Names Project', *Critical Inquiry*, 19(4), pp. 752–79.

6 Hawkes, Ponch, Yardley, Ainslie and Langley, Kim 1994, *Unfolding: The Story of the Australian and New Zealand AIDS Quilt Project*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne.

7 Phil Carswell, Interview with the author, 17 December 2005.

Memorial as Political Strategy

In his book on the bubonic plague, Johannes Nohl writes that one of the major contributory factors to the evolution of social institutions and burial rites during this period was the community's 'loss of confidence in the establishments' (medical, church and state) powers to control or cure these deadly diseases'.⁸ A loss of faith in formal traditions and institutions led to new practices for both commemorating death and protecting the living. The establishment of AIDS memorials invites a similar analysis of history. The stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS meant there was no formal recognition of HIV/AIDS as a 'national tragedy', nor would there be moves to commemorate formally those who had died from the virus in a manner that often occurs following events such as natural disasters or wars. The Quilt and candlelight vigils gave people an opportunity to grieve collectively and publicly.

AIDS memorials also functioned as a ritual of remembrance, akin in many ways to collective funeral rites. Throughout the 1980s, the gay community was enduring the illness and loss of large numbers of its members, yet there was a void of institutional recognition of this. While the individual funerals of many who died from AIDS were undoubtedly held in churches, collectively, the gay community was ostracised from the central institutions through which funerals are performed. Certainly, the mainstream churches would have been unlikely to play a leadership role in any formal memorialising of people killed by AIDS. AIDS memorials played a role in filling this voice, as Gerard Lawrence, organiser of the 1993 Sydney Candlelight Memorial, explains:

We have to find ways of dealing with our losses...Many find funerals are too religious and do not work for them. With the AIDS Memorial Quilt, wakes, and with Candlelight, people have found new ways of arranging the needed ceremony, a framework for the process of death that is appropriate for us.⁹

Public memorials and monuments influence both the collective memory of a society and public attitudes towards the present. War memorials, for instance, generate an image of soldiers as brave heroes or martyrs. Acts of memorial, such as the Gallipoli dawn service, serve not only to define Australian history but to influence attitudes towards war in the present day. Modern soldiers are 'remembered' alongside those from World War I as heroes deserving of respect

⁸ Quoted in Lewis, Lynette and Ross, Michael 1995, *A Select Body: The Gay Dance Party Subculture and the HIV/AIDS Pandemic*, Cassell, London, p. 124.

⁹ Lawrence cited in Editorial, '5000 March in Sydney Candlelight AIDS Rally', *The Canberra Times*, 24 May 1993, p. 3.

and recognition. Gallipoli is signified as a defining moment in Australia's history.¹⁰ Memorials, in this sense, are highly political in that they directly contribute to the shaping of history and identity.

The term 'counter-memorial' is sometimes used to describe memorials that attempt to challenge mainstream attitudes or draw attention to an alternative conception of reality.¹¹ The Quilt Project and candlelight memorials can be seen as counter-memorials in that they form part of a political protest—a reaction to mainstream institutions. Yet their intention is not dissimilar to that of state memorials. In the same way that the Gallipoli ceremonies construct a particular image and collective memory of that battle and the soldiers who fought it, AIDS memorials seek to influence public perceptions of people who have died from AIDS. What makes a project such as the AIDS Quilt a 'counter-memorial' is that fact that it challenges much of the public imagery around HIV/AIDS and the stigma cast upon people with AIDS. The very act of memorialising an individual, or group of individuals, is in itself a declaration that they deserve to be remembered in a way that is dignified and celebrated. It asserts that people who die from AIDS are morally worthy of a public memorial.¹²

According to Phil Carswell: 'The Quilt could make a profoundly political statement just by the positioning of panels. Having gay men next to children who had died of AIDS made a statement (about AIDS affecting everyone, the egalitarian nature of the Quilt, everyone deserving equal respect).'¹³

The AIDS Quilt also worked to confront negative stereotypes associated with gay men and people with AIDS through its design, which emphasises the lives and deaths of individuals, as well as the group. The intention of the Quilt project—originally called 'The Names Project'—from its inception in the United States was for the names of individuals who had died from AIDS to be memorialised as a way of reducing the anonymity and secrecy surrounding AIDS.¹⁴ In part, this was because the creators of the Quilt wanted public acknowledgment of

10 Capozzolo, Christopher 2002, 'A Very American Epidemic: Memory Politics and Identity Politics in the AIDS Memorial Quilt, 1985–1993', *Radical History Review*, 82 (Winter), pp. 91–109; Hawkins, 1993.

11 Bold, Christine, Knowles, Ric and Leach, Belinda 2002, 'Feminist Memorialising and Cultural Counter-memory: The Case of Marianne's Park', *Signs*, 28(1), pp. 125–48.

12 Olick, Jeffrey and Robbins, Joyce 1998, 'Social Memory Studies: From "Collective Memory" to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, pp. 105–40.

13 Phil Carswell, Interview with the author, 17 December 2005.

14 Rand, E. 2007, 'Repeated Remembrance: Commemorating the AIDS Quilt and Resuscitating the Mourned Subject', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 10(4), pp. 655–80; Names Project Foundation 2008, 'History of the Quilt': *The AIDS Memorial Quilt*, Names Project Foundation, Atlanta, Ga, viewed 15 October 2008, <<http://www.aidsquilt.org/history.htm>>; Melbourne Candlelight Vigil Committee 1992, *Remember Their Names*, Melbourne Candlelight Vigil Committee, Melbourne.

the deaths of their own friends and partners. But also, the Quilt as a whole is designed to visually represent the total number of AIDS-related deaths. It is a monument to large-scale loss.¹⁵

In this context, viewings of the Quilt and candlelight memorials were often politically charged events. They became a chance to connect the grief and loss being experienced by individuals with demands for tangible political change. This was articulated well by Justice Michael Kirby, who presented a formal address at the unfolding of the Quilt in the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre at Darling Harbour in 1999. Kirby said:

I think of the friends that I have lost. I go through their names like a Rosary (and this despite a stern Protestant upbringing). A Rosary of much loved human spirits. Of Peter, a school friend. Of Daniel, the artist in Paris. Of another Peter from England... But remembering and thinking is not enough. Celebrating their lives and recalling their strengths and joys and little foibles, recorded in these cloths, is not enough. These quilts, and the people they remember, propel us to action... On this last note we should dedicate ourselves here and now. We should do so in the presence of these quilts and the spirits that they memorialise. We should demand an end to the last vestiges of prejudice and discrimination that still lurk in the hidden, and not so hidden, corners of Australian society... Remembrance is not enough. Sorrow, is not enough... These are days for action, lest receding memories and apathy and political time-serving take over.¹⁶

Internationally, AIDS quilts reached almost iconic status for their striking representation of the mortal impact of HIV/AIDS. The American Quilt found its way into popular culture as a feature on the television talk show *Nightline* in 1988. It also appeared in an episode of daytime soap opera *All My Children*. A documentary film, *Common Thread: Stories from the Quilt*, made in 1989, received an Academy Award. The same year, the Quilt was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.¹⁷

15 Brown, M. 1997, 'The Cultural Saliency of Radical Democracy: Moments from the AIDS Quilt', *Cultural Geographies*, 4(1), pp. 27–45.

16 Kirby, Michael 1999, Once Again, The Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt, Opening address to The Quilt Project Sydney Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt Display, 10 April, Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour, NSW.

17 Stull, Gregg 2001, 'The AIDS Memorial Quilt: Performing Memory, Piecing Action', *American Art*, 15(2), pp. 84–9.

First and foremost [the purpose of the Quilt is] to be there for those people to create the Quilt. But if we just created a Quilt that was static, that would defeat the purpose of being...we'd just have a room full of quilts and what's the point of that? It's the ability then to take the Quilt back into the community, to give it back to the community and to utilise it for really positive reasons...To make people aware. To use it to support safe sex education. That's very important.

— Terry Thorley (1993)

In Australia, AIDS memorials—particularly the Quilt—received wide-scale public attention, becoming part of HIV/AIDS prevention education as well as being integrated into political protest strategies. Opportunities were created for broad sectors of the community to view the Quilt—in public libraries, schools, museums and galleries. Candlelight memorials have attracted up to 8000 people in any one city, and up to 60 000 across the country. Arguably, these two initiatives have reached the broader public to a greater extent than any other actions of the AIDS movement.

The Quilt has been the subject of numerous news and feature articles. In 1989, *ITA Magazine* featured a five-page spread including interviews with mothers and children of people who had died of AIDS, as well as with the lovers of gay men.¹⁸ The Quilt also tended to attract interest from the mainstream media, which generally produced articles that were supportive of the Quilt Project. These usually featured anecdotes about the families who produced panels for their children, running headlines such as, 'Honour the Courage of Those Living with AIDS'¹⁹ and 'AIDS Quilt Brings Comfort to Community'.²⁰ The Quilt has been displayed in numerous public locations, including Sydney's Darling Harbour and the National Gallery of Victoria. Several panels were also displayed at the National Gallery of Australia in 1994 as part of an exhibition, *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS*. The Quilt has regularly been taken into schools and in some cases school students have made panels, either dedicated to a person they knew or a general panel acknowledging their support for people with AIDS.²¹

Alongside this, by involving the extended families of people who have died from AIDS, the Quilt has been an important outreach tool—a link between the gay community and the broader public. This link is evident in the Quilt panels themselves, many of which have been made by community groups, hospices and jails. Quilt panels read: 'Mount Alvernia (hospital). Keeping the flame of

18 Woodhouse, Ursula 1989, 'The Quilt Project', *ITA*, 1(4), pp. 106–10.

19 Frith, Marion 1993, 'Honour the Courage of Those Living with AIDS', *The Canberra Times*, 23 May, p. 2.

20 Dennis, Jenny 2001, 'AIDS Quilt Brings Comfort to Community', *Illawarra Mercury*, 26 November, p. 7.

21 Woodhouse, 1989.

compassion alive...Maitland Gaol. In memory of all those Inmates who have passed on: Family Planning NSW—Health Promise Promotion Unity Unit: The Continuing Care Unit. Alfred Hospital, Melbourne. 1997: Royal Melbourne Nurses, Care and Remember...'

AIDS memorials also encouraged people within the gay community to become involved. Candlelight memorials/vigils became the largest public rallies seen in Australia around HIV/AIDS. As activist Phil Carswell describes:

People came to Candlelight Vigils who never came to other AIDS events. The bars in Melbourne would advertise them, put together clips to play on their video screens. It was a community event, one of those things everyone assumed you would go to—like a dance party. People would go to [the Sydney Gay and Lesbian] Mardi Gras and they'd go to the Vigil.²²

The Politics of Empathy

The Quilt illustrates the human side of HIV/AIDS. The inclusion of individual memorials on the Quilt allows its viewers to find personal connections between their own lives and the lives of people who have died from AIDS. Rather than didactically informing people about the number of AIDS deaths or the nature of HIV transmission, it is a device for storytelling, introducing viewers of the Quilt to some intimate details of the lives of people with AIDS. Someone who previously had no association with HIV/AIDS can suddenly find a connection between themselves and someone on the Quilt—the same birthdate, similar interests, the same name.²³

Terry Thorley says:

[One of the Quilt volunteers/presenters] used to tell the story that there was this little boy, and [the volunteer had] taken down one of the panels with a pair of jeans on it. And this little boy became fascinated with them and, you know, kept coming back: 'Were they his favourite pair of jeans?' 'Yes'. And a little bit later came back: 'He must've loved those jeans.' And just this little cycle of this boy connecting with the jeans...I mean, if his knowledge of AIDS comes through connecting with that pair of jeans then, you know, it's a learning thing.²⁴

22 Phil Carswell, Interview with the author, 17 December 2005.

23 Melbourne Candlelight Vigil Committee, 1992; Hawkes et al., 1994; Capozzolo, 2002.

24 Terry Thorley, TRC 2815/54, NLA.

Phil Carswell explains:

You could take a Quilt panel to a public event and immediately have people on side. I've done dozens of school talks, and as soon as you tell a story behind a Quilt panel the kids start to make a connection—a connection that all the leaflets and badges can't make. One student saw a panel of a person who had the same birthdate as her and I bet she still thinks about that person on World AIDS Day. We would take videos of the Quilt to public talks—we made up a 10-minute video. The visual nature of these made it very easy to start a talk with. You saw images of these beautiful young people who just shouldn't have died as early as they did.²⁵

By encouraging viewers to make an empathetic connection to people who have died from AIDS through the details depicted on its panels, the Quilt plays a role in extending the emotional impact of the AIDS epidemic beyond the borders of the gay community. People might react to viewing the Quilt with feelings of sadness or loss, or even happiness or interest, for those whom they might previously have understood only as part of a stigmatised minority: gay men, drug users, people with AIDS. Empathy and emotion have political impact in this context because they humanise AIDS, which in turn implies that AIDS affects ordinary people and is therefore a problem for the whole community. By encouraging an emotional reaction from its viewers, the Quilt has the potential to recast prejudice towards both gay men and people with HIV/AIDS.

In her analysis of public memorials, Marita Sturken describes the Quilt as 'bright, colourful, easy to understand, and moving, a perfect human interest story on the evening news or in the local paper'.²⁶ She goes on to discuss how this has created some cynicism among US activists for sanitising the experience of AIDS. The mainstream public accepts the Quilt because it does not make many references to the sexuality or sex lives of gay men. Nor does it carry imagery associated with sickness and death. In this sense, the Quilt does not challenge deep-seated homophobia and AIDS-related stigma. Even critics of the Quilt, however, acknowledge its capacity to personalise and humanise the plight of people with AIDS.²⁷ AIDS memorials might not directly tackle homophobia and prejudice, but they do introduce an alternative moral framework. It is this that makes memorials a profound form of cultural activism. They are concerned not with formal political engagement, but with the production of social and moral

25 Phil Carswell, Interview with the author, 17 December 2005.

26 Sturken, Marita 1997, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering*, University of California Press, Berkeley, p. 213.

27 Ibid.

codes. They also tap directly into emotional sentiment as a means of challenging the social reality of people outside the movement (or the community most directly affected).

The Right to Grieve

Challenging 'emotional codes' has been part of the explicit agenda of many social movements. The Gay Pride Movement, for instance, and the Civil Rights Movement both sought to make visible 'bad' feelings associated with stigmatised identities—such as shame and guilt—and replace them with a sense of pride in one's identity. The Gay Pride Movement asserted that feelings of self-esteem and happiness should be the acceptable and 'rational' way to feel towards gay identity, rather than the sense of shame, distress or sadness that had become the 'normalised' reaction to being gay (certainly, people had not always been encouraged to feel proud about discovering they had homosexual desires). Both these movements sought to rewrite the 'feeling rules'—or the cultural norms that guide individuals in the expression and sensation of emotion—associated with particular identities.²⁸ The aim of a social movement in this context is not just to change the way in which a social group is perceived by society, but also to change the experience of belonging to that group—to assert that the experience of being gay is positive and worthy of pride. In this sense, the targets of the movement are its own constituents as much as it is the mainstream public. Indeed, the very act of developing a sense of solidarity with others might in itself become a positive emotional experience, more conducive to feelings of pleasure and confidence than shame or ambivalence.²⁹

The social stigma of AIDS complicated the process of grief for many people, especially the families of gay men who lived in mainstream, heterosexual society without connection to others affected by HIV/AIDS. The usual sources of support that might be present following the death of a child, sibling, friend

28 Hochschild, Arlie Russell 1998, 'The Sociology of Emotion as a Way of Seeing', in Gillian Bendelow and Simon Williams (eds), *Emotions in Social Life: Critical Themes and Contemporary Issues*, Routledge, London; Jasper, James 1998, 'The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and Around Social Movements', *Sociological Forum*, 13(3), pp. 397–424; Flam, Helena 2005, 'Emotions Map: A Research Agenda', in Helena Flam and Debra King (eds), *Emotions and Social Movements*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK; Taylor, Verta and Rupp, Leila 2002, 'Living Internationalism: The Emotion Culture of Transnational Women's Organisations 1888–1945', *Mobilization*, 7(2), pp. 141–58.

29 Taylor, Verta 2000, 'Emotions and Identity in Women's Self Help Movements', in Sheldon Stryker, Timothy Owens and Robert White (eds), *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis; Caron, Bruce 2003, 'Festivals and Social Movements—Event Centred Solidarity', *Community, Democracy and Performance, The Urban Practice of Kyoto's Higashi-Kujo Madang*, viewed 2 December 2005, <<http://junana.com/CDP/corpus/D511.html>>; Nugteren, Albertina 2001, 'Collective/Public Ritual Behaviour After Disasters: An Emerging Manifestation of Civil Religion?', Presentation to Spiritual Supermarket Conference, April, London School of Economics, viewed 2 December 2005, <<http://www.cesnur.org/2001/london2001/nugteren.htm>>

or parent were not necessarily available in the case of AIDS, where community attitudes were often hostile. Even where support was present, the experience of grief could be overshadowed by a sense of indignity or dishonour that came with a family member's death from AIDS. In some instances, families would deny publicly that HIV had been the cause of death, blaming another illness such as cancer. For the lovers of gay men, their grief was often not acknowledged by the biological families of those who had died. In many cases, gay men were excluded from their partner's funeral or other family-controlled burial rites.³⁰

There is a strong moral code that guides grieving in societies—a 'morality of loss'.³¹ The social value placed on an individual's relationship with a person whom they have lost (through death or separation) tends to influence the respect paid to, and concessions made for, an individual's grief. For example, the loss of a marriage through death is generally greatly respected by the community. Widows and widowers are presumed to be—indeed are expected to be—suffering great sadness, while funeral rituals include paying homage to their bereavement. When a relationship does not fit into accepted moral codes, however, such as with an adulterous affair or in many cases with homosexual relationships, the community generally does not recognise or acknowledge the grief of a partner following loss. Also, where the individual who has died has breached certain social or moral expectations—as would have been the case with many gay men who died from AIDS—there are generally fewer accommodations made for grieving loved ones. Indeed, the sense of loss an individual experiences in these cases might be recorded as illegitimate. Martha Fowlkes describes this process, writing: 'The "spoiled identity" of which stigma is constructed has the power to contravene or cancel out the meaning of loss *even* where kinship is concerned. The mourner encounters hostility and disregard, and these add to and underscore the pain of the loss itself' (emphasis in original).³²

AIDS memorials were created to provide support to people who had lost loved ones to AIDS. But also, through creating a forum where grief for people with AIDS was legitimised, AIDS memorials sought to change an experience that was, for many people, filled with feelings of shame. Moreover, they created space for those whose sense of loss might not have been recognised in other forums—namely, the friends and lovers of gay men—to grieve.

The nature of AIDS means, however, that these memorials were highly politicised acts. Experienced individually, grief is a personal process, but the collective

30 Holst-Warhaft, Gail 2005, *The Cue for Passion: Grief and Its Political Uses*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.; Wettergren, Asa 2005, 'Mobilization and the Moral Shock', in Helena Flam and Debra King (eds), *Emotions and Social Movements*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK; Fowlkes, Martha R. 1990, 'The Social Regulation of Grief', *Sociological Forum*, 5(4), pp. 635–52.

31 Fowlkes, 1990, p. 648.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 648.

expression of grief and mourning facilitated by AIDS memorials demonstrated a refusal by large numbers of people to yield to the stigma around AIDS. The political power of collective action in this instance is asserted through the creation of space within which the expression of a particular emotional state is legitimised and respected—a space that did not previously exist within the stigma of AIDS. By asserting the right to grieve and acknowledging that grief, AIDS activists challenged the negative cultural and moral status of HIV/AIDS and the people most affected by it.

Breaching the Moral Code

In her analysis of the 'Women in Black' vigils, Tova Benski is interested in the possibility for social-movement performances to become 'breaching events'.³³ By this she means that movement action can present a moral or ethical stance that contradicts common assumptions or social norms. Social movements pose symbolic resistance to the social order when they expose the social and moral codes that are ingrained in cultural processes by presenting a different reading of reality. The Women in Black vigils were a series of peace protests held by a group of women in Israel calling for Israeli/Palestinian reconciliation. Benski suggests that the significance of a 'breaching event' can be witnessed in the emotional reaction of spectators. Negative reactions from observers tend to follow a significant violation of moral codes. In her study of viewers of the Women in Black vigils, Benski found that the majority of people who witnessed the vigils expressed anger or contempt towards protestors, shouting at them or making angry gestures. Benski argues that the protestors incited anger amongst spectators because their actions breached dominant and deeply ingrained attitudes towards both Israeli/Palestinian politics and the role of women in politics. Women publicly expressing a political position in this context confronted the moral sensibilities of spectators.³⁴

AIDS activists were well aware that AIDS memorials challenged mainstream moral attitudes towards both gay men and HIV/AIDS. The very act of commemorating people who had died from AIDS was confronting in terms of the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. But Quilt Project organisers sought to control as much as possible the reaction of outsiders and spectators by creating a particular 'mood' at Quilt events. A series of rituals was³⁵ performed at Quilt

33 Benski, Tova 2005, 'Breaching Events and the Emotional Reactions of the Public: Women in Black in Israel', in Helena Flam and Debra King (eds), *Emotions and Social Movements*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK.

34 Ibid.

35 I use the past tense in this chapter because I am referring specifically to events that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. To my knowledge, however, these rituals are still practised when new Quilt panels are unveiled.

unfoldings to solemnise the process of handing over new quilt panels from those who made them to the 'public project'. Trained volunteers encircled each Quilt panel and unfolded it in choreographed unison. People wore simple, white outfits to ensure their dress did not detract from the detail of panels. The unfolding was accompanied by a public recitation of names from the Quilt, often read by prominent community figures.³⁶ The rituals around Quilt unfoldings and viewings, along with the visual impact of a candlelight procession, were designed to be deliberately quiet and calming—setting up a particular emotional experience for both participants and spectators. The rituals were similar to those that govern action in a church or sacred site, and the mood evoked was similar. By creating such an atmosphere, the emotional reaction of participants and spectators tends towards sadness or quiet reflection, leaving limited room for public heckling or derision. As Quilt organiser Phil Carswell describes: 'There is something approaching reverence for the Quilt. People are always extremely respectful. Even children always behave at the Quilt, they pick up on the atmosphere.'³⁷ Activists worked to counter the possibility of antagonistic reactions to the 'breaching event' by controlling the environment—using visual and emotional codes to illicit a particular response. As Carswell says: 'People participated in the Quilt because the "aura" of the Quilt overtook the fear of vilification or other stigma. When all the panels were displayed together it was amazing. Like an oasis of amazing tranquility.'³⁸

The emotional dynamics of grief and loss are personally and culturally familiar to most people. One does not have to be gay or affected by HIV/AIDS to understand sadness and loss. AIDS memorials tapped into a common moral framework of 'respect for the dead' and utilised the familiar cultural cues that have developed around rituals such as funerals and religious services.³⁹ In other words, outsiders respected the Quilt and the candlelight memorial because they used common cultural codes to invoke respect and solemnity.

AIDS memorials were not a confrontational form of political activism. But this does not mean they were apolitical. Since their inception, AIDS memorials have involved literally thousands of people—many from outside the gay community—in a form of community protest against stigma and discrimination. These memorials have captured the attention of political leaders and the broader community and have become a focal point of both the politics of HIV/AIDS and HIV-prevention education.

36 Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt Project, 2004.

37 Phil Carswell, Interview with the author, 17 December 2005.

38 Ibid.

39 Collins, Randall 2001, 'Social Movements and the Focus of Emotional Attention', in Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper and Francesca Polletta (eds), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, University of Chicago Press, Ill.

According to Phil Carswell:

What we were fighting [against] for so long was invisibility. We had sensationalist stories in the media and images of skeletal people dying of AIDS. But most people never knew anyone dying from AIDS. The Quilt gave visibility to the real lives of people. It made that gut-level, primal connection that people in the gay community had from knowing people who had died from AIDS. But those in the broader community hadn't been up close and personal. The Quilt was as up close and personal as you can get without holding them in your arms.⁴⁰

Through paying tribute to people who had died from AIDS, and respectfully acknowledging those grieving for them, the Quilt Project and candlelight memorials recast the moral context of HIV/AIDS. They insisted that people who had died from AIDS deserved public memorial even in cases where the virus had been acquired through perceived 'immoral' means. As well as supporting individuals in their grief, the public display of respect for both those who had died and those who were grieving challenged the stigma surrounding both HIV/AIDS and homosexuality.

AIDS memorials were successful in drawing people into the AIDS movement and engaging observers and people outside the movement through their drama and art. But more importantly, the ritual of the memorials, which drew on familiar cultural imagery of funerals and commemorations, evoked a particular emotional reaction for both outsiders and participants that encouraged respect for people who had died from AIDS. In this way, they challenged the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The success of the Quilt itself might indeed be evidence of the fact that public attitudes towards gay men have been changed over the course of the AIDS epidemic. The public was willing to accept and be involved with the Quilt and with gay men in a way they might not have been early in the 1980s when fear and uncertainty about HIV/AIDS were at their height. Over time, the fear of being publicly outed as a person with AIDS was also mitigated—indicated through the greater willingness of people to be identified on Quilt panels over time.

Terry Thorley recalls:

Back in the '80s when the project...was first started there was still a lot of fear and secrecy and discrimination surrounding AIDS. So a lot of the panels weren't clearly personally identifying, in that they would come in with initials or just Christian names. Now I think there has been a

40 Phil Carswell, Interview with the author, 17 December 2005.

change in that circumstance. I mean, it's still not ideal but there has been a change. But the panels are becoming more elaborate, more openly expressive of personality and character.⁴¹

Social movements are a part of history and are engaged in a social process of 'knowledge making'. They seek to influence the cultural and moral scripts that frame everyday life. AIDS memorialising—as a social-movement strategy—became a means through which the AIDS-movement 'frame' was expressed. That is, AIDS memorials both reflected and reinforced the ideological stance of the AIDS movement using imagery and emotion rather than an articulated ideological argument. In this context, social movements can be seen as concurrently intellectually and emotionally driven.

41 Terry Thorley, TRC 2815/54, NLA.