“Person with AIDS” is an unwieldy expression that does not match the catchy simplicity of the other 1980s objects of knowledge. Even the media-friendly abbreviation “PWA,” putting an acronym inside another acronym, leaves us with a confusing amount of condensation. In fact, acronyms abound in AIDS discourse during the decade: HTLV-III, GRID, AIDS, LAV, ARC, AZT, HIV, ARV, IDAV, ACIDS, CAID, WOG, ACT UP, GMHC, KS, PCP, CDC. Who is this new individual that he or she must be so carefully veiled behind a thicket of abbreviated letters? Even this central figure “AIDS” is not, as Susan Sontag points out, the name of one univocal disease, but rather an acronym that represents a spectrum of unnaturally bordered illnesses, the “condition called AIDS.” I begin this chapter with the linguistic abbreviations that both center and obscure the conversation about AIDS and PWAs. The history of AIDS acronyms is a history of negotiations between the medical, media, and activist communities, each of which must balance the need to be descriptive with sensitivity in labeling new individuals. This is evident in discourse around photographs of PWAs that appeared in news media, which scholars and activists criticized for mainly focusing on tropes of victimization. After examining this history, I turn to a less-discussed medium of visually representing AIDS—comics art. Historians of AIDS have shown that safer sex education in response to the AIDS crisis had been exclusively textual before 1985, until Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) began distributing safe sex pamphlets in comic form that imitated the pornographic “Tijuana Bibles” or “eight-pagers” popular in the 1920s. Ironically, it was homophobic Republican senator Jesse Helms who brought these publications to a much wider audience in 1987, when he used them as an object lesson to garner support for a spending bill amendment that would prohibit positive depictions
of homosexuality in AIDS-education material distributed by groups that received federal money. In a dramatic version of the tale, Helms took examples of the pornographic GMHC comics to the Oval Office, where Reagan pounded his fist on his desk in anger after looking at the first few pages. The parodic, sex-positive nature of these comics, which use humor and eroticism to help convey up-to-date information about safer sex, was a far cry from the documentary photographs that were criticized for victimizing PWAs. Ironically, though, the figurative nature of the cartoon image made these comics adaptable by both activists organizing to fight the spread of AIDS and conservatives seeking to stop a supposed “homosexual agenda.” I conclude this chapter with a reading of three collections of AIDS-related comics—Strip AIDS (1987), Strip AIDS U.S.A. (1988), and AARGH!: Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia (1988)—which introduce and challenge visual conventions of representing AIDS, producing a conflicted understanding of how best to show the PWA.

Abbreviating Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS, is the name for a disease of the immune system that leaves the body susceptible to various opportunistic infections or rare cancers; it is fatal without treatment. AIDS has often been confused and conflated with HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, which is the virus that causes AIDS. Researchers now know that AIDS appeared in the United States as early as 1981, although at that time there was uncertainty over exactly what the new disease was and what it should be called. While, says researcher Jean L. Marx, “disputes over viral nomenclature do not ordinarily command much attention beyond the individuals immediately involved in the fray,” in the case of AIDS, the battle for nomination was politically and financially charged. On the one hand was a rivalry between French and American researchers who offered differing names for the proposed virus that causes AIDS, LAV versus HTLV-III. LAV stands for “lymphadenopathy-associated virus” and HTLV stands for “human T-lymphotropic virus Type III.” (A third possibility, ARV for “AIDS-related virus,” was suggested later and was not as often used.) What the media was calling simply the “AIDS virus” was problematic for a few reasons: it too pessimistically suggested that the virus would inevitably lead to AIDS, and it mistakenly implied that AIDS itself could be transmitted virally. Rather, testing positive for the virus that causes AIDS did not mean one would necessarily develop AIDS, nor can AIDS itself be transmitted—only the virus that causes AIDS can be. In 1986, the international medical community agreed that LAV and HTLV-III were the same thing,