

Remembering and Recognizing LGBTQ+ History:

A Sociological Content Analysis of the Mini Docuseries *When We Rise*

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Abstract

This article is an exploration of the distinctive uprising of the LGBTQ+ community, in specific its depiction in the ABC mini docuseries *When We Rise* and the overarching monumental occurrences within the community's history. The lives of three San Francisco activists are told through first person perspective as they continue to fight for civil rights movements spanning from 1972 to 2015. By accumulating and extracting research through a qualitative content analysis, concise data was collected and coded to promote a self-defined, unaltered outcome. While using this method, patterns within theme emerged. There is thorough indication that primary themes exemplified in *When We Rise* include sexual orientation visibility/validity, intersectionality and adversity.

Introduction

This article is focused on examining the eight-part mini-series entitled *When We Rise*. This docudrama depicts the trials and tribulations faced by early LGBTQ+ activists in San Francisco from 1972 to 2015, an area of great populous for the minority community. Released on February 27, 2017 and written by Dustin Black, this series is a recount of the ground-breaking steps taken by pioneers Cleve Jones, Roma Guy, Ken Jones and their fellow advocates. Following their development from free-minded youths looking to make a difference in their societal inequality into leaders of their very own revolution, the cast soundly presents a set of out-spoken and diverse peoples- all of varying sociological and ethnic backgrounds. Both informative and heart wrenching, it tells the true stories of hardship faced by the community through times of bigotry, prejudice and disease. Their sacrifices, their losses and their defeats are navigated as deeply as their successes. These activists formed the roots of the lifestyle and treatment of queer people today. Within the sphere of LGBTQ+ representation (which is limited in itself) *When We*

Rise makes note of events that shaped the movement through the decades, optimizing their ability to represent the extensive and constant fight that is queer culture and history. This is seldom done in such a short series of installments- in doing so the creators have given to their audience a timely and concise education on a piece of American history. *When We Rise* is a tribute to the activists of the LGBTQ+ community, encourages further humanizing developments and sheds light on the various needs of a vast community.

Literature Review

Cleve Jones finds himself a steady figure in large scale civil rights movements from the Harvey Milk election to the fight against AIDS all the way to the election of Barack Obama and the passage of Proposition 8 in California (D'Addario, 2017). As of 2017 Roma Guy is a chair on a number of boards including the Health Care Services Act Community Advisory Committee, the Health Committee of the California Women's Agenda, the SF Mayor's Local Homeless Board, the Jim Hormel Advisory Council for the SF Public Library, etc.; (Getz, 2017). Ken Jones was a highly intersectional activist and became known for working to discover and confront racism within the gay community as well fighting for diversity within the entirety of the gay rights movement and his participation in the fight against AIDS. More recently he has been working with at-risk youth, focused in the Haight in San Francisco and has brought his clean-needle-exchange to the Black Caucus (Thomas, 2017). Prior to the acts depicted in the series, on the night of June 27-28, 1969, the Stonewall riots inspired a new wave of self-assertion and taste for justice. It was common practice for police to raid hotspots of queer folk including the Stonewall Inn. Rather than continue to accept their harassment quietly, many patrons that night retaliated with previously unseen amounts of blunt rage and violent behavior (Shashkevich, 2017). Police, frightened by the ever-expanding crowd, were pushed back into the bar. This occurrence was a definitive moment in the history of this community because it launched LGBTQ+ advocacy into a legitimate realm of social

confrontation. The AIDS epidemic began in 1981. In June of 1981 five people in Los Angeles were diagnosed with a strange case of pneumonia. In July of the same year doctors working in Los Angeles and New York LGBTQ+ communities noted forty cases of rare skin cancer. By the following month the associated press reported that the strange disease was in fact a combination of the skin cancer Kaposi's Sarcoma and pneumocystis (a form of pneumonia caused by a parasite). By the third month the two diseases had infected more than a hundred gay men in America and more than half of the cases proved fatal. Rounding out the end of the year 121 men had passed. In 1982 the disease was named Auto Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS); in 1984 the virus was isolated; and in 1986 it was named Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). The disease had killed 27,408 by the end of the decade. Congress banned the use of federal funding in campaigns for AIDS prevention and education in 1987. They didn't want campaigns that promoted homosexual tendencies, even if the intent of the campaign was to keep the people safe. (Gailing, 2017)

Methodology

The necessary research procedure for this analysis came in the form of a qualitative research approach, by utilizing this process I was able to question the structures and behavior of the series as a whole and in subsections of data collection. This approach is concrete in its application because one is able to gather findings from studying visual media more substantially while allowing the patterns to form naturally and of their own accord. In using this approach, larger sums of subject matter are manageable in analyzation, ergo data is collected that would likely be overlooked when researching by other means. The mini-series docudrama *When We Rise*, which consisted of eight parts, allowed observation, evaluation and logging of information. Initial viewing allowed making note of generalized ideas and thoughts. This was done in a matter that reviewed basic statistics and stereotypes diverged from race, gender, sex etc.; as well as the prevalent plot points and character actions/developments that took place. Each episode required a secondary viewing in order to be coded. In the context of this research, a latent coding method was used

in which codes were recorded within a chart. This chart was beneficial for this analysis as it made grouping and determining codes more easily. Once these codes were combined, themes were developed.

Findings

By way of data collection through a content analysis approach, there were three recurring themes that emerged. Patterns in coding suggested that sexual identity visibility/validity, intersectionality and adversity were the primary themes to surface. These themes are intrinsic to the series and appear on a repeated basis in each individual episode/part.

Themes:
Sexual Orientation Visibility/Validity
Intersectionality
Adversity

Sexual Orientation Visibility

The foremost theme throughout the entirety of the series and within each given episode/part is sexual orientation visibility. All three protagonists are presented divided across continents yet in similar states of disarray and all amazed by gay liberation on the cover of *Life* magazine's 1970 year-in-review issue. Cleve's story introduces him as the closeted, Arizonian son of a homophobic psychologist prepared to electro-shock the homosexuality out of him. Roma begins as a women's activist afraid to admit her own sexuality, going so far as to quite loudly deny her sexuality in a police precinct. Ken is a Naval officer that had served time in Vietnam, during which his former lover and fellow officer was killed; and feared God would be unaccepting of his sexuality. Each one of them, once so insecure and unsure of themselves,

find their individual paths to self-actualization. In fact, this series is a testament to visibility. There is no point in which an activist or activists aren't working to spread the word on their cause and reach a broader audience in the hopes of causing reform and inspiring people like themselves to become involved in their passions. One of Cleve's accomplishments noted is his Names Project AIDS Quilt which brought attention even from President Clinton and his wife, who'd taken a day to visit and remember their loved ones lost to AIDS (D'Addario, 2017). He also led the 2009 National Equality March, while protesting against Obama's silence on gay rights since his election. One of Roma's final appearances is of her marrying her significant other immediately after same-sex marriage is legalized. Her significant other has a biological daughter, whom Roma helped raise, that provides a cheesy yet touching recount of how those two women taught her what family is and what real love entails.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is not only about multiple identities but is about relationality, social context, power relations, complexity, social justice and inequalities (Hopkins, 2017). The union formed between Cleve, Roma and Ken is a relationship built upon recognizing the atrocities and indecent treatment faced by those outside of their own oppressed groups. By bridging the gaps between the peace movement (Cleve Jones), the women's movement (Roma Guy) and the black civil rights movement (Ken Jones), the bonds and connections formed between the groups are critical in value. *When We Rise* serves to show that any social justice movement is neither secure nor strong enough to advance on its own. As shown through history, a movement must find strength in its ties to other social justice movements. For this reason, it was important the presented advocates all originated from other social justice movements (Hoey, 2017). This themes catalyst manifestation takes place as the women who began San Francisco Women's Centers recognize their alienation of gay men's rights has long stemmed from a radical view of disdain for the male species in a generalized sense, rather than recognizing them as individuals with morals and values

that are capable of decency. As Roma Guy becomes accustomed to activism in San Francisco; she turns away from her membership in the National Organization for Women (NOW) after learning of leadership member Rita Mae Brown's forced departure motivated by her sexual orientation. This decision was difficult for Guy as she is seen struggling over the idea of leaving her organization for an extended bit of time. However, her recognition of the importance of intersectionality allowed her to pull herself from false activism that strayed away from coinciding social injustices. Instead embracing her role to play in alleviating tensions between mainstream and radical feminists, gay women of color and "straight white Wellesley girls," respectability politics and revolution (Poniewozik, 2017). The series also recognizes Cecilia Chung, a Bay Area transgender activist. Whose story feels less like an account of history and more so like the reality of so many trans women of color today (Kost, 2019)

Adversity

With the 1970's came the revolution of self-love, however, this was not without substantial setbacks and certainly not without turbulence from less liberal perspectives. This theme is presented time and time again as each protagonist is met with tumultuous endeavors. As a young man, Cleeve is out on the streets of San Francisco when he is stabbed, beaten and left for dead due to his attraction to men. While he recovers safely at the hospital, his friend Bobbi Campbell lays floors away covered in dark lesions, dying of AIDS and Kaposi's Sarcoma a matter of floors away. He was one of the first to come out publicly as a person with AIDS (Román). Ken serves as a beacon of hope for those struggling with racial identity, religious faith, addiction and recovery. Forced to hide his sexuality in the Navy, he returns to San Francisco with advice to change into regular clothing immediately, already foreshadowing the rough journey ahead of him. After losing his lover in Vietnam, he sees no purpose in life and questions whether or not he and his lover will end up in heaven or hell. Forced out of white bars by the volumes of racism and entrenched in internalized homonegativity he turns to drugs to cope. It isn't until he is much older

that he visits a ministry and pleads for help. Ken finds the grace of God once more as he basks in the sun light peaking beyond the D.C. buildings that surround the Supreme Court after learning gay marriage was at long last legal.

Conclusion

After conducting the aforementioned conclusive research and repeated content analysis the intentions of When We Rise were apparent. It is a docuseries built upon the need for representation and a voice that will fight, as well as the bond between people of diverse backgrounds all sharing common ground and working as one unit. It is clear the docuseries was intended to remind the masses of the power behind perseverance and self-liberation. In today's culture the LGBTQ+ community is becoming more and more normalized. This has only become true in more recent years and the history that led to this newfound sense of acceptance is seldom spoken of. The years of advocacy, fighting for basic human rights and living a life of courage in the face of discrimination go unrecognized. Not only does When We Rise show astounding feats of the community, but these events hail from the actions of every-day young adults and their trusty companions. This is to say that any individual does in fact have the power to start a movement and go beyond the boundaries of societal norms. The themes of sexual orientation visibility/validity, intersectionality and racial identity and bias cannot be dismissed. They stand as thematic anchors, guiding each visionary in unconditional and absolute omnipotence.

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