Community and the Politics of Mourning in the Work and World of David Wojnarowicz

by

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the writings of New York artist, David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) and the forms of activism that were inspired by his work as sites through which to examine the contours of politics and community in late 1980s and early 1990s New York. In his collection of autobiographical essays, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991), Wojnarowicz proposes an alternative model of selfhood and confronts his own mortality, thereby disrupting the category of the bounded individual in favour of a self that is beholden to others. His text offers an ethical revelation by asking why some deaths matter more than others – more specifically, how the death of a queer man from AIDS is perceived to be less tragic than the death of a middle-class child in America. Wojnarowicz’s reflections on the politics of mourning were taken up by activists following his death in 1992. In particular, passages of his writing insisting on the need to make mourning public inspired a series of political funerals and protest actions. My project questions an argumentative logic that insists artists and activists directly refute and undermine biomedical regulation through their work. Engaging with such arguments, I advance a reading of both Wojnarowicz’s writings and the protests his work inspired that considers the difficulty of formulating acts of resistance within a biopolitical order. Wojnarowicz’s art and the public memorial actions that followed his death enable a reimagining of community and politics through mourning in the midst of the AIDS crisis. They do so by enacting an alternative model of selfhood, confronting mortality and inspiring a politicization of grief.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Sheila Giffen.

A variation of chapter two appeared previously in a paper entitled: “‘I’m carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg’: AIDS, Violence and Impersonality in the Works of David Wojnarowicz,” which I delivered at UBC’s English Graduate Conference on May 12, 2013.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The rest of my life is being unwound and seen through a frame of death. And my anger is more about this culture’s refusal to deal with mortality. My rage is really about the fact that WHEN I WAS TOLD THAT I’D CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS IT DIDN’T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I’D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL. (David Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives 113-114)

David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) wrote these words after being diagnosed HIV-positive in 1987. By the mid-1980s, Wojnarowicz was already a prominent artist in New York’s East Village art scene, but the moment of his diagnosis precipitated a tremendous production of highly political and urgent art in the final years of his life. Variously a painter, photographer, filmmaker, writer, performance artist, and activist, Wojnarowicz was continually making art in various media and collaborating with other artists to give material representation to his queer sexuality, his experience of violence and, later in his career, his impending death. The lines quoted above appear in an essay entitled “Postcards from America: X Rays from Hell” which was published in two exhibition catalogues and in Wojnarowicz’s collection of autobiographical essays, Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration.1 I open with these lines to highlight three aspects of Wojnarowicz’s artistic vision and the context from which his art emerges germane to my study. First, countering the assumption that HIV/AIDS is merely an epidemiological issue, Wojnarowicz asserts that it is neither his illness nor his impending death that causes him anger, but rather the social and political significance the disease takes on. More enraging than the threat of debilitating opportunistic infections is the disease’s strong social

1 The essay appears in the exhibition catalogue Witnesses: Against our Vanishing (curated by Nan Goldin) and in the catalogue for Wojnarowicz’s show, Tongues of Flame (edited by Barry Bliderman).
stigma, which invited the moralizing notion that he earned his fate by engaging in sordid sexual behaviour and further that his life is expendable. Further, cultural analyses of the epidemic were seen as detracting from the more imperative study of epidemiological facts about the virus. Contemporary critics of Wojnarowicz noted that popular media and governmental responses to the spread of the disease invited a privileging of biomedical and scientific research. Such information often shrouded homophobic, racist and sexist assumptions in neutral terms proclaiming to be definitive factual analysis.\(^2\) The focus on the epidemiology of the virus not only ignored how scientific research and reporting was skewed by deeply embedded societal prejudices – it often hid the social, cultural and political conditions that created a state of crisis in American society as AIDS deaths mounted. In her analysis of the damage figurative language causes in public health crises, Susan Sontag argues, “More than cancer, but rather like syphilis, AIDS seems to foster ominous fantasies about a disease that is a marker of both individual and social vulnerabilities. The virus invades the body; the disease … is described as invading the whole society” (154).

\(^2\) In a collection of essays published in 1987 entitled \textit{AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism}, several authors examine how deferring to scientific understanding as the authoritative “truth” of AIDS ignores how biomedical discourse builds on oppressive and exclusionary cultural practices and assumptions. According to Douglas Crimp, “AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through those practices” (\textit{Melancholia and Moralism} 28). In another essay from the same collection, Paula A. Treichler asserts that, “Our social constructions of AIDS (in terms of global devastation, threat to civil rights, emblem of sex and death, the “gay plague,” the postmodern condition, whatever) are based not upon objective, scientifically determined “reality” but upon what we are told about this reality: that is, upon prior social constructions routinely produced within the discourses of biomedical science” (35). Pushing the thread even further, Simon Watney’s essay from the collection argues, “it is impossible to separate individual perception of risk, and endlessly amplified fears concerning the “threat” of “spread,” from the drastically miniaturized “truth” of AIDS, which has remained impervious to challenge or correction since the syndrome was first identified in the ideologically constitutive and immensely significant name GRID (gay-related immunodeficiency) in 1981” (“The Spectacle of AIDS” 73).
Second, by claiming that he contracts a diseased society along with the virus, Wojnarowicz collapses the boundary between his own diseased body and the society he inhabits. The limited understanding of the virus’ spread in the mid-1980s established clear categories of those who were most “at-risk” of contracting HIV (gay men, intravenous drug users, sex workers, people of colour) and those who were not (everyone else). As Steven Epstein argues, “AIDS has been understood both in epidemiological and lay parlance as a disease of certain already-constituted social groups distinguished by their ‘lifestyle,’ their social location, or both. The result is that the very meaning of AIDS has been bound up with cultural understandings of what such groups are like, while the very identity of the groups has been shaped by the perceptions of them as ‘the sort of people who get this illness’” (11). Following from such logic, carrying the virus becomes a marker of identity. As Sontag argues, “to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases, as a member of a certain ‘risk group,’ a community of pariahs” (113). When Wojnarowicz declares that contracting the virus is tantamount to contracting a societal disease, he counters the widespread assumption that AIDS can be contained within the already-marginalized and “at-risk” groups that are most affected. Third, following closely from the previous, the moment of diagnosis is one that allows Wojnarowicz to achieve a psychic separation from his own bounded and discrete selfhood. Facing mortality compels him to question the category of the autonomous individual thus reimagining selfhood as de-centered and constituted by others.

Wojnarowicz’s reflections are not the work of a lone and solitary artist; rather his writing emerges from the context of a community of people saddened, enraged and spurred to action by the AIDS epidemic in New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The lines of my epigraph first appear in the catalogue accompanying an exhibition at Artists Space in New York, which
featured artistic responses to AIDS. Curated by Nan Goldin, the show entitled “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing” (November 16, 1989 – January 6, 1990) garnered media attention because recently passed anti-obscenity legislation sought to limit government funding to artworks depicting homosexuality. Wojnarowicz’s role in this controversy has been the subject of much scholarly attention and criticism (I will address this in chapter two). Beyond involving Wojnarowicz in public debates about censorship, the essay’s place in “Witnesses” situates his creative world and community. In the introductory essay to the show’s catalogue, Goldin explains the significance of art about AIDS, saying, “I am often filled with rage at my sense of powerlessness in the face of this plague. I want to empower others by providing them a forum to voice their grief and anger in the hope that this public ritual of mourning can be cathartic in the process of recovery, both for those among us who are now ill and those survivors who are left behind” (5). Goldin’s exhibit, not meant to shock or titillate as conservative responses would make it seem, acts as a memorial that fills an absence in dominant discourses on the AIDS crisis. Artists and activists in this era persistently called for public rituals of mourning marking the deaths of people deemed expendable by the state. Wojnarowicz’s reflections on selfhood, mortality and society’s dysfunctions surface from within a community of people profoundly shaken by the epidemic’s devastating effects, but also bound together and mobilized not in spite of but through the act of mourning publicly.

This thesis analyzes Wojnarowicz’s writings and the forms of activism that were inspired by his works as sites within which to examine the contours of politics and community in late

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1980s and early 1990s New York. In his collection of autobiographical essays *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991), Wojnarowicz proposes an alternative model of selfhood and confronts his own mortality, thereby disrupting the category of the bounded individual in favour of a self that is beholden to others. His text offers an ethical revelation by asking why some deaths matter more than others – more specifically, how the death of a queer man from AIDS is perceived to be less tragic than the death of a middle-class child in America. Wojnarowicz’s reflections on the politics of mourning were taken up by activists following his death in 1992. In particular, passages of his writing insisting on the need to make mourning public inspired a series of political funerals and protest actions. My project questions an argumentative logic that insists artists and activists directly refute and undermine biomedical regulation through their work. Engaging with such arguments, I will advance a reading of both Wojnarowicz’s writings and the protests his work inspired that considers the difficulty of formulating acts of resistance within a biopolitical order. Wojnarowicz’s art and the public memorial actions that followed his death enable a reimagining of community and politics through mourning in the midst of the AIDS crisis. They do so by enacting an alternative model of selfhood, confronting mortality and inspiring a politicization of grief.

1.1 Historical Context: AIDS Activism and Ways to Resist

In her 1984 essay “Thinking Sex,” Gayle Rubin argues that the early 1980s in America saw a return to oppressive, anti-sex and moralizing societal attitudes recalling the conservatism of both the 1950s and the late nineteenth-century. Rubin accurately forecasts the disastrous public health crisis that resulted from the combination of an American culture increasingly anxious about non-heteronormative and extra-marital sex and the emergence of a sexually
transmitted disease disproportionately affecting gay men. The fact that AIDS was thought to be first and foremost a “gay man’s disease” and in some cases understood as gay men’s punishment for promiscuity and deviance meant that research efforts and public awareness were slowed by homophobia and a reluctance to speak openly about sex. Further, as the disease spread through already marginalized populations – gay men, intravenous drug users, sex workers, people of color and the poor – the governmental response was sluggish and moralizing. In response to growing stigma surrounding AIDS, many activists, artists, and critics from varied and diverse backgrounds fought to change the ways research was conducted and also how AIDS was signified in popular representations such as news media. Many community-based organizations worked tirelessly to disseminate up-to-date information about the spread of the virus, pressured government research agencies to find a cure, and advocated for the rights of persons with AIDS. At every step, such efforts fought to counter social prejudices by changing the public discourse on the disease.

The AIDS crisis highlighted the fundamental inequities plaguing American society, such as access to healthcare for marginalized groups, institutionalized sexism and homophobia, and massive inequities of gender, race, and class latent in a self-congratulatory post-civil rights era proclaiming the alleged universality of freedom, liberty and justice for all.

4 Rubin accurately predicts a state of moral panic resulting from “the Right’s increasing use of AIDS to incite virulent homophobia,” (169) going on to argue that, “Whatever happens, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) will have far-reaching consequences on sex in general, and on homosexuality in particular … Fear of AIDS has already affected sexual ideology. Just when homosexuals have had some success in throwing off the taint of mental disease, gay people find themselves metaphorically welded to an image of lethal physical deterioration. The syndrome, its peculiar qualities, and its transmissibility are being used to reinforce old fears that sexual activity, homosexuality and promiscuity lead to disease and death” (170).

5 For discussion of AIDS activism and community organizing, see interviews compiled by Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman in the ACT UP Oral History Project. See also Jennifer Brier, Infectious Ideas; Deborah Gould, Moving Politics; Douglas Crimp AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism; and Steven Epstein, Impure Science.

6 In an interview from 2012, AIDS activist and community organizer Zoe Leonard notes, “What AIDS revealed was not the problem of the virus; what AIDS revealed was the problem— the problems of our society. It was this fissure through which everything, all the ways in which our society isn’t working, became really clear. The sexism was
In tandem with societal prejudice, government inaction, and misguided media reporting about AIDS, there grew a rich array of artistic and literary responses to the epidemic, which bore witness to a lived experience of loss and stigmatization. At the same time as advocating for a more diverse array of AIDS representations, the effort to produce a counter-narrative to official media and government discourse on the epidemic insisted that art fulfill a social utility. Surveying the history of AIDS art in 1999, David Deitcher suggests that a prescriptive definition of AIDS activism chastised artistic responses that were not radical enough or sufficiently political:

At the same time that the limits of cultural possibility were being expanded … the struggle against AIDS, against government neglect, against public apathy, and against personal devastation served to justify intolerance for those art practices that could not be seen to contribute directly to that effort. Nor was this intolerance limited to cultural practice. Should gay people not act up to the standards of clarity, militancy, and bravery that were established by AIDS activists in New York, they might well feel a sense of personal failure, if not of outright shame. (99)

Deitcher observes the limitations of prescribing ways to resist and insisting on the utility of art as an agent of action and mobilization. Further, he explains how certain rhetoric employed by activists shames already stigmatized groups. Similarly, Lee Edelman describes an AIDS activist response that pits a narcissistic gay male attitude (symbolized by the mirror) against a militaristic self-sacrificing one committed to social change (the tank):

clearly delineated, the racism was clearly delineated, classism. The whole healthcare debate that we’re having in this country now was kickstarted by ACT UP.” (56)
For those of us who are and who love gay people, it ought to be possible to affirm and participate in the work of “AIDS activism” without transforming that rubric into an identity whose exclusions uncannily mirror the exclusions of the culture at large. It ought, that is, to be possible to affirm the legitimacy and value of the innumerable ways in which lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and their allies can participate in the continuing resistance to ‘AIDS’ even while – indeed, even sometimes by – resisting the essential but sometimes too narrowly conceptualized “politics” of “activism.”

(27)

Imagining the multiple ways in which activism and resistance can be constituted affirms a diversity of responses and re-imagines how the work of politics can be done. In his study of New York’s gay world in the first half of the twentieth century, George Chauncey relates the need to understand resistance in broad and permeable terms – where politics and action can occur through simple gestures of dissent within lived experience as well as through more formal political organizing (5). In my own analysis of Wojnarowicz’s work, I consider how we might read his politics and activism in ways that do not merely slip into a programmatic insistence on a politics of art that effects direct change.

1.2 Wojnarowicz as Truth-teller and the Parrhesiast’s Dilemma

Many critical responses to the work of David Wojnarowicz position him as a heroic figure bringing the light of truth to a public health crisis often shrouded in misinformation and deceit. The following examples demonstrate the rhetorical strategies of critics that portray Wojnarowicz as a revelatory truth-teller. In an essay from Wojnarowicz’s exhibition catalogue Tongues of Flame, Carlo McCormack describes how, “[i]n his work, the harsh, controversial and provocative Other History is unleashed from the shackles of its long-mute suffering silence and
social exile, its message delivered from one who has himself lived on this world’s tattered fringe as one of its socially, sexually and economically outcast denizens” (15). Writing about Close to the Knives, Eric Waggoner suggests, “Wojnarowicz’s autobiographical narrative … stands as a counter-narrative to official discourse, piecing official discourse into the text itself” (180). Also discussing Close to the Knives, Dianne Chisholm argues, “With avant-garde poetics and typographics, Wojnarowicz makes visible what conservative politics makes invisible: the erotic otherness of gay sexuality and the genocidal policies of patriotic nationalism” (82). I draw on these varied statements to highlight how Wojnarowicz is perceived to speak the truth for himself and AIDS with perfect clarity. Taken together, these critics suggest how a counter-narrative unleashes a hidden history, stirring powerful possibilities for social change. In his critical reception, Wojnarowicz’s art and writing come to emblematize the true history of the AIDS crisis. Without undermining the celebration of his work, I would like investigate the desire to turn Wojnarowicz into a heroic martyr whose voice stands for a lost generation. In particular, I scrutinize criticism that suggests Wojnarowicz’s account of himself and AIDS speaks truth to power and further that his work illuminates an era that is misconstrued in current mainstream historical discourses.7

7 In her intellectual memoir Gentrification of the Mind, Sarah Schulman recalls listening to an NPR show in 2001 marking 20 years since the start of the epidemic and her enraged reaction to how AIDS had become historicized: “‘At first America had trouble with People with AIDS,’ the announcer says in that falsely conversational tone, intended to be reassuring about apocalyptic things. ‘But then, they came around.’ I almost crash the car. Oh no, I think. Now this. Now after all this death and all this pain and all this unbearable truth about persecution, suffering, and the indifference of the protected, Now, they’re going to pretend that naturally, normally things just happened to get better” (2). Over the course of her book, Schulman works to counter this progress narrative, saying, “My own study of the AIDS activist movement, the ACT UP Oral History Project, reveals the true message of AIDS, that a despised group of people with no rights or representation, who were abandoned by their government, families, and society, facing a terminal illness, bonded together against great odds and forced this culture – against its will – to change its behavior towards people with AIDS thereby saving each other’s lives” (155-156).
As I will discuss in the following pages, such transformative truth-telling – the kind that is able to change both speaker and listener in the process of its being told – is complicated within a modern biopolitical regime of power. Instead, I propose an analysis of Wojnarowicz that takes into account his simultaneous desire for art to be transformative and his admission of art’s ineffectualness. As Jennifer Doyle succinctly comments: “at issue in much of his most affecting work is the difficulty of expression, and the ridiculousness of saddling one’s work – be it literary or visual – with the hope that it might transform the world – and yet, of course, he does invest his work with exactly that kind of weight” (“A Thin Line” 228). It is not just Wojnarowicz’s critics but the artist himself who hopes for art to speak truth and effect change. But within his art and writings, Wojnarowicz continually reveals the failure of such an attempt. Conveying his lived experience in an unintelligible way is in itself a powerful response to discourses (be they from the right or the left) that insist on an authoritative and immediately intelligible truth of the AIDS crisis.

Foucault’s analysis of the ancient Greek concept of truth-telling illuminates the impulse to imbue the truth with redemptive and transformative power. In Foucault’s late work on ethics and subjectivity from the Collège de France lecture series (in particular, *The Government of Self and Others 1982-1983* and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject 1981-1982*), he traces a history of thought to suggest how the subject is constituted through discourse by drawing on classical texts from Greek and Roman periods. Throughout his critical project, Foucault excavates ancient conceptions of ethics, selfhood and governance to emphasize the way in which our modern understanding of subjectivity is grounded in Enlightenment philosophies from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In an essay from 1984 entitled “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault responds to Immanuel Kant’s 1784 essay of the same name to show how modern practices of
knowing the self are founded in Enlightenment epistemologies. Foucault suggests criticism no longer “be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying” (“What is Enlightenment?” 46). For Foucault, the Enlightenment marked a shift in philosophical inquiry; pure reason became the means to access universal truths and to make transcendental and transhistorical claims about metaphysics and subjectivity.

In contradistinction to Enlightenment philosophies of pure reason and transhistorical truth, Foucault investigates discourses surrounding parrhesia (which roughly translates to mean frank talk, free speech, or truth-telling) in ancient Greek and Roman texts. In the scenes he analyzes, the act of parrhesia or truth-telling necessitates that the speaker be vulnerable and held accountable for any truth that is spoken in the public arena. Retracing the conditions that allow for truth-telling to take place, Foucault describes the ancient concept of “care of the self” as an attitude toward self, others and the world that weds practices of spiritual self-reflection to any investigation of knowledge or truth. According to Foucault, “The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject’s being into play,” and there can be “no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject” (Hermeneutics of the Subject 15). Emphasizing that such truth-telling demands the speaker have courage and take risks, Foucault explains that in these ancient texts “at the very moment he says ‘I speak the truth’ he commits himself to do what he says and to be the subject of conduct who conforms in every respect to the truth that he expresses” (Hermeneutics of the Subject 406). In this model of address, the speaker conducts himself in a manner that is in keeping with his speech and he is changed in the process of speaking the truth.
In *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault analyzes the conditions surrounding truth-telling in Euripides’ play *Ion*. This episode is of particular relevance to my scrutiny of Wojnarowicz as truth-teller. As Foucault summarizes, Ion learns about his true origins as the direct descendant of the god Apollo. Following the revelation of the truth, his rightful place as the leader of Athens is restored in order to allow peace and democracy to flourish. Importantly, the oracular form of truth-telling (often shrouded in illusions and difficult to understand) is surmounted and gives way to a democracy founded on free speech being available to all citizens. In order for this process to occur, Creusa (Ion’s mother) needs to speak out to confirm Ion’s true origin – and in the process admit to her own shameful violation at the hands of Apollo: “this is the point at which Creusa, in the depths of illusions and humiliation, bursts out with the truth. But it is important to understand that she does not do so in order to make her own right prevail, revealing the birth of a glorious son. She bursts out with the truth only in shame, humiliation, and anger” (*The Government of Self and Others* 120). Stepping back from the specifics of this scenario, Foucault explains how this particular form of truth-telling functions: “So *parrhesia* consists in this: a powerful person has committed an offense; this offense is an injustice for someone weak, powerless, with no means of retaliation, who cannot really fight or take revenge, and who is in a profoundly unequal situation. So, what can he do? He can do one thing; he can speak, at a risk and danger to himself, he can stand up before the person who committed the injustice and speak” (*The Government of Self and Others* 134). In this example from *Ion*, the revelation of truth clarifies the illusions of the Delphic oracle through a confession springing from Creusa’s own anger and shame, which results in the restoration of democracy in Athens. Not only does speaking the truth lead to a transformation in Creusa, but it also restores free
speech to the broader populace. The speaker (Creusa) is redeemed and the truth she speaks has an important transformative effect for society.

Foucault clarifies that this model of truth-telling and ethical relations – one very much alive in ancient texts – is not possible for the modern subject, who instead accumulates knowledge endlessly without any self-scrutiny or transformation: “The point of enlightenment and fulfillment, the moment of the subject’s transfiguration by the ‘rebound effect’ on himself of the truth he knows, and which passes through, permeates, and transfigures his being, can no longer exist … Knowledge will simply open out onto the indefinite dimension of progress” (Hermeneutics of the Subject 18). Foucault pronounces that in a modern regime of power, “the truth cannot save the subject” (Hermeneutics of the Subject 19). The scene that Foucault describes where the weak speak out to the strong about injustice, resulting in a revelatory transformation, is a scene that cannot take place in a modern context where sovereign power functions through the insidious regulation of bodies in a biopolitical order. Yet a paradigm that invests an artist with revelatory truth-telling ability persists in many interpretive strategies. In addition to validating art’s transformative capacity, this logic affirms a critical practice that can only value work if it can be said to evade, expose or undermine dominant ideologies and oppressive systems of power.

Foucault’s suggestion that truth-telling cannot have the same impact as it did in ancient contexts is part of his broader analysis of modern systems of power in an era of biopolitics. According to Foucault, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marked a shift in models of sovereignty when the state began to take responsibility not just for the public lives of its citizens, but for “the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (History of Sexuality Vol. 1 140). Foucault makes clear that biopolitical regulation is so deeply embedded in
modern ideology that any attempt to undermine it risks reifying that which it opposes.
Paradoxically, a politics that purports to be in place for the benefit of human life and liberty limits freedoms and reduces existence to a state of precarity. Foucault draws on the example of the rise in genocidal wars since the nineteenth century to highlight the paradox of a sovereign order that is simultaneously for and over life: “Wars are not longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital” (History of Sexuality Vol. I 137). To believe in the power of a speech act conveying a truth that has the ability to transform and lift the veil of sovereignty’s stranglehold is to misunderstand the pervasiveness of the biopolitical paradigm.

Admittedly, I find myself deferring to this interpretive model. I want David Wojnarowicz to be a voice illuminating and exposing the AIDS crisis against assimilationist histories. I want his words to have a transformative power in their truthfulness, in their irreverence and profound sincerity. I defer to an image of Wojnarowicz’s artistic work where he is compelled by anger and shame to speak out to the strong about injustice in a speech act that both redeems him and alters the regulatory order from which his speech emerges. Part of my aim in this project is to examine this impulse in order to imagine how we might read his work differently. Such an approach would allow for more diverse sites of resistance and politics in response to the AIDS crisis in New York.

### 1.3 Impersonality and Unintelligibility: Rethinking the Politics of Literature

In *Dissensus*, Jacques Rancière questions interpretive strategies that insist literature becomes political by exposing oppressive systems of power and by revealing what is hidden from dominant discourse. As he argues, ascribing a politics of revelation to writing is a habit that
derives from a narrative strategy embedded within literature: “Explaining close-to-hand realities as phantasmagorias bearing witness to the hidden truth of a society – this pattern of intelligibility was the invention of literature itself. Telling the truth on the surface by traveling in the underground, spelling out the unconscious social text lying underneath – that also was a plot invented by literature itself” (164). The desire to outline a pattern of intelligibility resonates with the critical reception of Wojnarowicz’s work. The uptake of his art and writing shows a persistent desire to make his work something that can change the world and represent people who have been denied a voice. In Rancière’s estimation, an aesthetics of politics “does not give a collective voice to the anonymous,” but instead “re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience” (143). Framed in this way, literature can do politics by opening up a space to redefine community and our necessary interdependence by way of unintelligibility.

Arguing that a politics of aesthetics will convey a “shared impersonal experience,” Rancière joins contemporary critical debates that attempt to dismantle the unique and personalized individual as the grounds for all knowledge and ethics. Theorizing a similar ethical framework, Leo Bersani and Adam Philips argue that being able to see an impersonal version of oneself in the other is a powerful alternative to the Judeo-Christian notion that self-sacrifice is the only viable basis for ethics. For Bersani and Philips, being able to love the self in an unindividuated way is important for recognition of a common experience: “If we were able to relate to others according to this model of impersonal narcissism, what is different about others (their psychological individuality) could be thought of as merely the envelope of the more profound (if less fully realized, or completed) part of themselves which is our sameness” (86).
An “impersonal narcissism” would disrupt notions of a bounded and discrete individual selfhood at the same time as recognizing the embodied self as the foundation for all experience.

In her study *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler also calls into question the Enlightenment individual, discussed above, as the basis for ethical relations. Rather than insisting on a pattern of intelligibility in all forms of address, Butler argues that our own inability to convey ourselves with perfect clarity is what signals our collective interdependence. Admitting to the impossibility of relating the self through the social product of language in an address intended for another person is a moment where our sociality and connectedness are decided. According to Butler,

This failure to narrate fully may well indicate the way in which we are, from the start, ethically implicated in the lives of others … The purpose here is not to celebrate a certain notion of incoherence, but only to point out that our ‘incoherence’ establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us. (64)

Our very incoherence and inability to be perfectly intelligible in a regulated order of sense and meaning is productive because it alerts us to our fundamental sociality and to our inextricable ties to a common experience that is highly impersonal.

1.4 Structure and Argument

Invoking the theoretical framework outlined above, in chapter two I examine how Wojnarowicz proposes a different relation to selfhood than Enlightenment epistemologies outline by abandoning biography and resisting an immediately intelligible portrait of himself in his collection of autobiographical essays, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. In this book, speaking about himself necessitates admitting the failure of language and narrative to
convey his lived bodily experience. As I argue, Wojnarowicz’s portrait of himself reveals a de-centered subjectivity that displays how he is sustained by networks of interdependence. Read through the lens of Foucault, Rancière, Bersani and Philips, and Butler’s respective theories, such an unindividuated approach to selfhood forms the basis for community as shared impersonal experience. Further, Wojnarowicz’s reflections on his own mortality question teleological life narratives, fixity of identity and a regulatory order that makes some deaths more worthy of public grief than others. In response, Wojnarowicz promulgates representations of violence, sex and death in order to alter the representational landscape he inhabits. But the anonymous selfhood that Wojnarowicz conveys in many ways conflicts with how much his name, writings, and artworks have spurred censorship controversies and become symbolic representations of queer sexuality and AIDS activism.

Chapter three situates Wojnarowicz’s cultural legacy in the context of AIDS activism in New York. In particular, I analyze the series of political funerals and memorial actions organized by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) that took Wojnarowicz’s writings as inspiration. Rather than assume these actions undermine and threaten the state’s biomedical regulation of bodies, I argue that protesters are equally implicated in a biopolitical regime. More than exposing a callous biomedical state, the force of these actions lies in how they redefine community and politics through collective mourning. As a pair, these chapters aim to question how resistance can be defined in the midst of an epidemic that heightens the regulation of bodies, sexuality and movement. My aim in this project is threefold. First, I show how the tropes of Wojnarowicz’s writings invite reflections on how the impermeable boundaries of the Enlightenment individual might be fractured in an alternative conception of selfhood, thus disrupting a centerpiece of the neoliberal paradigm. Second, I examine how the work of AIDS
activists re-imagine community through public mourning. Third, I outline what might constitute a resistance in the midst of the epidemic without deferring to a revelatory paradigm that assumes shedding light on a misconstrued era is inherently political. Beyond the specifics of Wojnarowicz’s artworks, my project examines this cultural moment in an effort to recuperate the memory of AIDS and its lingering traumas against contemporary historicization of the AIDS crisis as “over”. Such a view not only ignores the plight of millions without access to treatment but also glosses over years of government neglect and harm. Returning to Wojnarowicz’s work at this moment and examining the specific context from which it emerged is a way to recover the radical demands made by artists and activists in the midst of the AIDS crisis.
Chapter 2: ‘I’m carrying this rage like a blood-filled egg’: AIDS, Violence and Impersonality in *Close to the Knives*

As Wojnarowicz was compiling *Close to the Knives* in 1990, he was fighting against the image, made prevalent in popular media and government discourse, of AIDS victims as morally reprehensible and perverse people who got what they deserved for having deviant sex or engaging in illegal drug use. In Wojnarowicz’s writings, paintings, photographs and performance pieces, artistic expression allows him to take control of the way he talks about himself, his sexuality, his illness and his death in order to counter such moralizing notions. In *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz’s response to his own looming disappearance does not involve guiding the reader through memorable dates and life events to preserve a linear narrative, such as you might find in a tell-all account about the AIDS crisis. Instead, he effaces personal and biographical content and focuses on an anonymous bodily experience as he moves through spaces and states that confine his sexuality and desire. The book records intimate portraits of love between strangers cruising in rural parts of the American Southwest, fragmented memories of his youth in the New Jersey suburbs being abused by an alcoholic father, as well as his life as an artist with AIDS in New York City. In the book’s final and most substantive essay entitled “Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine Over a Mouse Hole,” Wojnarowicz recedes even further from his already experimental and unindividuated self-portrait by telling the

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9 Such a narrative strategy is employed in Randy Shilts’ widely-read account of the AIDS crisis in *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic*. 
story of his queer friend Dakota’s suicide through a pastiche of journal entries and transcripts of interviews with friends. Here, Wojnarowicz destabilizes the convention of the author as the primary subject of an autobiographical account thus allowing the work to be taken over by a cacophony of other voices. I argue that this approach to writing about himself disrupts the bounded and distinct Enlightenment individual and instead presents a self that exists through networks of interdependence.

Guided by theories of ethics and subjectivity by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler outlined in my introduction, this chapter argues that Close to the Knives expands the scope of representations of sex and violence to propose an ethics of radical equality by way of a de-centered self. There are two central components to this notion of ethics that I intend to elaborate through my reading of Wojnarowicz’s text. First, Close to the Knives is both a reflection on the self and a divestment of the self insofar as Wojnarowicz refuses to dwell on personal episodes and experiences. His project imagines how turning away from individualized selfhood and recognizing shared vulnerability reframes the category of the individual. Second, through this reimagining of self, Wojnarowicz exposes how American culture and media consider certain deaths more grievable than others by asking what makes the death of a queer man from AIDS more socially acceptable than the death of a middle-class child in America. In pointing to this disparity and by advocating for private mourning to be transformed into forms of public demonstration and protest, Wojnarowicz calls attention to the political potential of grieving communally and publicly.

2.1 An Impersonal Memoir: Abandoning Biography and Resisting a Politics of Identity

In Close to the Knives, there is a conscious abandonment of biography. There is little attention devoted to dates, names of people in his life, or particular places. The impulse to record
a more strictly biographical account of his life is by no means absent in Wojnarowicz’s body of works. From January 23 to March 4, 1990, a decade’s worth of Wojnarowicz’s art was on display at the University Galleries of Illinois State University in a show called “Tongues of Flame,” curated by Barry Blinderman. The accompanying exhibition catalogue, published in 1990, included several of Wojnarowicz’s essays that were later compiled in his “memoir of disintegration.” The piece entitled, “Biographical Dateline” is the only essay by Wojnarowicz featured in the “Tongues of Flame” catalogue that does not also appear in Close to the Knives. It begins: “1954 Born in Redbank, New Jersey to a sailor from Detroit and a very young woman from Australia” (113). The dateline proceeds with pithy comments annotating every year of his life up until 1982 in a detached third person voice. He writes in incomplete sentences and unembellished prose, focusing on a bare articulation of facts and events: “1970 Dropped out of school and lives on the streets full-time. Was almost murdered twice more in ratty hotels and sidestreets of times square” (116). Cynthia Carr’s extensive biography of Wojnarowicz’s life, Fire in the Belly, points to several places where the dates in the biographical dateline appear to be skewed. For instance, she notes that, “David placed his move to the streets in 1970, a year before it actually happened. Usually he was off by two or three years” (46). Although the dateline shows the impulse to preserve a biographical record, it is also a mythologized portrait. It stands as a version of a rehearsed life story more than as a factual record.

Wojnarowicz’s interest in biography also surfaces in the graphic novel Seven Miles a Second, which combines his writing with illustrations by James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook. 10 Romberger completed the project after Wojnarowicz’s death based on their prior

10 The book was published in 1996 by DC Comics and was recently re-issued by Fantagraphics Books in 2012.
conversations and by drawing on pieces of writing from Close to the Knives and Wojnarowicz’s diaries.\textsuperscript{11} The book is divided into three sections: “Thirst,” which recounts Wojnarowicz’s abusive childhood and life as a prostitute in Times Square, “Stray Dogs,” which tracks Wojnarowicz’s teenage years living on the streets, and “Seven Miles A Second,” which takes up his life with AIDS as a queer artist working in New York’s Lower East Side. Although the graphic novel is experimental and depicts surreal and dream-like states, there is a linear narrative plotting out life’s trajectory. Speaking about how he came to collaborate with Wojnarowicz in the first place, James Romberger said in an interview, “We wanted to pull together a couple of different things, to make it like a sequential narrative, like a film. David gave me snippets of dreams and other memories. We cut them up and made them into a scroll. I had to edit that down and provide continuity” (109). In this sense, the experimental quality of the book is still guided by a clear sense of narrative since part of the artistic vision sought to provide linearity. These attachments to biographical narrative are left behind in Close to the Knives.

I choose the words “left behind” consciously – since an earlier manuscript version of Close to the Knives in Wojnarowicz’s archive features a linear and biographical, albeit highly fictionalized, account of his early life. Like Seven Miles a Second, the 100-page, unpublished manuscript of Close to the Knives tells the story of a young boy growing up with an abusive father and an absent mother and moving to New York City from the suburbs of New Jersey. In

\textsuperscript{11} In an interview with Mysoon Rizk, Romberger describes how “[t]he first and second parts of the project were easy because David had provided the text already. For the third part, he’d only given me a rough idea of what to do. So I had to do it on my own and choose from what I had. It probably would have been a different thing if David had lived. I pulled some bits from Close to the Knives and Tom Rauffenbert gave me access to David’s diaries. David wanted this project to be something that teenagers would read. He hoped they’d pick it up and see that someone else had gone through the same thing. Towards that intent, I had a hell of a time trying to get a comic book deal” (110).
the manuscript, the young boy strikes up a friendship with a misfit youth named Blackie Swift who encourages him to become a prostitute in Times Square in order to survive. In comparison to the adult narrator perspective in the published version of *Close to the Knives*, in this abandoned manuscript Wojnarowicz embodies a persona by putting on the voice of a naïve youth discovering the dizzying city for the first time:

Walking up Broadway I was still amazed at the jamming of so much light and media and signs and stores in what would’ve been just a couple of football fields or a farmer’s stretch of land. There were places for shoes, suits, minks, ceramics, glass, household goods, porcelains, antiques, hotdogs, jokes and gaps, burgers, steaks, pokerino games, movies, stag shows and even a dance hall that promised ‘real life girls’. (“mss Close to the Knives” 13)

The text conveys a young boy’s incredulity at the pace and consumerism of commercial life in New York. However, as the protagonist becomes involved in prostitution, there is no moralizing subtext making it a cautionary tale. Instead, the candor with which he observes lights and shops on Broadway extends to his descriptions of a life spent hustling:

Now that I am aware of the hustling I could pick up Johns everywhere easily. Grinning men in large lapels feeding dimes to the game machines being used by scrawny grimey-faced kids. Shitless, almost faceless men in light coats lurking for intended minutes before a sporting shop window or in the lobby of a theater filled with framed stills of the current attractions, while two feet away a nodding teenager or animated kid leans against the building front with hands thrust seductively in his pockets. (“mss Close to the Knives” 22)
In this manuscript, there is not a shred of self-pity in the narrator’s voice – only his impressions and an account of how he survived – without any suggestion that he has become debased and corrupt because of his actions. Although this strategy of conveying a character without recourse to moralizing or criminalizing judgments persists in Close to the Knives, the rest of the published book departs from this manuscript entirely. The dedication to linear narrative and the clear articulation of plot and character are abandoned in the final version.

There are several possible reasons why this never made it into the book’s final edition. Wojnarowicz’s editor at Random House, Karen Rinaldi, admits that her editorial influence favoured a more surreal and stream of consciousness style of writing. She originally encountered Wojnarowicz’s work at a gallery exhibit and was struck by the emotive force of one of his mixed-media pieces combining image and text. She thought of Close to the Knives as a prose poem and encouraged what she calls a more impressionistic style throughout the editing process.12 Another possible reason for the excising of this section is Wojnarowicz’s own anxiety about revealing aspects of himself and his personal life. Carr’s biography of Wojnarowicz argues, “the central struggle in his life was about how much of himself to reveal. Who was safe? What could he tell? He felt he was an alien, that something at his core was suspect and would make people hate him. This feeling persisted until the last few years of his life” (5).

Carr’s book goes on to trace the various circles Wojnarowicz found himself in and how each group of friends heard a different version of his life story. Wojnarowicz himself addresses his mixed feelings about revealing his personal history in an interview with Sylvère Lotringer from April 1989: “I realize that what I’ve loved all of my life, and what came out of promiscuous

sex, sex in Times Square, was anonymity. Nobody was witnessing what I saw because there was no communication. And I loved that. That informs my work. It comes from my alienation, or my isolation” (185). Backing down from a linear biography could be an expression of Wojnarowicz’s own ambivalence about revealing himself in more overtly intelligible ways. This explanation does not go far in explaining the deeply personal moments of Close to the Knives. Although Wojnarowicz abandons biographical details and calendrical sequencing in his memoir, he does not efface himself completely. Instead, he offers a portrait of himself that is at once unindividuated and anonymous, and also very intimate.

In Close to the Knives, Wojnarowicz rejects the notion that memories can be recollected and plotted into a linear narrative. Instead, the text conveys his state of consciousness living in a society that stigmatizes his desire and blames him for contracting a deadly virus. In order to articulate how he feels bound by certain cultural and social constructions and also to imagine how he might escape such oppression, Wojnarowicz distinguishes between the ‘World’ and the ‘Other World.’

First there is the World. Then there is the Other World. The Other World is where I sometimes lose my footing. In its calendar turnings, in its preinvented existence. The barrage of twists and turns where I sometimes get weary trying to keep up with it, minute by minute adapt: the world of the stoplight, the no-smoking signs, the rental world, the split-rail fencing shielding hundreds of miles of barren wilderness from the human step. A place where by virtue of having been born centuries late one is denied access to earth or space, choice or movement. The bought-up world; the owned world. The world of coded sounds: the world of language, the world of lies. The packaged world; the world of metallic motion. But there’s the World where one
adopts and stretches the boundaries of the Other World through keys of the imagination. But then again, the imagination is encoded with the invented formation of the Other World. (87-88)

Wojnarowicz laments the various social conventions that restrict his mobility both psychological and physical. The solution to feeling oppressed by this “Other World” lies in creating an alternative psychic life of his choosing. Throughout *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz imagines and articulates the form of his desire in order to create a world of representations in which he can exist more comfortably. But this passage also reveals how Wojnarowicz is aware of his debt to language and his inescapable position within social and linguistic structures. By saying, “imagination is encoded with the invented information of the Other World,” Wojnarowicz acknowledges that any counter-narrative he writes to dominant culture will borrow from that which it opposes. Despite this admission, he proceeds in his attempt to fill his world with images that speak to his experience.

For Wojnarowicz, abandoning biography means embracing a more fluid subjectivity and resisting clearly intelligible identity: “I came to understand that to give up one’s environment was to also give up biography and all the encoded daily movements: those false reassurances of the railing outside the door. This was the beginning of a definition of the World for me. A place where movement was comfortable, where boundaries were stretched or obliterated: no walls, borders, language or fear” (*Close to the Knives* 108). Biographical encodings are ways of fixing identity in a given place, of rendering the self as something concrete, independent and unchangeable. For William Haver, this passage speaks to Wojnarowicz’s dismissal of a teleological world outlook: “Thus, the World is not, in fact, a destination, a destiny, a telos, that which would accomplish a fully constituted and realized subjectivity: the nonalienation or
nonauthenticity of the World is not thereby a presence to the self” (131). Wojnarowicz understands that his alienation cannot be resolved through a modeling of his personal destiny onto the perceived destiny of the world. Rather, alienation is the fundamental basis for identity. Accordingly, he represents his bodily experience and state of unrest rather than a cohesive portrait of the self as cerebral, and independent.

Further, the book’s experimental form displays his state of consciousness rather than the rudimentary facts of his life. In a journal entry from 1991, Wojnarowicz writes: “I’m not so much interested in creating literature as I am in trying to convey the pressure of what I’ve witnessed or experienced. Writing and rewriting until one achieves a literary form a strict form just bleeds the life from an experience – no blood left if it isn’t raw. How do we talk, how do we think – not in novellas or paragraphs but in associations, in sometimes disjointed currents” (“1991 or thereabouts”). Thus, linear and coherent narratives, such as the one employed in the manuscript edition of Close to the Knives, have no place within the artistic vision of conveying his own corporeality. As he moves away from biographical details, Wojnarowicz’s text reveals how producing a portrait of himself requires questioning language’s very ability to do so.

2.2 Heightened Mortality and the Politics of Mourning

In Close to the Knives, it becomes clear that in order for Wojnarowicz to talk about his lived bodily experience with any accuracy, he must convey the failure of language to approximate that same experience. By stating in various ways that “I’m trying to give something unspeakable words,” (39) Wojnarowicz simultaneously admits to the impossibility of his own artistic undertaking and asserts his need to proceed with it regardless. This is most salient in Wojnarowicz’s portrayal of his friend and lover Peter Hujar’s life and death, which demonstrates this compulsion to depict what he feels evades language and representation. Hujar was a
celebrated photographer in New York who died of AIDS in 1987. Having met in 1981, over the next several years, their relationship became one of the most important in Wojnarowicz’s life (Carr 170-1). In his journal from 1987 following Hujar’s death, Wojnarowicz writes: “I realized Peter was many things to me, or I realize it now. Peter was a teacher of sorts for me, a brother, a father. It was an emotional and spiritual connection such as I never had with my family” (In the Shadow of the American Dream 199). In the context of Wojnarowicz’s own artistic output, Hujar’s life, illness and death are recurring subjects.

Most notably, moments after Hujar’s death, Wojnarowicz photographed the dead man’s feet, hands, and face and developed a series of gelatin prints in 1989 – now iconic visual representations from the midst of the AIDS crisis. Some of these prints were assembled into a collage piece, “Untitled (Hujar Dead)” 1988-1989, with a long block of text overlaying the images. The piece begins with a line in quotations that reads: “If I had a dollar to spend for health care I’d rather spend it on a baby or innocent person with some defect or illness not of their own responsibility; not some person with AIDS” (Brushfires in the Social Landscape 70). The rant-like text goes on to express Wojnarowicz’s anger at the voices in American government and media such as this one that make him out to be a morally repugnant monster for contracting HIV. The image-text piece layers Wojnarowicz’s own rage-filled social and political critique with photos capturing the precise moment of his friend’s death from AIDS-related infections. The death of his friend is the visual background and constant reminder of Wojnarowicz’s own AIDS diagnosis and looming death as he speaks out against the injustice of moralizing government discourse. A variation of this same text appears in Close to the Knives (without the accompanying visuals). Yet, the writing on its own echoes the effect of the visual palimpsest in “Untitled (Hujar Dead),” as describing the moment of Hujar’s death confronts Wojnarowicz with
his own heightened sense of mortality. Further, at every turn of phrase, the failure of language and words to express death and mortality pervades his expression.

In Close to the Knives, Wojnarowicz attempts to process his fears of Peter dying by creating artistic representations and rituals: “I can’t form words these past few days, sometimes thinking I’ve been drained of emotional content from weeping or fear. I keep doing these impulsive things like trying to make a film that records the rituals in an attempt to give grief form” (100). He catalogues the material gestures he makes to give shape to grief, thus making sense of loss and gaining distance from its harrowing effects. But the moment of Peter Hujar’s death makes Wojnarowicz aware of his desire to distract himself from death through recourse to words and gestures that ultimately fail him: “This is the most important event in my life and my mouth can’t form words and maybe I’m the one who needs words, maybe I’m the one who needs reassurance and all I can do is raise my hands from my sides in helplessness and say, ‘All I want is some sort of grace’” (103). Admitting that the most important moment in his life is also one that he cannot narrate is not a revelation concerning the failure of the text. He is not struck-dumb and left speechless at the force of death – rather, the experience of seeing Peter dying wakes him to the limits of representation and makes him question the impulse to make something legible and intelligible through language.

Wojnarowicz’s heightened sense of mortality, precipitated by Peter’s death in the fall of 1987 and his own HIV-positive diagnosis in the spring of 1988, leads him to question all the words, gestures and rituals surrounding death and purporting to make it understandable:

I found that, after witnessing Peter Hujar’s death on November 26, 1987, and after my recent diagnosis, I tend to dismantle and discard any and all kinds of spiritual and psychic and physical words or concepts designed to make sense of the external world
or designed to give momentary comfort. It’s like stripping the body of flesh in order to see the skeleton, the structure. I want to know what the structure of all this is in the way only I can know it. … I suddenly resist comfort, from myself and especially from others. There is something I want to see clearly, something I want to witness in its raw state. And this need comes from my sense of mortality. There is a relief in having this sense of mortality. (116)

The simultaneity of processing Peter’s death and his own diagnosis results in a questioning of representational systems designed to explain death beyond its corporeality. He questions the impulse to seek comfort in a time of grief and mourning through recourse to metaphysical systems that detract from a lived and bodily experience of loss. For Haver, describing the moment of Peter’s death signals the rejection of a certain representational coherence: “It is the death of an other that discloses the apocalyptic destitution of being beyond every consolation of intelligibility” (124). Pushing beyond the “consolation of intelligibility” is a liberating gesture that allows Wojnarowicz a certain critical distance from social and linguistic constructions generating a representational landscape that confines his existence.

In the process of describing the desire to strip away comforting rituals and systems of signification, Wojnarowicz admits to the inadequacy of language for conveying such thoughts: “I’m a prisoner of language that doesn’t have a letter or sign or gesture that approximates what I’m sensing” (117). Registering the limits of language and representation becomes a way through to a range of possibilities for the power of language beyond clarity, intelligibility and sense. If the death of Peter confronts him with language’s insufficiency, this is also what inspires his rage and desire to write. Rather than signaling the collapse of the text, embracing the inherent unintelligibility of death and resisting the hollow comfort that words provide enable
Wojnarowicz a renewal of consciousness which registers his implication in a social world of representation and language.

As I discussed in my introduction, according to Butler, acknowledging that you cannot give a proper account of yourself because you rely on the social product of language is not to submit to incoherence. Admitting to our own inability to convey ourselves with perfect clarity is a way of registering how we are all connected through a shared vulnerability. For Butler, death and mourning provide key moments for such revelatory shifts in consciousness. In *Precarious Life*, Butler outlines a politics of mourning and questions how some lives come to be perceived as more grievable than others. Specifically, she asks how it is that in a post 9/11 world, the lives of American soldiers come to matter more than Iraqi civilians in U.S. public discourse. As an ethical intervention in the midst of such a crisis, she suggests how our own opacity to ourselves can allow us to register our implication in the lives of others. One means of clarifying this fundamental vulnerability and sociality is through the dislocating experience of mourning. She argues that grief displays “the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (23). In *Close to the Knives*, mourning for Peter and confronting his own mortality opens Wojnarowicz up to a similarly dislocating and defining experience of grief. Wojnarowicz’s text urgently questions how some deaths are more tragic than others in American public discourse and bemoans how he has been “losing count of the friends and neighbors who have been dying slow vicious and unnecessary deaths because fags and dykes and junkies are expendable in this country” (161). But he does not convey this injustice by making his meaning entirely legible or deferring to platitudes about the significance of every life and death. Instead,
by facing mortality and by disrupting the codes that surround death to make it more intelligible, Wojnarowicz calls for a broader scrutiny of how some deaths come to matter more than others. He strips away the momentary comforts associated with privatized rituals of death in part to expose the working of a political regime that sustains and normalizes death from AIDS.

2.3 Attracted to the Dark Things: Violence and Radical Gestures of the Imagination

Much as Peter Hujar’s death from AIDS remains a haunting presence throughout Wojnarowicz’s memoir, the suicide of his friend Dakota guides the book’s final and most substantive chapter as reflections on mortality and sexuality come by way of other people. The final chapter and ode to Dakota entitled “The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine over a Mouse Hole” combines journal entries, dreams, phone conversations and interviews with friends – leading to a fractured narrative structure that destabilizes Wojnarowicz as the sole author and authority in the text. For Dianne Chisholm, this diversification of sources and voices means “we could read the form itself as a celebration of difference in defiance of institutions committed to cultural and sexual uniformity” (88). Wojnarowicz recedes from his own portrait of himself by concluding his memoir with a portrait of someone else and by drawing on the speech of others. Elizabeth Young remarks that this section of Close to the Knives allows him to achieve a dislocated form of selfhood: “As Wojnarowicz evinces an extraordinary empathy with his dead friend, as he magically animates his friend’s lost life, Wojnarowicz loses the consciousness of his own ‘self’ that naturally propels a memoir” (222).

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13 In Close to the Knives, Dakota is based on a real person in Wojnarowicz’s life named Montana Hewson (often misspelled Montanna in Wojnarowicz’s notes). An earlier manuscript version of the “Suicide of a Guy” essay included both Montana’s real name and the real names of all the people interviewed to make up this section of the book. In the published version, all the names were changed. In this essay, I refer to “Dakota” in reference to the fictional character in Close to the Knives. I use the name Montana when referring to any documents relating to the real person. (“mss Suicide of a Guy”)
Young’s use of “own” is fitting here since the self that is abandoned is one that is singular, possessed and individualized. The self that he conveys in his memoir is one that he cannot claim to be solely his own.

From the perspective of the book’s publication history, Wojnarowicz’s decision to devote so much of his collection of essays to a portrait of another man happened late in the editing process. Unlike “Suicide of a Guy,” several of the essays in Close to the Knives appeared in previous journals and publications.\textsuperscript{14} The real life person upon whom “Dakota” is based, Montana Hewsom, committed suicide in January of 1990. After finding out about his death a month or so later, Wojnarowicz set about interviewing a group of friends who had known Montana when they had been making films about satanic teens and violence.\textsuperscript{15} Wojnarowicz conducted interviews with Tommy Turner, Richard Kern, Mary Hayslip and Sophie (no last name indicated), who appear as fictionalized characters in Close to the Knives as Johnny, Joe, Beth and Sylvia, respectively. Only the conversation with Mary Hayslip is dated (April 4, 1990), but the audio files indicate they were all recorded within a short time frame.\textsuperscript{16} By June of 1990, Wojnarowicz was signing his contract with Random House after having finished the book. According to Carr, “The five-thousand-dollar advance was small but he didn’t care. He didn’t think he had a lot of time left. He just wanted the book to get out there” (489). Close to the Knives’ editor, Karen Rinaldi recalls how the final section of the book grew and grew in the

\textsuperscript{14} Prior versions of the essays “Losing the Form in the Darkness,” “Self-Portrait in Twenty-Three Rounds,” “Being Queer in America,” “Living Close to the Knives” and “Post Card from America: X-Rays from Hell” all appear in the catalogue for Wojnarowicz’s exhibit at Illinois State University in 1990, Tongue of Flame.

\textsuperscript{15} For insight and resources on Wojnarowicz, Tommy Turner and Richard Kern’s involvement with satanic and violent filmmaking, see Jack Sargeant, Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression.

\textsuperscript{16} I ascertained this by listening to the following taped interviews in Wojnarowicz’s archive: “Interview: Mary Hayslip re: Montanna’s Death” “Richard Kern on Montanna”, “Tommy Turner on Montanna” and “Sophie on Montanna”.

33
The timeline of events indicates this was a hurried but substantial effort in the months leading up to the book’s publication. Its pages contain some of Wojnarowicz’s most compelling reflections on life, selfhood and his impending death as he rushed to finish and publish his book before he died.

The “Suicide of a Guy” essay features excerpted transcripts from interviews Wojnarowicz conducted with Dakota’s friends, posing questions about mortality, violence and death. Listening to the interview tapes Wojnarowicz drew from to write this section reveals his fixation on addressing a precise set of issues. Each interviewee was asked some variation of the following questions: What was your first impression of Dakota? What did you think of him physically? What did you think about when you heard he killed himself? Have you ever wanted to kill yourself? What does the suicidal impulse mean? What is death? Why do you take drugs? What did you feel when you heard Dakota stabbed a drug dealer? His questions aim to provoke reflection on the meaning of death and mortality and also to highlight all of the ways Dakota becomes defined through his transgressions – his sexuality, his drug use, his fascination with violence and the occult, and his alleged stabbing of a drug dealer. Wojnarowicz is challenging rituals of mourning at the same time as fighting for the deceased Dakota’s life at the level of representation by chronicling all the aspects of his life that are absent from culturally acceptable forms of eulogizing. The text also situates Dakota’s anxieties and depression in the context of an oppressive society that continually turned his fantasies and desires into perversions. In one of the taped conversations, Wojnarowicz describes his interest in writing about Dakota’s suicide, saying:

17 Karen Rinaldi, Telephone Interview. May 23 2013.
If I were to say this guy was extremely valuable as a human being, that I feel really bad that he died – other people out there, people on the news or in journalism would say – who the fuck cares about this guy? Because he stabbed somebody, he was into heroin abuse, because he was breaking into people’s houses jerking off I mean – all the reasons that attract me to him – or all the things that attract me to him. The boundaries he would step over are the very things that would make people say – y’know small loss. (“Richard Kern on Montanna 1990 Tape 1”)

Wojnarowicz is interested in uncovering something about Dakota’s mind and life in particular and questions the logic that makes such a life seem expendable. Further, he exposes how such a figure comes to be perceived as deranged, perverse and immoral.

As Wojnarowicz interviews his friends, he questions how certain forms of violence and murder become sanctioned and culturally acceptable while others do not. More specifically, he perceives the government’s reluctance to devote time and energy into researching a cure for AIDS to be a form of socially acceptable murder. In contrast, someone like Dakota is deemed a perverse and violent criminal. In response, the chapter offers a complex portrait of Dakota, balancing descriptions of his shyness and non-aggression with in-depth conversations about the time he stabbed a drug dealer. The dialogue with Dakota’s friends describes these incidents without criminalizing him. Such a portrayal overturns the notion that violence is only committed by morally perverse people and instead suggests that every person is capable of such actions, whether they are deemed to be deviant or not. In one conversation, Wojnarowicz recalls the words of his friend Johnny, saying, “It’s the separation people feel from those who commit acts of violence or murder. The way they feel a person who murders belongs to the other” (Close to the Knives 178).
Johnny’s words recall theory by Leo Bersani who identifies the misguided self-purifying impulse to make evil something outside the self. Bersani describes how “the affixing of moral categories thereby becomes a tactic of unavowed self-purification; it sequesters certain persons and certain behaviors in a different universe from that of the moralists. Expelled from the psychic, these moral monsters are confined within the satisfyingly unimaginable and theologically sponsored universe of evil” (Intimacies 58). The many voices in Wojnarowicz’s text counter the notion of a pure and innocent self by consciously investigating what they refer to as the “dark things” (Close to the Knives 202). One voice in Wojnarowicz’s text, Johnny, describes how, “When I was making that magazine MURDER, I was dealing with the imposed line that people put inside themselves, where they think they are different from those who commit murders or violent acts” (202). As in Bersani, the many voices in Wojnarowicz’s text insist that a capacity for violence resides within everyone.

These conversations also push the boundaries of taboo and question what forms of sex and violence are permitted to occupy space in the representational landscape. Wojnarowicz fixates on violence in part to affront moralizing sensibilities. In Close to the Knives, he recalls some writing he was working on, saying, “I was trying to uncover something in people’s responses to images of violence: how a drawing of violence seemed to some people to contain more of a repellant intent than a photograph of violence, possibly because the photograph suggested that the image was merely witnessed – its intent was buried in the medium” (184). Wojnarowicz’s distinction between drawing and photographs betrays his interest in defending an uncensored fantasy and imagination. He is observing how depictions of violence and sexuality are more shocking than what they actually represent. In Close to the Knives and elsewhere in Wojnarowicz’s artistic work, he pushes against boundaries of what is deemed appropriate or
acceptable to be displayed in public. Not meant to merely shock or scandalize, these are gestures that give him comfort. Describing violent fantasies and validating the urge to commit violence is a way of giving his genuine feelings of rage a physical trace. Depicting the form and expression of his desire functions in part as a way to create a world of representations within which he feels he can survive. These are also gestures that constitute an important critical intervention in Wojnarowicz’s work – faced with a culture that limits his desire and silences his rage, he advocates a promulgation of representations of sex, violence, AIDS and sexuality.

In an essay responding to the censorship of “sexually explicit” artworks in the late 1980s, Judith Butler suggests, “If prohibitions invariably produce and proliferate the representations that they seek to control, then the political task is to promote a proliferation of representations, sites of discursive production which might then contest the authoritative production produced by the prohibitive law” (“The Force of Fantasy” 197). For Butler, the effective rejoinder to censorship legislation denying expressions of sexuality is not to impose and insist on a single and unified counter-image. It is only in the chaotic multiplicity of representations of sexuality that a more reductive and authoritative vision can be dismantled. I would argue that Wojnarowicz’s text responds to voices that seek to censor him in much the same way. Rather than offering a cohesive response to the state’s repression of his sexuality, he produces a panoply of images and a cacophony of voices that diversify how sex, AIDS, violence and death get talked about. Wojnarowicz’s text gains force by proposing a radical proliferation of writing and images that chronicle the experience of people who are denied space in dominant and pervasive forms of representation. Wojnarowicz writes, “I’m beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is the imagination” (Close to the Knives 120). Allowing space for a kind of unbridled and uncensored imagination is one means of countering a
regime of power that stigmatizes his desire, undermines his anger, and insists that some lives are worth more than others.

2.4 Anti-Obscenity Legislation, Censorship, and the American Family Association

The attempt to proliferate representations of violence, death and queer sexuality is in part a reaction to a moment in U.S. cultural history when freedom of artistic expression was being threatened. It is imperative to study Wojnarowicz’s choice of intervention within its historical context not only to understand the cultural moment in which it surfaces, but also to avoid assuming that such a strategy would have the same relevance in different spaces and times. Although representations of queer sexuality are now more present in mainstream media, Wojnarowicz lived and worked at a time when dominant discourse was completely silent about non-heteronormative sexuality. As Peter F. Spooner notes, “[l]ike so many individuals who are not members of the dominant (i.e. white, male, heterosexual, Christian, middle or upper-class) culture, Wojnarowicz rarely saw his own experience, or read or heard his own voice, reflected in popular culture or in high art” (340). Noting the absence of public markers of his desire, Wojnarowicz produces more diverse representations of queer sexuality. Richard Meyer summarizes the kind of appeal Wojnarowicz makes to his readers and viewers noting, “[h]e directs lesbians and gay men to document experiences that would otherwise be denied, distorted, or erased outright by the dominant culture” and “taps into the force of individual fantasy to contest both the AIDS epidemic and the censorship of homoerotic art” (244).

For Wojnarowicz, being able to represent a fantasy, be it sexual, unsanctioned, or even violent, is essential for his survival in a world that confines his existence. In an interview with Adam Kuby from 1992, Wojnarowicz defends his need to express himself freely: “I have fiercely protected whatever emotions I decide to engage in, whatever changes, whatever
thoughts, whatever self-education – I need room for all of it. If an activist community is going to
denounce a writer who writes books of sex without any mention of condoms, then I say Fuck
You to that activist community. I really believe in the value of unrestricted fantasy, unrestricted
thought” (59). Wojnarowicz opposes efforts to control his imaginative impulses whether they
come from a conservative politician attacking his murderous fantasies or an AIDS activist
insisting that any representation of queer sexuality feature a safe sex campaign. These
interview remarks, made in 1992, also speak to a recent and fraught history of anti-obscenity
legislation and censorship that implicated Wojnarowicz personally.

In the summer and fall of 1989, Senator Jesse Helms launched an attack on the National
Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and what he perceived to be obscene federally funded art. In
1989, he attached a measure to an appropriations bill that denied any use of federal funds to
“promote, disseminate or produce obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to
depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals
engaged in sexual acts; or material which denigrates the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a
particular religion or nonreligion” (qtd. in Dubin 180). By October of 1989, a slightly modified
version of the Helms Amendment restricting NEA content had been signed into law. At precisely
this moment, Nan Goldin’s show “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing,” having received a grant
from the NEA, was set to run at Artists Space. The exhibit, which featured various artists’
responses to the AIDS crisis, came under attack from Helms and others primarily as a result of
Wojnarowicz’s essay contribution to the exhibit’s catalogue, “Postcards from America: X Rays

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18 Wojnarowicz’s comment references a debate that raged in the late 1980s concerning the politics of representing
gay sexuality and lifestyle. While activists were stirred by the rallying cries of Larry Kramer proclaiming the need to
take direct action to fight the AIDS crisis, many found his attack on gay men’s promiscuity moralizing. Douglas
Crimp’s 1987 “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic” asserts the need for sex positive approaches to AIDS
activism.
from Hell.” At first, funding was denied to the entire exhibit, but after much protest, the grant was restored on the condition that none of its monies fund the catalogue. This was seen by many (Wojnarowicz included) as a hopeless capitulation to censorship legislation. Meyer points out that as media coverage mounted, a few lines of Wojnarowicz’s essay in particular were quoted (or misquoted) repeatedly:

I’m beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is the imagination. At least in my ungoverned imagination I can fuck somebody without a rubber, or I can, in the privacy of my own skull, douse Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire or throw rep. William Dannemeyer off the empire state building. These fantasies give me distance from my outrage for a few seconds. They give me momentary comfort. (qtd in Meyer 245)

While the rest of the essay depicting his experience living as a queer man with AIDS in New York was ignored, Wojnarowicz was virulently attacked for giving written form to his feelings of anger, violence and rage and for articulating the need for unrestricted fantasy and thought.

Controversy would continue to dog Wojnarowicz when the same essay was reprinted in the exhibition catalogue for his retrospective show at Illinois State University early in 1990. While Wojnarowicz was not directly funded by the NEA, the Galleries did receive a $15,000 grant in order to mount the exhibition. Beyond the individual essay that garnered much media attention, the exhibition itself housed such works as Sex Series (for Marion Scenama), 1988-1989. In a series of photo prints of warehouses, trains, and industrial city spaces, Wojnarowicz

19 In an interview by Sylvère Lotringer, Wojnarowicz expresses his frustration at how Artists Space and the NEA handled the controversy saying “They sold the catalogue containing my essay out the door in order to get their $10,000 bucks from the NEA. They created a precedent whereby a single object can be defunded because of its political nature” (189).
overlayed circular insets that featured photo-negative images of cropped stills from 1970s pornography. Although the series of artworks depict a range of visuals, including scenes from an ACT UP protest, the sexually explicit materials became the focus of media frenzy and anti-NEA attacks from conservative leaders and politicians. In April of 1990, the head of the American Family Association, Donald Wildmon distributed a brochure with the headline “Your tax dollars helped pay for these works of art,” urging people to deny the NEA funding. The pamphlet cropped Wojnarowicz’s paintings to include only the sexual images from his larger works.20 Spooner notes, “the brochure was distributed to 523 members of Congress, 3,230 Christian church leaders, 947 Christian radio and TV stations, and 1,578 newspapers. Mailed in envelopes labeled ‘Caution: Contains Extremely Offensive Material,’” and adds that, “the brochure failed to mention that the images reproduced were small parts of much larger works” (345). Although Wildmon’s intention was to speak out against the immorality of such images, his pamphlet reproduced the titillation he sought to oppose. At the same time as wildly misrepresenting Wojnarowicz’s work, Wildmon’s campaign ensured that thousands would receive a personal flyer featuring pornographic and homoerotic images.

As a response to Wildmon’s campaign, Wojnarowicz sued Donald Wildmon and the AFA for copyright infringement, defamation of character, and breach of the Lanham Act and the New York Artists Authorship Rights Act (Spooner 346). Wojnarowicz’s affidavit from the case, dated May 18, 1990, reads something like an artist statement as he explains the context of these paintings and attempts to defend his own artistic integrity:

20 I viewed a scanned copy of Wildmon’s flyer in Wojnarowicz’s archive (“Wildmon AFA Flyer”).
the images of sexuality in my works are not meant to titillate the viewer – whether heterosexual or homosexual – but are part of a broad comment on many aspects of human existence. When, however, as in the AFA Pamphlet, the images of sexuality were removed from the other images with which I display them, they lose their importance in my work. In fact, when these sexual images are displayed independently they set out sexuality as something separate from normal experience – perhaps exciting or shocking – rather than as part of normal experience. This is precisely opposite to the meaning which I intend my work to convey. (“Wildmon – Wojnarowicz affidavit” 7-8)

In order to defend himself as an artist, Wojnarowicz must specifically spell out his creative intention and reject the charge that these works are mere celebrations of eroticism. The scholarly criticism on this court case is likewise committed to ensuring that Wojnarowicz’s works not be viewed as pornographic. Spooner argues, “Works like the Sex Series (for Marion Scemama) do use pornographic images, but that does not make them pornography, since their intended context is one of emotional intellectual, not primarily sexual, stimulation” (348-9). Meyer too suggests that, “Rather than conjuring specific scenarios of sexual activity (e.g. an orgy below deck, an afternoon of hotel-room sex), the porn inserts signal the space of sexual fantasy itself, a space that punctures the public mappings of the visual field” (252). Without contesting that these artworks should indeed not be classified as pornographic, it is worthy of note that Wojnarowicz and his critics, in response to anti-obscenity legislation and censorship debates, must distance these artworks from pornography and overtly titillating content, as much as the artworks do borrow from erotic representation intended for sexual arousal.

I have detailed the controversies that surrounded Wojnarowicz’s work in late 1989 and 1990 in order to situate the context for his writing “Suicide of a Guy” and compiling Close to the
I contend that his fascination with giving expression and form to sexual and at times violent and murderous impulses stems in part from enduring attacks from conservative and religious leaders. A single line describing his urge to murder politicians garnered Wojnarowicz massive amounts of media attention and ultimately led to the head of the American Family Association launching a campaign distorting his artistic work. When Wojnarowicz advocates the need to proliferate representations of queer sexuality and to give form to his experience of rage, he is responding to a general climate of censorship and also to a very particular and personal experience of being attacked for his artistic vision. As these controversies unfolded, the response from critics, rather than insisting on the need for a diversity of responses, in many ways sought to validate Wojnarowicz’s work by distancing it from something that was explicitly pornographic. As a rejoinder to the accusations of Jesse Helms and Donald Wildmon, critics distanced Wojnarowicz’s work from erotica and thus decided what kinds of depictions of sexuality should be allowed to stand as appropriate resistance. In an effort to defend Wojnarowicz from voices that denigrate his art, such criticism paradoxically works against the goal of enabling unrestricted fantasy and thought.

The controversies, court cases and media exposés surrounding Wojnarowicz’s work highlight the extent to which his identity as an artist was present in public discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This chapter has argued that Wojnarowicz conveys an unindividuated portrait of himself by abandoning biography and confronting his impending death. If he achieves an alternative vision of impersonal selfhood in his writings, such a vision is complicated by his public reputation as an artist embroiled in censorship controversies covered in the media. For conservative politicians and religious leaders, Wojnarowicz and the artworks he produced come to stand for moral perversity and the absurdity of federally funded art projects. For the group of
community activists and artists that supported and defended his artworks against such criticisms, his work embodies the struggle to pressure the state to carve out space for queer sexuality in public discourse and to respond to the many crises of AIDS.
Chapter 3: ‘Forget Burial’: Biopolitics, AIDS Activism and Political Funerals

In the previous chapter, I argued that Wojnarowicz achieves a different relation to self in his memoir by abandoning biography and embracing an anonymous subjectivity that displays how he is formed and sustained by others. In the context of his work and legacy, Wojnarowicz is far from anonymous as evidenced by his implication in public debates surrounding anti-obscenity legislation and censorship. Additionally, his name and the words and artworks so strongly associated with him have become emblematic of a radical politics of sexuality and fierce AIDS activism. As Jennifer Doyle points out:

‘If I had a dollar’ and a handful of phrases and images from Wojnarowicz’s archive have become emblems for the AIDS crisis itself. Statements like ‘When I was told I’d contracted this virus it didn’t take me long to realize that I’d contracted a diseased society as well’ appear frequently in writing about AIDS and homophobic culture. An image of his mouth sewn shut, a photograph of his face almost completely buried in sand, an image of buffaloes being driven over a cliff, all circulate widely as a visual shorthand for the deadly effects of the prohibition against talking about sexuality and AIDS, for the experience of living with a death sentence and a declaration of the AIDS pandemic as a form of ‘social murder’. *(Hold it Against Me* 129)

Doyle succinctly catalogues the ways in which Wojnarowicz’s name and art become representative of AIDS history and queer culture. If Wojnarowicz abandons biography and displays an impersonal subjectivity in his memoir, the broader context and reception of his work reaffirm some sense of the heroic individual, as his name, words, and art come to stand as iconic representations of the AIDS crisis. I turn to this in part to show how Wojnarowicz as an artist is not exempt from the process of subjectivation that he attempts to resist and further, that such a
process is carried out not only by government officials and church leaders, but by activists eager
to elevate his work and identity to an iconic status. In this chapter, I will consider how activists
take up Wojnarowicz’s words as inspiration for the AIDS political funeral and how this process
both enacts and defies the force of a de-centered subjectivity that I outlined earlier. The tropes
and themes of Wojnarowicz’s art, rather than attesting to the work of an unparalleled genius,
emerge from the context of AIDS activism, civil disobedience and public life in New York in the
late 1980s.

In March of 1987, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was formed at a
meeting of 300-or-so people at the New York City Lesbian and Gay Community Center
following an impassioned speech by Larry Kramer advocating the need for immediate and direct
action to fight the AIDS crisis. In light of the Reagan government’s painfully slow response to
the epidemic, a varied and enraged group of people began mobilizing in a series of public
demonstrations. Over the course of the late 1980s and 1990s, ACT UP and its affiliated groups
carried out countless protests and acts of civil disobedience that effectively pressured the U.S.
government, the Center for Disease Control and the Food and Drug Administration into
committing more time, resources and money to saving the lives of people with HIV/AIDS.
Although ACT UP’s initial goal of getting “drugs into bodies” emphasized the need for more
research into treatment options, for many involved there was a broader agenda at play aimed at
confronting societal problems underlying the epidemic’s devastating effects.\(^{21}\) Finding a cure,
although the initial motivation for the group’s mobilization, was by no means the end goal. Since
the AIDS epidemic spread first through the gay community as well as to people of colour,

\(^{21}\) For a discussion of this issue, see Jennifer Brier’s *Infectious Ideas*, chapter 5 “Drugs into Bodies, Bodies into
Health Care: The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power and the Struggle Over How Best to Fight AIDS.”
intravenous drug users, sex workers and, for lack of a more nuanced descriptor, the poor, the story of AIDS activism is inextricably connected to combating societal prejudices. The fight against AIDS was equally a fight against racist, homophobic, classist, anti-sex and moralizing judgments that proliferated in dominant media and government representations of HIV/AIDS decrying the epidemic as the deserved predicament of society’s underclass. Accordingly, the fight for the cure became a fight to make treatment available and accessible to all. For many activists, until there is universal access to health care, the AIDS crisis will continue – a view that flies in the face of narratives that attempt to historicize AIDS as “over.” Varied in its goals and tactics, AIDS activism in the late 1980s fought not just for treatment, but for a more equitable health system, for humane representation of persons with AIDS and for an understanding of the epidemic not just as a medical issue but as a social, political and cultural one as well.

David Wojnarowicz’s artistic work is closely entwined with the story of AIDS activism in New York in the late 1980s. Not only were Wojnarowicz’s writings informed by the climate that such activist fervor generated, but his own words in Close to the Knives were taken up as motivation for AIDS political funerals. In the following pages, I will discuss Wojnarowicz’s relationship to ACT UP, how AIDS activism informs his work and how his writings in turn spark a potent form of public protest enacting the process Judith Butler theorizes wherein grief itself becomes “a resource for politics” (Precarious Life 30). The AIDS political funerals brought privatized rituals of mourning into the public sphere. Drawing on theorization about the politics of mourning by Judith Butler and Roberto Esposito, I argue that groups of people engaged in public memorial rituals are dislocated from their individual selfhoods through the experience of grieving and pose a threat by demanding recognition for lives deemed expendable by the state. Such a moment reveals the potential for grief to mobilize community. As with Wojnarowicz’s
impersonal memoir, a community of people grieving publicly shapes a radical redefinition of the individual as beholden to networks of interdependence. I suggest this continuity between the thematics of Wojnarowicz’s text and the actions that his words precipitated not as a way to affirm some artistic vision realized posthumously. Rather, I suggest that both Wojnarowicz’s writings and sites of AIDS protest and activism be read within the context of a biopolitical regime of sovereignty and the challenges that such subjectivation of bodies poses to any attempts at resistance. As I argue, recapitulating the oppositional logic that pits sovereign heads of state against unwitting subjects demanding change and justice reifies the very processes of subjectivation such arguments purport to resist. Acknowledging that Wojnarowicz’s artistic responses to the AIDS crisis and the ensuing political funerals his writings generated operate within a biopolitical horizon, I propose a reading that highlights the challenge being posed by such actions to the political category of the individual in a radical reframing of politics and community through mourning.

3.1 Wojnarowicz and ACT UP

I will begin by tracing Wojnarowicz’s involvement in ACT UP in order to give a sense of how he fits in to the general climate of AIDS activism in New York. Although never a prominent organizer or outspoken member of ACT UP, Wojnarowicz frequently attended demonstrations and protests organized by the group. Cynthia Carr writes that by the summer of 1988, following the death of Peter Hujar, Wojnarowicz was attending ACT UP meetings with his lover, Tom Rauffenbert and participating in demonstrations.\footnote{Carr’s book explains that Wojnarowicz was one of 176 to be arrested at the “Seize Control of the F.D.A” protest organized by ACT UP in Rockville Maryland on October 11, 1988 (399). He was also arrested at a protest outside City Hall in New York that blocked the Brooklyn Bridge on March 28, 1989 (Carr 419) and on December 10, 1989, he attended ACT UP’s “Stop the Church” demonstration outside St. Patrick’s Cathedral (Carr 463).} In addition to attending protests and
demonstrations, Wojnarowicz supported the work of AIDS activists by way of his art and public profile. For example, at the opening for Wojnarowicz’s controversial “Tongues of Flame” exhibition at the University of Illinois, he concluded his opening speech by encouraging members of the audience to support ACT UP:

Outside there’s a group of people from ACT UP L.A. who have a table and they’re trying to raise money in order to continue fighting for your lives as well as mine in this epidemic and I’d really appreciate it if you could reach into your pockets on the way out at any point this evening and contribute to them because they don’t have much money – they’ve been putting themselves on the line in terms of civil disobedience and actions and confronting people who are helping to accelerate this epidemic rather than educate the public. And I thank them for being here tonight because you know it makes me feel comfortable and on that I’ll start my reading – thank you. (“Tongues of Flame Opening 7/26-27, 1990 Normal Illinois”)

The opening of the exhibit in Normal, Illinois was fraught with controversy. As I discussed in chapter one, funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was being denied to sexually explicit artworks at the behest of Senator Jesse Helms, and this exhibit captured the attention of religious leaders and conservative politicians resulting in an intense media flurry. In the midst of such reactionary responses to his art, it was important for Wojnarowicz to pay heed to a community of people committed not just to fighting for a cure for HIV / AIDS, but also insisting on the need to speak openly about sex and affirm non-heteronormative desire. Although Wojnarowicz was peripherally involved in the group’s organization, ACT UP’s mere presence at his gallery opening is of personal significance to him. Much as he writes of how, “Sexuality defined in images gives [him] comfort in a hostile world” when faced with a government that
seeks to silence and dehumanize him (as evidenced by the motions of Jesse Helms), the presence of ACT UP members puts him at ease (Close to the Knives 120).

ACT UP’s influence on Wojnarowicz surfaces in his writings as well. In particular, the essays from Close to the Knives entitled “The Seven Deadly Facts Sheet” and “Additional Facts and Statistics” explicitly spell out how officials in the church and in government are responsible for prolonging the AIDS crisis. In “The Seven Deadly Facts Sheet,” Wojnarowicz lists a series of people: Edward Koch, Cardinal John O’Connor, Rep. William Dannemeyer and Jesse Helms among others, cataloguing actions they undertook that worsened the effects of the epidemic. The opening of this section reads: “Thanks: A.N., J.E. & R.E. (ACT-UP)” (Close 124). In her book, Cynthia Carr explains that Wojnarowicz consulted ACT UP members Ann Northrop, Jim Eigo and Richard Elovich to learn more about their upcoming campaign against the Catholic church (457). As Wojnarowicz points out, influential leaders from the church not only inflicted psychological violence by shaming people for contracting the disease in the first place, they also thwarted safe-sex information campaigns. In this essay from Close to the Knives, a dialogue with ACT UP members inspires an enraged and yet highly lucid catalogue of government negligence and malice. Although he blurs his own self-portrait, Wojnarowicz carries out scathing fact-based portraits of politicians and religious leaders.

Dissatisfied with an approach that might view the epidemic as the general fault of a disorganized government, Wojnarowicz points to particular people who cause tangible harm and exacerbate a public health crisis. From a formal perspective, he targets these individuals with pithy bullet-point sentences in a concise articulation of facts. In the entry for Jesse Helms, he lists his actions saying, “Cut out any and all AIDS education funding that relates to gays and lesbians. Introduced legislation that we must now live with that prevents any HIV positive
people or PWA’s from entering any border of the U.S.A. as well as deporting people with green cards forcibly tested and found to be HIV positive” (129). Written in truncated sentences and stark prose, Wojnarowicz catalogues the homophobic, racist and misguided actions undertaken by Helms. More than being inspired by the activism of his peers, this section echoes a rhetorical strategy undertaken by ACT UP protesters – a strategy aimed first, at bringing to light underreported facts about government negligence and second, at taking control of the means of communication and representation to disseminate such information. This section of *Close to the Knives* in particular reads as a piece to be excised and reproduced in a pamphlet for easy distribution. But in the context of the larger work in which it appears, it is a decided contrast from Wojnarowicz’s reflections on mortality, selfhood and anonymous sex that appear elsewhere in the book’s pages. As an interlude to an otherwise stream of consciousness style of prose, these excerpts display a rhetoric infused with the direct action and civil disobedience strategies of AIDS activists.

Overall, I would characterize Wojnarowicz’s involvement with ACT UP as peripheral, yet pivotal. Although he was not significantly affiliated with its organizational structure, he participated in protest actions and the presence of the group was of profound importance to him and his work. Yet, I read his limited involvement as a symptom of his own ambivalence about wholly ascribing to a certain politic. In an interview with Barry Blinderman, Wojnarowicz admits his own reluctance to associate with political groups:

> As far as politics go, I hate the idea of being politically correct. I think it’s inhuman. We all carry contradictions, and by negating our contradictions we live lies. I don’t really like to be part of political groups because it’s exchanging one power structure for another, and I no more want to live under that system than I would a communist system. I don’t think
anybody outside of myself could create a design for a society that I would like to live in.

Only I could create a design for myself. (53)

Although this statement seems to more readily speak to affiliation with an official political party, this reference to exchanging one power structure for another could easily be applied to ACT UP and AIDS activist organizing. On a page of a notebook from 1991 with the heading “California AIDS panel (Gay and Lesbian Conference) Notes,” Wojnarowicz scribbled: “Rage If I say something that displeases the left the politically correct – that’s where I am” (“1991 or thereabouts”), displaying his reluctance to compromise his own manner of expression for the sake of not inflaming AIDS activists eager to gain institutional acceptance. Wojnarowicz sought to remain uncompromising in his portrait of himself, and not satisfy any definitions of correctness that might make his account of queer sexuality and the AIDS crisis more palatable to a wider audience. Wojnarowicz was inspired and sustained by ACT UP and activism, at the same time as being reluctant to subscribe fully to politics and organizing. Noting this tension between reverence and ambivalence is crucial for situating Wojnarowicz’s role in the cultural legacy of AIDS activism.

23 This is not to suggest that ACT UP necessarily imposed a dominant political order on its participants. The organization functioned by allowing for opposing and competing views to fill its ranks with an affinity group structure. As Anna Blume points out in her interview with Sarah Schulman for the ACT UP Oral History Project: “And the whole idea of the affinity group; that ACT UP itself was already a counterculture, and then it had to have countercultures within its own counterculture, and also create ways for people to bond and create identities, and then create actions that didn’t need to be okayed on the floor, and didn’t have the stamp of approval of ACT UP. I mean, everything about ACT UP was so brilliant organizationally, and it was brilliant because it was organic, and it came out of necessity. And the affinity groups were pure necessity. Because ACT UP always — when I was part of it, always wanted the freshness of irreverence. And irreverence can’t come from consensus. And the affinity groups allowed for small groups of like-minded people to do whatever they wanted” (16-17). In many ways, Wojnarowicz’s comments about politics speak to the need for this very irreverence.
3.2 Public Grief: Funeral Marches and the Ashes Actions

Although Wojnarowicz responded critically to AIDS activism and political organizing at times, his work and writings became a source of inspiration for protesters and organizers. I now turn to how Wojnarowicz’s own writings and reflections on the AIDS crisis sparked political funerals and public memorials. As I argue, these sites of public protest, much like the sketch Wojnarowicz offers of life being constituted by contradictions, simultaneously oppose and reify a biopolitical regime of power in a productive space of opposition and tension. Here we find a compelling site of affirmative biopolitics where groups of people, distanced from their individual selves build community through mourning. In many ways, Wojnarowicz’s writings function as a set of directives for the first AIDS political funerals. The force behind these actions is not their origin in Wojnarowicz’s writings, but in their powerful enactment of community through public mourning.

In Wojnarowicz’s responses to AIDS, he questions the ways in which death and mortality are ignored in his culture and society. In an interview with Barry Blinderman, Wojnarowicz says: “Growing up in a violent family, with my father having a penchant for guns, killing, and violent abuse, I think I always had a strong sense of mortality … So I could never bury the idea of mortality, it was always there, and I think for people to get a sense of mortality is something akin to examining the structure of society” (51).24 In the context of an activist demonstration demanding government accountability for AIDS deaths, examining the structure of society

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24 It is worth noting that Wojnarowicz’s fascination and artistic obsession with death and mortality preceded the deaths of friends and lovers to AIDS. In the mid-1980s, Wojnarowicz’s collaborations with Richard Kern often took up morbid and violent subject matter. In particular, their 1985 film and installation, You Killed me First featured skeletons of dead families arranged in bloody tableaux. A consistent preoccupation in Wojnarowicz’s artwork, his fascination with death, violence, and the occult stems in part from his abusive family history but also reflects a 1980s punk aesthetic. See Cynthia Carr’s account of Wojnarowicz’s role in the Cinema of Transgression in Fire in My Belly (265-266) and Jack Sargeant’s book, Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression.
entails exposing how some lives are valued over others. Wojnarowicz’s writings reflect a concerted interest in confronting the state with the corporeality of death. On October 11, 1988, Wojnarowicz attended ACT UP’s “Seize Control of the F.D.A.” demonstration in Rockville, Maryland donning a jacket with the words: “IF I DIE OF AIDS – FORGET BURIAL – JUST DROP MY BODY ON THE STEPS OF THE F.D.A” printed across the back (Carr 399). The pithy line speaks to Wojnarowicz’s growing concern that the rituals surrounding death and mourning fail to address the political and social crisis from which those deaths emerge. In a journal entry from 1988, Wojnarowicz writes:

THE THING THAT’S IMPORTANT ABOUT MEMORIALS IS THEY BRING A PRIVATE GRIEF OUT OF THE SELF AND MAKE IT A LITTLE MORE PUBLIC WHICH ALLOWS FOR COMMUNICATIVE TRANSITION, PEELS AWAY ISOLATION, BUT THE MEMORIAL IS IN ITSELF STILL AN ACCEPTANCE OF IMMOBILITY, INACTIVITY. TOO MANY TIMES I’VE SEEN THE COMMUNITY BRUSH OFF ITS MEMORIAL CLOTHES, ITS GRIEVING CLOTHES, AND GATHER IN THE CONFINES OF AT LEAST FOUR WALLS AND UTTER WORDS OR SONGS OF BEAUTY TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE PASSING, THE NEXT DEATH. IT’S IMPORTANT TO MARK THAT TIME OR MOMENT OF DEATH. IT’S HEALTHY TO MAKE THE PRIVATE PUBLIC, BUT THE WALLS OF THE ROOM OR CHAPEL ARE THIN AND UNNECESSARY. ONE SIMPLE STEP CAN BRING IT OUT INTO MORE PUBLIC SPACE. DON’T GIVE ME A MEMORIAL IF I DIE. GIVE ME A DEMONSTRATION. (In the Shadow of the American Dream 205-206)
In Wojnarowicz’s reading, the conventional rituals around death level its broader political significance as mourners slink into a non-transformative and closed-off form of grieving. He is reacting to mourning practices that function more as coping mechanisms than as ways to mobilize and be changed through grief. In contrast, his words gesture toward the possibilities for mourning as cultural recuperation.

This journal entry is also an important precursor to Wojnarowicz’s more elaborated reflections on public mourning in Close to the Knives where he suggests that, “[t]o turn our private grief for the loss of friends, family, lovers and strangers into something public would serve as another powerful dismantling tool. It would dispel the notion that this virus has a sexual orientation or a moral code” (121). Explaining his anxiety about rituals of mourning in an oft-repeated, reprinted, and excerpted passage, Wojnarowicz writes:

I worry that friends will slowly become professional pallbearers, waiting for each death, of their lovers, friends and neighbors, and polishing their funeral speeches; perfecting their rituals of death rather than a relatively simple ritual of life such as screaming in the streets. I worry because of the urgency of the situation, because of seeing death coming in from the edges of abstraction where those with the luxury of time have cast it. I imagine what it would be like if friends had a demonstration each time a lover or a friend or a stranger died of AIDS. I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lovers or neighbors would take the body and drive with it in a car a hundred miles an hour to washington d.c. and blast through the gates of the white house and come to a screeching halt before the entrance and dump their lifeless form on the front steps. It would be comforting to see those
friends, neighbors, lovers and strangers mark time and place and history in such a public way. (Close to the Knives 122)

The repetition of ‘friend,’ ‘neighbor,’ ‘lover,’ and ‘stranger’ creates a community of people linked through a variety of platonic, sexual, or possibly unknown bonds. His call for public displays of mourning applies as much to an intimate lover as it does to a stranger on the street. In a pointed use of the word “comforting,” Wojnarowicz conveys how confronting mortality and demanding the state admit to its own negligence is soothing in a way that traditional rituals of mourning are not. Wojnarowicz confronts the reader with the corporeality of AIDS deaths, foreclosing the possibility for apolitical abstractions about life’s passing. Wearing a jacket with printed text calling for his dead body to be dropped on the steps of the FDA, writing a journal entry demanding a demonstration in the event of his death and suggesting, in Close to the Knives, that a limp lifeless body be thrown onto the White House lawn – again and again, Wojnarowicz returns to this impulse to make death and specifically the dead body public and undeniable in its corporeal presence. He is also insisting that the work of mourning be done not just by close family and friends but also by a broader community. Wojnarowicz was not the only one to advocate for such forms of protest but his words did inspire political funerals in the early 1990s after his book came out.

One affinity group within ACT UP known as the Marys strongly identified with Wojnarowicz’s ideas about politicizing rituals of death.25 Commenting on her involvement with the Marys in an interview, Joy Episalla notes that the group got started at the “Seize Control of

25 ACT UP was divided into many different affinity groups. Each group comprised of a small number of people who knew each other well and rallied together based on common politics and interests. Interviews conducted as part of the ACT UP Oral History Project (by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard) reveal that some members of the Marys included Tim Bailey, Jim Baggett, Joy Episalla, Ken Bing, Anna Blume, Jon Greenberg and Stephen Mishon.
the FDA” protest on October 11, 1988 where Marys’ members laid down on the ground propping up their own cardboard tombstones (10). Already engaged in actions that literalized death at the hands of the state, it is not surprising that Wojnarowicz’s memoir calling for public memorials resonated with the Marys and many other activists. Episalla explains his influence on the group saying, “we started to talk about David Wojnarowicz’s book Close to the Knives and the passage in there that says, ‘Every time somebody dies of AIDS, I think their lover, their friends, should drive with their bodies 100 miles an hour down to the White House, and throw their body over the White House fence.’ And we started thinking – goddamn right, that sounds right to us. So we decided that’s what we were going to do” (22). Episalla goes on to describe that when the Marys learned of David Wojnarowicz’s death on July 22, 1992, they approached Wojnarowicz’s lover, Tom Rauffenbert, about having a public memorial and protest to mark his passing. One week after his death, the Marys led a demonstration through the streets to mourn the life and death of David Wojnarowicz in what became the first political funeral to emerge from the AIDS crisis. Carr’s book recounts how a procession of mourners marched through the streets carrying a large banner that read “DAVID WOJNAROWICZ, 1954 - 1992, DIED OF AIDS DUE TO GOVERNMENT NEGLECT” (qtd. in Carr 576). Gathering hundreds as it wound through Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the procession finally culminated in a car park where a projector cast an enlarged image of the White House with the words “I imagine what it would be like if friends had a demonstration each time a lover or a friend or a stranger died of AIDS, etc…” superimposed.

More political funerals and processions followed in the weeks and months after Wojnarowicz died. Citing the same passage from Close to the Knives as inspiration, Mark Lowe Fisher wrote a piece called “Bury Me Furiously” (originally published anonymously in QW
magazine in October 1992) where he says: “I have decided that when I die I want my fellow AIDS activists to execute my wishes for my political funeral … I want my death to be as strong a statement as my life continues to be. I want my own funeral to be fierce and defiant, to make the public statement that my death from AIDS is a form of political assassination” (np). Upon his death, the Marys carried out Mark Fisher’s wishes by carrying his lifeless body inside an open coffin down Sixth Avenue in a public memorial and demonstration on November 2, 1992. In another demonstration inspired by Wojnarowicz’s words, Tim Bailey’s body was brought to the gates of the White House on July 1, 1993. In his interview with Sarah Schulman, Ken Bing describes the moment when they decided to follow Tim’s wishes and bring his body to the White House lawn saying, “it just snowballed into this big political action. And cars of people started going down to D.C. And it was pretty wrenching when the police and the authorities wouldn’t allow us to go more than two feet” (17). The documentary United in Anger shows footage of the protesters’ thwarted efforts to bring Tim’s body to the steps of the White House as police forces blocked the van-hearse. While the above-mentioned demonstrations were organized to mark particular individuals (David Wojnarowicz, Mark Fisher, and Tim Bailey), protesters also engaged in collective and communal memorial actions marking many deaths at once.

In the fall of 1992, The Marys organized a public memorial protest in Washington, D.C., called the “Ashes Action.” Distributing a pamphlet titled: “BRING YOUR GRIEF AND RAGE ABOUT AIDS TO A POLITICAL FUNERAL IN WASHINGTON D.C.” ACT UP members called on mourners to gather by the White House fence. The text for the pamphlet (tucked inside the shape of an urn) read:

You have lost someone to AIDS. For more than a decade, your government has mocked your loss. You have spoken out in anger, joined political protests, carried fake
coffins and mock tombstones, and splattered red paint to represent someone’s HIV-positive blood, perhaps your own. George Bush believes that the White House gates shield him, from you, your loss, and his responsibility for the AIDS crisis. Now it is time to bring AIDS home to George Bush. On October 11th, we will carry the actual ashes of people we love in funeral procession to the White House. In an act of grief and rage and love, we will deposit their ashes on the White House lawn. Join us to protest twelve years of genocidal AIDS policy. (ACT UP/New York 1992 qtd. in Gould 230)

In a poster inspired by and echoing Wojnarowicz’s words, the call to action seeks to commemorate the dead through public demonstration as opposed to mourning behind closed doors. The first “Ashes Action” took place on October 11, 1992 on the same weekend as the annual display of the Names Project Quilt, which according to Deborah Gould “drew a distinction between the quilt’s encouragement of grief and its own enactment of grief-inspired rage” (230). Footage from the “Ashes Action” in the film United in Anger shows a group of protesters yelling out the names of loved ones and then collectively scattering ashes over the White House fence. During ACT UP’s second “Ashes Action” in October 1996, Tom Rauffenbert brought some of Wojnarowicz’s ashes to Washington where, in the concluding words of Carr’s biography: “He got up to the fence and threw David onto the White House lawn” (578). Finally enacting the call that Wojnarowicz spelled out in his memoir, by 1996 the AIDS political funeral had become a powerful centerpiece of public demonstration and action in the midst of the epidemic.

Although inspired by his writings, political funerals and “Ashes Actions” were not a clear-cut legacy of Wojnarowicz’s work. More than just displaying how a writer’s words can
translate into a potent form of protest, the “Ashes Actions” and the AIDS political funeral propose a powerful model for examining the contours of the political and what constitutes community and resistance within biopower. As I argue, the gestures enacted in public mourning rituals, more than following a set of directives outlined by Wojnarowicz, convey the force of a community of people both destabilized and mobilized through grief and mourning.

In an article from 1993, Jack Ben-Levi argues that AIDS activism became more mournful, sorrowful, and grounded in grief in the mid-1990s as the number of deaths mounted without any sign of a cure on the horizon. Discussing Wojnarowicz’s influence on this beleaguered community of mourners and pallbearers, Ben-Levi calls the AIDS political funeral in particular “an open-ended culmination to David Wojnarowicz’s project, a culmination that pointed the way forward” (157) suggesting that by “throwing the ashes of the dead onto the White House lawn in full public view, the political funeral enacted what the preinvented world had aimed to suppress: public mourning” (156). Ben-Levi makes plain the connection between Close to the Knives and political funerals by suggesting protesters enact the themes set out in Wojnarowicz’s prose—in this case, public mourners evade the constraints of the pre-invented world in their memorial practice. For Ben-Levi, Wojnarowicz’s “example provided a set of directions, both literal and figurative, for the activists’ attempts at recentering themselves in relation to the United States’ psychic and social reality as it threatened in 1992 to take a further reactionary turn” (155).

In another analysis, Tom Roach’s study of AIDS and biopolitics situates the link between Wojnarowicz and the AIDS political funeral in a broader theoretical conversation about biopower. Taking up theories of biopolitical sovereignty by Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Tom Roach argues that public AIDS mourning rituals, in their
exposure of death, can “undermine sovereign power’s life management” (146). He suggests, “[i]f
death is necessarily relegated to the private sphere, such rituals bring death out of the closet in
order to expose the biopolitical manipulation of life” (147). In his reading of “Ashes Actions,” a
community of mourners can both undermine and expose a biopolitical regime of sovereignty.
Taking Roach’s argument as a starting point, I will elaborate on his discussion of the politics of
mourning in an attempt to nuance the relationship between AIDS activist mourners and
biopolitics. By revisiting Foucault’s formulation of biopolitics and then engaging the criticism of
Roberto Esposito and Judith Butler, I propose how we can view AIDS mourners as a community
within biopower – rather than acting in opposition to a biopolitical regime of sovereignty.
Keeping in mind the always-contradictory aspects of protest and action, public mourning in
particular provides a way into a redefinition of politics and community. In order to make this
argument clear, I will briefly discuss how the AIDS crisis can be read as an exemplary moment
in a modern biopolitical regime of power.

3.3 The Individual in an Age of Biopolitics and AIDS

Analyzing political discourses, Foucault observes a marked shift beginning in the
eighteenth century when the state moved beyond controlling the public lives of its citizens and
started to regulate people at the level of their biological existence. He goes on to explain that
within the “biopolitics” of the human race, people are isolated from their environment and each
other and thus easier to control and administer. Rather than allowing for a sense of freedom, this
ordering of bodies limits the possibility for community formation: “So after a seizure of power
over the body in an individualizing mode, we have a second seizure of power that is not
individualizing but, if you like, massifying, that is directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-
species” (Society Must Be Defended 243). The AIDS crisis is a salient moment for
comprehending the scope of biopolitics insofar as the experience of Persons with AIDS exposes how the workings of state institutions (government, hospitals, schools) reduce people to the level of their biological existence as carriers of a deadly disease. As Catherine Waldby has argued, biomedical discourse during the AIDS crisis, in its identification of “risk groups” allowed categories of marginalized peoples not only to become associated with the spread of the virus, but to stand as living embodiments of the disease itself: “the bodies of ‘risk groups’, with their dangerous permeability, are assimilated to the position of fluid transmission points for the virus’s progress through the body politic” (15). Drawing on Foucault’s conception of biopower, Linda Singer has argued that such treatment of human lives conveniently justifies the continued oppression and surveillance of an underclass of people: “The construction of a sexual epidemic, as Foucault argues, provides an optimum site of intersection between individual bodies and populations. Hence a sexual epidemic provides access to bodies and a series of codes for inscribing them, as well as providing a discourse of justification” (117). For Singer, the mentality that ensues from an epidemic justifies the regulation of bodies in both the public and private sphere. In this sense, a public health crisis is a means of heightening and exacerbating an existing regulatory order.

Speaking mostly about the context of AIDS in South Africa, Ed Cohen suggests that the biomedical conception of the individual biological body – discrete from others and its environment – is the prototypical figure for neoliberalism. Commenting on how medical and scientific approaches to HIV / AIDS were elevated to the highest legitimacy over other approaches that take into account political, cultural and social factors influencing the virus’ spread, Cohen shows how certain culturally constructed scientific maxims are viewed as neutral facts: “modern biomedicine embeds modern political ideology when it represents the singular,
epidermally bound organism which defends itself against a relentlessly pathogenic environment as a universal fact. Thus the consistency between neoliberalism and the biomedical construction of HIV/AIDS” (274). Biomedical discourse masks certain constructions of individualism and subjectivity that make a neoliberal order out to be natural and timeless. Waldby, Singer and Cohen reveal how medical discourse, in its attempt to present an absolute and objective truth, hides a process of individuation that it not only supports but also constructs and then proceeds to mask as inevitable. If the AIDS crisis indeed crystallizes a definition of biopolitics set forth by Foucault in the mid-1970s, how then do public mourning rituals respond to such valuation and diminution of life at the hands of the state?

According to Foucault, in a biopolitical regime, much as sovereign power begins to exercise control over people at the level of their biological existence, the state divests itself of any responsibility for people dying: “Death is outside of the power relationship … Power has no control over death but it can control mortality. And to that extent, it is only natural that death should now be privatized and should become the most private thing of all” (Society Must be Defended 248). In response, the call for public rituals of mourning directly counters the view that death is private and destined to be relegated to personal feelings of grief. For Tom Roach, the intervention of political funerals into a biopolitical regime of sovereignty is clear – activists refute, expose and undermine such regulation of life. Citing die-ins and “Ashes Actions” as examples, Roach argues, “ACT UP transforms the morbidity of naked life into the ground of constituent power. In doing so, they reveal not only the ways in which naked life is exploited by sovereign power, but also that naked life is a source of renewal, potentiality, and possibility –
laboring to live reveals living labor” (146). In this analysis, Roach takes up the damning position of naked life that Agamben outlines in *Homo Sacer* and finds a way for this process of subjection to be the grounds for powerful action in the context of public mourning rituals. I would like to pick up on the relationship he identifies between AIDS political funerals and the work of biopolitics. What is it about the act of mourning that enables such a challenge? What is it precisely that is being challenged? I argue that rather than posing a threat to a biopolitical state, such a protest operates within the sphere of biopolitics and can be read as a redefinition of community and politics that destabilizes the biomedical individual subject of AIDS policies outlined above.

Reframing our discussion of AIDS, biopolitics and community mourning in light of Roberto Esposito’s scholarship allows for a more nuanced approach to how the work of community activists can expose a neoliberal order that is made to seem banal and natural – an order that is only reaffirmed and recapitulated within arguments that defer to an oppositional logic that pits a mastermind sovereign state against the masses. Such arguments rely on an opposition not only between the state and the people but also on a discrete distinction between life and politics. In Esposito’s scholarship, he considers the enigma of biopolitics, posing the

26 Here, Roach’s reference to “naked life” is based on Agamben’s articulation of biopolitics in *Homo Sacer*. Agamben distinguishes between two definitions of “life” in ancient Greek society: *zoe* refers to living common to all beings while *bios* is the way of life proper to human beings and how you engage with society. In Greek society, the city (or polis) was only responsible for *bios*, but Agamben points out that in modern politics, the state is responsible for the former definition of life (*zoe*), the mere act of existing as a biological entity. Agamben then draws on the figure of *homo sacer* (originating in archaic Roman law) to demonstrate modern mechanisms of power. In Roman texts, *homo sacer* is a “sacred man” who cannot be sacrificed and yet can be killed (meaning if someone kills *homo sacer*, that person would not be charged with homicide). In effect, *homo sacer* is stripped of *bios* and left only with *zoe* and completely at the mercy of the state. For Agamben, the figure of *homo sacer* can be used as a model to understand how individual bodies engage with the modern state, reduced to the position of bare life, or as it is referred to in Roach, naked life. (Agamben 6-8)
question, “Why does a power that functions by insuring, protecting, and augmenting life express such a potential for death?” (Bios 39). Articulating a politics both for and over life, Esposito’s argument embraces the contradictory and opposing meanings embedded within a biopolitical horizon. Sketching out the enigma of biopolitics in part explains how scholarship diverges in two opposing directions on the subject of biopolitics: “the one radically negative and the other absolutely euphoric” (Bios 8). I return to the example Roach set up earlier to demonstrate the negative and euphoric options presented in Esposito’s analysis. In the work of Agamben the articulation of “naked life” reduces human beings to an inescapable level of subjection at the hands of the state and limits any possibility for escape or subversion. Responses to such theories, as in Roach, take up the position of naked life and show how it can be a powerful rallying tool. We might also turn to the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri who in Empire conclude with a staggering optimism that the multitude might be capable of countering oppression in an era of globalization. In Esposito’s estimation, these approaches posit ways that biopolitics can be either over (Agamben) or for (Hardt and Negri) life and yet none of them engage with the contradictory and always opposing nature of political categories. Instead,

27 Damningly, Agamben shows how all systems of modern thought and politics are founded on this conception of “bare life”: “Instead the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and the exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoe, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested” (9).

28 The optimism of Hardt and Negri’s position is evident in their preface to Empire: “Our political task, we will argue, is not simply to resist these processes [of globalization] but to reorganize them and redirect them towards new ends. The creative forces of the multitude that sustain Empire are also capable of autonomously constructing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges. The struggles to contest and subvert Empire, as well as those to construct a real alternative, will thus take place on the imperial terrain itself—indeed, such new struggles have already begun to emerge. Through these struggles and many more like them, the multitude will have to invent new democratic forms and a new constituent power that will one day take us through and beyond Empire” (Hardt and Negri, xv). Their unbridled optimism betrays a belief in the radical potential of a politics for life in biopower.

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Esposito suggests: “In opposition to it, biopolitics does not limit or coerce \textit{[violenta]} life, but expands it in a manner proportional to its development. More than two parallel flows, we ought to speak of a singular expansive process in which power and life constitute the two opposing and complementary faces” (\textit{Bios} 37). In contrast to arguments that insist biopolitics can either work for or over life, Esposito makes clear that both forces are enacted simultaneously.

My own analysis of political funerals and Ashes Actions seeks to demonstrate the ‘opposing and complementary faces’ of biopolitics. In response to the state’s mishandling of the AIDS crisis, protesters reject how persons with AIDS are treated as dangerous bodies harbouring a deadly virus. But the intervention AIDS activists make through political funerals is both a repudiation of the ways bodies are subjugated under biopower and a plea for bodies to have the care that biopower promises – AIDS activists want state funded treatment, healthcare and accessible housing. In other words, they want the state to be responsible for the biological lives of its citizens. In response to a regime that callously exerts power \textit{over} life – activists demand the state work \textit{for} life and in many ways uphold the regulation of the biological body that is foundational to a regime of biopower.

Part of Esposito’s project is also to investigate the epistemological origins of biopolitics. Tracing the history of the term, Esposito reveals how any articulation and analysis of this regime relies on categories that are foundational for western philosophy and modern politics. In scrutinizing and re-examining concepts such as liberty, security and individualism, Esposito teases out how much of criticism aimed at challenging the atrocities of a ‘thanatopolitics’ (when a politics of life becomes one of death) still relies heavily on a central definition of the human subject as unique, strong-willed and free. Grounding his work in Foucault, Esposito too examines ancient concepts from Greek and Roman texts in order to cast into relief a modern
regime that might seem inevitable and universal. In particular, he imagines how a desire for “liberty” is one of the ways in which the individual is pitted against its neighbours, thereby limiting any possibility for community formation: “modern liberty is that which insures the individual against the interference of others through the voluntary subordination to a more powerful order that guarantees it” (Bios 72). Paradoxically, the terms established to ensure freedom from power are the very ones that subject the individual to a regime that limits freedoms. Making the link between biopolitics and the individual clear, Esposito’s analysis elaborates the process Foucault identifies as foundational to biopolitics, wherein people are isolated, individualized and yet massified in their reduction to biological beings.

Scrutinizing the process by which the individual comes to be defined destabilizes universalizing claims to an always inevitable and true conception of the human being under state power. Without recourse to notions of liberty, freedom and the rights of the individual subject, Esposito imagines how becoming attuned to interdependence amongst all life can form the basis of a different conception of community. In her introduction to Esposito’s work, Vanessa Lemm makes clear how the subversion of the modern political category of the individual is necessary for reimagining community: “The communal dimension of life sweeps away individual life – that is, by lack of identity, individuality and difference” (Terms of the Political 4). It is with this constellation of ideas surrounding biopolitics in mind that I return to the question of a politics of mourning. How might we read a group of mourners demanding the state be held accountable for AIDS-related deaths not just as a threat to a politics over life, but as a demonstration of a politics for life and as a powerful enactment of community?
3.4 Community through Mourning

In order to examine how the AIDS political funeral can be read as a powerful intervention within a biopolitical and neoliberal order, I will consider the role of mourning in public protests and tease out how precisely grief becomes a resource for politics. In an essay entitled “Mourning and Militancy,” AIDS activist and scholar Douglas Crimp takes up Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia” to discuss how structures of bereavement and grief affect AIDS activism. Crimp critiques the activist view of mourning as a weak display of emotion:

Public mourning rituals may of course have their own political force, but they nevertheless often seem, from an activist perspective, indulgent, sentimental, defeatist – a perspective only reinforced, as Kramer implies, by media constructions of us as hapless victims. “Don’t mourn, organize!” – the last words of labor movement martyr Joe Hill – is still a rallying cry, at least in its New Age variant, “Turn your grief to anger,” which assumes not so much that mourning can be foregone as that the psychic process can simply be converted. (132-133)

Crimp advocates instead for an acknowledgement that psychic and physical violence has been done to a community of people and argues that activism must emerge alongside and from feelings of anger, grief, and shame. According to Crimp, “To decry these responses – our own form of moralism – is to deny the extent of the violence we have all endured; even more important, is to deny a fundamental fact of psychic life: violence is also self-inflicted” (146). He

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29 This essay was originally presented at the “Gay Men in Criticism” session of the English Institute at Harvard University in August, 1989 and later published in a collection written and compiled by Crimp entitled: Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics (2002). The book as a whole takes up his concern “with a particular relation between devastation and self-abasement, between melancholia and moralism, between the turn away from AIDS and the turn toward conservative gay politics” (8). In the introduction to this work, he calls the essay, “Mourning and Militancy” the “theoretical core of the entire collection” (18).
goes on to conclude that “if we understand that violence is able to reap its horrible rewards through the very psychic mechanisms that make us part of this society, then we may also be able to recognize – along with our rage – our terror, our guilt, and our profound sadness. Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning and militancy” (149). Speaking in 1989, before the massive increase in AIDS deaths in the early 1990s, Crimp’s statements engage the need to lean into feelings of rage and shame in order to address the challenge being posed by American society’s response to the epidemic. He conveys the necessity of wrestling with the psychic process of grief and bereavement in all AIDS activism.

Sigmund Freud, in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” discusses how the state of mourning differs from that of melancholy. Although both states concern the loss of a loved object, in melancholia, the condition of mourning becomes protracted, pathological, and further, one is not certain what exactly has been lost and what is being mourned. Continuing to elaborate on the distinction between the two, Freud says, “[t]he melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (246). Although Freud intends to convey melancholia as a negative and pathological state, the diminution of ego through melancholy can be a way of reimagining selfhood.

In Precarious Life, Butler suggests that the work of mourning can involve submitting to a transformation of the self, without knowing what the outcome will be (21). Butler re-imagines the disruption of ego that grief enables to “challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (23). Much like Crimp, Butler is engaging with how feelings of emotional grief and political rage can allow for a certain dislocation from the self:
Perhaps we can say that grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am. This possibility does not dispute the fact of my autonomy, but it does qualify that claim through recourse to the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own. (28)

Destabilizing the notion of a discrete and liberal individual and embarking on a process of mourning with no particular resolution in mind can reveal how we are constituted and sustained by networks with others. Esposito makes a similar argument in *Terms of the Political*, going so far as to suggest that a common experience of melancholy is the moment at which community is decided: “What else is community if not the lack of ‘one’s own’? What is it if not not one’s own and that which is unable to be appropriated? This is the meaning that is etymologically inscribed within the very munus from which communitas is derived and that it carries within itself as its own nonbelonging to itself” (29). For Esposito, the process of becoming melancholic and estranged from the self is what provides the basis for a collective formation. He suggests that this alienation from the self is central to community, arguing that: “Community is not an “entity” [ente] but instead a non-entity [un ni-ente], a non-being [non-ente] that precedes and cuts every subject, wrestling him or her from identification with him or herself and submitting him or her to an irreducible alterity” (*Terms of the Political* 29). Departing significantly from the conclusions Freud makes in “Mourning and Melancholia,” Crimp, Butler and Esposito propose that grief and melancholy estrange us from ourselves and alert us to our implication in the lives of others. More than just a site of collective formation, such dislocation from individuality and isolated selfhood is a condition for the emergence of community.
It is with these definitions in mind that I return to the work of public mourning and in particular, political funerals carried out during the AIDS crisis. In Precarious Life, Butler questions why some lives merit grief while others do not. Citing a particular incident when the San Francisco Chronicle refused to publish the obituaries of two Palestinian relatives who had been killed by Israeli troops because the newspaper did not wish to offend anyone, Butler poses the questions: “We have to wonder under what conditions public grieving constitutes an ‘offense’ against the public itself, constituting an intolerable eruption within the terms of what is speakable in public? What might be ‘offensive’ about the public avowal of sorrow and loss, such that memorial would function as offensive speech?” (35). For Butler, it is not just the process of confronting grief, but of confronting a kind of disallowed public mourning that questions the very foundations of an order deciding which lives are grievable.

Returning to the subject of my inquiry – what do the “Ashes Actions” and the political funerals of David Wojnarowicz, Mark Fisher, Tim Bailey and others reveal about what is considered offensive speech in the midst of the AIDS epidemic in America? What forms of resistance do these actions pose to a state that continually heightens the regulation of bodies? David Wojnarowicz, who produced many politically-charged works commenting on the AIDS crisis, and yet held a certain distance from overt political affiliation, became the inspiration and starting point for the AIDS political funeral. What interests me here is not a causal link between Wojnarowicz’s directives and the process of public mourning that ensued, though this does offer a compelling example of an artist’s words translating to public actions. Beyond its inspiring spark, this process of public grieving and protest conjures a similar disrupted subjectivity to the one outlined in Wojnarowicz’s memoir. To be sure, protesters are not merely an anonymous and unindividualized mass. Although the work of community mourning challenges the category of
the individual in its enactment of grief-filled politics, activists demand rights for individuals such as access to healthcare and housing.

Video footage from the “Ashes Action” in October shows a crowd of friends, lovers and strangers gathered together in a collective process of bereavement. As protesters march, each voice yelling out the name of a loved one is blended and blurred into a cacophony of voices, at once individualized and massified. What unites this group of people is not mourning a particular person but the very fact of loss. As no one loss is the same, they are only united by the sense of lack that they share. The action is also very much grounded in confronting the corporeality of death. All that remains of these people are ashes and bone chips. As these remains are hurled over the White House fence, the detritus drifts together, making whatever is left of each individual scatter and blend with the ground and others’ ashes surrounding. If in the AIDS Quilt we find a patchwork of persons – each commemorated with a decorative square paying homage to their individuality – in the “Ashes Action” there is no such distinction between people. As the ashes mix on the ground, the dead become an anonymous mass, and so too do their mourners. Being estranged from their individual selves through a process of grieving is what opens mourners up to a deciding moment of community and politics in action.

Rather than read this as a moment that exposes or opposes a biopolitical regime, we should remain sensitive to how it is operating within a biopolitical horizon. Emphasizing the discrete boundary between the state on one side of the fence and a countercultural mass on the other ignores the extent to which both sides are embroiled in complexly layered power relationships. Suggesting a group of activists has the power to oppose and eventually become liberated from state control relies on a definition of freedom that is foundational to the very process of subjectivation it seeks to escape. Further, the individual obituaries read out at the
protest do not abandon the ideology of the free-willed individual leading a life culminating in a valiant death. What I would like to suggest instead is that we read such a moment, such a gathering of people, as a redefinition of what it means to be a community and to do politics, centered partly on the destabilized individualism evident in Wojnarowicz’s memoir. This is not meant to suggest a causal link between the estranged selfhood that Wojnarowicz conveys in Close to the Knives and the ensuing challenge to individualized subjectivity that takes place through public mourning rituals. I would argue that such a resonance between the two speaks to a particular cultural moment where the terms of what constitutes offensive speech and a forceful response to the AIDS epidemic are being negotiated.

More than merely opposing a state regime, these actions invite us to examine the formation of political categories that enable such a crisis to unfold. Esposito makes the case that understanding a biopolitical order involves apprehending how it is founded on modern political notions such as liberty, freedom and security. In this way, we can read the actions of protesters and public mourners as a challenge to the biomedical regulation of bodies and callous disregard of deaths by the state at the same time as noting how such protests operate within biopower and rely on conceptions of liberty to make a case for bodily sovereignty and demands for state responsibility. Further, this congregation of mourners does not, merely by virtue of putting their bodies on the line, pose a threat to the established order. Such a formation of bodies could equally form to protest the rights of the unborn in a pro-life rally. But insofar as the AIDS political funeral constitutes an offensive speech (in Tim Bailey’s funeral, the police barred the van containing his dead body from even approaching the White House gate) by displaying an order and logic that decides certain lives are expendable, it enacts a politics of mourning. Such an intervention is only possible with a questioning and reexamination of political categories
deemed foundational and irrefutable. Disrupting the impermeability of the individual and opening up to the porous boundaries of the self through a public and collective process of mourning offers a powerful redefinition of community in the midst of the AIDS crisis.
Chapter 4: Conclusion – What makes Wojnarowicz Political now?

On October 30, 2010, the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery opened the exhibit, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, “the first major museum exhibition to focus on sexual difference in the making of modern American portraiture.” (National Portrait Gallery). A four-minute excerpt from Wojnarowicz’s twenty-minute unfinished film, *Fire in my Belly* was featured. Although his film was originally silent, the curators chose to add an accompanying soundtrack of audio from an ACT UP demonstration which Wojnarowicz had once recorded. The visuals feature images of bandaged hands dropping coins, a set of lips being sewn shut, a spinning globe on fire, a man undressing and masturbating, and ants crawling over a crucifix. The latter image would spur Bill Donohue, the president of the Catholic League to request the film be removed from the exhibit on the grounds that it constituted hate speech against Catholics. The Smithsonian secretary, G. Wayne Clough, complied with the request and the video was removed, sparking protests demanding the work be re-installed, fierce debate about censorship, and a renewed interest in Wojnarowicz’s work. Recalling how Wojnarowicz became embroiled in late 1980s anti-obscenity legislation – this more recent event shares a few features with its predecessor: both of these incidents reveal the power that Catholic leaders exert over art institutions, they remind us that issues of censorship continue to be relevant in both the late 1980s and 2010s, and finally they display how efforts to ban art have the adverse effect of promoting the works’ public reach and popularity. Both of these controversies cemented Wojnarowicz’s artworks as sites of resistance. Yet, closer scrutiny of the Smithsonian controversy reveals a more complex picture of how his short film can be said to resist.

Jennifer Doyle notes that adding the ACT UP demonstration soundtrack to the film situated it firmly in the context of AIDS activism and insisted on the kind of critical intervention
the piece offers. She argues, “[t]he ‘political’ soundtrack doesn’t make *Fire in My Belly* more political but less, by mobilizing a familiar sense of the political in order that we may see where ideology does its most intimate work” (*Hold it Against Me* 142). A friend and artistic collaborator of Wojnarowicz’s, James Romberger, questioned the absence of critical conversations about Wojnarowicz’s vexed relationship with the Catholic church following the controversy: “A Fire in My Belly has been defended as being about AIDS and not about his anger towards the Church” (“Wojnarowicz’s Apostasy”). Indeed P.P.O.W, the gallery that manages Wojnarowicz’s estate, issued a statement four days after the film had been removed from the exhibit expressing their concern saying, “The call for the removal of ‘A Fire in My Belly’ by Catholic League president William Donahue is based on his misinterpretation that this work was ‘hate speech pure and simple.’ This statement insults the legacy of Wojnarowicz, who dedicated his life to activism and the arts community” (P.P.O.W.). In order to defend Wojnarowicz against charges of hate-speech, he needs to be firmly situated as a legitimate member of an artistic community devoted to justice and activism. Likewise, in order to explain his representations of violence and queer desire, his film needs to have the soundtrack from an AIDS demonstration signaling its place within activist politics.

The simple equation between Wojnarowicz’s work and AIDS activism is one that I have explored and troubled in this thesis. The Smithsonian’s exhibit recapitulates the notion that AIDS art and activism must comply with a particular definition of resistance. Justifying the inclusion of *Fire in My Belly* to the Catholic League as the work of a life-long activist in many ways denies a critical conversation about the Catholic Church’s role in the AIDS crisis and refuses Wojnarowicz’s anger as a legitimate form of expression. To closely scrutinize this recent event is to question the benign designation of what makes Wojnarowicz’s art political. I have been
arguing that part of the political force in Wojnarowicz’s work lies in how he imagines an alternative selfhood that threatens notions of privatized individualism and that diversifies the scope of representations of violence, sex and death in a celebration of unrestricted fantasy. The activists that take his words as inspiration in turn re-imagine community through collective mourning. The controversy surrounding the Smithsonian exhibit reveals how his art becomes historicized: Wojnarowicz is positioned as an artist who embodies AIDS activism and the work of activists fighting for a cure in turn becomes plotted into a progress narrative of American civil rights victories. Recuperating and contextualizing a voice such as Wojnarowicz’s is integral for the inter-generational transmission of a living memory of AIDS outside of such strategies of assimilation and historicization. Further, his work invites reflections on how the boundaries of politics and resistance can be rethought, extended, and re-imagined.
Works Cited

Abbreviations:


Archival Works:

Wildmon, Donald. “Wildmon AFA Flyer.” DWP, Series VII, Sub B, Box 14, Folder 70.

---. “mss Close to the Knives.” DWP, Series III, Box 4, Folder 12.
---. “mss The Suicide of a Guy.” DWP, Series III, Box 4, Folder 60.
---. “Sophie on Montanna (Parts 1 and 2).” DWP, Series VIII, Sub A, Media ID 092.0620.
Published Works:


Print.


