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## "The Symbol of My Condition": Dynamics of Alignment with Power in Sarah Schulman's *Rat Bohemia*

This article considers how Sarah Schulman in her novel *Rat Bohemia* and other works utilizes her intersectional position as a Jewish lesbian writer to bear witness to her experience of AIDS epidemic. It analyzes how Schulman represents family as an institution of power to hold it accountable for the spread of AIDS epidemic in the context of her postmemory of Holocaust. It deals also with mechanisms of alignment with power within the gay community itself. Finally, it focuses on the central symbol of rats in *Rat Bohemia* understood as an indexical sign of the obscene. All these issues are theorized in the context of the problem of witnessing as strategies to write a testimony that remains loyal to the community and the reality of a crisis event.

Keywords: Sarah Schulman; AIDS; queer; postmemory; witnessing literature

Liberation movements view history as a progressive process. At first, the oppression is unchallenged, then the demand to stop it is articulated, fought for, and eventually the change is effected. This was the dominant view within the gay liberation movement in the short period between the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the early 80s. In her youth, Sarah Schulman, a lesbian author and an activist, believed in that narrative: "When I turned twenty I thought I was growing up in the world of women's rights, gay liberation, and a viable future. Instead I entered adulthood in a world dominated by Reaganism and AIDS" (*My American History* 16). These two blows to the cause of equality were crucial to her activist work, both in feminist and gay organizations, including AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP), a confrontational group credited with many political changes that positively influenced lives of people with AIDS in the United States. The political climate of that era also deeply influenced Schulman's development as a novelist, with AIDS fiction comprising a significant part of her *oeuvre*. Sarah Schulman's approach to the problem of witnessing the epidemic in *Rat Bohemia* and other novels utilizes her intersectional position as a Jewish lesbian writer, simultaneously uncovering how the power structures adapt to the increased visibility of gay community, and trying to invent a way to counter these processes. In this article, I intend to analyze the way Schulman represents the institution of family and its exclusionary practices, especially in connection with Jewish heritage. Then, I will look at the way she represents mechanisms of alignment with power within the gay community. Finally, I will consider numerous instances of how Schulman encodes these ideas into the recurring image of rats.

Schulman's homosexuality affected her work deeply, and so did her Jewish identity, and the inherited experience of the Holocaust. As she states herself: "I knew about the Holocaust since I was born. There was never a time I didn't know about it. I was from a generation where the kids sat there while the parents talked. So of course it's very influential in everything I do – it's my number one influence" ("Sarah Schulman with Jarrett Earnest" 2). Her identity of a Jewish lesbian informs her

writing project. This position is considered in this text as intersectional, in the sense described by Anna Carastathis as the initial aim of the term: "to render visible phenomenological experiences of people who face multiple forms of oppression without fragmenting those experiences through categorial exclusion" (ch. 1). In this sense, the identity of a lesbian is intersectional in its simultaneity, its immediate inclusion of oppression experiences of both a woman and a gay person. This position is further nuanced by its relation to the history of the persecution of Jews, another experience of oppression Schulman identifies with, if not through lived experience, then through her postmemory.

The term "postmemory," coined by Marianne Hirsch, refers to what is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (22). It is understood to be, first and foremost, the experience typical of children of traumatic event survivors. In Hirsch's words:

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (22)

The experience of a child of a camp survivor is, in fact, Hirsch's foremost example, as the term's usefulness is presented in the context of her analysis of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. The idea of postmemory describes well the relationship that Rita, the protagonist of *Rat Bohemia*, has with narratives of Holocaust, and this link resonates clearly in Schulman's writing with the AIDS crisis. It is a significant and potent connection made by some other authors, including Larry Kramer, the founder of ACT UP, who made it in many of his speeches and articles: "AIDS is our holocaust. Tens of thousands of our precious men are dying. Soon it will be hundreds of thousands. AIDS is our holocaust and Reagan is our Hitler. New York City is our Auschwitz" (*Reports from the Holocaust* 173). Whereas Kramer focused on the direct rhetorical power of the comparison, Schulman's intersectional approach explores a complex network of interconnections between exclusions and privileges that she could observe, experience and relay as a Jewish lesbian author.

Why is the parallel between the Holocaust and the AIDS epidemic so powerful? According to Ross Chambers, both the Holocaust and the AIDS epidemic constitute disasters within the Western culture that he calls "extreme" events

both in the sense that they are unusually violent or grueling, intensely degrading, or profoundly unjust and in the sense that they are therefore relegated to a position at the very "edge" of consciousness, the position of that which has to be both known and, at the same time, unrecognized. (24)

Chambers argues that there is a connection between both components of the extreme position. It occupies the space at the "edge" of consciousness precisely because of its degrading quality. Western culture refuses to fully acknowledge that occurrence of the extreme events is its inherent part; instead, these disasters are framed as "merely occasional or exceptional lapses, accidental happenings that can be explained by special circumstances" (xix). As a result, they are believed to be of little relevance to the general human experience. This allows Western culture to operate further without any need to deal with the reality of these extreme events, and proceed with its faith in civilization unshaken.

This cultural force of denial is present in art, media and politics. Kramer recognized the direct parallel between his postmemory of Holocaust and the struggle he participated in as a member of the gay community. One of his first demands was to increase press coverage of the epidemic. Ned, the main character of his play *The Normal Heart*, tries to convince a gay *New York Times* journalist to cover the AIDS crisis using historic examples of media unwillingness to cover the Holocaust:

Do you know that when Hitler's Final Solution to eliminate the Polish Jews was first mentioned in the *Times* it was on page twenty-eight. And on page six of the *Washington Post*. And the *Times* and the *Post* were owned by Jews. What causes silence like that? Why didn't the American Jews help the German Jews get out? Their very own people! Scholars are finally writing honestly about this – I've been doing some research – and it's damning to everyone who was here then. (50)

The issue of press coverage serves as an opening to discuss several underlying problems simultaneously. First of all, Kramer castigates the gay people working in the media who failed to get the message about the epidemic through to the public outside of gay community, which obstructs taking a significant political action. Furthermore, he discusses similar betrayals of the American Jews during the World War II. Finally, Kramer suggests that the discussion of this neglect had been stultified for several decades. The lens of a historical reference allows to observe and recognize the phenomenon of cultural denial in the context of a crisis event as early into the epidemic as in 1985.

Kramer's outspoken criticism of these mechanisms of denial, manifest through the lacklustre press coverage, is not unique. On the contrary, the body of AIDS literature started to grow very early into the crisis, and has continued to do so ever since. Whilst not every novel or play about AIDS is an attempt to acknowledge the crisis event in its gruesome entirety, many of them, especially the ones written by HIV-positive authors or their closest friends, the witnesses whose "education in trauma has involved extremely close proximity" (Chambers xxiv), attempt to relay the experience of disease as effectively as possible. This sort of testimonial literature, or witnessing literature, tries to break the discursive silence encompassing the crisis event by recording its reality. The Holocaust is a significant reference, as the camp literature, too, constituted an attempt to relay an incomprehensible, unacknowledged, and unimaginable reality of a death camp into Western culture.

However, the witnessing literature does not carry out its task unobstructed. The culture at large sees its subject as "obscene," the idea defined by Chambers as

[t]hat domain of experience or event, having historical actuality and formally recognized as real (not a fiction), for which the culture finds itself, generically speaking, poorly equipped or even totally unequipped – so that there are few or no conventions of appropriateness that might accommodate it. (26)

The lack of conventions caused by the extremity of the event renders the whole experience unpalatable to the general audience. Since Western culture is unwilling and unable to integrate the reality of a crisis event, it precludes earnest attempts to represent, discuss and react to this obscene subject. It does so through institutions of power, understood in this article as those mechanisms of social order which are deeply involved in the upkeep of current power relations, such as government, judicial system, and family. As further analysis of Schulman's work will exemplify, the task of the witness becomes, to a large extent, the task of resistance to these institutions.

Witnessing writers are posited between an ineffable experience and a necessity to relay it in order to prevent their dead from being dehumanized further by being forgotten, and so that their living (and often themselves) may have a chance of survival. Chambers discusses this problem in the following way:

[t]he dilemma of surviving AIDS witnesses has much in common therefore with that of Holocaust survivor-witnesses and that of the witness survivors of trench warfare. It is the dilemma of having only a story of surviving to tell, when the story to be told would rightly be that of those who did not survive, and of having to tell that story of surviving for an audience one step further removed by virtue of survivorhood that blinds them to the hauntedness of the situation of survival. (246)

The survivor recognizes their particular position as a link between the one who died and the one who remains unaware of death caused by the crisis event and attempts to bridge the gap

between the two. In order to resolve the problem of telling the story of another who cannot tell their own story, Chambers suggests "agencing," which entails "using one's own voice to make the tellable story, of surviving, readable as referring to, because haunted by, the story that cannot otherwise be told" (246). In Schulman's writing both postmemory of Holocaust and memory of people who died of AIDS are such a haunting presence.

The main character in *Rat Bohemia*, Rita Mae Weems, is a Jewish lesbian who works for Pest Control in New York City. As a member of the gay community, she has a close experience of AIDS, with many of her male friends dying while her unthreatened health allows her to witness the spread of the epidemic. She is "both inside and outside the disease . . . an ideal chronicler of a community in distress" (White). This relationality of her AIDS experience is of special relevance, as the novel strives to represent the importance of relationships formed within the gay community, as opposed to the community members' family relationships, which are almost universally strained, discriminatory and full of poorly hidden resentment. Rita's Jewish heritage gives an additional edge to this experience. The story of her mother's escape from Bremen shapes her postmemory of Holocaust. However, she has been excluded from that family after being caught by her father with a girl in bed. Thus, she was victimized by the family of crisis event victims. During her sexual initiation with a woman, which positioned her outside of the heteronormative experience, she fills the silence after the act by describing a childhood memory of her visit to a store where all clerks were concentration camp survivors. According to John Goshert, as little Rita sees tattoo numbers on their arms, she

realizes that the experience of the Nazi holocaust is available only to initiates, and is furthermore, only available to Rita (who speaks neither Yiddish nor German) as an untranslatable noise or as a semaphoric communication through the image of serial numbers. ("The Aporia" 58)

Both the history of her family and her homosexuality are phenomena for which she has no language. This sense of similarity is further reinforced as Rita's homosexuality brings her in close proximity to the AIDS crisis, akin to the proximity of a death camp she felt in presence of its survivors. However, the connection is oblique for the rest of her family, who choose to exclude her and enforce a discursive void of the same kind that obstructed helping European Jews.

Rita's sense of exclusion from her family heritage, as well as her relatives' choice to overlook the link between her postmemory and her lived-through experience, are represented by Schulman in geographic terms. Rita's identification with the gay community is connected to the sense of space in the novel and, more specifically, to her neighbourhood. In the words of Monica Bachmann, "[m]any of Schulman's lesbian and Jewish characters express this sense of belonging in the mixed urban jumble of downtown Manhattan" (83). This identification makes sense both for a Jew and for a lesbian, because, as Bachmann states, the island is historically and ideologically relevant to both groups:

the Lower East Side becomes a cultural touchstone for American Jewish identity, in Schulman's novels and elsewhere the site where Jews are recognizable, authentic, making the brave transition from Europe to the new world, taking the first steps that got us to where we are today: to integration, to assimilation, to the suburbs. Similarly, Greenwich Village functions as a mythic place of origin for gay people, the original space of bars and cruising spots, of gay writers and gay lives, where Beebo Brinker and Allen Ginsberg ran the streets, and of course, where gay people first fought back against oppression. (88–89)

Schulman utilizes the geographical proximity of the Lower East Side and the Village, and their significance to both communities, in order to represent Rita's predicament. Living in Manhattan,

she remains close to the "cultural touchstones" for both her lesbian and Jewish identities, and the lack of distance between these spaces points to the lack of internal contradiction between the two. However, Rita does not feel able to visit Jackson Heights, the neighbourhood she grew up in. The closest she gets to revisiting her childhood area is Yorkville, "Manhattan's version of Kraut-town" (Schulman, *Rat Bohemia* 197). In there, she experiences both proximity and exclusion as she observes people in a store:

A rehashed old argument about something that happened back home in a Germany that could never exist again – a paradise. The last place any of these people was Somebody. The last place any of them had a family. The last place they'd ever belonged. Their last good night's sleep. I guess Jackson Heights was my version of Bremen. Now, I too am in exile, staring through a store window in a foreign part of town. (198)

In this passage, Rita identifies with the store customers' sense of abandonment, and connects her own experience of exclusion with her mother's escape from Germany. Although Rita herself moved merely a few blocks, reconnecting with her childhood and her family is just as impossible for her as it was for her mother after moving from one continent to another. Schulman's rhetorical tactic in this passage is the usage of an available discourse of geographic distance to express the intensity of Rita's experience of exclusion, and the mental distance homophobia and the denial of AIDS had put in between her and her family.

For Schulman's gay characters, the parallel between the AIDS crisis and the Holocaust is obvious. However, the same does not apply to their families. Their failure to recognize or discuss experiences of their gay children and siblings is one of the major themes in *Rat Bohemia*. The centre of action in the novel is sickness and eventual death of Rita's friend, David. As the narrative shifts to his perspective in the middle of the novel, David recounts his numerous attempts to force his parents into some form of acknowledgement of the AIDS crisis:

I started mentioning AIDS to my parents around the time Don got sick. I waited to see how they would respond. When they didn't respond, I couldn't say anymore. I just mentioned. Mentioned, mentioned, mentioned, mentioned . . . "I just came from visiting my friend Robert at NYU. You remember Robert? . . . Remember, I mentioned that he was trying out this new drug that was really promising? Well, I gotta go now . . . I'll let you know how he's doing next time." But the next time I'd wait and wait. I'd wade through all the stories of eighty-year-olds with heart attacks and whose daughter was getting married and I'd wait and wait for one word. I just wanted them to utter that word. That word was *Robert*. (85)

Contrasted with its omnipresence in his life, the invisibility of David's AIDS experience to his parents points to the role of the family as an institution of power which shapes the discourse in a way that allows it to remain inactive and leave the gay community alone to die. David's mother reveals that her behaviour is intentional as she acknowledges his sister's loss of her graduate school professor, saying "You've had more people die in your life than anyone I know" (87). David startles, but before he even responds, his mother accuses him: "You mean the AIDS thing . . . You're always looking for ammunition against us" (87). The loss experienced by David's sister is a part of their heteronormative world, and thus it is acknowledged; David's dead are the relationships he built in the gay community, and thus are non-existent to his parents. His interventions in an attempt to force them into an uncomfortable acknowledgement of the epidemic are perceived as a continuous, relentless assault on their peace of mind. David repeatedly describes the way his family treats him in terms of murder: "I realized that my parents were trying to kill me. In fact, my entire family is in on it . . . It is their only possible motive . . . There's nothing on earth that could kill us more efficiently than parental indifference" (63, 87). The environment in which David's accounts of AIDS epidemic

are relegated into discursive silence is carefully constructed by his relatives through their repeated choice to overlook the reality of the crisis event.

Representation of these relationships uncovers the extreme vulnerability of gay people, who are denied the support of their families. Throughout her *oeuvre*, Schulman represents painful disappointments that originate in families to counter the popular narratives of help, love and support. In her novel *The Child*, Stew, a gay teenager arrested by a police officer while trying to seduce him is disdained by his parents, and recognizes the difference between the media image and his real experience of a family:

The real point was that he was being punished but hadn't done anything wrong. His parents should be defending him, like Heidi Fleiss's father and O.J. Simpson's mother. Like every parent on TV whose child had been accused of murder or worse. They all stood behind their children and stuck by them even if they were guilty. Here, Stew had done nothing wrong and his parents were blaming him. (32)

Similarly, Rita is haunted throughout *Rat Bohemia* by her non-existent relationship with her father. Even her lover's casual observation on how her own Hispanic ethnicity is visible through the colour of her vagina eventually leads Rita to missing her father. After an attempt to contact him, however, she describes her emotional response in terms of a physical suffering of cosmic magnitude: "I feel transported to Planet Pain. My molecules go there. It is unbearable" (189). She acknowledges her inability to let go, understanding each instance of exclusion as a singular choice made by her father over and over:

As my life has progressed, I have changed. I have learned things and come to understand new things. So it would seem natural that my father would do the same. That's why his abandonment of me has always been a big surprise . . . My problem is that as long as he is still alive, he has the chance, every second, to change the way he views me. So every time he refuses, I'm devastated. (187)

Rita's account mirrors David's relationship with his mother, who in turn recognizes the virtual universality of this gay experience: "these reactions are so typical. My friends and I exchange them like baseball cards" (87). Schulman shows that through the praxis of excluding and ignoring gay members of families, the straight majority chose to remain unaware of the reality of AIDS crisis, and thus forfeited its right to claim ignorance.

If Rita's family chose to recognize the similarities between her experience and the Jewish history, perhaps they would be able to include her. However, they made themselves unaware of any connection, preferring to exclude Rita, mirroring the response to AIDS of both the government and the general public that allowed the epidemic to spread. Thus, the historically victimized group becomes oppressive. Larry Kramer notes the irony of this outcome in his essay *Report from the Holocaust*: "[t]his is a horrible singularity of the gay situation: Can Jews imagine being hated by their parents for their Jewishness?" (232; emphasis original). In *Rat Bohemia*, Schulman presents the victims of a crisis event who become the oppressors by prioritizing the power structure over links of kinship with their relatives.

This shift is not a sole privilege of the Jews in Schulman's *oeuvre*, however. Whereas gay people and communities are often represented by the author as disempowered and vulnerable, there are also numerous gay characters in positions of power acquired by the betrayal of their own communities. Throughout *Rat Bohemia* many characters read a novel by Muriel Starr, who is a successful lesbian author. The epilogue comprises four chapters of the novel, which turns out to contain life stories of Rita and her friends, but in a heterosexual version. Muriel exchanged the possibility to represent their life stories for financial gains connected with successful publishing. Similarly, in *People in Trouble* Kate, a married woman involved in a lesbian romance, turns to

activist art, but her focus quickly becomes her own career. John Goshert discusses this theme in the following way:

while avant-garde painter Kate flirts with the intersection of politics and art when she becomes involved in an AIDS activist group through her lover, Molly, her ostensibly subversive act of killing a rapacious Trump-like developer by burning her paintings around him is quickly flattened, aestheticized as a new genre and stripped of any significance. ("The Aporia" 54)

In *The Child Hockey*, a gay lawyer with AIDS, defends David, Stew's adult lover. Stew, driven mad by his family, eventually kills his nephew. Hockey wants to pin the blame on the boy for the benefit of his client. His co-worker Eva, who took the case for ideological reasons, criticizes this tactic:

Hockey wanted to argue in court that Stew was responsible for his actions, in order to get David off the hook. But that was not the truth. Stew was driven to murder. But not by Dave. He was driven to it by people who would never be put on trial. Eva couldn't pretend it was any other way. (232)

Schulman juxtaposes two contrary positions, as both lawyers are acutely aware that neither of the gay men is truly to blame for Stew's actions, and agree that it was the fault of the homophobic family. Hockey helps the oppressive forces to find a more palatable culprit because he is certain that blaming the family would not be a helpful line of defence. He works within the system to improve his client's situation. Eva feels affinity both with Dave, the client, and Stew, the boy, and thus refuses to proceed with Hockey's plan. Through Hockey, Schulman depicts the alignment of the marginalized with power, and through Eva, resistance to this process.

In the last part of *Rat Bohemia* David's father appears at his son's funeral and makes a short speech devoid of any interest in the actual circumstances of David's life to the exasperated outrage of the gay attendees. Shortly after the funeral Rita, haunted by her inability to get acceptance from her own father, stumbles upon David's:

Right away the mechanism of betrayal started up in my brain. Immediately I was burying David, finishing him off, dismissing him, discrediting him. I was blaming him for his family's abandonment . . . I, Rita Mae Weems, could convince his father and therefore own his father. Once I transformed his father, his father would belong to me, and then I would have a father. I could be a daughter. I would finally, because of David's death, get a family. (198–99)

In this scene, Schulman explores the dynamics between Rita's two identities: the lesbian and the daughter. Her unsatisfied desire to connect with her family overrules her loyalty to the gay community, leading to her transition from the resistance to the alignment with power, that is, seeking approval from David's homophobic father. She fantasizes she might establish a connection and reach an understanding with him, and as a result be embraced by some family (if not hers). However, the real consequence of her betrayal is that Rita has to listen to the father's story, where his dreams of normalcy "will never be realized because my son took it away from me the day he decided to be a homosexual" (202). Again, a family member victimizes himself, preferring this to the acknowledgment of the epidemic. Thus, instead of redeeming herself by helping David's father to overcome his homophobia, she relives the trauma of being punished by her own father. In the words of John Goshert:

[t]he conversation thus serves a double function, both as an indication of the inability of people who represent normative sexuality, ethnicity, or citizenship to recognize the suffering of others, and as an object lesson to Rita about the stakes of betrayal. When David's father appropriates the victim position in the conversation, Rita too is implicated in the network of responsibility, for she faces simultaneously the possibility of being both the agent of abandonment of the people with AIDS and the recipient of rejection by the legitimating cultural structure of the family. ("The Aporia" 65)

Rita's witnessing practice is ultimately rendered inadequate, as her own losses bring about her betrayal; regardless, the institution of family remains as impenetrable and punitive as before, and Rita still cannot comfortably identify both as a daughter and a lesbian at once.

The scene is an example of the author's stance against the simplified images of marginalization, as Schulman, in Goshert's words "resists the temptation to present one image of marginality through sexuality, religion, or ethnicity which would serve as the index for other subordinate identificatory concerns; instead, she simultaneously deploys and calls into question the gamut of identificatory possibilities" ("Is It Bad" 53–54). The hybrid identities of her characters, such as the daughter and the lesbian, enable shifts from one mode of behaviour to another, which are sometimes at odds. The dynamics between the two is clearly brought into light in the context of Rita's approach to the idea of the "meaning of AIDS." Early in the novel, Rita realizes the inadequacy of looking for such an explanation, or searching for a redemptive narrative. "There is nothing to be learned by staring death in the face every day of your life. AIDS is just fucking sad. It's a burden. There's nothing redeeming about it" (Schulman, *Rat Bohemia* 52). However, her own disloyal attempt is based on the odd narrative of redemption she invents:

Was this the hidden purpose of AIDS – to give the rest of us a chance to have parents? . . . Maybe these hateful parents would regret the way they abandoned their gay children and love us instead. That way, at least one of us would have love. (199)

Just as Rita begins to believe she can fulfil her dream of having an accepting family, she is willing to sacrifice her resistance to the imposition of a meaning onto the crisis event, and invents one that can help her newfound goal. The invention of that narrative helps her betray the memory of David, and her own community, which points to a connection between the imposition of a meaningful narrative onto the crisis event and alignment with an institution of power.

The construction of a stable narrative of meaning for the AIDS epidemic has been usefully theorized by Monica B. Pearl as a work of mourning. The implicit goal of such narrative is to accept the loss and thus sever the link with a lost love-object (in the case of AIDS usually a partner or a close friend). This approach is juxtaposed with the one Rita represents in the beginning, when she acknowledges the meaninglessness of the epidemic and the disruption it imposes on the system of signification. Pearl calls this position melancholic and attempts to rehabilitate the term by pointing to its positive effects on modes of representation:

[m]elancholia, as conveyed and constructed in AIDS literature, was instead productive; the inability to control grief or accept loss made for a more challenging and complex literature and therefore a more resonant expression of complex identities. (162)

In the case of melancholia the goal is not to sever the link with a lost love-object, but to keep it very much alive. In Pearl's analysis, writing on the AIDS epidemic is divided into two categories: gay and queer, which are respectively works of mourning and melancholia. Schulman's representation of both positions, and the ultimate failure of the former, exemplified through David's father's failure to fulfil Rita's expectations, posits her writing firmly in the queer category. Her novels not only do not impose any narrative meaning onto the epidemic, but also represent such action as disloyal to the queer community.

As discussed, Schulman touches upon the ideas of family unwillingness to recognize the reality of the epidemic or to relate it to their own experience, and gay people's own readiness to turn their backs on their community, should they stumble upon (or imagine) a possibility of entering the power structure comfortably. Goshert states that both phenomena lead to an increased visibility that does not translate into any direct action:

The visibility of AIDS was . . . typically associated with gay men, but visibility did not provide any new legitimacy for people with AIDS or gay people; on the contrary . . . visible manifestations of AIDS provided the grounds for renewed commitments by families, cities, and nations to the marginalization of their gay constituents. (Goshert, "The Aporia" 61–62)

As Goshert notes, the increased visibility alongside inaction is coded in a scene where Rita's co-workers from Pest Control kill rats by hitting them with shovels, a scene observed by a crowd of art students, none of whom would take the picture, "too busy being surprised, I guess" (*Rat Bohemia* 46). AIDS and the Holocaust are implied to be extensions of the extermination process, and the scene reflects the failure to bear witness to the crisis events.

The rats constitute a central symbol in the novel. The figure of rodents blurs the boundaries between the obscene and appropriate discourses in the Western culture. The rat infestation, as well as Rita's determination to manage it, open the possibility of employing the discourse of genocide:

Once it became evident that no poison was ever going to get them, the guys at the lab came up with the most diabolical tactic ever attempted in the history of Rat vs. Human warfare. Warfarin. It is this odorless, tasteless, anticoagulant that produces massive internal hemorrhaging. (*Rat Bohemia* 151)

An effect-oriented development of killing methods is justified by a generic assumption of rodent extermination. However, in the context of Rita's Jewish heritage, this description points to death camps, another carefully crafted mass annihilation; the context of AIDS suggests that a similar one might still be at work, as the scene points to David's reflection about his family's murderous intentions. The employment of a culturally justified discourse of genocide in thematic and compositional relation to the extreme events draws attention to the availability of genres in which such discourse is viable. Ultimately, it achieves a transgressive effect, introducing the obscene implication that the viability of such conversation with regards to other objects is not entirely uncivilized, but rather relies solely on the definition of "rodents."

Schulman explores the dynamics between the discourses available to discuss the actual rats, and their symbolic meaning, i.e. victims of crisis events. At one point, Rita's reflections on the rat migration discuss both the spread of AIDS epidemic and the Jewish migration:

[New Yorkers] don't realize that at the exact second that they are watching rodents frolicking on the subway tracks, somewhere off in a faraway ocean, a weather-beaten fishing trawler is about to dock on a tiny island. Stowed away in the locker of that boat is a pair of one-pound Norway rats ready to scoot along the hawser when the sun goes down. At the same moment, deep in the hold of a neighborly grain barge, a family of Polynesian rats are about to come ashore. Once they've invaded the previously pristine spot, these rats are going to go after large unsuspecting birds by biting the backs of their necks, severing their spines and chewing off their legs. (*Rat Bohemia* 149–50)

The image of rats travelling to devour pristine lands refers to the ways HIV virus has spread throughout the world due to air travel and to the way in which Jewish immigrants fled Europe. The copresence of these meanings serves double purpose of simultaneous description and commentary; recognition of rats as the figure for HIV virus draws attention to the restrictive policies preventing the migration of HIV-positive people. Both, in turn, point to the history of anti-Semitism related to the Jewish migration. The metaphors of purity and contagion are introduced by Schulman in a non-obtrusive form of commentary on rodent extermination, but point towards, and demand to acknowledge, the obscene discourses of dehumanization constructed to talk about Jews and people with AIDS.

Rita's job in Pest Control foreshadows her later betrayal of David's memory. One of her formative moments was the first time she identified with rodents:

One night I was so alone . . . And I looked up at a passing boat and saw a rat climbing out of a hole on the dock about three feet from my face. Then I saw that there was a whole swarm of them, that they owned this place and could do as they wished . . . My first rats. They were the symbol of my condition. And, I have to say, that although it is a blasphemy, I thought of my mother and compared myself to her. We had both been punished and neither of us had done anything wrong. (*Rat Bohemia* 196)

The boat in the scene stands for New York City, filled with gay people, and for the early twentieth-century Germany full of Jews. There is no strength in numbers, however; as soon as the rats leave the ship and hop on the American shore, they become subjects of Pest Control hunt. As noted by Goshert, at another point Rita's betrayal is foreshadowed by rats devouring bodies of their dead. The symbol is thus deployed by Schulman also to figure the failure of witnessing.

The job of an exterminator is related to another significant figure in the novel, that of a bohemian. As Rita tries to find a social category she fits in, her friend Killer explains: "[w]e're bohemians. We don't have those dominant culture values . . . Nowadays it's not generational. Bohemians aren't grouped by clothes or sex or age. Nowadays, it's just a state of mind. Anyone with a different idea is IN" (*Rat Bohemia* 29). Bohemians are understood as people who resist power rather than align with it. In the way the figure is presented there is, too, some foreshadowing of Rita's betrayal:

In the fifties, the Beats, those guys were so all-American. They could sit around and ponder aesthetic questions, but a cup of coffee cost a nickel. Nowadays, with the economy the way it is, you can't drop out or you'll be homeless . . . You have to meet the system head-on at least once in a while and that meeting, Rita, is very brutal. (30)

Alignment with power, which constitutes a betrayal of bohemian values, is rendered inevitable due to the American economy in the 1980s. Rita, identifying with rats, recognizes herself both as the exterminator, doing a job for which she is getting paid, and as the exterminated, witnessing the lack of response to AIDS. Her position is thus similar to that of her family; a victim of crisis event that becomes an oppressor. The refusal to take this position and gain rewards for aligning with power is expressed by Schulman in a manifesto-like passage:

I'm an UnAmerican. I believe that ninety percent of the people can be wrong at the same time. Your entire family can be wrong and you might be the only one who is right.  
 QUESTION: Is it better off, in that case, to be wrong?  
 NO. That's the patriotic way. Don't do that.  
 BE RIGHT. Because the way I figure it is that if I make my contribution to truth, some Rat Bohemian down the line will notice and appreciate it. She'll be sitting down in a city strewn with rats and rat carcasses and will come across my petite observation. That's the most amazing relationship in the universe. The girl on rat bones who knows that she is not alone. (53-54)

Alertness to the practices that aim at the incorporation of minority experiences without active help to any of those groups, akin to Goshert's notion of increased visibility that provides no legitimacy, is at the core of a successful witnessing practice, and provides, in turn, the site for actual community in times of a crisis event.

While representing the complexities of the rejection of gay people from their families through the lens of their ethnic identification, especially the postmemory of Holocaust, Schulman conveys the experiences of exclusion and the tactics of turning the excluded into oppressors. Showing that gay people are not exempt from the allure of these phenomena, the author problematizes the figure of a witness and shifts the way it is understood from a stable identity to an unstable practice. Finally, by encoding the ideas of isolation and betrayal into the symbol of rats, Schulman invites

a discourse of extermination, thus pointing to the obscene reality of the epidemic. The awareness that witnessing is a constant practice of dissent from cultural techniques that relegate crisis events to the "edge of consciousness" is represented by Schulman as a precondition of a successful testimony, while her use of the symbol of rats serves as an example of such dissenting stance. The practice of witnessing, just as the rats, remains a constant in the lives of Schulman's characters, as they are both at odds with the dominant American culture looking for the ways to purge itself from the burden of reality.

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