

February 12, 2020

# Hardcore

## *Shoghig Halajian*

"There is no rest until the fighting's done."

—Diamanda Galas<sup>1</sup>

A performance about aging and grief leads to furious headbanging. There is something about the violence of repeatedly jerking one's head that perhaps makes it the best possible way to rebel against the heavy silence and stillness of loss.

Compulsive movement, in fact, may be the only way to shake off this burden, or even a way to shake it *all* off, to fling body parts away. It is an undeviating response to the way grief distorts the senses: amplifying sounds, weighing down movement, and oscillating emotions between highs and lows. It asserts endurance *and* exhaustion, excess in spite of loss—a body edging towards its fragility *and* a body holding its ground.

Julie Tolentino's late-night performance, *bury.me.fiercely.*, embroils themes of loss, grief, and longevity in relation to histories of queer organizing and resistance.<sup>2</sup> Taking place on December 12, 2019, at Performance Space New York, the event was staged in a dimly lit, black box room subdivided by two raised stages. On one, a group of performers of varying age, race, and movement abilities lay in an entangled

cluster, perpetually moving over-under-and-beside each other, like an excerpt from a sex party or a sample of a packed dance floor at a club. On the other, a layer of mirrors coats the entire surface, reflecting a black and white video—*The 29th Bather* (2019)—projected onto an adjacent wall.



Julie Tolentino, *bury.me.fiercely.*, 2019, performance documentation. Photo by Maria Baranova.



Julie Tolentino, *The 29th Bather*, 2019, digital video still.

The video loops an image of waves crashing ashore against the backdrop of a sharply defined horizon line. Tolentino stands on the sandy beach in the foreground, while draped with a large blanket of leather material. She models as an amorphous form and gradually moves under the weight of the heavy cloak. The artist documented this shoreline at Fire Island's Pines Beach, about sixty miles east of Performance Space. Known as "The Pines," this area has served as a place of

refuge for gay men, historically, and continues to be a popular summer outpost for New Yorkers, though skewed toward a primary demographic of white, upper-middle-class gay men. Tolentino occupies space on the beach while remaining concealed, suggesting a complex position of both presence and erasure. As a queer, gender-nonconforming artist of Salvadoran and Filipina descent, Tolentino is not the typical emblematic figure of The Pines. Veiled under a heavy garment, her stance signals to the gendered and raced conditions of exclusion between communities of white, gay, cis-men and lesbians, queers, and people of color.

Throughout *bury.me.fiercely.*, Tolentino remains on stage with the group of performers, but distinct. She confidently traverses the periphery, moving a collection of crotch-high standing mirrors, installed on wheels—pulling them with her, then pushing them away and slamming them towards each other. At times, she directs one towards an audience member, tilting the object's "face" as if gesturing emotion through *épaulement*—the head, neck, and shoulder position in ballet. She holds the mirror here longer than expected, confrontationally asserting that the audience "keep looking," while likewise implicating them in the group's exploratory actions on stage.

Tolentino's practice addresses themes of vulnerability, care, and queer kinship, while avoiding the usual pitfalls that blindly romanticize community formation as an ultimate utopian end goal. Instead, her work enacts community in its failures and

possibilities, in its tendencies to exclude and to break, and in its radical potential to hold, temporarily. Such threads originate in her background in contemporary dance where she, as a queer movement-based artist of color, had to negotiate racialized boundaries within a field of white belonging.<sup>3</sup> Developing her practice in the performance, dance, and nightlife worlds of New York in the 1990s, Tolentino signals to the complex history of friendships and political alliances forged between lesbians and gay men around HIV/AIDS-related cultural production, as well as within the wider networks of HIV/AIDS activism that inform her work.

"The Shiny Dark Figure is marked, wanting, and wrong: aging, brown, queer, decaying, disabled, and haunted by its growing ledger of ghosts. A body that doesn't recover but unfolds,"<sup>4</sup> describes Tolentino. As *bury.me.fiercely.* continues, performers pull a large, dark, hand-sewn leather tarp over themselves until they are fully engulfed.<sup>5</sup> They conceal all identifying markers and transform themselves into a different, amorphous form. Brownness, queerness, age, and ability all morph into one another under this blanketing structure. They create "The Shiny Dark Figure," an amalgamation of each body but also something entirely its own. The audience no longer sees discrete features but a surface-heavy topographic landscape in a united front—a gleaming leather skin that performs by reflecting, refracting, and absorbing light.

Drawing from her personal experiences of caretaking and nightlife organizing as forms of advocacy work, Tolentino addresses prolonged states of loss, aging, and disability through a consideration of the body as a decaying archive of embodied knowledge. Her presentations—including private one-to-one-exchanges, durational performances, and installations using rogue materials such as fluids, smoke, and scent—enact opacity as a strategy of resistance. Many components cannot be easily captured on camera, performing an intentionally evasive strategy that surfaces critical questions around how to make art about queer histories of grief and resilience, and ongoing struggles against societal oppression, without flattening these into a digestible narrative.

The theorist Joshua Chambers-Letson describes minoritarian performance—the ways that marginalized subjects sustain life under subordination and rehearse new ways of living together, such as the party—to be an ephemeral happening that crashes singular beings together to become singular plurals, which then ends inevitably. "The dawn breaks, the performance ends, the party comes undone, and they slip away from each other, falling back into the void."<sup>6</sup> The slow disappearance of *bury.me.fiercely*'s performers under a burdensome covering recalls how the advent of AIDS cast a dark shadow over an entire generation who faced the psychic burden of losing friends and confronting death. The art critic Douglas Crimp addressed this stealthy trauma in his 1989 essay, "Mourning and Militancy,"<sup>7</sup> when he asserted that the gay community not only

faced the loss of friends to AIDS, but also the loss of particular forms of sexual intimacy and sexual culture, once risk-focused rhetoric permeated the cultural sphere. Tolentino refers to "the void" that engulfs the performers. Akin to grief with "its ledger of ghosts," the leather weighs down and isolates them. As they continue to move, flashes of limbs and flesh are exposed. Given that a performance, just like the party, unravels and slips away, what traces, memories, and insights linger on in the aftermath? And if grief contains through its hold, how do these fractured remains spill out and construct an afterlife?

## The Party

Before it all ends, there is the party: a potentially insurgent space that brings bodies together, inviting them to touch, wriggle, bounce, and shake in unison. Differing ways of exploring oneself in relation to others. These movements are not performed alone, but amongst others, shoulders grazing in synchronized action. In a performance about grief, convulsive shaking enacts a metonymic gesture of collective mourning. It points to a wider context of the social life that forms around loss.

In 1990, Tolentino and the artist Jaguar Mary founded the Clit Club, a lesbian and queer, sex-positive dance venue in the Meatpacking District of Manhattan.<sup>8</sup> Promoting varying forms of desire and sexual expression, the club featured erotic dancing (with women dancing specifically for other women), kink, and BDSM, all especially poignant against the backdrop of

the sex-negative ethos that resulted from the AIDS epidemic. "Sex in fact looked like many things," recalls Tolentino. "Couples cruised. Sex happened on the pool table, the bathroom, and on the dance floor. People were turned on and sometimes, turned out."<sup>9</sup> Clit Club's clientele was distinct from other queer nightlife locales in the area that mostly catered to cis-men. In Tolentino's words, the place attracted:

- young and old men and women
- gay and lesbian - trans - transsexual - transvestite - tranny - bisexual - queer - PWAs (People With AIDS)
- polite / impolite / neurotic / unfamiliar / familiar / fetish-y / political / in the closet / out
- black, brown, white and other, mixed, Asian, off-white, pink, shades of black and other brown.<sup>10</sup>

The club served as a response to the social demands surrounding AIDS activism, as well as to the homophobic and misogynist landscape of right-wing political conservatism during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Tolentino was involved in the direct-action group ACT UP NY (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), and noticed an urgent need to create space for organizers to go after meetings, as a place to continue the night and remain in solidarity. ACT UP's horizontal, nonpartisan, and volunteer-driven structure drew in a heterogeneous crowd from varying backgrounds and experience levels, with diverse approaches to social justice activism. Discussing the multiplicity of voices at meetings (what Tolentino deems as "the multiple ACT UPs in the room"), she recounts:

There was always sort of a feeling that you had to let the folks in the front of the room speak

first, or there was a certain kind of particular activism that was being championed. And you know, there was that kind of back-of-the-room feeling like, "How are we going to get in there?" ... So, I feel like all of that was part and parcel of how Clit Club came to be, which was, "Let's make some space where we can talk about those things. Let's hang out around those things."<sup>11</sup>

The club was as a party, a meeting ground, a distribution center for resources and information, and a memorial site for friends who had passed away. The staff—which remained mostly intact throughout Clit Club's life (1990–2002)—were all members of ACT UP NY and affinity groups, including House of Color, Art Positive, and DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television). Many worked as emergency responders and social service workers focusing on LGBTQ youth, harm reduction approaches to drug use, and safer sex. For example, Tolentino, with the artist and filmmaker Cynthia Madansky, co-authored the *Guide to Safer Sex for Lesbians*, which was distributed on-site during weekly parties. The handbook included tongue-in-cheek images of Clit Club staff members alongside instructional descriptions of safe-sex best practices, and was packaged with gloves, dental dams, and condoms.<sup>12</sup>

The nighttime accounted for overlapping needs and forms of community: "the meetings, the actions, home care, and dance, and Clit Club. You know, there's a very congealing experience amongst all those things."<sup>13</sup> The inseparability between socializing, partying, political organizing, art-making, and mourning created an urgent condition in which one's proximity to

death resulted in a stronger need to be with others—to form affective bonds through varying friendships, partnerships, sexual relationships, and experiments to make place in order to hold all these things.

"I think by then we were already recognizing that we had to live lives pretty fully for the people we were losing. And we were losing them quickly, and we were losing them young."<sup>14</sup>

Under grave conditions emerged this imperative to stay close together for survival. Living "fully" meant forging alliances, gathering for public demonstrations, collectively experimenting with drug therapies, sharing legal services and resources, fighting eviction, and meeting at the club to strengthen and test such ties. The party gave form to a counterintuitive perspective on loss that considers and fosters its inherent world-making capacities.

Clit Club lasted for twelve years despite various antisocial measures targeting queer nightlife. Mayor Ed Koch's "urban revitalization" programs (1978–89) policed public and underground entertainment locations, particularly where such parties as these claimed space in the areas in and around the Meatpacking District. Following that was Mayor Rudy Giuliani's (1994–2001) initiation of various discriminatory anti-crime measures, such as "broken windows" policing and stop-and-frisk practices.<sup>15</sup> All the while, from the mid-1990s forward, mainstream culture was starting to integrate and market to a specifically privatized neoliberal form of gay and lesbian consumer-citizens.<sup>16</sup>

The reality of belonging to a community wrought by illness and neglect impacted not only why, but *how* Tolentino produced work.<sup>17</sup> She began to position caregiving both as a central subject of her art, and as a specific practice built into her production processes. Tolentino would host the Clit Club until 3:00 or 4:00 AM, then would volunteer to sit by friends' bedsides at the hospital through the remainder of the night in order to ensure that they were provided adequate care by doctors who often needed coercion. During the day, she would attend dance rehearsals or distribute promotional material for the club. Her routine wove together multiple and multi-scalar forms of activism that are not always written into the dominant histories of AIDS resistance and social change. Documentary footage of demonstrations with people yelling on the streets presents the person on the frontlines as the image of activism. But there are those on the periphery of the frame who, due to myriad precarities and positions, enact equal resistance from the sidelines. They carry the materials and the medicine. They watch out for police, distribute information, and conduct various and dedicated forms of organizing and care work in private.

The performance of such care is most visible in Tolentino's durational work, *Honey (A Cry of Love)*. Presented with longtime collaborator Stosh Fila, also known as Pigpen, this three-to-five-hour-long duet involves fifty pounds of honey that is distributed between the two protagonists through a single, hanging gold thread.<sup>18</sup> Working within an extreme condition of vulnerability, Tolentino's body is displayed

on the floor as she gradually swallows glob after glob of the honey over hours, performing a "choreography of the throat."<sup>19</sup> Pigpen, perched above her on an elevated hunting blind, determines the intake by periodically squeezing the sugary contents from a plastic bottle onto the shining thread, releasing small golden tear-shapes that move down the line and into Tolentino's mouth in a continuous flow. The slow movement of the honey draws attention to the in-between—this strand of gold is where the real action is—and amplifies the inherently relational aspects of care labor. Pigpen crafts the speed and shape of the honey drops, as Tolentino determines its intake by swallowing and allowing portions to spill out and down her face.

The performance meditates on modes of communication and the reciprocity of caregiving and -taking. As Tolentino swallows honey, she is unable to speak, so she invites another to speak for her. She holds a tape recorder that plays Chavela Vargas's song, "Soledad"; in her other hand, she holds another recorder that captures the sound. Rewinding, replaying, and re-recording, Tolentino gradually layers and obfuscates Vargas's words, while collecting sounds from her surrounding environment. This act of manipulation, paired with Tolentino's therapeutic slow and steady swallow, highlights the tension between the sensual and embodied experience of speaking, and language as an abstracted system of socialization. It points to illness as both a physical malady and a cultural construction of taboos, stigmatization, and projections of identity that necessitate

critical attention to language. As Tolentino and Pigpen give and take, they both perform as active agents in the work of care, positing this one-to-one exchange as infused with palpable intimacy as well as an erotic that arises from the conditions of interdependency.

### **Haptic Entanglements**

Tolentino thinks and feels through corporeal fragility as a condition of being a body that reacts, changes, and gradually degrades. By the time of 2019's *bury.me.fiercely.*, the aging body becomes a primary site to explore the permeability of flesh and muscles, and the unboundedness of bodily boundaries. At one point, Tolentino and Pigpen move forward and take a seat, facing each other with knees touching. The duo has worked together exclusively for over twelve years; their exchange here is mostly non-verbal and micro-gestural.<sup>20</sup> They proceed to play-pierce several hypodermic needles into each other's faces—along eyebrows, jawlines, and lips. Audiences observe a process both difficult to watch yet also playful, child-like, and necessarily collaborative. At times, Tolentino nervously pulls away from the needle, then laughs at herself for doing so. Pigpen knowingly smirks in response.



Julie Tolentino, *bury.me.fiercely.*, 2019, performance documentation. Photo by Maria Baranova.

After they have inserted a row of needles on each side of both of their faces, they begin to weave a golden thread across and around each needle, binding their faces together. Suddenly they stop and slowly move away from each other, tightening the entangled thread. Their skin pulls towards each other and off of their skulls, edging towards its limits. This sort of cringe-inducing play explores the body as a malleable and unfixed entity, challenging where one body ends and the other begins. As they pull threads tighter, they blur the boundary between pleasure and pain and recall how the onset of HIV/AIDS demanded an entire generation to suddenly rethink what sex looks and feels like. Surrounded by societal homophobic indifference, it also demanded examination of the obligations of community—that is, how one body can take care of another, and the responsibilities of the well in relation to the vulnerable. While mainstream media proclaims that the crisis is over, the disease persists today, especially for poor, immigrant, or incarcerated communities who do not have access to HIV prevention.<sup>21</sup> Practitioners recently have placed greater attention on AIDS-related culture in the twenty-first century, with

efforts to challenge the dominant, whitewashed narrative and to emphasize continued production amid the ongoing epidemic.<sup>22</sup>



Julie Tolentino, *bury.me.fiercely.*, 2019, performance documentation. Photo by C de Castro.

All of a sudden, Tolentino and Pigpen hurriedly take out each needle, allowing the punctures to open and rapidly release blood. They rush to the mirrored stage and the audience follows. Assuming a side-by-side position, Tolentino exclaims, "Stand back!" With music blasting overhead, they start to shake their heads in unison, hard and fast. Blood drips down steadily from their open wounds and splatters the mirrored floor. Blood marks time.

"We were never actually meant to be 30, and we became 31 and now we are 100."<sup>23</sup> As they continue to shake and jerk with dizzying speed, they grasp each other's arms and clothing, exploring different ways of finding support. For those who made work and made space to fight homophobia at the advent of the epidemic, endurance demonstrates a longevity that is bound up with caregiving and resistance, in all its varying experimental forms. "I felt like enduring was our job and learning to get

through the time was something we had to learn to articulate and also value."<sup>24</sup>



Julie Tolentino, *bury.me.fiercely.*, 2019, performance documentation. Photos by Maria Baranova.

Prolonged, all-in headbanging—as an unabashed avowal of grief—communicates a world of remnants: improvised practices, fugitive insights, blood memories, and lingering ephemeral traces of parties that communed and then broke apart. Duration holds grief, but also survival, a recognition that one exceeded, even reshaped, the conditions imposed onto them. This propulsive bleeding duet recalls distinct victories—such as increased queer visibility and rights-based inclusion—but also points to the persistence of anti-gay discrimination, the ongoing criminalization of HIV/AIDS, and the violent ways in which the mainstream gay rights agenda implicitly links itself to whiteness, privacy, and upward mobility.

It is inside all of this that they continue. They headbang; they tire; they go on. Drops of blood fall off, shades of red stain the stage. They nod yes, shake no; hunch over, shift angles, keep thrashing on. The mirrored dancefloor below reflects their own image back at them, trembling and flinging parts away, while firmly holding their ground. There is reflection of the ocean behind them. There is haunting presence of all those other bodies dancing and continuing the night.

1. This is a lyric from the song "There are No More Tickets to the Funeral," from Diamanda Galas's album, *Plague Mass*. Recorded in 1990 and released in 1991 on Mute Records, *Plague Mass* was intended to convey the pain of those afflicted and families touched by HIV/AIDS, and the rage associated with cultural indifference to the disease.
2. *bury.me.fiercely.* was presented as part of *Slipping Into Darkness*, Tolentino's project at Performance Space New York, December 12, 2019, <https://performancespacenewyork.org/shows/slipping-into-darkness-page/>. This essay reflects on distinct moments of the performance and does not present a comprehensive account of the work.
3. Tolentino was a member of David Roussève's dance-theatre company, REALITY, which employed dancers of color and addressed politicized themes such as racism, homophobia, and illness. As well, she was a longtime collaborator with Ron Athey and Company, presenting performances—mostly in late-night club settings—that interrogated practices surrounding HIV/AIDS via the aesthetic intersections of religious, punk, queer, and BDSM subcultures. Tolentino was instrumental in bringing this work from nightclubs into theatre venues.
4. Julie Tolentino, press release for *Repeater*, an immersive installation presented at Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles, September 21, 2019–November 2, 2019, <http://commonwealthandcouncil.com/exhibitions/repeater/press>.
5. Tolentino described this as an exercise in trying to "contain in order for something to fall out."

Conversation with the author, Los Angeles, January 12, 2020.

6. Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), xxi.

7. Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October*, vol. 51 (Winter, 1989): 3-18.

8. For a thorough account of Clit Club, as well as the names of key participants, see Julie Tolentino, Vivian A. Crockett, Tara Hart, Amira Khusro, Leeroy Kun Young Kang, and Dragon Mansion, "THE SUM OF ALL QUESTIONS: Returning to the Clit Club," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 4 (2018): 467-488.

9. *Ibid.*, 468.

10. Julie Tolentino wrote these words for the Sixth Annual Last Address Tribute Walk, read by Vivian Crockett, Tara Hart, Michele Hill, and Lori E. Seid. *Visual AIDS*, "The Clit Club Crew on the Clit Club for the 6th Annual Last Address Tribute Walk," July 3, 2018, <https://visualaids.org/blog/the-clit-club-crew>.

11. Oral history interview with Julie Tolentino, April 11–12, 2018. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. See full transcript here <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-julie-tolentino-17564>. Also, see <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/>.

12. *Guide to Safer Sex for Lesbians* was produced by the Lesbian AIDS Project of the Gay Men's Health Crisis. An excerpt from the pamphlet is featured in the exhibition, *Metanoia: Transformation through AIDS Archives an Activism*, ONE Archives Foundation, Los Angeles, January 17–April 5, 2020. <https://www.onearchives.org/metanoia/>.

13. Oral history interview with Julie Tolentino.

14. *Ibid.*

15. In "SUM OF ALL PARTS," Tolentino, et al. discuss how these anti-crime measures targeted the social life of queer women, trans, and gender-nonconforming people of color, as well as immigrant communities. They note that during his time in office, Giuliani resurrected the long-dormant NYC Cabaret Law, which was instituted in 1926 during the Harlem Renaissance to prevent interracial socializing. The law was used to fine and

eventually shut down what the mayor perceived to be the city's "nuisance" bars.

16. *In The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), Sarah Schulman examines the impact of AIDS on a generation of gay Americans, and explores gentrification as a process that changes place and thought, asking "How did the gay liberation movement ... this radical, living, creative force deteriorate into a group of racist, closeted, top-down privatized couples willing to sacrifice their entire legacy to get married? And fail?"

17. Tolentino discussed this routine during a panel discussion with the performers Justin Vivian Bond and Hunter Reynolds as part of the New Museum's *ACT NOW: Perspectives on Contemporary Performance and HIV/AIDS*, New York, September 19, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoTWZs8Fuls>.

18. Tolentino and Pigpen performed this work in galleries, museums, conferences—both indoors and out—across the United States and abroad, from 2009 to 2017. See documentation of their performance at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions in 2010 here. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrrwPOVtc2Q>.

19. Tolentino describes the performance of *Honey (A Cry of Love)* as a "choreography of the throat." See Artist Statement, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, New York, January 2019, <https://www.foundationforcontemporaryarts.org/recipients/julie-tolentino>.

20. Tolentino and Pigpen began working together with Ron Athey and Company in the 1990s. They have been performing together exclusively since 2008.

21. The author Che Gossett discusses the intersection of AIDS, anti-blackness and incarceration, and aptly asks, "How can we create more HIV/AIDS resources in anti-oppressive and decolonial ways?" "We will not rest in peace," in *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kunstman, and Silvia Posocco (New York: Routledge, 2014), 43.

22. For select examples, see: What Would an HIV Doula Do?, "Twenty-One Questions to Consider When Embarking on AIDS-Related Cultural

Production," produced with Triple Canopy, 2018, [https://tc3-production.s3.amazonaws.com/upload/5c89421fd4ae4000046ac2bd/l24\\_How-We-Do-Illness\\_21-Questions.pdf](https://tc3-production.s3.amazonaws.com/upload/5c89421fd4ae4000046ac2bd/l24_How-We-Do-Illness_21-Questions.pdf); Theodore (ted) Kerr, ed., "What You Don't Know About AIDS Could Fill A Museum: Curatorial Ethics and the Ongoing Epidemic in the 21st Century," *On Curating* 42 (September 2016): <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-42.html#.XjtUsi2ZPOQ>; Sarah Cascone, "'AIDS Is Not History': ACT UP Members Protest the Whitney Museum's David Wojnarowicz Show, Claiming It Ignores an Ongoing Crisis," *ArtNet News*, July 30, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/act-up-whitney-museum-david-wojnarowicz-1325891>; Larry Buhl, "Art AIDS America & Institutionalized Racism in Art," *a&u: America's AIDS Magazine*, June 27, 2016, <https://aumag.org/2016/06/27/art-aids-america-institutionalized-racism-in-art/>; *AIDS and the Distribution of Crisis*, eds. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2020); and the ongoing programming at *Visual Aids* in New York, <https://visualaids.org/events>.

23. Tolentino, *ACT NOW* panel discussion.

24. Ibid.

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