

QUEER'S APORIAS: MOURNING, DEATH, AND RHETORIC

by

NICHOLAS JOSEPH LEPP

(Under the Direction of Barbara A. Biesecker)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the question of what queer may do, be, or mean through a rhetorical investigation into three instances of ACT UP's political funerals. In particular, I argue that queer is irreducibly aporetic, made possible by a simultaneous threshold and impasse, by which the term comes to have particular uses in different contexts. In this sense, queer is mobilized within this project as a term with a wide range of possibilities: as an impossible demand to recognize the insurmountable violence of HIV/AIDS, as a term with which the language of the family may be reclaimed and utilized for more liberatory ends, and as a distinct space-time which eschews linearity and denies a normative tale of progress. Drawing from a variety of scholars within queer theory, rhetorical studies, and deconstruction, this project seeks to further our understandings of queer's potentialities by remaining open to the term's movements yet nevertheless attending to its contingently and contextually determined limitations; queer, then, as I come to understand it here, is neither a boundless term nor a definitional opposition to normativity but is instead both made possible and impossible by its situationally determined constraints and opportunities. As a result, I suggest that it is a sense of undecidability which gives queer its potentiality, allowing so many different people to use the term to mean so many different things at various times and places. I conclude this dissertation by

arguing that it is this undecidability embedded within queer which allows the term to be utilized as a tool in our fight for an impossible yet necessary justice.

INDEX WORDS: Queer, Aporia, Rhetoric, Justice, ACT UP, Mourning Rituals

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: QUEER, APORIA, AND POSSIBILITY

Queer discourses and scholarship have proliferated since their original instantiation in early 1990s activism and academia. From its initial deployment by activist groups like Queer Nation to its inclusion in the acronym LGBTQ reflecting non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identities, it is not an exaggeration to say that theorizations about queer, its nature, its applicability, and its importance for a wide amalgamation of topics have reframed thinking throughout a variety of social, political, and legal spheres. And, as its continual prevalence suggests—and contrary to 2010s academic anxiety about the death of queer theory¹—it seems likely that queer is here to stay. Queer is now understood as having several semantic forms: a noun signifying a variety of topics such as the sexual or gender identities of an untold number of persons, places, and things; a verb applying to a variety of actions such as turnout efforts to increase voting (“queer the vote”); and an adjective describing things such as unconventional and innovative methodological approaches to nearly every academic field of inquiry. Because of the prevalence of this term in so many spheres, disagreements regarding what queer is, does, and can be inevitably arise. What is queer? What can queer do, be, or mean? How can we look at something and say “yes, that is queer,” or “no, that is not queer?”

I do not propose a definitive answer to any of these questions. But I do believe that investigation into what queer is, does, and can be is an important inquiry—and not just because queer is here to stay. I am drawn to queer because of several of (what I perceive to be) its important allegiances: its commitment to challenging binaristic modes of thinking and structures of oppression that have historically committed physical and psychological violence; its existence as more than just a catchall for gender and sexuality while simultaneously refusing to be

divorced from those identity categories; and its constant demand to theorize from both the available means of thought and action while concurrently aspiring for new worlds which radically reshape the very ways in which we think and act. Both Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael O'Rourke remind us that the etymological root of "queer" connects the word to a kind of twisting, turning, or torquing; it is this root which capacitates scholars to use queer to theorize within categories like gender and sexuality while simultaneously imagining something else.² In other words, queer remains theoretically, politically, and socially committed to a kind of "both/and" at the levels of thought and action: queer "is both interactive and yet resistant, both participatory and yet distinct, claiming at once equality and difference, demanding political representation while insisting on its material and historical specificity."³ Queer provides the means *both* to theorize within and about the identities, politics, and relations we are thrust into *and* also to seek and make a better world.

Semantic debates about what queer is, does, and can be are thus valuable. As Annamarie Jagose tells us, "because the word queer indexes—and to some extent constitutes—changed models of gender and sexuality, semantic struggles over its deployment are far from pointless."⁴ The intervention that this dissertation proposes to take is within these "semantic struggles." Simply put, my argument is that attending to the movement of queer between and within its multiple conflicting meanings is worthwhile for conceptualizing what queer is, does, and can be. As will be further explained, in rhetorical studies, queer's meaning shifts and moves, oftentimes in the same book, essay, and even paragraph. And frequently, those meanings are contradictory. My suggestion is that these contradictions are both possible and productive because queer is irreducibly aporetic (more on this below). While the broader dissertation discusses three ways we find aporias in queer rhetoric, this introduction details one aporia by focusing on queer as it

operates as both a non-essentialist critique of identity politics and as an essentialist form of identity politics within rhetorical studies. I forefront this aporia to demonstrate that the debate between an essentialist and a non-essentialist understanding of queer underlies rhetorical investigations into queer theory. My suggestion is that taking seriously the fact that these understandings of queer are in conflict with each other can productively contribute to the conversation about queer's radical potentiality. Because, as I suggest later, queer rhetorical theory and activism ought to participate in queer worldmaking, theorizing queer rhetoric from the position of aporia is necessary.

Before continuing to lay out the contours and aims of this project, I want to clearly state that my purpose is not to criticize or arrest the contradictory movement of queer: I find the ways that rhetorical studies have adopted queer's "open mesh of possibilities" to be illuminating, creating numerous important works.⁵ Indeed, it is exactly because rhetorical studies has adopted these conflicting understandings that I find this project to be beneficial. I agree with Sedgwick who suggests that we approach queer from "a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other."⁶ My aim, then, is not to say that other scholars' readings of queer are definitionally bunk. Rather, I want to unpack and detail the productive aporias underpinning the usage of the term queer. With Jagose, I wish to theorize queer's contradictory meanings and usages as "necessarily relational," creating room for a version of that something else which queer seeks.⁷ My suggestion is that theorizing between and within these aporias rather than moving past them can benefit the conversation about what queer is, does, and can be.

The case studies of this dissertation will investigate queer public mourning rituals. This is so for two reasons. First, as will be discussed later in this chapter, I believe that queer activism—

and queer public mourning rituals in particular—arise from and make sense within the various aporias embedded within and between different understandings of queer. Douglas Crimp makes this argument in “Melancholia and Moralism” in two ways. First, Crimp reminds us that for Sigmund Freud, mourning is necessarily individual and singularized. This Freudian understanding of mourning creates “trouble,” Crimp argues, because the collective nature of queer public mourning rituals requires “a social interaction of our private efforts” and thereby demonstrates a contradiction embedded within mourning.⁸ Second, Crimp takes Larry Kramer to task for assuming that mourning and militancy are necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, Crimp suggests, while mourning and militancy are different—and often quite contradictory—their differences can be a productive source for both queer activism and queer theory broadly. Thus, as Crimp famously says, “militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning and militancy.”⁹ As such, queer public mourning rituals are productive sites for understanding queer’s aporias. This dissertation aims to adopt a similar position to Crimp’s, suggesting that adopting a conflicting stance can be a fruitful force for reconceptualizing and advancing queer.

Second, I find my academic work to be theoretically committed to activism. Public mourning has been a common tactic of queer activism since the term garnered widespread public usage. Deborah Gould, for example, draws from Crimp’s work connecting mourning and militancy to argue that ACT UP “altered the meaning of grief by renaming and enacting as ‘anger’ that complicated constellation of emotions.”¹⁰ This alteration of emotions via a reconceptualization of and thus connection between mourning and activism, Gould further tells us, became a crucial tactic of most queer activist groups.¹¹ My commitment to activism aims for the creation of a better political, social, and academic world. In other words, I not only hope that my scholarship is, to some extent, influential upon queer activists—what queer is and can do

should be a relevant concern for them—but also committed to the sustainability of academic spaces for students and scholars alike to do queer theorizing. In my mind, then, queer theory ought to be committed to queer worldmaking—“a messy enterprise driven by a vision of another world, another way of living...[which] requires engaging the contemporary situation with its historical legacies, varying interests, and much more.”¹² I am in agreement with Erin Rand who describes her academic interest in activism thusly: “This is not just a matter of academics proving their ‘street cred’ by writing about activism; rather, it is about the political agency of academic work—that is, its ability to participate in imagining and making a queerer world—being staked in the politics of activism.”¹³ If it is true that academic work has a certain level of political agency—something I agree with Rand about, despite the increasing neoliberalization of the academy and subsequent sequestering of academics into the ivory tower—then further research into queer activism is worthy of inquiry.

The rest of this introduction proceeds as follows. I begin by first unpacking aporia and explaining the difference between aporia and contradiction. Rather than shutting down investigation as a contradiction does, an aporia provides the means to theorize within conflicting positions so as to better understand what queer can do. Afterwards, by taking a brief detour through notions of radical contingency and context, I suggest that rhetoric is a useful tool for investigating queer’s aporias. Next, I discuss one of the ways that queer is aporetic in rhetorical studies, explaining queer as a critique of essentialist identity politics and queer as a form of essentialist identity politics. I also provide an etymological argument for understanding queer itself as irreducibly aporetic, a suggestion that further demonstrates how a differently productive reading of queer arises from tarrying within and between the conflicts arising from its aporias. Then, I lay out the dissertation’s reading strategy by both further explaining the value of

approaching queer's aporias by rhetorically reading queer public mourning rituals and explaining my commitment to queer worldmaking. I conclude by introducing the three case studies that this dissertation will tackle.

Aporia

An aporia is an impasse, a point at which it seems as if one has reached the end of an investigation, or a logical limitation which cannot be overcome. In classic Greek rhetoric, an aporia arises when one is put into a position of uncertainty resulting from competing yet equally compelling claims in an argument.¹⁴ "If we arrive at an aporia," Stuart Murray tells us, "it means we are in doubt, we are perplexed, we are confused at how (best) to proceed."¹⁵ An aporia, then, arises when one no longer knows what to do next because one is locked in a stalemate or gridlock. In *Aporias*, Jacques Derrida tells us that an aporia is "the difficult or the impracticable...the refused, denied, or prohibited passage" and "the impossible, the impossibility, as what cannot pass."¹⁶ That is, what is fundamental to aporia is a certain kind of impassability or logical constraint. Derrida finds aporias in different philosophies, political systems, discourses, and rationalities; he finds aporia to be the condition of possibility of hospitality, democracy, the gift, death, and friendship.¹⁷ For Derrida, aporias are nearly everywhere.

What distinguishes an aporia from a contradiction is that an aporia does not shut down discussion like contradiction does but rather conditions new ways of thinking outside the previous confines of thought. To resolve a contradiction, one must choose a side and adopt an either/or perspective; either option A or option B—but not both—must be correct. One works through a contradiction by picking one competing possibility. By choosing one side over another, contradiction denies the both/and perspective that scholars like Theresa de Lauretis have

importantly propagated as crucial to queer theory.¹⁸ Instead, an aporia is not “synonymous with closure” but rather “represent[s] a limit through which something announces itself in an affirmative fashion. The aporetic is affirmative, constitutive.”¹⁹ Rather than considering an aporia a roadblock, Derrida suggests that it is more akin to “a door, a threshold, a border, [or] a line,” albeit one that cannot be crossed and therefore functions as an impasse.²⁰ Thus, aporia is both threshold and impasse, doorway and divider, crossable and uncrossable. As a result, an aporia must be approached in a doubled fashion. Rather than taking an either/or approach like one does to resolve a contradiction, one reads aporia in a both/and way (it is *both* threshold *and* impasse) to find meaning. As threshold, an aporia functions as a line which, in crossing, would open a different way of thinking. But as impasse, an aporia constrains that crossing, preventing that different mode of thought. One cannot move past an aporia because it is an impasse, but one must also read an aporia as a doorway to new modes of thinking. In this sense, an aporia serves as both a condition of possibility *and* condition of impossibility. This dissertation suggests that, by attending to the aporetic nature of queer within rhetoric, scholars can more thoroughly understand queer’s radical possibilities.

To understand how aporia can be both impasse and threshold requires a brief detour through Derrida’s quasi-transcendental notion of *différance*. For Derrida, *différance* is the non-foundational condition of possibility for all speech, identity, subjectivity, and being; it is that which “makes signification possible.”²¹ *Différance*, a neologism putting together the French words for difference and deferral, suggests that meaning is established via a continual process of deferral to that which is different such that “the different threads and different lines of meaning...go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others.”²² Meaning, then, is never contained, holistic, or complete, but rather temporarily

established, contingently maintained, and in a constant state of play. In Barbara Biesecker's words, meaning "is forever in process, indefinite, controvertible."²³ Thus, meaning itself is only determined in relation to another element of any given system:

It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called 'present' element...is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present.²⁴

Différance ensures that the general economy of meaning operates such that each individual meaning is temporally defined—both in relation to the past and the future—in order for a present meaning to become temporarily possible. Meaning is never determined in a definitive or absolute manner; instead, meaning is "strategic and adventurous:"

Strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a telos or theme of domination.²⁵

Différance conditions a reading of aporia as both impasse *and* threshold insofar as the very meaning of both "impasse" and "threshold" are determined differentially between and within one another. Impasse cannot exist without threshold and threshold cannot exist without impasse such that both condition the possibility of the other. The impasse of the aporia, then, does not shut down thought or conversation but rather capacitates a different mode of thought. My suggestion, then, is that reading queer as irreducibly aporetic is worthwhile.

Importantly, *différance* is a quasi-transcendental rather than a transcendental. "Quasi" means seemingly but not actually, in part, or almost. Thus, to say that *différance* is a quasi-transcendental is to say that it is almost—but not quite actually—a transcendental. *Différance* thus cannot be the sole rule or foundation of aporia. *Différance* allows one to, as Matthias Fritsch

says, “experience the aporia in order to invent a new rule each time” such that “sedimented institutional structures and social relations are exposed to an open future that recovers their contingency, the moment of decision, and their democratic negotiability.”²⁶ Depending on the particular contingent situation or context, one may find the trace of *différance*—the “*différance* which opens appearance”²⁷—in a variety of different forms, including cinders, the corpse, specters, names, spacing, supplements, and the mark.²⁸ In other words, to find that which makes the aporia possible (e.g., *différance*), one must read for contingency and context. My suggestion is that it is rhetoric which uniquely provides the means to read for queer’s aporias.

Rhetoric, Contingency, Context

This dissertation investigates queer’s aporias from a rhetorical perspective. A rhetorical approach to investigating queer, as demonstrated by other rhetoricians interested in queer and queer theory, suggests that there is a fundamental link between queer and contingency; as Isaac West tells us, contingency is “a thoroughly rhetorical condition.”²⁹ Furthermore, West suggests, a rhetorical approach to queer recognizes “the impossibility of a pure queerness” and its radical “unfinalizability.”³⁰ Thus, what rhetoric’s radical contingency uniquely adds to an investigation of queer’s aporias is an understanding that one cannot investigate the “necessary ground” or metaphysical foundation of queer without also attending to its particular manifestations.³¹ Conventionally, contingency is defined as a possible but not fully predictable occurrence. However, the Latin root word for contingency—*contingo* or *contingere*—has two meanings: both “to happen” or “to come to pass” and “to come into contact with” or “to contaminate.”³² Drawing from its Latin root, contingency suggests a kind of contamination such that queer cannot be read without attention to the contextual instantiations of it. A rhetorical approach to reading queer indicates that the term is made possible by its particular uses.

A radically contingent/rhetorical reading runs contrary to the prevailing academic interpretation of queer. A variety of scholars in fields such as English, Cultural Studies, and Women's Studies have forwarded the notion that the very foundation of queer is its connection to antinormativity or radical negation.³³ For example, Lee Edelman famously posits queer as "the social order's death drive," that which resists and disrupts the socio-symbolic order and heteronormative future which intrinsically deems the homosexual abject.³⁴ My rhetorical reading of queer disagrees that this is the necessary (non)position of queer, instead suggesting that the particular contexts in which the term is deployed demonstrate its variable meanings. Queer may certainly still operate as antinormativity or radical negation, but tying contingency and rhetoric together means that a rhetorical approach provides space to read queer as other than absolute negativity. To draw from West once more, the problem with a non-contingent approach to theorizing queer is that it means that "certain institutions, practices, and identities are held in suspended motion and frozen as inherently normative (and thus not possibly queer) regardless of how they are actually lived and experienced."³⁵ In other words, non-contingent queer theory necessitates an either/or perspective—either this is queer, or it is normative—rather than a both/and perspective, denying queer's radical possibilities and ignoring that "norms are more dynamic and more politically engaging" than antinormative critiques let on.³⁶ Centralizing contingency means that rhetoric allows scholars to acknowledge that we should not only think of queer in abstract, dualistic terms (like normative versus queer) but rather remain uncertain about, and therefore open to, queer's radical possibilities depending on the contextual instantiations of the term.

But what does it mean to understand queer within particular contexts? In other words, what does an approach that reads queer contextually provide? In "Signature, Event, Context,"

Derrida calls J. L. Austin's total context into question, arguing that no context can ever be fully delimited or complete. For Austin, Derrida tells us, there can be "no residue" or "irreducible polysemy" in the speech act; that which Austin calls infelicities "always come[s] back to an element in what Austin calls the total context."³⁷ However, Derrida suggests, because of iterability, that which "is indispensable to the functioning of all language," no context can be absolutely determined.³⁸ Iterability, or repetition with a difference, necessarily ensures that all efforts at communication are marred by a certain indeterminacy which prevents their context from being entirely closed. Contexts may be—and frequently are—stable, but iterability ensures that they are never complete, holistic, or final. What is of particular note for thinking context, then, is that iterability ensures that what is communicated can be spoken and/or written in a different context. That is to say, the intrinsic openness of each particular context means that it cannot entirely determine what is communicated. As Derrida says, "every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written...can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in doing so it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable."³⁹

The fact that context does not entirely determine (yet remains quite relevant for studying) meaning is exactly what makes context important for this dissertation's central question. That is to say, the context in which queer is understood is significant for considering what queer is, does, and can be. In his "Afterword" to *Limited, Inc.*, Derrida indicates that "there is always something political 'in the very project of attempting to fix the contexts of utterances'" because each context is never natural or inevitable.⁴⁰ Rather, the "non-natural" status of contexts, the fact that every utterance can break from any particular context, ensures that the question of "which politics is implied" by a particular context must be raised.⁴¹ Because contexts are not natural,

they must also not be neutral. It is in this sense of non-natural and non-neutral that Derrida suggests we think of context as “the entire ‘real-history-of-the-world’,” designating a continuation of “the world, reality, [and] history” within each particular situation.⁴² That is to say, reading for context is important insofar as it makes possible the social, political, and historical factors influencing the meaning of queer. By reading rhetorically, then, I am suggesting a reading strategy which attends to both the contingent and contextual instantiations of queer.

I read rhetorically to locate the trace within each of my three case studies. For Derrida, a trace is that which comprises “identity *and* difference, repetition *and* alteration, etc.,” or that which “renders the *project* of idealization possible without lending ‘*itself*’ to any pure, simple, and idealizable conceptualization.”⁴³ In other words, a trace exists within a chain of iterability, serving as residue by which we may come to understand the *différance* within a text, event, or demonstration. A trace is thus the “nickname” with which an object serves a differential function.⁴⁴ Reading for the trace allows me to locate aporia as it arises in each of these demonstrations and, as a result, begin to understand what queer is doing in each of my case studies. The three traces that I read for are the ashes (chapter two), the corpse (chapter three), and the ghost (chapter four).

Queer Aporias

In this section, I begin this dissertation’s central position that queer is made possible by aporia by arguing that rhetoricians frequently theorize queer in conflicting ways. The goal of this section is not to provide an exhaustive definitional understanding of queer, detail the definitive record of queer in rhetoric, or determine the “who’s who” of queer rhetoricians. Instead, I seek to describe a rhetorically significant trend of the term’s usage. I begin by detailing two opposing

understandings of queer—as critique of essentialist identity and as form of essentialist identity—as they are used by rhetoricians. I then provide several examples of rhetoricians moving between these understandings.

Two of the most common ways that queer is conceptualized in rhetorical studies is as a critique of essentialist identity and as an essentialist identity category. In particular, the queer critique of identity calls into question as essentialist the notion that identity categories ought to be formulated along the lines of similarity and being while queer-as-identity is an umbrella term signifying either the LGBTQ+ acronym or non-normative sexualities and genders which are not conventionally captured under that acronym. As I will explain, the queer critique of identity still formulates queer as identity. That identity is just formulated from a non-essentialist position rather than an essentialist one. Thus, queer scholarship in rhetorical studies is both essentialist and non-essentialist.

By using the terms “essentialism” and “non-essentialism,” I am wading into a debate in feminist and queer studies that is at least fifty years old. Essentialism, as I understand it here, suggests that there is an innate characteristic or set of characteristics necessary for an identity. Thus, as Jagose tells us,

essentialists regard identity as natural, fixed, and innate....hold that a person's sexual orientation is a culture-independent, objective and intrinsic property....[and] assume that homosexuality exists across time as a universal phenomenon which has a marginalized but continuous and coherent history of its own.⁴⁵

An essentialist understanding of queerness necessitates an ontological connection to non-heterosexual or non-cisgendered identities regardless of culture, time, or situation—that is, queerness must be LGBT+ in order for queerness to be itself. This understanding of queerness becomes “shorthand” for LGBT, “offer[ing] itself as a new solidification of identity.”⁴⁶ By

contrast, a non-essentialist identity is one which does not entail any necessary characteristics; instead, a non-essentialist approach provides a contingent and strategic understanding of identity. Non-essentialism does not deny or destroy the existence of identity but rather challenges the ontological foundations of identity in favor of “an infinitely pluralized weave of interanimating discourses and events.”⁴⁷ Thus, what distinguishes these two understandings of queer is not “identity versus not identity,” but rather “essentialized versus non-essentialized identity.” Scholars frequently move between and among these two seemingly opposing positions, at some points understanding queer as essentialized identity, and at other points understanding queer as non-essentialized identity. The rest of this section will detail the queer critique of identity as non-essentialist and queer as essentialist identity before providing a reading of queer rhetorical scholarship which holds essentialism and non-essentialism in tension with one another.

I begin with the understanding of queer as a critique of identity because that is its initial meaning upon being reclaimed by queer activists, deployed by queer scholars, and explored by rhetoricians in the 1990s.⁴⁸ Queer as a critique of identity calls into question normative and essentialist identity politics. Identity politics, conventionally, begins from the position that identity is based on a certain kind of being. In other words, it is a common characteristic—*being* Black, *being* woman, *being* gay—which determines the lines along which identity is grouped. That grouping, the queer critique of identity suggests, stabilizes and normalizes those people according to what they have in common; thus, a gay man becomes defined by his gender and sexuality or a Black woman becomes defined by her gender and race. The problem with this stabilization is two-fold. First, it leaves little room for theorizing other aspects of identity. As R. Anthony Slagle says, “the very construction of identities necessarily names certain characteristics that shape the identity (and, conversely, certain characteristics are excluded).”⁴⁹

Thus, a gay man is defined *solely* by his gender and sexuality or a Black woman is defined *solely* by her gender and race. “The result is that identity formation essentializes the meaning of *gay*, or *lesbian*, or *feminist*, or *African American*, etc.”⁵⁰ Second, this stabilization actively disenfranchises non-normative peoples who do not fit well into those broader categories. For example, Slagle reminds us that a common assumption of early gay activism was the existence of a “gay essence” which necessarily accepted the dichotomous logic of heterosexual and homosexual.⁵¹ Those whose sexuality do not fit neatly into either category were further marginalized insofar as they could not be represented by this movement for equality.

Instead, queer critiques of identity embrace the instability of identity and identity categories, arguing that there are fundamental incoherencies within and between identificatory characteristics such as sex, sexuality, gender, and desire which cannot be mapped by stable notions of identity. Identity is reconceptualized as fluid, variable, and shifting. Thus, queer signifies nothing essential; it is “a celebration of difference rather than the imposition of a fixed identity.”⁵² Uncertainty and ambiguity become central to identity instead of coherence and resemblance. This understanding of queer is not meant to suggest that queer people are not similar or “normal” in some ways but rather to undo the ontological foundations by which identities become intelligible. Hence, queer is still used as an identity category—one can claim a queer identity—but what makes someone queer is not necessarily the same as what makes someone else queer. As Sedgwick says, “anyone’s use of ‘queer’ about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else.”⁵³ For example, Queer Nation and ACT UP activists who identified as gay men or lesbians would have sex with each other; for these activists, claiming an identity revolving around same-sex desire yet actively sleeping with people of the opposite sex was a characteristic of a queer identity.⁵⁴

Distinct from queer critiques of identity, queer-as-identity supposes an essentialist understanding of identity revolving around sexuality and gender. In some instances, queer is an umbrella term for the longer acronym LGBT+, representing every identity not categorized as heterosexual or cisgender; in other instances, queer designates those non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identities which are not conventionally understood as LGBT (without the +). In either instance, it is a state of being which defines queer, reconceptualizing it as an extension of—but importantly not synonymous with—LGBT liberation politics predominant in the 1970s and 80s.⁵⁵ That is to say, queer-as-identity relies on the same ontological foundations of LGBT liberation politics—*being* LGBT+—while orienting those foundations to radically distinct political and social goals. Two key political and social distinctions separate queer politics from LGBT liberation politics. First, queer-as-identity signifies an understanding that sexual and gender differences are foundational and should be celebrated rather than downplayed; for example, sexuality and gender identities shape the way people communicate, the way messages are interpreted and understood, the creation and sustainability of the family, how nationalism and other ideologies come into force, the circulation of capital, and much more.⁵⁶ Gay liberation theorists instead suggest that LGBT folks are just like everybody else except for who they sleep with or what gender they identify as (and thus that LGBT people aren't really all that different from heterosexual and cisgender folks). Second, queer-as-identity signifies a commitment to smashing the heteronormative foundations of dominant society in favor of a queerer one; this is in contrast to gay liberation theorists who advocate for the integration of LGBT individuals into dominant society.

What is essential to queer-as-identity is being LGBT+; what distinguishes queer politics from LGBT liberation politics is a commitment to the importance of sexuality and a fundamental

opposition to heteronormativity. We find these essential characteristics, for example, in Charles Morris' work, who defines queer as that which fundamentally "suggests the instantiation of sexuality as indispensable."⁵⁷ Gust Yep also makes these essential characteristics clear, telling us that "queer identity is an identity with an essence....that calls into question conventional understandings of sexual identity."⁵⁸ An essentialist queer identity is one which starts from the being of LGBT+ individuals and orients that being toward an entirely different political and social milieu that celebrates sexual and gender differences rather than ostracizes, downplays, and neglects them.

We come, then, to two distinct understandings of queer: one that criticizes and rejects essentialist notions of identity in favor of non-essentialist ones, and one that embraces essentialist notions of identity and uses them to agitate against heteronormativity. Rather than choosing one side in the essentialism/non-essentialism debate, I want to use this dissertation to hold both sides in productive tension, playing within the aporia that is produced when putting these two opposing concepts together. On my view, playing within this aporia is productive for two reasons. First, I believe it is necessary that we hold onto both the essentialism and the non-essentialism within queer studies and theories. On the one hand, the essential is crucial for using queer to press for particular political and social demands (as each of my case studies will suggest); furthermore, without an essentialist understanding, queer easily slips into being claimed by anyone to mean anything—in which case, the term becomes both everything and nothing at once, losing much of its theoretical and academic value. On the other hand, the non-essential is crucial for considering how queer may shift and move, producing a variety of different meanings which may be mobilized for radical change. In this sense, then, aporetically considering queer as both essentialist and non-essentialist is meaningful. Second, I think we can

productively read against the grain to find the aporetic essentialist/non-essentialist tension within a variety of queer rhetorical scholarship. In other words, we may find other scholars productively holding onto this aporia as further proof of the benefits of holding an essentialist/non-essentialist reading of queer together. Here I provide three examples: Thomas Dunn's work on Matthew Shepard's murder, E. Cram's work on queer intimacies, and Charles Morris's work introducing queer memory studies.

In his essay exploring the discourse surrounding Matthew Shepard's brutal murder, Thomas Dunn tells us that queer "challenge[s] what it means to be gay"⁵⁹ by destabilizing normative assumptions regarding that identity category, thereby aligning queer with non-essentialism. Dunn is very careful to define his terms in a detailed endnote early in the essay:

I use "LGBT" to signal the wide and diverse community of individuals often united by their exclusion from the "norms" of exclusive heterosexuality, opposite sex desire, and gender conformity....I use "queer" to signal an additional *part of the LGBT community* that seeks to disrupt static notions of identity. Although the distinctions between these terms are often blurred in popular and scholarly usage, I attempt to use them precisely to specify distinctions within the following texts.⁶⁰

One may read this passage to understand Dunn as providing an exclusively non-essentialist understanding of queer: if "LGBT" refers to a "community" of individuals whose sole positive characteristic is their "exclusion" from the "norms" of "exclusive heterosexuality, opposite sex desire, and gender conformity" then the term "LGBT" may include people who are not lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender at all but rather people who engage in non-normative or non-exclusive heterosexuality, such as heterosexual people in open relationships or who engage in non-normative sex acts. But if we instead consider LGBT to be an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, then we may instead productively read slippage between queer as essentialist and queer as non-essentialist in this endnote. In this sense, to be LGBT is to belong to a community of people identified as those who are not exclusively heterosexual or cisgender.

Queer is a distinct *subset* of people within this community who aim to disrupt unchanging and normative notions of identity. This is to provide, then, a reading of queer which is at once non-essential, aiming to disrupt normative understandings of identity, and essential, being people who are LGBT. Staying within this tension may also help us differently consider what Dunn says about those members of the LGBT community who rearticulated Shepard's death in order to advance a structural criticism of homophobia and heteronormativity. Dunn argues that attempts to detail Shepard's death as an isolated and particularized event marks

an exigence in which *the LGBT community* might argue for an alternative meaning of Shepard's death productive for the community's social, political, and cultural aims....Shepard's death was a rare opportunity for skilled *queer* rhetors to constitute the violence he faced as a worldview associated with culture at large.⁶¹

Queer, then, can function in both an essentialist manner, operating interchangeably with the broader acronym LGBT, and in a non-essentialist manner, operating as a criticism of static identity categories and politics.

In their essay exploring queer intimacies and the settler colonial archive, E. Cram may also define queer in both an essentialist and a non-essentialist manner. In an important endnote, Cram tells us that they

deploy queer in a number of registers. First, queer is shorthand for an imagined public of sexual minorities. Second, queer acts as a process, verb, method, and orientation to criticism. I use it relative to a phenomenological sensibility to 'disorder' and 'disorient' how modern archival imaginations encourage following 'straight' lines.⁶²

Much like Dunn's essay, one may read Cram's first understanding of queer to be exclusively non-essential; if queer stands in for an "imagined" public of sexual minorities, then it is not necessarily stable or unchanging. Yet that imagined public is still one of "sexual minorities," suggesting that it is both made possible by and defined by the status of sexual minority. While not necessarily synonymous with LGBT (and therefore a bit different than Dunn's definition), to

define a group of people by their sexuality requires a static and essentialist notion of sexual identity. In Cram's second definition, however, queer is an "orientation to criticism" which seeks to disrupt and disturb that which is straight (i.e., normative). In this excerpt, queer can thus be understood as both essentialist—understood as a "public of sexual minorities"—and non-essentialist—understood as a critical method which unsettles the foundations of the modern social and political imaginary. Given that Cram tells us that "a queer approach accounts for the productive moments" that arise when the interaction between different elements in an archive "does not necessarily result in coordination or continuity," we may productively read their work by playing within the essentialist/non-essentialist aporia.⁶³ That is to say, if, for Cram, queer finds meaningful the moments of discontinuity and disconnect, then we may benefit from reading their essay in a simultaneously essentialist and non-essentialist manner.

In the introduction to his famous *Queering Public Address*, Morris persuasively argues that scholars ought to reclaim the past as a site of queer intervention and worldmaking. Morris begins by forfronting a picture of what he calls "Seneca Falls Boys," an anonymous image of two young men which he suggests metonymically demonstrates the potential of a queer turn toward the past within rhetorical studies. Recognizing the potential pitfalls of returning to the past, Morris tells us that

some of my contributors have noted that adopting our Seneca Falls Boys suggests that the project potentially smacks of (nonstrategic) essentialism...an emphasis on the primacy of sexual identity, an identity whose desire is fixed in a gendered direction....The risk here is that whatever rewards it might accrue, heteronormative structures and humanist assumptions remain uncontested, if not reified.⁶⁴

"By contrast," Morris suggests, a "more radical queer historical yearning" seeks "to explode the homo/hetero binary on which an ethnic perspective rests," thereby rejecting "identity and sexual object choice as analytical category" in favor of the "examin[ation] of erotic identifications,"

desire, and normative discourses of gender and sexuality.⁶⁵ Theoretically, then, queer operates as a criticism of essentialist notions of identity, rejecting sexual object choice in favor of a shifting and contingent understanding of desire. Yet it is possible to also read Morris as providing an essentialist understanding of queer. In “My Old Kentucky Homo” published in the same book, Morris calls “queer history” “the story of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender historiography.”⁶⁶ That is to say, in queer history, “queer” operates as a stand-in for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, demonstrating an essentialist understanding of the term. Thus queer, for Morris, is both non-essentialist—exploding the very binary by which sexuality comes to be intelligible—and essentialist—functioning as a substitute for LGBT.

It is thus possible to read essentialism and non-essentialism as at once underlying important scholarship which discusses, in variable contexts, queer rhetoric. These conflicting positions, it would seem, produce an impossible bind which ostensibly should bring this scholarship to a grinding halt by forcing scholars to choose either a non-essentialist or an essentialist understanding of queer. That is to say, if we take contradiction at face value, these alternative investigations into queer within the rhetorical field either should not exist or should be understood as poor scholarship. Yet nevertheless, these investigations do exist and are certainly *not* poor scholarship (they are, I believe, quite fruitful). To understand this tension productively, I propose to look past conventional understandings which position contradictions as halting in favor of a turn toward aporia. My suggestion is that theorizing from the position of aporia demonstrates that the doubled nature of these conflicting theorizations pushes queer in a productive direction.

To put it plainly, my wager is that queer is irreducibly aporetic. Derrida tells us that in the case of an aporia there is “no more *trans*- (transport, transposition, transgression, translation, and

even transcendence).”⁶⁷ I draw attention here to *trans-*, the Latin prefix meaning across. Because of *différance*, Derrida’s claim does not mean that *trans-* no longer exists but rather that it fundamentally must engage with *impasse*. In other words, *trans-* or acrossness cannot pass through the *impasse* of *aporia* but is instead constrained and constituted by *aporia*. Importantly, *trans-* is also within the etymological family of *queer*, as Sedgwick tells us: “the word ‘queer’ itself means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*, which also yields the German *queer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*. . . . *across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across ‘perversions’*.”⁶⁸ Queer, then, etymologically speaking, is necessarily imbued with a sense of *trans-* or acrossness. Therefore, queer is made possible by *aporia*. There can be no queer without *aporia*.

Queer Public Mourning Rituals and Worldmaking

This dissertation rhetorically reads three instances of queer public mourning rituals. In particular, I will attend to three of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)’s political funerals. Beginning in 1990, ACT UP’s political funerals fundamentally reshaped AIDS activism, signaling a turn away from representations of death in favor of a stricter displaying of the dead.⁶⁹ From the throwing of the ashes of those who had died of AIDS on the White House Lawns to the parading of corpses throughout New York City and Washington, D.C., ACT UP’s political funerals were more bold, more aggressive, and more visceral than previous demonstrations had been. As Jordan Miller says, ACT UP’s political funerals were “a potent media spectacle and also a profoundly meaningful and affective expression of a community in mourning.”⁷⁰ These funerals, then, serve as powerful demonstrations of queer’s potentiality, and are thus meaningful case studies for this dissertation.

In choosing to investigate three instances of AIDS activism, I do not mean to suggest that queerness is necessarily or inevitably tied to AIDS. Instead, my aim is to turn toward AIDS activists which have, in my view, mobilized queerness as a disruptive force. To be very clear, my interest lies in what makes the force of queerness disruptive rather than any normative claims about queer as it relates to AIDS and activism. While it is true that, historically, the activist reclamation of queer arises coterminously with AIDS activism, it is also true that this term has been utilized in a variety of other contexts to signify much more than just a relationship to AIDS. So, while my case studies are all instances of AIDS activism, my point is not to irreducibly tie queer and queerness to AIDS but rather to investigate three political demonstrations which help us understand some of queer's potentiality.

This dissertation dives into a variety of academic and non-academic sources in order to investigate my case studies. In particular, I attend to videos of each of these three protests recorded by activists, memoirs published by former and current members of ACT UP, blogs and op-eds written by and about members of ACT UP, interviews with former and current activists, academic essays and books written about each of these events and ACT UP more broadly, and theoretical and philosophical writings which help me develop my arguments. Many of these sources provide first-hand accounts of these protests, some of which come from the demonstrations themselves; others involve scholarship developed by others interested in these case studies, queer theory, and AIDS activism. My hope is that, by drawing from a wide variety of sources, I can develop a fruitful and detailed understanding of what queer can do, be, and mean.

In agreement with queer's allegiance to a "both/and" perspective, I suggest that each of the rituals reflect both an essentialist and a non-essentialist understanding of queer. The way that

each of these case studies are essentially queer is fairly obvious: each deals with the mourning of LGBT+ deaths. The way that these case studies are non-essentially queer is less obvious. My belief is that each of these demonstrations queer the life/death binary by challenging the fundamental difference between life and death. If a non-essential understanding of queer suggests that there is no necessary characteristic or intrinsic form of being that defines identities, to queer a binary is to call into question the division (the slash between the two words) that separates the two relevant categories. In this instance, then, by saying that these three rituals queer the life/death binary, I am suggesting that these rituals meddle with the life/death binary such that what we understand as “alive” and “dead” is called into question. As Adam J. Greteman says of ACT UP’s political funerals, “the political funeral became an act that...allowed to dead to speak for the living. The living—those who had buried friends, lovers, and more—were at a loss for words or realized that words were not enough. As such, the bodies of the dead became the spokespeople for the AIDS crisis....The dead spoke from beyond their graves.”⁷¹

Furthermore, as I will explain in each chapter, these case studies each point toward a different aporia which may help us understand queer’s potentiality. The Ashes Action suggests an aporia of absence/presence, Mark Fisher’s political funeral suggests an aporia of inside/outside, and Kiki Mason’s political funeral suggests an aporia of past/present/future and here/there. If, for Miller, ACT UP’s political funerals “enact a kind of double movement” such that they each function as “ritualized reflections upon what has been and what was lost for the purpose of energizing and mobilizing present actors to produce an alternative future that may never come,” then we may understand these protests as being made both possible and impossible by aporia.⁷²

It is my suggestion that these moments of queering embedded within these rituals demonstrate both the irreducible aporia within queer and how that aporia can critique certain social structures and create change. That is to say, it is in the traces within each of my case studies—the cinders, the corpse, and the specter, respectively—where queer is at once essential and non-essential that one finds the particular form of *différance* and thus the aporia embedded within queer. And importantly, each of these rituals demand social and structural change, thereby demonstrating the important effects of aporetic thinking. For example, one of my case studies involves ACT UP's 1992 Ashes Action in which protestors threw the ashes of those who had died from HIV/AIDS onto the White House lawn. Refusing to call this a funeral, protestors suggested that they continued to presence their dead loves ones and instead absence the Bush administration who had lost legitimacy in their eyes. My suggestion is that, through the irreducible aporia of absence and presence, queering can operate as a rhetorical strategy which makes a political and social demand to acknowledge the insurmountable violences which caused AIDS deaths to occur. As suggested by this and my two other case studies (namely, Mark Fisher's political funeral and Kiki Mason's political funeral), my hunch is that queer public mourning rituals can demonstrate what a turn to aporia can contribute to the conversation about what queer is, does, and can be. To put my reading strategy simply, then, I rhetorically read the moment of queering the life/death binary within three instances of ACT UP's political funerals in order to better understand what queer can do.

My hunch is that many rhetoricians would find this reading strategy valuable. Cram, for example, argues that "a queer approach accounts for the productive moments...in which their interaction does not necessarily result in coordination or continuity."⁷³ For Cram, then, queer prioritizes the points in which things do not quite fall in line. Additionally, Rand argues that the

distinction between queer as synonymous with LGBT and queer as committed to anti-essentialist political and social formations is undercut by the “ambivalence” displayed by those who identify with the moniker queer; Rand ultimately suggests that this is a characteristic of a queer identity which rhetoricians ought to attend to.⁷⁴ My reading strategy agrees with both Cram and Rand insofar as I am reading for something which doesn’t quite add up. However, if Cram theorizes a queer “approach” and Rand theorizes a queer “identity,” my reading strategy seeks to understand what makes that approach and identity possible. That is to say, in distinction to Cram’s and Rand’s studies, I find queer’s discontinuities and disconnects at the level of aporia and *différance*.

I also believe that this dissertation can contribute to understandings of queer worldmaking, an approach to queer theorizing which seeks to disrupt or evade heteronormative logics and develop a world sans heteronormativity. I understand heteronormativity to be a social structure which legitimates a variety of violences—physical, verbal, discursive, social, psychological, and more—upon sexual and gender minorities. My purpose is not to theorize queer for the sole sake of theorization, but rather with the express aim of a different social reality. It is my goal to contribute to a world where heteronormative violence is no longer thinkable. Drawing from Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s seminal piece “Sex in Public,” I understand the creation of a queer world as “not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture.”⁷⁵ By denaturalizing and delegitimizing heteronormative logics and social relations, queer worldmaking renders livable non-normative ways of life. Rhetoricians have suggested that queer worldmaking may be enacted in a variety of ways, including via distinct communities and publics,⁷⁶ ephemeral art

installations and demonstrations,⁷⁷ and protest events displaying LGBT life and love.⁷⁸ Thus, the denaturalization of heteronormativity could result from a direct challenge to its hegemony, or it could come from the uncovering of a space or way of being which elides its control. Regardless of the means, queer worldmaking suggests a reality where the normalization of heterosexuality and heterosexual culture are no longer predominant. In Warner's words, "even when coupled with a toleration of minority sexualities, heteronormativity can be overcome only by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world."⁷⁹

With West et al., I believe that this worldmaking practice "must be adjudicated in a contextual manner, not against an imagined, universal norm."⁸⁰ For me, queer worldmaking does not take aim at abstract, decontextualized heteronormativity, but rather its particularized, on-the-ground instantiations. Thus, queer worldmakers may develop modes of being outside heteronormativity or use whatever tools available to them for making the world a queerer place. For example, I find myself more closely aligned with the rhetoricians who read the "It Gets Better" campaign as a contingent and contextual queer worldmaking practice which makes the world more livable for LGBT youth⁸¹ than with those critical theorists who read the campaign as violently normalizing.⁸² This is not to suggest that these criticisms are invalid or unworthy of engagement, but rather to argue for a worldmaking practice which draws upon theory to make the world more livable. My commitment to particularized instantiations of queer worldmaking is also demonstrated by my pull toward queer public mourning ritual practices, as previously discussed.

Chapter Preview

The rest of this dissertation proceeds as follows. In chapter two, I discuss ACT UP's 1992 Ashes Action, in which protestors marched throughout Washington, D.C. and cast the

ashes of those who had died from HIV/AIDS over the White House fences and onto the Lawns. I read the ashes displayed during this demonstration not as metaphor for the AIDS dead but rather as metonymy of the Bush administration and broader American society which had allowed AIDS deaths to occur in order to argue that these protestors queered both the Bush Administration and the AIDS Quilt (which was on display in D.C. at the time of this protest). These ashes, then, serve as trace of absence and presence, signaling an aporia which at once acknowledges that the AIDS dead are indeed dead and gone but nevertheless continue to place demands upon the living. Queering, in this chapter, is understood as a rhetorical strategy which demands that Bush and American society recognize the insurmountable injustices which caused the AIDS crisis to kill.

In chapter three, I turn toward Mark Fisher's political funeral, in which activists paraded Fisher's dead corpse throughout New York City to Bush's re-election headquarters and proclaimed Bush to be Fisher's murderer. This corpse, I argue, is not simply Fisher's dead body, but also operates as the abject exemplar, a trope by which the person with AIDS is at once included within and excluded from the broader American population. This corpse, then, signals an aporia of inclusion and exclusion, whereby the very contours of who "counts" as American is called into question. Importantly, throughout this demonstration, activists laid claim to the rhetoric of family, directly contradicting Bush's claim that people with AIDS were not a part of the family. In this chapter, then, queering operates as a way to rearticulate the family which challenges the national heteronormative imaginary that interprets family members as exclusively heterosexual and without AIDS.

Chapter four discusses Kiki Mason's political funeral, in which activists summoned the ghost of Kiki Mason in the middle of New York City in order to continue the fight against

HIV/AIDS. Rather than reading the ghost as a literal manifestation of Mason post-mortem, I suggest that this ghost points toward an aporia of space and time, calling into question the distinction between past/present/future and here/there that a normatively linear space-time assumes. For protestors who take aim at the broader social belief in the end of AIDS as crisis due to the development of protease inhibitors, what this aporetic understanding of space and time suggests is that the AIDS crisis has not ended because this crisis, in fact, cannot end, as its violence continually recurs throughout and within time and space. Queer, as I understand the term in this chapter, is a distinct space-time in which the linear progression from past places to present and future ones is called into question, inviting an understanding of space and time which is wildly off-kilter, out of joint, and in disarray.

Chapter five, the conclusion, returns to the question of what queer may do, be, and mean by suggesting that each of these three case studies point toward the undecidability at the “core” of queer. As I will explain in this chapter, undecidability is not a position of absolute indeterminacy but rather an economy of *différance* by which action is made possible. Undecidability, then, denies any absolute knowing or certainty but, at once, necessitates that decision be made. It is queer’s undecidability, then, which unites disparate understandings of queer and simultaneously allows the term to mean so many different things for so many different people. Additionally, the conclusion discusses a question that each of my chapters begins to investigate: queer’s relationship to justice. I will suggest that queer is a useful tool for seeking a world of justice, albeit one which is trapped by aporia. Through these various chapters, then, I hope to better understand what queer can do, be, and mean.

¹ See, for example, Michael O’Rourke, Aideen Quilty, Michael Barron, BeLong To, Kathryn Conrad, Eibhear Walshe, and Moynagh Sullivan, “Roundtable: Are We Queer Yet?,” *Irish University Review* 43, no. 1 (2013): 12-54; Michael Warner, “Queer and Then?,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 1, 2012, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/queer-and-then/>.

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- ² Michael O'Rourke, "The Roguish Future of Queer Studies," *SQS* 1 (2006): 22-47; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
- ³ Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities: An Introduction," *differences* 3, no. 2 (1991): iii.
- ⁴ Annamarie Jagose. *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996): 105.
- ⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): 8.
- ⁶ Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 5.
- ⁷ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 98.
- ⁸ Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004): 135.
- ⁹ Crimp, "Melancholia and Moralism," 149.
- ¹⁰ Deborah B. Gould, "Life During Wartime: Emotions and the Development of ACT UP," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (2002): 8-9. See also Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," 129-150.
- ¹¹ See, for example, Deborah B. Gould. *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- ¹² Thomas K. Nakayama and Charles E. Morris III, "Worldmaking and Everyday Interventions," *QED: A Journal in Queer Worldmaking* 2, no. 1 (2015): vi-vii.
- ¹³ Erin Rand. *Reclaiming Queer: Activist & Academic Rhetorics of Resistance* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014): 7.
- ¹⁴ Stuart J. Murray, "Aporia: Towards an Ethic of Critique," *Aporia* 1, no. 1 (2009): 11.
- ¹⁵ Murray, "Aporia," 11.
- ¹⁶ Jacques Derrida. *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993): 8; 23.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, Derrida, *Aporias*; Jacques Derrida. *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Jacques Derrida. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Jacques Derrida. *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹⁸ de Lauretis, "Queer Theory." Daniel Brouwer and Adela Licona also describe the value of a "both/and" approach for queer theory, criticism, and methodologies: "When we take a third-space, both/and approach we are moved to consider *both* the constraints *and* the possibilities." Daniel C. Brouwer and Adela C. Licona, "Trans(affective)mediation: Feeling Our Way from Paper to Digitized Zines and Back Again," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33, no. 1 (2016): 79.

¹⁹ François Raffoul, "Derrida and the Ethics of the Im-possible," *Research in Phenomenology* 38, No. 2 (2008): 272.

²⁰ Derrida, *Aporias*, 12.

²¹ Barbara Biesecker, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation From Within the Thematic of 'Différance'," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 22, no. 2 (1989): 117.

²² Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1982): 3.

²³ Biesecker, "Coming to Terms," 148.

²⁴ Derrida, "Différance," 13.

²⁵ Derrida, "Différance," 7.

²⁶ Matthias Fritsch, "Derrida's Democracy to Come," *Constellations* 9, no. 4 (2002): 585.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): 69.

²⁸ See, for example, Derrida, *Aporias*; Jacques Derrida. *Cinders* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Jacques Derrida. *On The Name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

²⁹ Isaac West, "Queer Generosities," *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 5 (2013): 540.

³⁰ West, "Queer Generosities," 540. See also Shuzhen Huang and Daniel C. Brouwer, "Coming Out, Coming Home, Coming With: Models of Queer Sexuality in Contemporary China," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 11, no. 2 (2018): 97-116.

³¹ Adrian Mackenzie, "Technical Materializations and the Politics of Radical Contingency," *Australian Feminist Studies* 14, no. 29 (1999): 106.

³² Mackenzie, "Technical Materializations."

³³ See, for example, Lee Edelman. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); J. Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Jasbir Puar. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

³⁴ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

³⁵ Isaac West, Michaela Frischherz, Allison Panther, and Richard Brophy, "Queer Worldmaking in the 'It Gets Better' Campaign," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 1 (2013): 57.

³⁶ Robyn Weigman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, "Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions," *Differences* 26, no. 1 (2015): 2.

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Limited, Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988): 14.

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Limited Inc a b c...", in *Limited, Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988): 53.

³⁹ Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context" 12.

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward An Ethic of Discussion" in *Limited, Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988): 132.

⁴¹ Derrida, "Afterword," 136.

⁴² Derrida, "Afterword," 136.

⁴³ Derrida, "Limited Inc," 71.

⁴⁴ Simon Morgan Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010): 197.

⁴⁵ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 8-9.

⁴⁶ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 129.

⁴⁷ Barbara Biesecker, "Coming to Terms With Recent Attempts to Write Women Into the History of Rhetoric," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 25, no. 2 (1992): 148.

⁴⁸ See, for example, de Lauretis, "Queer Theory;" Jagose, *Queer Theory*; R. Anthony Slagle, "In Defense of Queer Nation: From *Identity Politics* to a *Politics of Difference*," *Western Journal of Communication* 59, no. 2 (1995): 85-102.

⁴⁹ Slagle, "In Defense of Queer Nation," 97.

⁵⁰ Slagle, “In Defense of Queer Nation,” 97.

⁵¹ R. Anthony Slagle, “(Re)Conceptualizing The Role of Identity in Rhetoric: Queer Theory and Communication Studies,” PhD Diss., (The Ohio State University, 1998): 5.

⁵² Slagle, “In Defense of Queer Nation,” 93. This idea is also detailed by numerous other rhetoricians. Daniel Brouwer tells us that a “queer political project” is to be understood as “attention to demographic differences that structure material differences” while Peter Odell Campbell suggests that queer is a “political choice to embrace uncertainty itself as the basis and desired end result of politics of resistance to ever shifting boundaries of oppression” and Erin Rand says that what queer unites is “a shared difference from and opposition to dominant norms of sexuality as well as to more moderate gay and lesbian identities.” Daniel C. Brouwer, “Counterpublicity and Corporeality in HIV/AIDS Zines,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 5 (2005): 357; Peter Odell Campbell, “The Procedural Queer: Substantive Due Process, *Lawrence v. Texas*, and Queer Rhetorical Futures,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 2 (2012): 221; Erin J. Rand, “A Disunited Nation and a Legacy of Contradiction: Queer Nation’s Construction of Identity,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 28, no. 4 (2004): 293.

⁵³ Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” 8.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Gould, *Moving Politics*; Jagose, *Queer Theory*.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Larry Gross, “The Past and Future of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies,” *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 3 (2005): 508-528; Isaac West, “Queer Perspectives in Communication Studies,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. Jon Nussbaum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁵⁶ See, for example, Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, “Queer Nationality,” *boundary 2*, no. 19 (1992): 149-180; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547-566; Gust A. Yep, “The Violence of Heteronormativity in Communication Studies: Notes on Injury, Healing, and Queer World-Making,” in *Queer Theory and Communication: From Disciplining Queers to Queering the Discipline*, ed. Gust A. Yep, Karen E. Lovaas, John P. Elia (New York: The Haworth Press, 2004): 11-60.

⁵⁷ Charles E. Morris III, “Introduction: Portrait of a Queer Rhetorical/Historical Critic,” in *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2008): 5.

⁵⁸ Yep, “The Violence of Heteronormativity,” 40.

⁵⁹ Thomas R. Dunn, “Remembering Matthew Shepard: Violence, Identity, and Queer Counterpublic Memories,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2010): 612.

⁶⁰ Dunn, “Remembering Matthew Shepard, 639. My emphasis.

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- ⁶¹ Dunn, “Remembering Matthew Shepard,” 618. My emphasis.
- ⁶² E. Cram, “Archival Ambience and Sensory Memory: Generating Queer Intimacies in the Settler Colonial Archive,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (2016): 126.
- ⁶³ Cram, “Archival Ambience and Sensory Memory,” 111.
- ⁶⁴ Morris, “Portrait of a Queer Rhetorical/Historical Critic,” 6-7.
- ⁶⁵ Morris, “Portrait of a Queer Rhetorical/Historical Critic,” 7.
- ⁶⁶ Charles E. Morris III, “My Old Kentucky Homo: Abraham Lincoln, Larry Kramer, and the Politics of Queer Memory,” in *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2008): 105.
- ⁶⁷ Derrida, *Aporias*, 21.
- ⁶⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Foreward: T Times,” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): xii. Author’s emphasis.
- ⁶⁹ See, for example, Anna Blume, “Layers of Disaster,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 21, no. 2 (2021): 27-43; Charles E. Morris III, “ACT UP 25: HIV/AIDS, Archival Queers, and Mnemonic World Making,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 49-53; Erin J. Rand, “Repeated Remembrance: Commemorating the AIDS Quilt and Resuscitating the Mourned Subject,” in *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt*, in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011): 229-259.
- ⁷⁰ Jordan E. Miller, “ACT UP,” in *Resisting Theology, Furious Hope: Secular Political Theology and Social Movements* (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan): 113.
- ⁷¹ Adam J. Greteman, “Queer Pedagogy and Documenting AIDS,” in *Sexualities and Genders in Education: Toward Queer Thriving* (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018): 137.
- ⁷² Miller, “ACT UP,” 121.
- ⁷³ Cram, “Archival Ambience and Sensory Memory,” 111.
- ⁷⁴ Rand, “A Disunited Nation,” 302.
- ⁷⁵ Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 548.
- ⁷⁶ See, for example, Isaac West, Michaela Frischherz, Allison Panther, and Richard Brophy, “Queer Worldmaking in the ‘It Gets Better’ Campaign,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 1 (2013): 49-86.

⁷⁷ See, for example, E. Cram, “Prelude to an Encounter,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 6, no. 1 (2019): 72-78.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Charles E. Morris III and John M. Sloop, “‘What These Lips Have Kissed’: Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (2006): 1-26. Also see Charles E. Morris III and John M. Sloop, “Other Lips, Whither Kisses?,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (2017): 182-186.

⁷⁹ Michael Warner, “Introduction,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): xvi.

⁸⁰ West, Frischherz, Panther, and Brophy, “Queer Worldmaking,” 57.

⁸¹ See, for example, Dustin Bradley Goltz, “It Gets Better: Queer Futures, Critical Frustrations, and Radical Potentials,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 2 (2013): 135-151; West et al., “Queer Worldmaking.”

⁸² See, for example, J. Halberstam, “It Gets Worse...,” *Social Text Online*, November 20, 2010, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/it_gets_worse/; Jasbir Puar, “In the Wake of It Gets Better,” *The Guardian*, November 16, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/16/wake-it-gets-better-campaign>.

CHAPTER 2

ASHES, BUSH, AND THE QUILT: THE FIRST ASHES ACTION

This chapter presents queering as a rhetorical strategy which makes a political and social demand for a relationship with the AIDS dead that both acknowledges and recognizes the insurmountable and unforgettable injustice which caused these deaths to occur. Queering, as I understand it here, signals a refusal to relegate the AIDS dead to the dustpan of history through the placement of an impossible demand upon those in political and social power to attend to HIV/AIDS and its concomitant violences. If, as various scholars before me have argued, the dead continually place demands on the living,¹ then queering is one such response to that demand which displays the insurmountable violence of the AIDS epidemic as justification for action. The dead's impossible demands for justice in the face of an incalculable AIDS genocide are thus a central part of how this chapter approaches what queering may do; it is because of that impossibility, not in spite of it, that queering becomes possible as response. In its acceptance of the indeterminate and unsettled position that the dead's impossible demands place upon the living, then, queering serves as pre-condition for a more ethical relationship with the dead.

I turn toward ACT UP's first Ashes Action to make my argument. On October 11, 1992, members of ACT UP staged the first Ashes Action by processing throughout the streets of Washington D.C. and hurling the ashes of those who had died of AIDS over the White House fence and onto the lawn. Following the Reagan administration, the H. W. Bush administration had refused to openly acknowledge that AIDS was ravaging gay, poor, and Black and Brown communities throughout the United States. In response, ACT UP activists sought to "bring the funeral to you" by marching throughout the capital, banging funeral drums and indiscriminately screaming and crying to express their rage and grief.² Upon arriving at the White House,

protestors covered the lawn with the ashes of the AIDS dead. Recalling the event, Eric Sawyer poignantly remarked that “the lawn was littered with this light dusting of ashes and bone — sort of like an early snow — from the urns, bags, and boxes we’d been carrying our lovers in. I’ll never forget the look of it.”³

As the first of many political funerals conducted by the group,⁴ the Ashes Action marked an amplification of ACT UP’s protest tactics. Deborah Gould tells us that, “in using the actual ashes of dead people, the action would itself be an escalation in tactics, a shift from actions that deployed representations of death (e.g., mock tombstones and fake coffins) to a funeral procession that was centered around the actual remains of loved ones dead from AIDS-related complications.”⁵ Rather than using their bodies as a metonymic stand-in for the dead (a tactic this group was known for at this point),⁶ activists spotlighted the cremated remains of those who had died from AIDS. In activist Eric Robinson’s words, “these are the actual ashes. This is the literal physical result of the Bush administration’s AIDS policies.”⁷ The tactics developed during this protest were used repeatedly after this demonstration, as the dead were paraded during a variety of political funerals and a second Ashes Action four years later.⁸ The Ashes Action is thus an important moment in ACT UP’s history. Activist Bob Rafsky even declares this protest to be a turning point for the organization, demonstrating “a new generation of ACT UP members” arising from “a funeral for the first-generation founding fathers [and mothers] of the group.”⁹ Thus, as Andrew Weiner notes, the Ashes Action provided an “unprecedented boldness” that reshaped the face of ACT UP.¹⁰

It is thus no overstatement to suggest that the Ashes Action has had much activist and academic significance. Gould, for example, reads the Ashes Action as demonstrative of the way in which ACT UP channeled anger into both mourning and action, “searing in our minds any

number of images...of urns and ashes hurling through the sky.”¹¹ Erin Rand also tells us that the Ashes Action is meaningful, arguing that “the angry, confrontational activism” of this demonstration makes possible both the mourning of those who died from AIDS and “different forms of gay male subjectivity” that were not previously accessible.¹² And Michelle C. Valasquez-Potts reads the Ashes Action as a significant political funeral which makes possible what she calls queer refusal, that which rejects normativities in favor of non-normative gendered sexual self-expressions and beings.¹³

This chapter approaches the Ashes Action differently than other scholars do. Simply put, I argue that Ashes Action protestors respond to the aporia of the ashes strewn on the White House Lawns by queering the AIDS Quilt and the Bush administration. In addition to the literal cremated remains of those who had died from AIDS, I read the ashes at this protest as trace, suggesting an irreducible absence/presence from which we may begin to conceptualize the protestors’ response to the overwhelming violence of the AIDS crisis. At this demonstration, ashes are more than incinerated bodies; they are also and at once metonymy of the insurmountable genocide which caused hundreds of thousands of people to die from AIDS. It is within these ashes, then, that we may locate the AIDS dead’s impossible call for justice, a call to which the protestors at the demonstration responded through the rhetorical strategy of queering. Queering, as an impossible political and social demand for justice for those who died from AIDS, is thus made possible by this aporetic understanding of ashes.

By queering the AIDS Quilt and the Bush Administration, activists rearticulated both as indicative of the insurmountable injustices that allowed AIDS deaths to occur. If, for protestors at the Ashes Action, the AIDS Quilt made something beautiful out of the epidemic, then activists queered the Quilt by instead displaying the ugly and upsetting reality of AIDS violence; if Bush

had done virtually nothing to address AIDS, then he was to be forcibly conscripted into the fight against the disease. Neither of these queering strategies nor the Ashes Action broadly could serve as fix or solution to the AIDS epidemic but both were nevertheless necessary in response to the dead's continual demands. It is in a position of indeterminacy, then, that queer is located.

This chapter proceeds in the following manner. First, I begin by exploring the irreducibly aporetic status of the ashes cast during the Ashes Action. My suggestion is that these ashes suggest an aporia of absence and presence which makes possible the Ashes Action protestors' queering of the AIDS Quilt and the Bush administration. Second, I detail the protestors' queering of the AIDS Quilt and the Bush Administration by arguing that demonstrators both exposed the ugly reality of AIDS in response to the displaying of the AIDS Quilt and conscripted Bush into the fight against the disease in response to his administration's general inaction on the crisis. Third, I return to the broader question of what queer is, does, and can be by suggesting that it signals a demand for justice for the AIDS dead and, in doing so, provides inroads to conceptualizing activism differently.

Ashes, From Life and Death

For ACT UP protestors, what set the Ashes Action apart from previous demonstrations was the ashes thrown on the White House Lawns, as these ashes were not artificial or imitation but instead the cremated remains of once living people. David Robinson, the progenitor of this demonstration, stated that, "the idea was, you don't need anything fake. We want to show what have really been the consequences of this administration's, and the previous one's, actions."¹⁴ For protestors, then, the Ashes Action was an amplification of AIDS activist tactics because this demonstration included the physical remains of the dead. Eric Sawyer's forceful description of the Ashes Action also reflects this tactical advancement: "carrying a wooden coffin in the streets

doesn't seem to be getting your attention. How about we dump ashes and bone fragments from our friends who died of AIDS on your lawn?....*We will literally start dumping our dead on your doorsteps unless you get your fucking act together.*"¹⁵ By placing the manifestation of America's inaction on HIV/AIDS front and center, protestors sought to make their activism more forceful and meaningful through the displaying of these ashes.

It is thus worth drawing attention to the meaning of the ashes during this demonstration. Conventionally, ashes are understood symbolically as an object of mourning, serving as a metaphor for the loved one who has been lost.¹⁶ This understanding of ashes can be traced back to the 1770s when "the advocates of cremation sought, unlike earlier burial and funeral reformers, not merely to improve sanitary practices, or simplify funerary rituals, but rather, by manipulating the physical remains of the dead, to alter fundamental attitudes towards death itself."¹⁷ Thus, as Brenda Mathijssen puts it, "cremated remains have the potential to evoke physical and intense relationships with the dead, as they provide a focus for memorialization and for conversation with the deceased."¹⁸ As a result, people frequently place much meaning in the ashes of the dead by either keeping them on their household mantle place or scattering them in a place of some significance.¹⁹ Whatever is done with these ashes is generally meant to help find some level of peace and resolution in the wake of someone's death.

While this conventional reading of ashes is meaningful, I suggest that a different reading of ashes, one which understands them as trace, is necessary for an understanding of the Ashes Action. Rather than a dead loved one or someone that the mourner intimately knew, I read the ashes cast on the White House Lawns as metonymy of both the irrecoverable absence of the AIDS dead and continuing presence of that which caused them to die. Ashes do not masquerade as the former living, then, but are instead a rhetorical tool used to respond to the dead by

critiquing those in political power who allowed these deaths to occur. Importantly, ashes are irreducibly aporetic (both absent and present), placing the living in a position of irresolvable doubt and undecidability such that the living no longer have the capacity to know what to do in terms of the dead. It is this uncertainty, I suggest, which is necessary for understanding the Ashes Action demonstration and the protestors' queering strategy. To detail this position, I unpack the meaning of absence and presence in ashes as well as explain why this aporia necessitates indecision for Ashes Action activists.

A reading of ashes as trace recontextualizes them as absolute absence: there is nothing left in the ashes because what once was has been incinerated in fire. As Jacques Derrida writes, ashes are "a trope that comes to take the place of everything that disappears without leaving an identifiable trace."²⁰ Derrida continues by telling us that "the difference between the trace 'cinder'²¹ and other traces is that the body of which cinders is the trace has totally disappeared, it has totally lost its contours, its form, its colors, its natural determination. Non-identifiable. And forgetting itself is forgotten."²² Ashes, then, act as and for that which has become totally and completely absent; nothing at all remains because what was once "it" has been totally and completely annihilated. In this sense, ashes cannot stand-in for the person whose body was incinerated because these ashes are absolute nothingness. Instead, ashes "are a destruction of memory, one in which the very sign of destruction is carried off. The name of the victim is effaced."²³ Ashes, then, are not a substitute for the dead; instead, they tell us that death is permanent and that the dead are truly gone. Much like the religious adage "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" suggests, as trace, ashes return to nothing. Only absence remains.

For those protestors at the Ashes Action, these ashes were not a substitute for the dead but rather demonstrated the irrevocability of the deaths which had occurred. Robinson, for

example, makes clear that the ashes he deposited were not his dead lover: “Warren was gone....Nothing was bringing him back. And this box that I had been given by the funeral home, with a baggie in it that contained ashes and bone chips—that wasn’t him. And no matter what I did to dress it up with an urn, or with anything else, it wasn’t going to be him.”²⁴ Other activists expressed that these ashes signaled effacement rather than memory because they didn’t know whose ashes they threw on the White House Lawns. For example, Shane Butler, another activist at this demonstration, states in an interview that “I knew none of the people whose ashes we were carrying.”²⁵ Sawyer similarly recalls that “one of the things I thought was the most powerful about this whole action was how...people came up to us and handed us bags and little bottles and little boxes with their lovers’ ashes.”²⁶ Because random people unaffiliated with ACT UP handed Butler, Robinson, Sawyer, and other activists ashes while they marched, they could not possibly know whose ashes they were carrying. As a result, these activists could not interpret these ashes as metaphor for the former living: all that protestors knew was that the cause of death was HIV/AIDS, not “who” the person once was. Additionally, shortly after throwing the ashes on the White House Lawns, the wind picked up the deposited ashes and intermingled them throughout the terrace. As a result, it became impossible for protestors to distinguish between “whose” ashes were in which piles on the grounds, preventing them from being understood as a tool of mourning in any conventional manner. For all of these reasons, these protestors could not distinguish between and know whose ashes were on the White House Lawns, even if they wanted to; instead, the ashes signaled only absence in the wake of death from AIDS.

Nevertheless, ashes do have presence; if they did not, then activists at this demonstration would not have had anything to throw on the lawns. In order to conceptualize this presence, we may at once understand the ashes as trace of the fire which burned the bodies of those with

HIV/AIDS and turned them to ash. That is, because ashes are the physical residue which remains after a fire, they serve as both a constant reminder about “and the affirmation of” that very flame.²⁷ As Derrida puts it, fire is that which “one cannot extinguish in this trace.... Memory or oblivion, as you wish, but of the fire, trait that still relates to the burning.”²⁸ Derrida continues: “no doubt the fire has withdrawn, the conflagration has been subdued, but if cinder there is, it is because the fire remains in retreat.”²⁹ The ashes, then, serve as constant reminder of the fire which made them possible. Ned Lukacher plainly states that in ashes “one can feel the effects of the fire even if the fire itself remains inaccessible, outside cognition though not without leaving a trace.”³⁰ As trace, ashes presence—albeit barely—that very flame.

The fire or flame to which the ashes’ presence refers is more than just literal but also and at once the very structure and society whose negligence allowed AIDS deaths to occur in the first place. In an interview with Elizabeth Weber, Derrida explicitly connects the ashes’ fire to “the crematoria or genocides by fire....the genocides for which the genocide by fire is a figure, all the destructions whose victims are not even identifiable or countable.”³¹ The fire is genocide, then, creating a destruction so thorough that its victims are not “identifiable or countable,” reduced to absolute nothingness.³² Thus, during the Ashes Action, protestors made explicit that the ashes’ fire is the genocidal AIDS policies adopted by the Bush administration. As one activist at this demonstration put it, “[members of the Bush administration] are guilty of genocide and murder. They—along with the former President Reagan—allow the AIDS pandemic to go virtually without any action and are responsible for the death of possibly millions of people.”³³ One of the chants that protestors repeated as they marched throughout Washington D.C. also made explicit the connection of the fire with Bush: “George Bush, you can’t hide, we charge you with genocide!”³⁴ And the pamphlet circulated to recruit for the Ashes Action suggested that

protestors hoped to stop Bush's "genocidal AIDS policy."³⁵ Activists at the Ashes Action, then, draw a connection between the ashes and the fire which created them.

Thus, we arrive at an impasse: ashes as absence or irreparable and total loss, yet also as presence as trace of a former flame. Rather than understanding this relationship of absence and presence as a simple contradiction, I suggest that it ought to be read as aporia, a productive yet impassable threshold. I thus approach this impasse from a both/and perspective, rather than an either/or one. As Zuzanna Dziuban puts it, ashes are "simultaneously, a synonym for an erased past existence and for a discrete and residual presence."³⁶ Rather than a symbolic object substituting for the life which was lost, ashes as trace serve as reminder both that the dead are absolutely and irrevocably gone and that the genocidal AIDS policy which allowed these deaths to occur en masse continues.

Ashes as at once absence and presence place protestors in a distinct position of indeterminacy and uncertainty which nevertheless renders the Ashes Action demonstration necessary. That is, in the face of the continued existence of the genocidal fire which burned those bodies to ash, political demonstration must be conducted. The AIDS dead really are dead, and nothing, including the Ashes Action itself, can either bring them back to life or do their memories justice. Nevertheless, something about the ongoing AIDS genocide must be done because the dead have demanded it. Thus, Lauren DeLand's description of this demonstration is quite apt: "so palpable is the sensation that the bereaved are doing something that they believe they must and yet obviously do not want to do."³⁷ This indeterminacy haunts protestors at the Ashes Action.

To clarify, my suggestion is not that protestors are unsure if the Ashes Action should happen—they know that they must take political action. Rather, the uncertainty arises from the

fact that whatever protestors do, it will never be enough in the face of the magnitude of Bush's genocidal AIDS policy. Sawyer, for example, continually reminds people of the importance of future political activism at the ACT UP/New York meeting immediately following this demonstration.³⁸ Another activist at that same meeting said that "I just hope there are many more showings like this. I mean, obviously, the epidemic hasn't been stopped."³⁹ Activist Alexis Danzig expressed similar sentiments as well: "we have to keep doing this so that there aren't more boxes of ashes. *We know there are going to be more*, but there don't have to be more. So...please try to keep putting your energy into actions."⁴⁰ Because Danzig and other activists recognized that there would be more AIDS ashes, they knew that more protest must occur. And there certainly were more actions, including multiple political funerals (two of which will be discussed in the following chapters) and a second Ashes Action which took place four years after the first. The Ashes Action was necessary in response to the aporia of the ashes but would never be enough to resolve it. As I will argue in the next section, it is this indeterminacy and irresolvability which makes possible the activists' queering strategy at the Ashes Action.

Protest and Indeterminacy

One must understand the Ashes Action via the indeterminacy arising from the aporia of the ashes. It is this uncertainty which demands a response, even while activists are forever unsure if their response will ever be enough. As I will explain, Ashes Action activists responded to this aporia by queering the AIDS Quilt and the Bush administration. Queering, as I understand it here, is a rhetorical strategy arising from an aporia which makes a political demand that insists on a particular relationship with the dead that acknowledges the overwhelming and unforgettable injustices surrounding their deaths. In this sense, queering helps make possible a more ethical relationship with the dead by refusing to turn away from the dead's consistent demands on the

living; instead, the living are mired in indeterminacy, perpetually unsure if their actions can ever be enough to do the dead justice. If, for Erin Rand, queerness concerns “the perpetual undecidability of rhetorical action,” then my suggestion is that this “perpetual undecidability” can only be understood as arising from aporia.⁴¹ Thus, the living necessarily remain continuously uncertain if their actions are enough yet nevertheless must respond to the dead’s demands. In the case of the Ashes Action, the dead demand that the living put a stop to the AIDS crisis. However, as I will explain, the living activists’ responses to that demand are internally conflicting, pointing toward the indeterminacy which provided impetus for the Ashes Action. The impossibility of knowing whether political action aimed at stopping this epidemic would ever truly do justice to the dead keep the living trapped in irresolvable undecidability.

The AIDS Quilt and the Bush administration were significant targets because, for protestors, both the Quilt and Bush were contributing to the continuation of the AIDS epidemic. The Quilt, many demonstrators argued, problematically papered over the ugly reality of the ongoing crisis with beautiful yet disconcerting quilt panels; instead, Americans should face the irresolvable horror of HIV/AIDS head-on. Bush and his administration continued to sweep HIV/AIDS under the rug, refusing to properly address the epidemic; protestors demanded that Bush instead enact political change to address the AIDS crisis. The Quilt’s popularity in the media and Bush’s political authority meant that they were both meaningful targets for this demonstration. To queer the AIDS Quilt and the Bush administration was thus important for demanding a response to the HIV/AIDS crisis which acknowledged the aporia arising from the hundreds of thousands of AIDS deaths. I begin by unpacking the queering of the Quilt before turning to the queering of the Bush administration.

For many Ashes Action protestors, the AIDS Quilt produced complacency with the ongoing AIDS epidemic because, these protestors argued, the quilt invited a collective act of mourning which was not militant enough. While certainly not the only sentiment, activists overwhelmingly expressed the belief that, rather than spurring militant direct activism, the Quilt created feelings of self-satisfaction in many of its viewers, as if they had done something meaningful to address the epidemic by either creating quilt panels or going to view the Quilt when it was on display. For example, during his speech at the Ashes Action, Robinson says that the AIDS Quilt “does make a lot of people feel better....I heard the people out there, as they walked among the panels, sort of sighing to them[selves], like ‘this is really beautiful, it’s so good that this is happening and we made such a wonderful panel.’”⁴² Robinson continues by calling out the quilt-goers who he perceives as complacent: “And I would wonder, is this [the Quilt] making you feel like this [the AIDS epidemic] is okay in some way? Because it’s not.”⁴³ Robinson’s understanding of the Quilt, then, is that it substitutes for substantive action on HIV/AIDS by absolving people of their guilt. Thus, Robinson concludes, the Quilt is “like making something beautiful out of the epidemic, and I felt like doing something like this [the Ashes Action] is a way of showing that there’s nothing beautiful about it.”⁴⁴ In other words, protestors advance the position that the Quilt can only bring attention to the crisis instead of substantive solutions. Because of this belief, during the demonstration, Bob Rafsky proclaimed that “the Quilt makes our dying look beautiful, but it’s not beautiful, it’s ugly, and we have to fight for our lives.”⁴⁵

To understand why protestors believed that the Quilt produced complacency with the AIDS crisis, it is best to think of the Quilt, like Kevin DeLuca, Christine Harold, and Kenneth Rufo do, as a response to, rather than a representation of, the epidemic: “The Quilt does not

represent AIDS, it *responds* to it. Response cannot be understood through mechanisms of substitution. Indeed, most of the panels are not about AIDS at all, but the individual personalities of people lost to it.”⁴⁶ For protestors, the Quilt as response to the crisis substitutes the political and social changes necessary to alleviate AIDS with beautiful images of individuals lost to the disease. While these beautiful images may produce intense emotion (which can spur positive change to address HIV/AIDS),⁴⁷ protestors at the Ashes Action overwhelmingly express the belief that these viewers should instead be engaging in direct action akin to ACT UP activists. Rand tells us something similar, arguing that the Quilt develops a socially acceptable understanding of the subjectivity of people with AIDS which constrains activism’s ability to alleviate the epidemic. “The Quilt as a public memorial performs a suturing of national identity,” Rand tells us, “and as such it constitutes rhetorically a subject position for gay men that does not threaten this imagined compassionate nation.”⁴⁸ Thus, while the Quilt does not normalize or make the epidemic acceptable, protestors believe that the production of quilt panels substitutes for the political activism necessary to stop the AIDS crisis. Instead of viewing the Quilt, then, protestors adopt the position encapsulated by ACT UP member Avram Finkelstein’s simple proclamation that “action is the real Quilt.”⁴⁹ Cleve Jones, the creator of the AIDS Quilt, expresses similar sentiments, stating that the Quilt was not designed to replace political action: “we never said that the Quilt is enough. It’s one response among thousands, not the final answer.”⁵⁰

In response to this perceived complacency, Ashes Action protestors queered the AIDS Quilt by forcing people to return to the ugly reality of HIV/AIDS: that the disease inevitably turned those it infected into ash and bone. Rather than beautiful yet harrowing quilt panels depicting the life of those who had died, people should face the continuing, horrendous deaths of

the epidemic head-on.⁵¹ If, for protestors, “the Quilt makes something beautiful out of this epidemic,” demonstrators sought to use the Ashes Action to return people “to the reality of AIDS.”⁵² Thus, as Robinson puts it, “what we are doing is showing everyone...the actual results of what that White House and this administration has done. They have turned people we love into ashes and bone chips and corpses. That should not be hidden. And from this point on, I hope you all agree with me, we are not going to hide this anymore.”⁵³ If the reality of the AIDS epidemic is “ashes and bone chips and corpses” rather than beautiful quilt panels, then the living’s response to the dead’s demands, protestors argue, should be to directly face the irreducible horror that is this disease. The epidemic causes deaths on an unfathomably large scale and that is what people should see.

Thus, rather than turning away from the ugly reality of HIV/AIDS with beautiful quilt panels, Ashes Action activists argued that we should respond to the dead’s demands by seeing the death and decay wrought by the epidemic. Activists queered the Quilt by enacting a political action which insisted on facing the reality of AIDS head-on rather than from a perspective which protestors thought produced complacency with the epidemic’s existence. Of course, queering the Quilt was not, and could not, be enough; more actions would be necessary. But activists believed that making more panels was not the right response: “The one thing I knew is that I had already made too many quilts...and that’s not what I wanted to do.”⁵⁴ Instead, looking at and seeing the horror of the epidemic by literally showing the ashes of those who had died from it was a better response to the crisis.

Yet even as protestors expressed disdain for the AIDS Quilt, they at once conveyed support for it as a meaningful way to bring substantial attention to the ongoing AIDS crisis. For example, in the middle of his speech criticizing the AIDS Quilt, Robinson says that “I’m not

maligning the Quilt. It's very useful and very important."⁵⁵ Sawyer tells us something similar in a recent interview, stating that the Quilt "was a good outlet for some of the grief and the anger that people had."⁵⁶ Many of the Quilt panels also "incorporate[d] the ashes of [the] AIDS dead into their designs," emphasizing that the Quilt portrayed a critical position which was, in many ways, in line with the message conveyed by protestors at the Ashes Action.⁵⁷ At once, then, protestors queered the AIDS Quilt and recognized it as an invaluable tool in the fight against the AIDS epidemic, expressing a similar position to Gust Yep in his writing on the AIDS Quilt: "mourning and activism are more intertwined than opposed.... Together they can generate energy for continued political work."⁵⁸ This contrary position is suggestive of the aporetic indeterminacy that the ashes placed the demonstrators in. In other words, what makes it possible for protestors to at once criticize the Quilt and affirm it as a useful tool in the fight against HIV/AIDS is the indeterminacy arising from the absence/presence of the ashes.

In addition to the AIDS Quilt, protestors at the Ashes Action targeted Bush because he and his administration had done functionally nothing to stymie the AIDS epidemic. Bush refused to spend more than two million dollars on HIV/AIDS research, repudiated safe sex education in public schools, and demonized ACT UP as a group of extremists who made the epidemic worse. As Sawyer said, "not only did Bush allow the epidemic to rage to over 110,000 people here in the United States on his watch, but globally, there were over 1.5 million cases."⁵⁹ Bush was so bad at addressing AIDS that, about a month before the Ashes Action, Magic Johnson stepped down from Bush's AIDS commission, citing the administration's consistent refusal to take action on the disease.⁶⁰ As Mervin Silverman put it a year before the Ashes Action, "that the president of the United States has only given one speech on a topic that has taken the lives of over 120,000

people and caused disease in close to 200,000 is—is a sad commentary.”⁶¹ Bush’s approach to AIDS responded to the dead by, for the most part, pretending that they did not exist.

Protestors at the Ashes Action made it impossible for Bush to pretend that the dead were non-existent. By covering the White House Lawns with ash, Bush was forced to literally see that people were dying from AIDS, as they were all over his entire front and back lawn. Importantly, these ashes were scattered across the terrace rather than just in one place and, accordingly, the quantity of ash piles made it more likely that Bush would see the AIDS dead. Additionally, it rained in D.C. almost immediately after the Ashes Action ended, making it difficult to pick up and remove the ashes. As activist John Winkleman said, the rain made it such that “the ashes were washed into the White House. So they’re there forever. They [the Bush administration] can’t sweep it up, they can’t deny it. They’re [the ashes are] there.”⁶² Nothing could be done to remove the ashes from the lawn, even as White House officials and police officers picked up the bags, boxes, and urns that were thrown over the fence. Thus, “the ashes [were] catalyzed as weaponry, strewn over the bars protecting the White House as a protest against government inattention or inaction.”⁶³ Bringing the dead to Bush’s home ensured the former president would see the results of his inaction on HIV/AIDS.

Additionally, after the ashes were deposited, the grounds surrounding the White House were turned into a graveyard, the final resting place for the ashes which “will remain forever as a part of the Washington Lawns.”⁶⁴ Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook draw attention to the “rhetoricity of places” for social movements by arguing that the particular location of a protest can contribute to its meaning; for protestors at the Ashes Action, then, the White House is important.⁶⁵ For example, shortly after the demonstration, activist Garance Franke-Ruta started making requests that the lawns be officially commemorated as a cemetery—a request which

continues well into recent memory.⁶⁶ Turning the White House into a graveyard was an important aspect of queering Bush because, as I will explain, it both made visible the results of Bush's inactions on HIV/AIDS and simultaneously conscripted Bush into the fight against the disease. But also conflictly, the White House cum graveyard allowed protestors to declare Bush to be a part of the dead. The fact that these different messages do not cohere with one another yet manage to arise simultaneously from the Ashes Action points toward the aporetic indeterminacy shaping protestors at this demonstration.

First, turning the White House into a graveyard simultaneously highlighted Bush's genocidal inaction on AIDS to the rest of the United States and conscripted him into the fight against the epidemic. That is, this action both made visible that Bush had done virtually nothing to fight HIV/AIDS but at the same time made it a part of his job to continue the fight against the disease. These two different results are possible when considering the location of the White House. The White House is commonly understood as an image of presidential leadership, influence, and power; it is, as J. Anthony Blair puts it, "not just [a] building," but rather a "powerful symbol" or "visual rhetorical device" which conveys "the immense authority and prestige of the institutions of the Presidency."⁶⁷ The White House, then, can be looked to as an image of what the president values and finds important. Thus, when the grounds surrounding this building were turned into a graveyard full of the AIDS dead, activists made manifest the physical results of Bush's values surrounding the ongoing epidemic. Yet simultaneously, activists did more than just show the crisis. By turning Bush's place of residency and work into a graveyard, they functionally declared that he now had a new job as grave keeper. That is, because Bush suddenly now lived in a graveyard, he was in charge of taking care of the AIDS dead there.

Activists thus conscripted Bush into the fight against this disease by functionally telling him that he had no choice but to pay attention to, and take care of, the dead.

But in a conflicting manner, because he now resided in a graveyard, some activists counted Bush as among the dead rather than the living. For example, after the ashes were thrown on the White House Lawns, Alexis Danzig shouted into a megaphone that, “we are gathered here today to pay our last respects to the Bush administration....We are *not* here to pay our last respects to the people who we love and who have lost because those people we carry forever with us.”⁶⁸ By paying their “last respects” to the Bush administration, Danzig made it clear that activists were laying to rest those in political power rather than those who had died from AIDS. For Danzig, it was not that Bush was in charge of the graves, but rather that he now belonged in one because it was Bush’s ashes that were laid to rest on the White House Lawns during the Ashes Action. Danzig explicitly stated that activists were not laying to rest the AIDS dead—those that “we love and who we have lost”—during this demonstration; instead, it is Bush who was being laid to rest. This declaration connects the ashes with Bush rather than the AIDS dead, serving as a reminder and demonstration of the effects of Bush’s inaction on the ongoing epidemic. In other words, it is the still-present genocidal fire that Danzig connects the ashes to. This declaration thus tells Bush that the AIDS dead in fact do exist, as he is one of them.

Ashes Action protestors sought to queer Bush in order to make him join the fight against HIV/AIDS by rejecting his functionally nonexistent relationship with the dead in favor of one which recognized that the dead continually make demands on the living to address this epidemic. However, the conflicting manners in which activists recruited Bush into the fight suggests that it is irresolvable indeterminacy which shaped protestors during this demonstration. Activists acknowledged, then, that they had not, and could not, have done enough during the first Ashes

Action, even if they had succeeded at both making visible the ugly reality of the AIDS epidemic and convincing Bush to do more to address the disease. For example, at the subsequent ACT UP/New York meeting, one protestor discussed the possibility of doing another Ashes Action and aptly declared that “we’ll keep the White House white—white with ash.”⁶⁹ Other activists stressed the importance of voting Bush out of office while still others suggested that future demonstrations needed to involve more people to maximize their efficacy.⁷⁰ Protestors immediately acknowledged that they had not done enough and that they would need to do more political action into the future.

Queer’s Aporia: Absence and Presence

Stuart Murray invites us to ponder the following question: “what might it mean to heed those we have let die, those who have been disappeared or disclaimed as the quiet casualties, the collateral damages, the opportunity cost of life today?”⁷¹ For activists at the Ashes Action, the answer is to make political demands for justice for the dead while simultaneously understanding that their deaths produce an irresolvable aporia which forever mires the living in indecision. My suggestion has been that Ashes Action activists queered the AIDS Quilt and the Bush administration by rejecting both a sense of complacency with and ignoring of the ongoing epidemic that protestors argued were produced by both the Quilt and the president. Instead, protestors argued that Americans ought to face the horrors of HIV/AIDS head-on and thus see and respond to the dead. Additionally, Bush ought to be drawn into the fight against AIDS and ramp up his efforts to address the disease. While demonstrators could never be certain that they had done enough, their efforts provided a different relationship with the dead than the one understood by the dominant American public sphere.

To return to this dissertation's central question, what does the Ashes Action suggest queer can do, be, or mean? I have argued throughout this chapter that queer can be a political and social demand for a relationship with the dead which acknowledges the insurmountable and unforgiveable injustices of their deaths. Queering, then, signals a refusal to allow the AIDS dead to be forgotten or for their demands to go unheard. While queering's acknowledgement is clear—it knows that the injustice causing these deaths must be remedied—it remains mired in indeterminacy about what action ought to be taken. Thus, while queering, as I understand it here, is a pre-condition for a more ethical relationship with the dead, it does not provide a clear and concise blueprint for what exactly ought to be done. Instead, queering remains indeterminate as a result of the aporia which made it possible. Queering here is, much as Thomas Nakayama and Charles Morris tell us about queer worldmaking, “not a clear-cut path.”⁷² What arises from queering, then, will inevitably be different in its particular contexts.

This chapter has also suggested that we can look to the Ashes Action as evidence of queering's efficacy for political activism. This demonstration, as I and others have stated, fundamentally altered AIDS activism, operating as the basis of numerous other political funerals and a second Ashes Action four years afterwards. As Deborah Gould puts it, “in using the actual ashes of dead people, the action would itself be an escalation in tactics.”⁷³ Escalating these tactics became possible because activists heeded the dead's demands and sought out a new relationship with the dead. As a result, as Pablo Alvarez says, “for ACT UP activists, the Ashes Action is significant on multiple levels, ones that place the responsibility for AIDS-related deaths at the hands of government.”⁷⁴ Importantly, the Ashes Action was the catalyst for an untold number of people to become activists: “where we started out [with this particular demonstration], I think we numbered in the hundreds. By the end, we had thousands of people.”⁷⁵ Many who

were in D.C. to view the AIDS Quilt were convinced by protestors and opted to join the march rather than remain at the Quilt. Numerous people who self-identified as non-political even became more heavily involved in AIDS activism as a result of this demonstration; as one self-identified non-political woman put it, “just being here this weekend and walking from the Quilt....I am so, so grateful to everyone that’s in ACT UP, that fights with us, for us, and that just has the spirit, the passion, to keep on fighting.”⁷⁶ There was, then, a massive change in AIDS activism as a result of the Ashes Action. As one activist aptly summarized this pivot, “when you get white-haired, middle-aged people to be out in the street with us, walking past the White House chanting, with all their hearts, ‘three more weeks [until Bush is out of office],’ you know a shift has taken place.”⁷⁷

In addition to an understanding of queer’s potentiality, this chapter provides two primary takeaways for broader rhetorical scholarship. First, the Ashes Action suggests that further attention ought to be given to the visibility of the dead’s demands. While a wide range of scholarship exists on the experience of listening to the dead’s demands,⁷⁸ little exists on attending to the visibility of the dead’s demands. For example, Stuart Murray makes it clear that the way his work hearkens the dead is by listening to their “voices,” or allowing the dead to “speak.”⁷⁹ Michelle Ballif also says that the living respond to the dead by “speaking to, listening to the dead other.”⁸⁰ Cary Wolfe even tells us that the living “find not one voice but many” which are both “muted and self-muting” within ashes.⁸¹ The response enacted by the Ashes Action is distinct from other scholarship insofar as it is primarily visual rather than auditory. Protestors draw attention to the “beautiful” AIDS Quilt, the “ugly” reality of AIDS deaths, and the visual components of the scattered ashes on the White House Lawns. It is visuals, then, which give the Ashes Action its particular force. The focus on visuals is supported by protestors

throughout this demonstration; as David Robinson says, “we wanted to show the truth, the unvarnished truth: *Don’t pretty this up in any way*. What has come out of this epidemic? It’s ashes, it’s bone chips.”⁸² What Robinson understands as the “truth” of the AIDS epidemic is juxtaposed with a prettiness that he implicitly understands as the “lie” of the ongoing crisis. Thus, attention to the visibility of the Ashes Action (and, as such, the broader AIDS epidemic) is important. As a result, this chapter suggests that scholars might expand their conception of the living’s response to the dead’s demands to include visual, rather than primarily auditory, components.

Second, this chapter suggests a nuanced approach to the ongoing conversation about absence and presence within rhetorical studies.⁸³ Raymie McKerrow, in his famous introduction to critical rhetoric, reminds us that “absence is as important as *presence*” when reading rhetorically because what gets “left out” or “unsaid” often influences the meaning of a text, event, or object.⁸⁴ The importance of McKerrow’s critical rhetoric for queer rhetorical studies is not lost; as Isaac West suggests, these two rhetorical methods share “many of the same commitments” insofar as they both “engage the problematics of power relations, discourse, and representation.”⁸⁵ What my reading of the ashes as trace suggests is that, not only is absence as significant as presence for critical and queer rhetorical studies, but the very notion of absence itself cannot be determined without also thinking presence (and vice-versa). That is to say, ashes suggest that “nothing...is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.”⁸⁶ As Jonathan Culler says, “for presence to function as it is said to, it must have the qualities that supposedly belong to its opposite, absence.”⁸⁷ It is not just that absence influences meaning, but rather that absence is a part of meaning itself.

For members of ACT UP, the fight against HIV/AIDS has never stopped and never can. While it is a common belief in the western world that the AIDS crisis is over, members of ACT UP would vehemently disagree, suggesting that we have not, and we cannot ever, do enough to respond to the dead's demands. Thus, while the group has a noticeably smaller number of members and weaker political presence than it did during its heyday in the late 1980s and early 1990s, members of the organization continue fighting HIV/AIDS. For example, current ACT UP member Ivy Kwan Arce continues fighting against the AIDS crisis by increasing educational opportunities about PrEP for women⁸⁸ while ACT UP/New York demonstrated in front of the White House on December 1, 2022 (World AIDS Day) to demand that President Joe Biden commit more funding to address AIDS across the world.⁸⁹ Recently, UNAIDS released data suggesting that, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts to address AIDS have faltered, making possible 1.5 million new infections globally in 2021 alone.⁹⁰ There is, then, good reason for ACT UP to continue to fight against the AIDS crisis. This group continues to acknowledge that the AIDS dead still make demands on the living, and that the aporia of AIDS deaths has not been, and cannot ever be, resolved. One lesson that we may learn from continuing to study ACT UP, then, is that we ought to continue looking for “an *other* life, and an *other* world...in which we might hold death, in refrain, rather than repudiate or forget death.”⁹¹

Thus, for members of ACT UP, the Ashes Action was not an end point, signaling the conclusion of the AIDS crisis. Rather, this demonstration pointed toward the importance of AIDS activism continuing on end. In his analysis of ACT UP's political funerals, Jack Lowery states that “the political funerals transformed....These funerals were the beginnings of...finding a new way to have an impact upon the world.”⁹² Lowery continues by explaining that activists at the Ashes Action agree: “David Robinson recalled the Ashes Action, and his use of Krause's

ashes in almost identical terms. For this kind of funeral to be an end point doesn't honor that sense of transformation."⁹³ Rather than an ending in and of itself, then, the Ashes Action is better understood as an open-ended demonstration which made possible both more activism and further challenges to the AIDS crisis. And, as the first political funeral put on by ACT UP, the Ashes Action heavily influenced future demonstrations. With Erin Rand, then, we may find the Ashes Action to be "an opportunity for a new kind of existence, in which death and mourning need not preclude activism, opposition, and social transformation."⁹⁴ To that end, the next chapter turns to Mark Fisher's political funeral as suggestive of another way to conceptualize queer and its possibilities.

¹ See, for example, Michelle Ballif, "Regarding the Dead," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 47, no. 4 (2014): 455-471; Diane Davis, "Breaking Down 'Man': A Conversation with Avital Ronell," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 47, no. 4 (2014): 354-385; Stuart J. Murray, "Thanatopolitics," in *Bloomsbury Handbook to Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. J. R. Di Leo (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 718-719; Stuart J. Murray. *The Living From the Dead: Disaffirming Biopolitics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022); Brooke Rollins, "The Ethics of Epideictic Rhetoric: Addressing the Problem of Presence through Derrida's Funeral Orations," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2005): 5-23.

² Quoted in Jason Silverstein, "Why the Ashes of People with AIDS on the White House Lawn Matter," *Vice News*, Published August 29, 2016, Accessed July 10, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vdqv34/why-the-ashes-of-aids-victims-on-the-white-house-lawn-matter.

³ Eric Sawyer, quoted in Phillip Picardi, "'George Bush, Serial Killer': ACT UP's Fight Against the President," *Out Magazine*, Published December 1, 2018, Accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.out.com/out-exclusives/2018/12/01/george-bush-serial-killer-act-ups-fight-against-president>.

⁴ See, for example, Sarah Schulman. *Let The Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (New York: Picador, 2022); Michelle C. Velasquez-Potts, "Abolitionist Generosities: On Hunger Strikes as Queer Refusal," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 8, no. 3 (2021): 107-125.

⁵ Deborah Gould, "Passionate Political Process: Bringing Emotions Back into the Study of Social Movements," in *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion*, ed. Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 158.

⁶ See, for example, Adrienne E. Christiansen and Jeremy J. Hanson, “Comedy as Cure for Tragedy: ACT UP and the Rhetoric of AIDS,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82, no. 2 (1996): 157-170; Pascal Emmer, “Talkin’ Bout Meta-Generation: ACT UP History and Queer Futurity,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 89-96; Kevin DeLuca, “Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36, no. 1 (1999): 9-21.

⁷ Quoted in Silverstein, “Why the Ashes of People With AIDS on the White House Lawn Matter.”

⁸ See, for example, Deborah Gould. *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); Debra Levine, “You Are Witness to a Crime,” *The Baffler* 55 (2021): 38-51.

⁹ Lucas Hilderbrand, “Retroactivism,” *GLQ* 12, no. 2 (2006): 309.

¹⁰ Andrew Weiner, “Disposable Media, Expendable Populations—ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 11, no. 1 (2012): 107.

¹¹ Gould, “Passionate Political Process,” 156.

¹² Erin J. Rand, “Repeated Remembrance: Commemorating the AIDS Quilt and Resuscitating the Mourned Subject,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007): 675. See also Erin J. Rand, “Gay Pride, Queer Shame,” in *Reclaiming Queer Activist & Academic Rhetorics of Resistance* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014): 127-155.

¹³ Vasquez-Potts, “Abolitionist Generosities.”

¹⁴ Quoted in Schulman. *Let The Record Show*, 607.

¹⁵ Quoted in Silverstein, “Why the Ashes of People With AIDS on the White House Lawn Matter.”

¹⁶ See, for example, Richard Davey, *A History of Mourning* (London: Jay’s, 1890); Margaret Gibson, *Objects of the Dead: Mourning and Memory in Everyday Life* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2008); Donovan J. Ochs. *Consolatory Rhetoric: Grief, Symbol, and Ritual in the Greco-Roman Era* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); Nancy C. Reeves, “Death Acceptance Through Ritual,” *Death Studies* 35, no. 5 (2011): 408-441; Robert Sandberg, “Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust,” *Journal of Beckett Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (1992): 55-66.

¹⁷ Jennifer Leaney, “Ashes to Ashes: Cremation of Death in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement: Volume 2*, ed. Ralph Houlbrooke (London: Routledge, 2020): 127.

¹⁸ Brenda Mathijssen, “The Ambiguity of Human Ashes: Exploring Encounters With Cremated Remains in the Netherlands,” *Death Studies* 41, no. 1 (2017): 34.

¹⁹ See, for example Carl Djerassi, “A Scattering of Ashes,” *The Hudson Review* 43, no. 4 (1991): 571-581; Ida Mari Høeg, “Solid and Floating Burial Places. Ash Disposal and the Constituting of Spaces of Disposal,” *Mortality* 28, no. 1 (2023): 1-20; Duncan Light, Julie Rugg, and Craig Young, “The Disposal of Cremation Ashes in Tourism Settings: Practices, Impacts and Management,” *Current Issues in Tourism* 26, no. 8 (2023): 1354-1366.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Passages—From Traumatism to Promise,” in *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992): 391.

²¹ For Derrida, cinders and ashes run over into each other in a chain of equivalence. That is, they both function as trace in the same way: there’s an “invisible distance...between languages, overrunning the distance between *cendre* [ash], *cenere*, *ashes*, *cinders*, *cinis*...” Jacques Derrida, *Cinders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): 55, my emphasis.

²² Derrida, “Passages,” 391.

²³ Derrida, “Passages,” 389.

²⁴ Quoted in Jack Lowery, *It Was Vulgar & It Was Beautiful: How AIDS Activists Used Art to Fight a Pandemic* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2022): 313.

²⁵ Quoted in Silverstein, “Why the Ashes of People With AIDS on the White House Lawn Matter.”

²⁶ James Wentzy, “Ashes Action and Subsequent ACT UP Meeting.” AIDS Community Television: 1992. <https://actuporalhistory.org/actions/political-funerals>. 1:17:10-1:17:40.

²⁷ Derrida, *Cinders*, 41.

²⁸ Derrida, *Cinders*, 43.

²⁹ Derrida, *Cinders*, 43.

³⁰ Ned Lukacher, “Mourning Becomes Telepathy,” in *Cinders*, ed. Ned Lukacher (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): 2.

³¹ Derrida, “Passages,” 392.

³² This understanding of those dead from AIDS as “reduced to absolute nothingness” connects to and draws from those scholars who have argued that, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, people with AIDS were understood as less than human by dominant society. One need only look to the likes of Jesse Helms, Pat Buchanan, and Jerry Falwell to understand this position, or to the fact that HIV+ children have been burned out of their homes and that funeral homes used to refuse to

handle people who died from AIDS for fear of becoming infected. See, for example, Bryant Keith Alexander, "Rhetorics of Loss and Living: Adding New Panels to the AIDS Quilt as an Act of Eulogy," in *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt*, in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011): 189-227; Jeffrey A. Bennett, *Banning Queer Blood: Rhetorics of Citizenship, Contagion, and Resistance* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009); David France, *How to Survive a Plague: The Story of How Activists and Scientists Tamed AIDS* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016); Charles E. Morris III, "ACT UP 25: HIV/AIDS, Archival Queers, and Mnemonic World Making," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 49-53; Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989); Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and The Media*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

³³ Wentzy, "Ashes Action and Subsequent ACT UP Meeting," 49:40-49:53.

³⁴ See, for example, James Wentzy, "Ashes Action Part 1." AIDS Community Television: 1992. <https://actuporalhistory.org/actions/political-funerals>.

³⁵ This is a quote from the pamphlet released advertising the first Ashes Action. The full text of the pamphlet is as follows: 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 a 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. Quoted in Gould, *Moving Politics*, 230.

³⁶ Zuzanna Dziuban, "Between Subjectification and Objectification: Theorising Ashes," in *Mapping the 'Forensic Turn': Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond* (Cambridge: New Academic Press, 2017): 285. My emphasis.

³⁷ Lauren DeLand, "Live Fast, Die Young, Leave a Useful Corpse: The Terrible Utility of David Wojnarowicz," *Performance Research* 19, no. 1 (2014): 36.

³⁸ "Ashes Action and Subsequent ACT UP Meeting."

³⁹ "Ashes Action and Subsequent ACT UP Meeting," 1:23:41-1:23:49.

⁴⁰ "Ashes Action and Subsequent ACT UP Meeting," 1:15:22-1:15:38. My emphasis.

⁴¹ Erin J. Rand, "An Appetite for Activism: The Lesbian Avengers and the Queer Politics of Visibility," *Women's Studies in Communication* 36 (2013): 128. See also Erin J. Rand, *Reclaiming Queer: Activist & Academic Rhetorics of Resistance* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014).

⁴² David Robinson, “ACT UP: Ashes Action – 13 October 1992,” 17:15-18:00.

⁴³ James Wentzy, “The Ashes Action (1992).” AIDS Community Television: 1992.
<https://actuporalhistory.org/actions/political-funerals>. 18:00-18:08.

⁴⁴ Wentzy, “The Ashes Action (1992),” 5:22-5:33.

⁴⁵ Bob Rafsky, quoted in ACT UP/New York, “Fight Back, Fight AIDS: 15 Years of ACT UP,”
<https://actupny.org/divatv/synopsis75.html>.

⁴⁶ Kevin Michael DeLuca, Christine Harold, and Kenneth Rufo, “Q.U.I.L.T.: A Patchwork of Reflections,” in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011): 78. Author’s emphasis.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Alexander, “Rhetorics of Loss and Living;” Jeffrey A. Bennett, “A Stitch in Time: Public Emotionality and the Repertoire of Citizenship,” in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011). 133-158; Morris, “The Mourning After.”

⁴⁸ Rand, “Repeated Remembrance,” 253. See also Mary Stuart Petty, “Divine Interventions: Art in the AIDS Epidemic,” PhD diss., (University of Pennsylvania: 2000).

⁴⁹ Quoted in Gould, *Moving Politics*, 232.

⁵⁰ Cleve Jones, “A Vision of the Quilt,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007): 583.

⁵¹ See, for example, Hildebrand, “Retroactivism.”

⁵² ACT UP/New York, “Media Advisory: Hundreds of AIDS Activists Dump Human Ashes on White House in Shocking Political Funeral,” October 9, 1992.

⁵³ Robinson, “The Ashes Action (1992),” 17:45-18:16.

⁵⁴ “Ashes Action and Subsequent ACT UP Meeting.” AIDS Community Television: 1992.
<https://actuporalhistory.org/actions/political-funerals>. 1:24:43-1:24:56. See also Ann Bausum, *Viral: The Fight Against AIDS In America* (New York: Penguin Young Readers, 2019).

⁵⁵ As Robinson says, “I’m not maligning the quilt. It’s very useful and very important, but it’s very beautiful, and it does make a lot of people feel better.” Wentzy, “The Ashes Action (1992).” 17:19-17:27.

⁵⁶ Mason Funk, “Eric Sawyer Interview,” *Outwards*, Published March 28, 2019, Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://theoutwardsarchive.org/interview/sawyer-eric/>. 1:42:02-1:42:15.

⁵⁷ Nino Testa, “‘If You Are Reading It, I Am Dead:’ Activism, Local History, and the AIDS Quilt,” *The Public Historian* 44, no. 3 (2022): 24-57. See also Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art +*

Textile Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Charles E. Morris III, "The Mourning After," in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011): xxxvii-lxix; Alisa Solomon, "AIDS Crusaders ACT UP A Storm," in *Radical Street Performance: International Anthology*, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz (London: Routledge, 1998): 42-51.

⁵⁸ Gust Yep, "The Politics of Loss and Its Remains in *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt*, in *Remembering the AIDS Quilt*, ed. Charles E. Morris III (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011). 58.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Picardi, "George Bush, Serial Killer'." See also Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Philip J. Hilts, "Magic Johnson Quits Panel on AIDS," *The New York Times*, September 26, 1992.

⁶¹ Quoted in Camila Domonoske, "'Kinder Gentler Indifference': Activists Challenge George H.W. Bush's Record on AIDS," *National Public Radio*, Published December 4, 2018, Accessed July 17, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/04/673276127/kinder-gentler-indifference-activists-challenge-george-h-w-bush-s-record-on-aids>.

⁶² John Winkleman, interview by Sarah Schulman, May 31, 2012, interview 131, transcript and recording, ACT UP Oral History Project, 44.

⁶³ David Gere, *How to Make Dances in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004): 195.

⁶⁴ Michelle Renee Baron, "Queering US Public Mourning Rituals: Funerals, Performance, and the Construction of Normativity," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley: 2011): 53.

⁶⁵ Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook, "Location Matters: The Rhetoric of Place in Protest," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 3 (2011): 257. See also Elizabeth A. Wright, "Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Place/Space," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 51-81.

⁶⁶ See, for example Garance Franke-Ruta, "The Plague Years, in Film and Memory," *The Atlantic*, Published February 24, 2013, Accessed September 8, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/02/the-plague-years-in-film-and-memory/273449/>; Silverstein, "Why the Ashes of People With AIDS on the White House Lawn Matter."

⁶⁷ J. Anthony Blair, "The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments," in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, eds. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004): 58.

⁶⁸ Alexis Danzig, "ACT UP Ashes Action 1992," 8:38-9:19. My emphasis.

⁶⁹ "Ashes Action Part 2," 15:52-15:55.

⁷⁰ “Ashes Action and Subsequent ACT UP Meeting.”

⁷¹ Murray, *The Living From the Dead*, 1.

⁷² Thomas K. Nakayama and Charles E. Morris III, “Worldmaking and Everyday Interventions,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 1 (2014): vi.

⁷³ Gould, “Passionate Political Process,” 158.

⁷⁴ Jih-Fei Cheng, Cecilia Aldarondo, Roger Hallas, Pablo Alvarez, Jim Hubbard, and Dredge Byung’chu Kang-Nguyēn, “Dispatches From the Pasts/Memories of AIDS,” in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, eds. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 206.

⁷⁵ David Robinson, interview by Sarah Schulman, July 16, 2007, interview 082, transcript and recording, ACT UP Oral History Project, 60.

⁷⁶ “Ashes Action Part 2.” AIDS Community Television: 1992.
<https://actuporalhistory.org/actions/political-funerals>. 16:49-17:10.

⁷⁷ “Ashes Action and Subsequent ACT UP Meeting,” 1:31:41-1:31:55.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Farzad Amoozegar, “Listening With the Dead Other,” *Ethos* 49, no. 4 (2022): 419-436; Paul Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Bongani Kona, *Our Ghosts Were Once People: Stories on Death and Dying* (Gauteng: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2021).

⁷⁹ Murray, *The Living From the Dead*, 1.

⁸⁰ Ballif, “Regarding the Dead,” 457.

⁸¹ Cary Wolfe, “Cinders After Biopolitics,” in *Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014): x; xviii.

⁸² Quoted in Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 607.

⁸³ Barbara A. Biesecker, “Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation From Within the Thematic of *Différance*,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 22, no. 2 (1989): 110-130; Nicholas S. Paliewicz, “Alchemical Rhetoric: The Presences and Absences of the Jackling-Gemmell Report (1899) in the Archives of the Anthropocene,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (2024): 1-23; Robert E. Tucker, “Figure, Ground and Presence: A Phenomenology of Meaning in Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87, no. 4 (2001): 396-414.

⁸⁴ Raymie E. McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” *Communications Monographs* 56, no. 2 (1989): 107.

⁸⁵ Isaac West, “Queer Generosities,” *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 5 (2013): 538.

⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981): 26.

⁸⁷ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). 95.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Alicia Green, “A Woman’s Journey,” *POZ Magazine*, Published March 28, 2022, Accessed December 21, 2022, <https://www.poz.com/article/womans-journey>.

⁸⁹ See, for example, ACT UP New York, “JOIN ACT UP NY IN WASHINGTON, D.C.,” *ACT UP New York*, Accessed December 21, 2022, <https://actupny.com/join-act-up-ny-in-d-c-on-dec-1-world-aids-day-to-demand/>.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Sophie Barton-Knott, “Millions of Lives at Risk as Progress Against AIDS Falters,” *UNAIDS*, Published July 27, 2022, Accessed December 21, 2022, https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/pressreleaseandstatementarchive/2022/july/20220727_global-aids-update.

⁹¹ Murray, *The Living From the Dead*, 175.

⁹² Lowery, *It Was Vulgar*, 338.

⁹³ Lowery, *It Was Vulgar*, 338.

⁹⁴ Rand, “Repeated Remembrance,” 674.

CHAPTER 3

THE CORPSE, THE FAMILY, AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE: FISHER'S POLITICAL FUNERAL

Queering the family may allow political activists to challenge the national heteronormative imaginary that interprets its citizens as both exclusively heterosexual and AIDS-free by advocating for a politics explicitly committed to a family inclusive of people with AIDS. For many scholars, queering the family in its myriad forms is a way to alter private kinship relations;¹ for others, the family intimately connects the public and private sphere in American life.² I extend both of these sets of scholars' arguments to suggest that queering the family may be an act of societal disruption which alters both the individual family unit and the collective, American family by scrambling the logics of binary and reproductive sexual difference which operate as the foundation of family in modern America. That is, through a commitment to a family whose makeup includes one or more people with AIDS, a queering of the family renounces the logic of reproductive sexual dimorphism which repudiates those with AIDS in favor of a queer political orientation that centralizes and values those PWAs deemed abject. Rather than understanding the family as exclusively a traditional, heteronormative institution³ or a liberatory site for breaking apart and rearticulating personal kinship relations,⁴ I suggest that an irreducible aporia at the center of the familial relation makes possible a particular instantiation of family committed to the fight against HIV/AIDS. Queering, as a public disruption of normative conceptions of family which nevertheless lays claim to that very language which it seeks to disrupt, helps us identify this aporetic understanding of family.

I take as my case study Mark Lowe Fisher's political funeral. Taking place on November 2, 1992, the night before George H. W. Bush was to be voted out of office in favor of Bill Clinton, this demonstration consisted of ACT UP activists parading Fisher's dead corpse nearly

40 blocks throughout New York City to Bush's re-election headquarters. Demonstrators chanted demands for attention to the ongoing AIDS crisis, handed out flyers to people watching, and drew attention to the open casket containing Fisher's corpse as they marched throughout the city. What makes this political funeral important for rhetoricians is neither just the spectacularized nature of this demonstration nor only that it marked the first time in American history in which an activist group publicly displayed a corpse in political protest but also and at once the protestors' claiming of the individual and national family as justification for political demonstration. "You thought we didn't matter because you stand for family values," activist Eric Sawyer loudly declared upon reaching Bush's reelection headquarters. "Well George Bush, we are all part of someone's family, and you are looking at Mark Fisher's family here today."⁵ None of the activists at the protest were Fisher's family by conventional relations such as blood or marriage, yet they declared themselves Fisher's brothers and sisters. This chapter suggests that these declarations are demonstrative of a family which has displaced a foundational reproductive sexual difference in favor of an explicit commitment to a queer politics oriented toward non-normative families.

A consideration of what constitutes family for protestors during this political demonstration requires a discussion of Fisher's corpse as it is displayed throughout New York City. It is the corpse itself which produced an irreducible indeterminacy that opened up the possibility of a queer interpretation of family. To explain this indeterminacy and response, I interpret Fisher's corpse as the abject exemplar, a trace through which I read the corpse as simultaneously expelled from yet paragon of the American population. As abject exemplar, Fisher's corpse both figures the entire American AIDS crisis and suggests that the line demarcating the declared "we" of the American people is permeable and malleable; Fisher's

corpse, and thus those infected with AIDS, are at once inside and outside of the American national family, rendering indeterminate both conservative and liberal interpretations of what constitutes the family. In this demonstration, it is Fisher's corpse which makes possible the queering of the family.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I begin with a discussion of the family as both a conservative talking point designed to otherize LGBTQ people and those with AIDS before discussing both liberal attempts to articulate LGBTQ families and queer critiques of those familial reclamations. Drawing from scholars such as Cindy Patton and Kath Weston, I will suggest that the dialectical nature of those opposing claims to the family ought to be called into question as indicative of an essentialized (and ultimately conservative) foundation of male/female sexual difference. This foundational logic of reproductive sexual difference renders abject people with AIDS. In the following section, I unpack what it means to read the corpse as abject exemplar, suggesting that ACT UP's displaying of Fisher's corpse at once makes impossible a foundational notion of family and makes possible a queer rendering of family oriented toward the fight against HIV/AIDS. Afterwards, I will argue that, rather than sexual dimorphism, it is the innumerable, or an unquantifiable conception of sexual difference, which Fisher's corpse allows to be the (non)foundation of family. Instead of simply rejecting the family, Fisher's political funeral points toward the productive aporia embedded in debates about the family's possibilities.

The Family

The family and family values may have been the most common conservative talking point throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. For example, by the time of Fisher's funeral, Bush's vice president Dan Quayle had delivered his notorious rant about the anti-family values

of *Murphy Brown* in the wake of the Rodney King riots, Anita Bryant had begun her campaign to “Save the Children” and protect the family from the gay rights movement, and Phyllis Schlafly had successfully mobilized claims to protect mothers and motherhood from the evils of the Equal Rights Amendment.⁶ The notion of family values was so commonplace that it heavily influenced the outcome of presidential elections throughout the aforementioned decades, operating as a primary mobilizer for getting people to vote.⁷ With Judith Butler, we may understand the family and its values as determining “the conditions of intelligibility by which life becomes livable, by which life also becomes condemned and foreclosed” throughout this time period.⁸ In other words, the family was so important that it made livable certain lives and unlivable many others. It is thus no coincidence that ACT UP activists laid claim to the family during Fisher’s political funeral.

A primary reason that family values became a common talking point for conservative leaders is the political and social marriage between the Republican party and evangelical Christians. While historically apolitical, many evangelical preachers became overtly interested in politics in the 1970s due to a perceived decline in American morality. Protests against the Vietnam War, gains accrued from the Civil Rights Movement, widespread experimentation with drugs throughout the 1960s, and increases in divorce and abortion rates attributed to the feminist movement convinced many that America was heading in the wrong direction.⁹ Concern about what infamous evangelical Jerry Falwell once referred to as “the lowering of moral standards among our young people” was enough for a radical shift toward the political sphere for many prominent evangelical preachers.¹⁰

For conservative evangelicals and political figures fashioned by Christianity, America was losing its way because of the weakening of the family. Shaped by the Christian belief that

the family is “the fundamental institution of society, an immutable structure established by our Creator,” these people believed that the family’s diminishment signaled doom.¹¹ And as a result, conservatives grew to believe that the only way to protect the American way of life was by protecting the family. Thus, when prominent Republican spokesperson Paul Weyrich suggested in 1990 that conservatives had to take on “the role of defending and fostering basic American values,” Weyrich functionally argued that the Republican party’s political strategy ought to be centered around preserving the family.¹² While these “basic American values” that Weyrich speaks of are more broadly indicative of a sense of the American common good—a vague yearning for a better past in which people were more “wholesome” and “responsible”—what made that common good cohere is the family.¹³ As Lauren Berlant aptly puts it, this appeal to the American common good is reflective of “a new nostalgia-based fantasy nation of the ‘American way of life’,” a “utopian America” in which the family operates as “the moral foundation of national life.”¹⁴ The family, then, was understood as the glue holding together the core American morals and standards that evangelicals, and subsequently conservatives, held dear.

Opposition to groups like ACT UP became “a key plank of the family values agenda” as conservatives believed that ACT UP “was not a civil rights movement” but rather “an attempt to legitimate anti-family behavior.”¹⁵ That is, because evangelical conservatives espoused an understanding of the family which was exclusively nuclear—a heterosexual father as the head of the household and his heterosexual stay-at-home wife who takes care of their two children in the family’s suburban home—ACT UP could only be understood as a challenge to the legitimacy of the family. LGBTQ people and PWAs weren’t heterosexual, didn’t have children, and didn’t (usually) live in suburban family homes. Additionally, the promiscuity associated with HIV/AIDS and LGBTQ culture contributed to the conservative belief that these people could not

be a part of the family. Furthermore, ACT UP's disregard for conventional gender norms was understood as a "vicious assault on the American family" as dominant conservative discourse portrayed LGBTQ people as both child groomers and molesters.¹⁶ Thus, the time in which Fisher's political funeral occurred was marked by the weaponization of the family as justification for refusing to address HIV/AIDS.

Bush, ACT UP activists' primary target during Fisher's political funeral, was a particularly prominent family man. In a 1992 speech, Bush argued that "we've got to ground our drive for change in some things that do not or should not change, things like values and family and faith. And too many Americans now feel that the country's on the wrong track, and how do we get it back on? We take the first step when we put the American family first."¹⁷ At the 1992 Republican National Convention, Bush's wife Barbara passionately affirmed the family and its values: "as in our family, as in American families everywhere, the parents we've met are determined to teach their children integrity, strength, responsibility, courage, sharing, love of God, and pride in being an American."¹⁸ After Bush's death in December 2018, the Institute for Family Studies and an array of news outlets released articles detailing how integral family was to Bush.¹⁹ Centralizing the family was thus a crucial part of Bush's political discourse, persona, and legacy.

As a conservative politician heavily influenced by Christian preachers, Bush was quite significant for the espousal of evangelical beliefs that deemed ACT UP's demands and the protection of the family irreconcilable.²⁰ After ACT UP delivered their National Plan to End the AIDS Crisis (a document detailing a variety of policy solutions that would address the AIDS epidemic) to Bush a year before Fisher's political funeral, a news reporter asked Bush what he planned to do to address AIDS. In response, Bush declared that he cared "far more" about

unemployment than he did about HIV/AIDS because unemployment affects families.²¹ Implied by this statement is the belief that AIDS does not affect families and is therefore unimportant. Thus, we may read ACT UP's focus on Bush as having a dual meaning: as president, he had the capacity to develop new policies and put forth more money to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic; as symbol of evangelical conservatism, he represented much of the social ostracization that ACT UP sought to defeat.

Yet despite the popularized conservative belief that LGBTQ people and PWAs could not be "family" or even a part of it, many of these excluded people have performatively reclaimed the family from those conservatives who would deny any kinship relation that is not conventionally nuclear or defined by sexual reproduction. There are an untold number of LGBTQ folks and PWAs who have made this claim: many have been gay parents to adopted children, many have been single aunts and uncles to their siblings' kids, and many have moved to the suburbs and participated in conventional workspaces.²² For a variety of scholars and members of these families, these kinship dynamics operate as "a construct of resistance and a symbol of the fallacy of the 'traditional' paradigms" of family.²³ This reclamation is important, Bruce Gillespie tells us, because it is "an act of empowerment that is at once personal and political."²⁴

Nevertheless, many queer theorists are critical of this LGBTQ assimilation into the family. While it is certainly true that "it's still a 'big deal' to live a life of same-sex attraction because very little in society is set up to acknowledge the family ties you propose to make"—especially in 1992, when Fisher's funeral took place and the American AIDS crisis was at its height—it is also true that many of the families LGBTQ people were a part of were not and are not all that different from the nuclear family and, as such, have been criticized for reflecting an

exclusionary form of conservatism.²⁵ For many theorists, the family demands adherence to a rigid identity politics which negates the fluidity necessary for a liberatory gender and sexual politic; for others, the family is a state-based institution which stymies our agential capacity to find new modes of relation and being.²⁶ Valerie Lehr's *Queer Family Values* aptly describes both of these critiques: "to reinforce an understanding of identity as unified around a single aspect of our experience through identity politics is to accept an understanding of the self and definitions of naturalized social reality that make systemic change difficult, if not impossible" and "the task for an analysis of family is to understand how state policy constructs 'family' and how we can resist these policies in ways that are both material *and* symbolic."²⁷ The alternative, these scholars suggest, is a wholehearted rejection of the family in favor of a more liberatory form of kinship.

The radical rejection of the family is not without its own set of problems, however. As scholars such as Cindy Patton and Kath Weston suggest, this debate about the family—whether it should be protected against change, slightly altered, or entirely rejected—operates within a dialectical logic which relies upon a foundational notion of family that is conservative. In Patton's words, this "oppositional dyad" helps to "consolidate the internal identities of each group" and "was also used by each to promote general societal *disidentification* with the other[s]."²⁸ When LGBTQ people amend notions of the nuclear family, that amendment can only be understood in relation to an initial foundational notion of the family which is nuclear; when queer scholars and activists reject the family altogether, their position is defined in dialectical opposition to and thus made possible by the nuclear family itself. As Weston puts it, "because any alternative must be an alternative *to* something this formulation presumes a central paradigm of family shared by most people. In the United States the nuclear family clearly

represents a privileged construct.”²⁹ The juxtaposition between family and its rejection affirms the family as a privileged construct in American political and social spheres.³⁰ Patton historicizes this argument in terms of the new right’s rise to power: “the new right seems to have gained power in part in response to the moderate gains of the gay civil rights movement and the increased visibility it has afforded many lesbians and gay men. But similarly, the gay movement capitalized on the bold and vicious opposition to it that was generated by a general societal homophobia.”³¹ Thus, both LGBTQ alterations of the nuclear family and queer rejections of the family fall prey to their own critique—they help make possible the American centralization of the nuclear family.

If both a reclamation and a rejection of the family presuppose a foundational sense of the family which is conservative, then perhaps scholars and activists ought to question the very foundation of the family itself. My suggestion will be that a rearticulation of the family as irreducibly aporetic rather than foundational makes possible a different understanding of this kinship relation which does not move past or ignore its conservative roots but at once reinterprets the family as a site of and for liberatory kinship relations. Queering the family, as ACT UP does during Mark Fisher’s political funeral, points toward this familial aporia. To explain this argument first requires that I read Fisher’s corpse as abject exemplar.

The Corpse

Fisher’s corpse was the centerpiece of this political funeral. This demonstration marked the first time in United States history that an activist group had publicly marched a corpse throughout a major city in protest of governmental injustice; as such, the corpse was quite important for protestors. For activist Eric Sawyer, what marked this protest as distinct was that “it was a body, as opposed to ashes....It was someone that we all knew, rather than just the ashes

of people that some of us knew or knew of.”³² Additionally, protestor Bob Rafsky powerfully commented that Fisher’s body served as an important reminder to the living “that they’re witnesses to a crime.”³³ Upon arriving at Bush’s re-election headquarters, activist Russell Pritchard delivered a simple but solemn message made possible by the presentation of the corpse: “here is a loved member of our family who has died; we want to show you. This is his body—and you killed him.”³⁴ If we are to take seriously Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca’s claim that the corpse is “a potent source of rhetorical power,” then studying Fisher’s corpse as it is displayed during this protest is significant.³⁵

The corpse, as Julia Kristeva puts it, “is the utmost of abjection.”³⁶ Abjection refers to that which is expelled as absolute other; it is “neither subject nor object” but rather “a ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing.”³⁷ What makes the abject significant for scholars like Kristeva and Judith Butler is that it is in the act of expulsion by which both that which expels and that which is expelled comes to have meaning. Thus, it is by expelling the abject that the subject is made possible *and* that the abject is understood as such. As Butler says, “the ‘abject’ designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered ‘Other.’ This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the ‘not-me’ as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject.”³⁸ As a result, the very delineation of the “inside” and the “outside” of the subject is made possible by the expulsion of the abject: “‘inner’ and ‘outer’ make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability. And this stability...is determined in large part of cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject.”³⁹ Thus, what can be labeled “inside” and “outside” the subject is called into question by the abject, as the border

dividing the abject from the subject is ambiguous, fragile, and contingent. Because abjection “does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it” but instead makes the very division between abject and subject possible, we may understand the abject to be “‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation.”⁴⁰ Kristeva discusses a variety of excrements as abject throughout her book *Powers of Horror*: vomit, shit, and infection are three prominent examples. What each of these waste matters suggest is that the body which expels becomes understood as the body through the act of expulsion.

Kristeva suggests that the corpse is the abject which allows the body to cohere as living. The corpse is distinct from what she calls “signified death”: “in the presence of signified death...I would understand, react or accept. No...corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live....There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.”⁴¹ To think the corpse as abject is thus to suggest that it is what must be expelled in order for the living to be. The corpse suggests that the boundary between life and death is malleable, permeable, and crossable. The impurity and permeability of the border between life and death pointed to by the corpse is why, Kristeva tells us, “the corpse...must not be displayed but immediately buried....The human corpse is a fount of impurity and must not be touched.”⁴² If the corpse is the impure abject that must be cast aside, then parading Fisher’s corpse signals a refusal to cast that impure abject aside but to instead understand it as what allows the living to cohere.

A variety of scholars have suggested that abjection may help us conceptualize not just the boundaries demarcating the individual body but also those boundaries which delimit both the state and the public from its constituted outside.⁴³ That is, there is an intimate relationship between the individual and the collective which allows scholars to map abjection onto not just

the body but also the public sphere. For example, Philippe Frowd argues that abjection “unsettles the inside/outside binary of the state as container and shows the precarity engendered by the state understood as an organism. The state as organism’s borders, rather than being seen as lines successfully drawn and defended, should rather be seen as *spaces of abjection* in which the state attempts—and fails—to undertake exclusion through law and regulation.”⁴⁴ Thus, we may read both the state and the public as organisms which are also made possible via abjection. To contextualize this understanding of abjection to Fisher’s corpse, it is the American population—the ‘we’ of the American people, the national family—which gains coherence against the rendering abject of the AIDS corpse. This argument furthers the positions presented by those scholars who suggest that gay men (who, according to homophobic myth, are comparatively more at risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS than other peoples) are abject.⁴⁵ I extend these scholars’ arguments by suggesting that it is the PWA corpse which makes homophobic and AIDSphobic society coherent (and that, subsequently, the display of this corpse threatens to undermine society’s coherence): it is the doubly abject status of the LGBTQ HIV/AIDS corpse which is key.

But why Fisher’s corpse, and not one of the many other AIDS dead? What made Fisher’s corpse particularly worthy of being marched throughout the streets of New York City? At first glance, the answer is seemingly paradoxical. On the one hand, Fisher was quite special to many of the activists partaking in this demonstration. For example, activist Joy Episalla described Fisher as both “our friend” and “our comrade”⁴⁶ while Michael Cunningham posited through tears that “we won’t recover from his [Fisher’s] loss, and we won’t forgive it.”⁴⁷ On the other hand, Fisher was interchangeable with and representative of everyone else who died during the AIDS crisis. In his now infamous essay “Bury Me Furiously,” Fisher referred to himself and

those others dead from the crisis interchangeably: “[when I die,] *I* want to show the result of my death, to display my body in public; I want the public to bear witness. *We* are not just spiraling statistics; we are people who have lives, who have purpose, who have lovers, friends, and families.”⁴⁸ The sudden shift from singular to plural pronouns suggests an interchangeability between Fisher and the other dead. Fisher’s corpse, then, is at once singular and substitutable.

If Fisher’s corpse is simultaneously unique and replaceable by any other PWA corpse, then perhaps we may read it as exemplar. The exemplar, Barbara Biesecker tells us, is “not merely or only an example—generalizable, sharable...but also *and at the same time* singular, unique, unequivocal, and incontrovertible;” it is an “irreducibly aporetic” trope made possible by an internal split between its interchangeable status and its existence as paragon.⁴⁹ The exemplar is at once synecdoche, the part which can substitute for the whole, and metonymy, replaceable link in a chain. As such, the exemplar suggests that the whole which is represented is internally split, divided at its foundation as an ideal yet substitutable representation of itself. For Jacques Derrida, the exemplar is “portrait but also...the duplicate, the reproduction, the copy as well as the original, the type, the model.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, Derrida suggests, the exemplar is the “ideal double...[the] other self, the same as self but improved.”⁵¹ The exemplar, then, is at once duplicate—imperfect copy of the original—and also model—the most perfect initial version. Simon Wortham adds to this understanding by suggesting that the exemplar is the “unexampled example,” by which it is at once promoted as example yet simultaneously demoted to a mere instance of that which it is example of.⁵² These conflicting understandings “cohabit here; they are—or seem to be—the same.”⁵³

But if Fisher’s corpse is exemplar, then what is it exemplar *of*? One answer may be the AIDS crisis itself. During the protest, activist Eric Sawyer proclaimed “George Bush, we charge

you with the murder of Mark Fisher and with the genocide of millions of people with HIV....Mark was only one of millions of us with AIDS who are waiting to die.”⁵⁴ Here, Fisher’s corpse is at once the particular of and substitutable with the “millions of us with AIDS who are waiting to die.” Furthermore, as activists marched to Bush’s reelection headquarters, they repeatedly chanted “Mark Fisher dead from AIDS, where was George?,” a play off a chant delivered at earlier political protests, “150,000 dead, where was George?”⁵⁵ As the exemplar, Fisher’s corpse is both singularly meaningful—it is the corpse of a dear friend, comrade, brother, and family member to these activists—and at the same time exchangeable with the hundreds of thousands of other corpses wrought by Bush’s inaction on the HIV/AIDS crisis. The displaying of Fisher’s corpse thus does not just publicize Fisher’s death but also and at once the many more deaths that have been forgotten by Bush and American society writ-large.

Yet I want to push thinking on this political demonstration further by suggesting that Fisher’s corpse is exemplar of not just the AIDS crisis itself but also the broader American population. That is, Fisher’s corpse is not just metonymy and synecdoche of those with AIDS but the “we” of the people who have collectively understood those with AIDS to be abject. I make this argument by putting together the abject and the exemplar. If the abject is at once inside and outside that which repudiates it as the repudiator’s very foundation, then to suggest that the abject is also at once exemplar is to suggest that the thing which is repudiated is actually an example of and also metonymic link in a chain which consists of that which repudiates. In other words, if the abject calls into question the distinction between inside and outside by making possible what can be “in” or “out” as its founding repudiation, then the abject exemplar suggests that the hundreds of thousands of AIDS dead are actually paragon of and substitutable with the American population who has expelled them. The American population thus sees their own death

in Fisher's corpse, the death which the population continually expels, but which cannot be expelled in the moment in which the corpse is displayed. As abject, the corpse is expelled in an act of horror, but as exemplar, the expelled corpse is at once a part of the very whole from which it has been expelled, synedochically and metonymically standing in for that very whole. This split at the core of the abject exemplar does not just suggest that the AIDS crisis is internally divided but also and at once that the American population which expels those with AIDS is divided as well. Fisher's corpse as abject exemplar is at once both inside and outside and therefore unsettles the contours of the American people. To play off Jeffrey Bennett's words, the AIDS corpse as abject exemplar is "a strong internal presence in the social body, but also read as a foreign entity in polity."⁵⁶

Fisher's corpse as abject exemplar during ACT UP's political demonstration makes possible an understanding of "the people" which is a contested and contestable rhetorical figure. Paul Elliot Johnson states that "'the people' names an unending process rather than a stable entity" which is perpetually open to contestation.⁵⁷ Derrida presents a similar argument in his discussion of the Declaration of Independence, in which he argues that the Declaration is signed by the very "people" whom that document supposedly brings into being; thus, the "people" are temporally split between the past, present, and future.⁵⁸ What my argument here suggests is that what splits the "people" is the abject exemplar. If we think that "'the people' names an unending process rather than a stable entity," then what makes possible that unending process is the abject exemplar.⁵⁹ And as I will suggest in the next section, this trope allows us to read Fisher's political funeral as providing a queering of the family which unsettles a binaristic understanding of sexual difference that operates as the conservative foundation of the family.

Queering the Family

At various moments throughout Fisher's political funeral, members of ACT UP described Fisher as a member of their family. For example, activist Eric Sawyer referred to Fisher as "our beloved brother Mark" while Michael Cunningham stated that "we are his [Fisher's] family."⁶⁰ Another activist suggested that members of ACT UP should engage in protest "for family" and "the ties we have as...his brothers and sisters" while Joy Episalla stated that Fisher was her family member.⁶¹ Given the political and social environment that this demonstration took place in, laying claim to the family was a tactic intended to make ACT UP's demands for furthering the fight against HIV/AIDS more relatable.

But more than just a demand for attention to an ongoing epidemic, I want to ask what it might mean for members of ACT UP to lay claim to the family. A cursory reading suggests that, in doing so, ACT UP capitulates to predominant, conservative kinship relations. The family's conservatism is why, for example, Leo Bersani concludes that "the definition of the family...is, inherently an exclusionary process."⁶² Because the family is a "master term" signifying "nuclear, white, prosperous, heterosexual, with wanted children, and with a happily agreed-on division of labor by sex," any instantiation of the family is necessarily exclusionary, Bersani tells us.⁶³ Drawing from Bersani's arguments, Lee Edelman is quite famously anti-family, suggesting that the family is made possible by the non-position of the queer as outside the very contours of both the future and the political.⁶⁴ And without embracing the radical rejection of the social as Edelman does, Lisa Henderson suggests that the family is "hegemonic" in American society and asks if we can move "beyond family" "in forging social relations in the world as we know it."⁶⁵ For these scholars, ACT UP's claim to the family formation ought to be called into question as an instance of conservative capitulation.

These theorists critical of the family rely upon an understanding of this kinship relation which is wedded to its conservative foundation. This critique of family as foundationally conservative can be applied to many LGBTQ families as well, as I have already suggested. However, approaching the family through the abject exemplar, as my reading of ACT UP's claim to the family during Fisher's political funeral does, unsettles that conservative foundation by suggesting that an aporia, or a structuring indeterminacy, rather than an essential that never changes, is the "ground" or "origin" of family. Thus, rather than a foundational understanding of what family is, I suggest a reading of the term which is fundamentally split. As I will argue, through the abject exemplar, the family can be queered to reflect a kinship relation which is liberatory yet does not move past or forget the conservative political and social dynamics that have been inculcated by the family.

To unpack this argument first requires an investigation into the foundation of family itself. While the form of family most commonly attacked as conservative is the nuclear family, scholars critical of the family are concerned with not just the nuclear family but the family in all its forms; thus, there must be something else at its foundation. A variety of scholars suggest that what constitutes the foundation of family is either blood, marriage, or both.⁶⁶ As Kath Weston puts it, "according to received anthropological wisdom, blood (consanguinity) and marriage (affinity) could be plotted for any culture on a universal genealogical grid."⁶⁷ Jeffrey Bennett suggests something similar, drawing from Michel Foucault's work to argue that blood and marriage are foundational concepts for understanding the family in American society.⁶⁸ And Ellen Lewin makes explicit that there is an "expectation" that "deep and enduring commitments are only to be found in the domain of kinship based on blood or marriage."⁶⁹ Blood as exclusionary foundation of family is particularly important when considering the abjection of

those with AIDS, as this is a disease which infects and is transmittable via blood. And marriage as familial foundation is why debates about same-sex marriage have been so significant; in order to be recognized by the state as a family—and thus receive all the benefits of living with a partner—LGBTQ activists have fought a long battle for marriage equality.

Yet without denying the importance of blood or marriage to the family as formation and institution I want to suggest that something else underlies the family as foundation: reproductive sexual difference. That is to say, while blood and marriage are both important for understanding the contours of the family in modern America—and are significant considerations for studies about HIV/AIDS and LGBTQ activism—I aim to push forward the conversation in queer studies and rhetoric by focusing on reproductive sexual difference as the foundation of family. Thus, while part of what makes Fisher's political funeral meaningful is activists' disavowal of blood and marriage as constitutive of family, what I want to draw attention to is the way in which Fisher's corpse as abject exemplar renders indeterminate a binaristic and reproductive interpretation of sexual difference (man/woman, male/female, masculine/feminine) as foundation of family. I want to suggest that blood and marriage cannot by themselves function as foundation of family because something else must underlie and give direction to both; that which provides blood and marriage their (heterosexual) orientation is sexual difference.

As I understand it, binary reproductive sexual difference signifies a fundamental opposition between "male" and "female" as "biological" categories. Operating as the economy of that opposition, binary reproductive sexual difference makes possible a wide range of institutions, identities, and social and political relations in modern society. For scientific and social scientific subdisciplines, this opposition can usually be traced to the difference between male and female sexual organs and/or biochemistry.⁷⁰ For scholars in the humanities, and

especially those of us influenced by poststructuralist and psychoanalytic thought, sexual difference may be a question of metaphysics, epistemology, desire, or a variety of other inquiries.⁷¹ Binary sexual difference has been a particularly important point of contention for queer theorists who are interested in questioning and breaking down sexual binaries.⁷² Needless to say, debates about sexual difference are ongoing, and this concept's contours, significance, and purpose are frequently contested.

To explain why binary sexual difference is the foundation of family, we must first ask why the family has been defended as necessary for the continuation of society in American political discourse. In other words, what conditions have made possible the centralization of the family as a political and social institution in modern America? The answer, as suggested by a variety of scholars, is the physical reproduction of people: the family serves as site for continuing the human race.⁷³ As anthropologist Harold Scheffler puts it, "each human child owes her existence to and, we say, is related by birth to, at least two other persons, who are, we say, his or her parents, and who themselves have two parents each, and so on ad infinitum."⁷⁴ People become parents, that central aspect of the American family unit, by having children; the family gains coherence, then, as the site of reproduction. We may return to and play off Edelman's infamous polemic here: the child is "the telos" of the family, "the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust."⁷⁵

When we consider that the family is oriented around the reproduction of the human race, we can begin to understand why it is a binaristic understanding of sexual difference rather than blood or marriage which is the family's foundation. That is to say, neither blood nor marriage can explain the family's reproductive purpose and orientation. Blood's prohibitory function, in fact, must be violated in order for the family to be a site of reproduction; it is generally accepted,

for a variety of reasons, that people reproduce solely with those who do not share their blood. Marriage as foundation encounters problems when considering reproduction as well, as people can get and remain married even when they do not have children (or do not intend to ever have them). While marriage's purpose may be to establish a family and thus facilitate reproduction, people who do not reproduce can still be married. Thus, there must be something else at play.

Binary sexual difference makes possible the family's reproductive telos because human reproduction occurs sexually. Without sexual difference, then, reproduction cannot occur; for the family to be the primary site of reproduction, sexual difference is a necessity. In Catherine Nash's words, we may understand "sex and birth" to be "the 'facts of life'," making possible the figuration of "the prospective trio of man, woman and child...as the natural foundation of the social and that which transcends cultural difference."⁷⁶ To return to the other suggested foundations of the family, binary sexual difference is that which explains why blood and marriage are so significant: to continue the familial blood line, one must engage in sexual reproduction; to facilitate the usage of marriage for reproductive purposes, sexual difference provides a heterosexual orientation by which marriage may function (and makes possible conservative criticisms of gay marriage).⁷⁷ Indeed, Bush makes explicit this reproductive purpose of marriage in his 1992 State of the Union address when he suggests that Americans have "a responsibility" to "refrain from having children out of wedlock."⁷⁸ Thus, to think the family as the "proper" site of reproduction requires a foundational sense of binary sexual difference.

My argument is that activists at Fisher's political funeral queer the family by replacing a foundational sense of binary sexual difference with aporia via the displaying of Fisher's corpse as abject exemplar. For aporia to replace this foundational dimorphism, a dichotomous

understanding of sexual difference must be called into question.⁷⁹ Thus, rather than a binary sense of man and woman, my suggestion is that a foundational sense of sexual difference is displaced by Fisher's corpse as abject exemplar into what John Caputo, following Jacques Derrida, would call the innumerable.⁸⁰ If we conventionally understand sexual difference to rely on two oppositional categories or sexual identities of man and woman, then the innumerable displaces that binary with the infinite—an uncountable number of sexual quasi-identities by which the binary can no longer function. A radical proliferation occurs such that sexual difference cannot be understood solely as man and woman. Caputo suggests that this displacement is “the affirmation of innumerability, of innumerable goods, of alternity and all the alternatives, all the polymorphic, pluralistic possibilities...that are left out by the monster of the law.”⁸¹ The innumerable is not a naïvely essentialist return to sex or sexual difference before the societal inculcation of sexual dimorphism but rather a radically proliferated sexual difference which aims to play with the difference in sexual difference such that a binary conception of “man/woman” may no longer function as such. For the innumerable, sexual difference is no longer solely or primarily oriented around a heterosexual reproductive function so foundational to the family in modern America but is rather committed to “a call for justice from and for the sexually otherwise, and a call to be otherwise than the present tolerances permit.”⁸²

It is Fisher's corpse as abject exemplar which makes possible the affirmation of the innumerable in this demonstration. Fisher's corpse burgeons into the innumerable, as this corpse is at once a site of abjection yet inclusion, appending those sexual deviants who have been declared abject into American society. Because Fisher's corpse is exemplar, and at once metonymy and synecdoche of the AIDS crisis and American society, it is not just Fisher who is understood as family here but rather all people who have died from AIDS. Thus, rather than a

stand-in for a single dead person, Fisher's corpse signals the innumerable dead from the disease—those who are unseen, forgotten, or otherwise declared abject. My usage of the word “innumerable” is not an exaggeration: methodology errors about estimated numbers of HIV/AIDS deaths, political and religious attempts to make the crisis seem smaller, and family members refusing to recognize or admit that their child died from the supposed gay sex disease mean that we will likely never know the exact death count of HIV/AIDS; those deaths are innumerable.⁸³ The pain and misery caused by this disease is also innumerable in the sense that these emotions and affects are unquantifiable and overwhelming, as suggested by a variety of personal narratives and experiences of survivors of the epidemic.⁸⁴ In displaying Fisher's corpse, then, activists aimed to show Bush and the American people not only the incomprehensible violence surrounding, and therefore the absolute necessity of addressing, the HIV/AIDS crisis, but also and at once that the innumerable AIDS dead ought to be given justice.

But it is important to remember that those innumerable HIV/AIDS dead represented by Fisher's corpse as exemplar are rendered abject, absolute excess and filth according to predominant society. Significant for my argument here, part of what renders the AIDS dead abject is that they do not fit into a normative binaristic logic of sexual difference; they instead signify positions outside of and displace the conventional contours of the categories “man” and “woman” because the very signifier “HIV/AIDS” was developed and thus understood as an attachment to that displacement. As Catherine Waldby explains, “HIV infection appears to have a ‘natural’ relation to certain sexual identity categories because *AIDS has been conceptualized through these categories from the start*. There is no point at which a sexually neutral explanation of the microphysiology of AIDS is willfully grafted onto these categories of sexual identity. Rather it is sexual identity ‘all the way down’.”⁸⁵ In other words, AIDS as a discourse is

constituted by and through those “sexual identity categories” which subsist outside of a reproductive and binaristic sexual difference; even as the disease itself does not discriminate along lines of sexual practice or identity, it has become understood as and through the abjected, those outside of reproductive sexual binary. Fisher’s corpse as the abject exemplar, and thus the innumerable, is an embracement of those sexual differences abjected by the normative man/woman sexual binary.

To clarify, my suggestion is not that PWAs could not or did not identify as or reflect certain characteristics that signify the categories “man” and “woman” but rather that, according to conventional logics of reproductive binaristic sexual difference, the people who Fisher’s corpse represent are abnormal enough to be understood as abject according to dominant social interpretations of the binary. It is not that the terms “man” and “woman” have no signifiatory force nor that they should be removed from language but rather that the fundamental opposition of and between these two terms is called into question by those who Fisher’s corpse as abject exemplar call attention to. The people who Fisher’s corpse is exemplar of are those who engage in “criminal intimacies...only recognized as intimate in queer culture” discussed by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in their seminal essay “Sex in Public.”⁸⁶ These people are also those gay men who Douglas Crimp says engage in “a culture of sexual possibility: back rooms, tea rooms, bookstores, movie houses, and baths; the trucks, the pier, the ramble, the dunes.”⁸⁷ The point is not that these people do not reflect *at all* binaristic sexual difference but rather that, in their everyday lives, actions, relations, and identities they reflect and perform sexual differences and activities which exceed that binary and are thus rendered abject according to predominant society. These people are the gender-fucks, butch femmes, drag queens, sissies, transgender folks, and others whose subversion of a normative conception of binary sexual difference meant

that, when AIDS became an epidemic, their lives were not worth saving. With Fisher's corpse, they were abject, placed on the side of death rather than life. Thus, to understand these abjected beings as exemplar, both paragon and mere instance, is to suggest the innumerable that exceeds the normative sexual binary.

Through this innumerability, protestors at Fisher's political funeral advanced a queered notion of family. Speaking at the beginning of the demonstration, one protestor declared that members of ACT UP must "take to the streets because our love is still second and third class."⁸⁸ Describing ACT UP's "love" as "family," this protestor clarified that, for him and other members of ACT UP, the family is a relational unit consisting of "comrades and ex-lovers and lovers to be; not just an army of lovers, but also...brothers and sisters."⁸⁹ For this protestor, then, strange relations make up the family: comrades, ex-lovers, and lovers to be, none of which are conventionally understood to be a part of the family. "Lovers" may become family members under certain conditions (i.e. marriage), but for this demonstrator it is an "army" of lovers which make up a family rather than a coupled pair of lovers who have gotten married; thus, it is a multiplicity of different lovers who can collectively make up a family rather than a man and a woman. Brothers and sisters are also included as family members here, designations which are conventionally part of the family. But given how frequently members of ACT UP referred to each other as brothers and sisters—as previously discussed, activists Sawyer, Cunningham, and Episalla all explicitly called Fisher their brother—it seems unlikely that this particular demonstrator thinks of brother or sister as bound by blood. Instead, what makes up the family for protestors is the innumerable, uncontained by normative or conventional understandings of familial relations.

It was not just the words said but also the performance of the funeral which suggests a queering of the family. Under United States law, members of the dead's family are legally given possession and ownership over the corpse;⁹⁰ historically, those who are bequeathed corpse ownership are determined by blood relations (usually one's parents) or by heterosexual marriage.⁹¹ To circumvent these legal restrictions, Fisher made other members of ACT UP his executors (the people responsible for executing his will) and made the demand for the political funeral a formal part of his testament.⁹² Thus, members of ACT UP had more legal ownership rights to Fisher's corpse than any of Fisher's blood relatives whose rights to the body would have been relinquished when activists were declared Fisher's sole executors. As such, Fisher and other ACT UP activists reproduced the law for purposes other than how it is usually intended. Fisher's family, then, was not made possible by sexual difference, blood, or marriage, but instead expanded to the innumerable AIDS demonstrators. The ownership and display of Fisher's corpse repudiated a historically limited understanding of family in favor of a queered one which starts from the innumerable.

I have advanced a queered notion of family not tied to binaristic sexual difference through a reading of Fisher's corpse as abject exemplar. Yet even as the notion of family promoted during this demonstration is distinct, it is important to recognize that this queered family form is made possible by aporia; that is to say, it is trapped by and stuck within the logic of the family even as members of ACT UP push the limits of what family may be. On the one hand, the family as it is understood by demonstrators is in many ways still the same. For example, members of this demonstration still use conventional familial terms like "brother" and "sister" to refer to each other and thus may fall prey to a variety of critiques of the familial form. Yet on the other hand, the family is quite different: it is not bound by the man/woman binary but

instead expanded to the innumerable via Fisher's corpse as abject exemplar. Even as activists' reclamation and reproduction of the family maintains problematic conventional norms, it nevertheless remains "a necessary political stratagem" for creating social and political change in the fight against HIV/AIDS.⁹³

Furthermore, Fisher's corpse as abject exemplar does not only tell us something about the innumerable sexual difference of those peoples directly affected by AIDS but also and at once something about the sexual difference of the broader American population. As I have already suggested, through the trope of the abject exemplar, we may read Fisher's corpse as metonymic link in a chain of both the repudiated and that which repudiates. The abject exemplar also allows us to at once read Fisher's corpse as synecdoche of the entire American population. Thus, the innumerability of Fisher's corpse applies to not just the abjected but also those who abject; it suggests that a binaristic sexual difference is not the sole foundation of family for the "normal" American population. Moreso than just those affected by AIDS, then, we may read Fisher's political funeral as telling us something about what it conventionally means to be "family" in modern America.

Thus, activists at Fisher's political funeral also disrupt reproductive sexual difference as familial foundation for the broader American population. Throughout the protest, demonstrators suggested that the family is not merely a private kinship relation consisting of a few people bound for the purpose of heterosexual reproduction but rather a collective moniker connecting those with AIDS to the general population. This broader application of the abject exemplar is made clear by activist Eric Sawyer at two crucial points during the protest. First, toward the end of the funeral march, Sawyer took out a megaphone and drew familial connections between Bush, Fisher, and all members of ACT UP. "George Bush, you killed *your brother, our brother,*

because you don't care about the lives of us have-nots."⁹⁴ Even as Sawyer declares that Bush doesn't care about Fisher because Fisher is abject (a "have-not"), he states that Fisher is still at once both Bush's and activists' brother, suggesting that Fisher is a part of not only the activists' family but also Bush's. Importantly, Sawyer is not related to the activists or Bush by any normal foundation of family. Yet nevertheless, this familial connection is stated, suggesting that the family must consist of both those abjected by AIDS and people who abject those with AIDS. Fisher's corpse's abject status is crucial for the familial connection on display.

Second, immediately after suggesting Bush killed Fisher, Sawyer declared a collective ownership over the White House: "we will tell George Bush to pack his bags and get the hell out of *our* White House. *Our* White House has no place for the murderer of millions, and *we* want George Bush out."⁹⁵ In this quote, "our" and "we" are indeterminate, sliding between different groups of people, gaining coherence based upon Sawyer's various audiences. Indeed, it is not clear who exactly Sawyer is talking to at this point in the protest—perhaps the hundred or so AIDS activists who had just marched throughout New York City, perhaps people watching the demonstration or reading about it in the newspaper the next day, perhaps Bush, Fisher's corpse, or the people who the corpse serves as exemplar of. The indeterminacy of Sawyer's audience allows for a reading of his statement which brings together an innumerable set of people, both abjected and not, connected in a metonymic and synecdochical chain whose monikers are "our" and "we." For Sawyer, an HIV-positive AIDS activist, to publicly declare collective ownership over the most prominent international symbol of American power and prestige is thus no meaningless feat. If those with AIDS were to be normally understood as outside the family, protestors instead reinterpreted the family to include those with AIDS.

Toward the Sexually Innumerable

This chapter has provided a reading of ACT UP's 1992 political funeral for Mark Fisher which reads Fisher's corpse as the abject exemplar. If the concern with debates about the family is that they rely upon a foundational notion of family which is a conservative and essentialist reproductive sexual dimorphism, then reading Fisher's corpse as the abject exemplar makes possible an interpretation of family which is not committed to the male/female binary. That is, rather than a dichotomous sexual difference, it is aporia which functions as the (non)foundation of family during this demonstration via an embracement of the innumerable. It is not a rejection of sexual difference but a radical proliferation of it which ACT UP advances with Fisher's corpse as the abject exemplar; attention is drawn toward the difference in sexual difference such that it is no longer conceptualizable as binaristic. The (non)foundation of family, then, is sexual difference as sexual *différance*, "a multiplicity of divided steps that resist stable formalizations, a differing (and also deferring) dance if you will, that shakes subjects [and abjects, we might add] as much as it shapes them in the movement(s) that draw them toward and away from one another."⁹⁶ As a result, the family's possibilities are proliferated. While still maintaining a commitment to the language and logic of the family, then, through Fisher's corpse as abject exemplar, ACT UP provides a queered notion of family which is explicitly committed to the political and social inclusion of those with AIDS. Many scholars have written about the permeability and malleability of the family; my arguments help us understand what makes the family have such characteristics.⁹⁷

Queering, as I have understood it in this chapter, is an unsettling of normative foundations which nevertheless remains stuck within the problematic logics and languages that it criticizes even as it calls those logics and languages into question. Queer is wracked by

indeterminacy, forever unsettled and unsure of itself even as it defends as necessary and certain a critique of normativity embedded within notions of things like the family. Yet in that very indeterminacy, the unsettling of conservative foundation may occur, making possible a conception of family which is not the justification for the ostracization of LGBTQ people and PWAs. If family cannot be foundationally anything at all, having been displaced by the innumerable, then there is room for distinct groups of people to claim the family. Queer makes possible a world in which family might do, be, and mean things that are entirely different than the ways in which the term is conventionally understood.

I want to briefly suggest that reading queer via the abject exemplar may be useful in another sense than just an unsettling of the family: this trope may help us better understand queer's tricky relationship to the identity category "LGBTQ," which queer seems to simultaneously be encapsulated by and exceed.⁹⁸ Because of this tricky relationship, queer seems to at once be both contingent and essential, particular and general, unified and divided. As R. Anthony Slagle puts it in the context of the short-lived activist group Queer Nation, "although Queer Nation can usefully be understood in terms of queer identity, it also can be understood as a movement against identity."⁹⁹ Thinking queer via the abject exemplar may help scholars understand how this unconventional relationship is possible.

On the one hand, an understanding of queer as abject would distance the term from LGBTQ+. Queer would be understood as so radically other that it could not even occupy an identity category at all. Kristeva makes explicit that abjection is that which "disturbs identity" or operates as "the danger to identity;" queer as abject, then, would deny an interpretation of the term as synonymous with LGBTQ+.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, an understanding of queer as exemplar would interpret the term as at once an ideal instance of LGBTQ+ identity and a single

example of queer existing in a chain with other parts of that identity. Thus, to consider queer as both abject and exemplar provides inroads to better understand how queer can be at once LGBTQ+ and exceed that identity claim. With Sedgwick, queer as abject exemplar may help us understand how queer's multiple conflicting meanings "can be at loose ends with each other."¹⁰¹ Other scholars have already provided an interpretation of queer as abject;¹⁰² my hope is that aporetically supplementing abject with the exemplar may help us better understand the term's relationship to LGBTQ identity claims.

Aside from my discussion of queer's possibilities, this chapter provides two broader takeaways for rhetorical scholarship. First, the abject exemplar is a trope which deserves further attention. By reading the abject as simultaneous paragon and interchangeable example with that which expels, the abject exemplar makes possible different forms of rhetorical investigation. That is, by understanding as intimate the metonymic and synecdochical connection between the abjected and those who are not, the abject exemplar opens space for different understandings of a variety of topics of interest to those in our field: the nature of communication, how interpersonal relationships are developed and maintained, and the ways in which social and political institutions are reproduced. Scholars both in and outside of queer rhetoric may find this trope useful.

Second, we may push the conversation in rhetorical studies about the family to sexual difference as foundation rather than marriage or blood. If my argument that neither marriage nor blood can explain the heterosexual and reproductive orientation of the family is to be taken seriously, then scholars must turn toward sexual reproduction as a precursor to blood or marriage as making the family possible. Considering sexual reproduction as foundation of family is meaningful not only for helping scholars better understand the family's constitution but also for

reading familial discourses differently. In particular, scholars may read prominent conservative statements about the family against themselves to further think the family's possibilities outside of binaristic sexual difference. For example, many parts of Barbara Bush's impassioned 1992 RNC speech about the importance of the family incidentally attest to the innumerable. In this speech, Barbara Bush presents a notion of the family which does not abide by binaristic sexual difference: "when we speak of families, we...include extended families, we mean the neighbors, even the community itself."¹⁰³ The family extends beyond sexual difference to include those who we live near; it even extends beyond the person to a notion of "the community itself" which, for many, includes locations such as parks, school systems, and community centers.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, Barbara Bush suggests that the family is not and cannot be defined by her or other conservatives. Speaking to the people watching her speech live on television, Barbara Bush says that "*however you define family*, that's what we mean by family values."¹⁰⁵ It's not up to her or any other person to say who does and does not count as family; instead, the family is innumerable, open to difference based on interpersonal ties and interpretation.

If queer is irreducibly indeterminate, then we may find this indeterminacy wracking protestors throughout Fisher's political funeral. Speaking at the beginning of the demonstration, one member of ACT UP stated that "I just about came up with nothing [to say at this funeral] because I feel so defeated today. And, I feel, you know, like it wasn't supposed to happen this way."¹⁰⁶ If the action were determinate, then this ACT UP member would have found a way to be explicitly defiant, exclaiming a clear critique of the Bush administration; yet, instead, uncertainty torments him. Activist Joy Episalla expressed similar sentiments, declaring that "it was very hard....to move forward.... [because] we were all in complete shock."¹⁰⁷ Yet despite the inability to be sure of what they were doing, protestors knew that political and social action

involving Fisher's corpse was necessary. For example, activist Anna Blume indicated that the "full weight of a human body" made her realize "the responsibility" of carrying on another person's activist legacy; while this responsibility was "frightening," Blume says, "it was something you felt you had to do. You had to somehow find a way" to continue protesting.¹⁰⁸ Activist Jim Baggett expresses similar sentiments about the obligation to continue fighting for justice for the dead as a result of this funeral, stating that the very reason he's still alive is to continue telling Fisher's story.¹⁰⁹ And during this protest Bob Rafsky defiantly shouted, "let the whole earth hear us now: we beg, we pray, we demand that this epidemic end. Not just so that we may live, but so that Mark's soul may rest in peace at last."¹¹⁰ Activist Richard Deagle's powerful description of the political funeral sums up these internal conflicts well when he indicated that this demonstration was "just hellacious, but...something that we had to do."¹¹¹

How and why might these demands continue to be made? What might be accomplished by them? Perhaps the answer lies not in Bush's response but rather in the irresolvable responsibility that the living felt and continue to feel in the wake of the AIDS epidemic. When asked why she participated in Fisher's political funeral, Episalla stated that "we are what's left. We got to live. They died. So I always feel like I have the responsibility of living for them too."¹¹² Blume states something similar when asked the same question: "you have faith that what you're doing is right. Or...right is not even the right word—it's like that you have faith that what you're doing is...that you *have* to do it."¹¹³ Activists knew that they had to continue protesting even as they were not sure what effects their protest would have because they felt a responsibility to do so. Perhaps we can return to Derrida once again when considering these obligations and activist demands. "Ethics, politics, and responsibility, *if there are any*, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia."¹¹⁴

¹ See, for example, Bruce Gillespie, *A Family By Any Other Name: Exploring Queer Relationships* (Canada: TouchWood Editions, 2014); Laura V. Heston, “Utopian Kinship?: The Possibilities of Queer Parenting,” in *A Critical Inquiry Into Queer Utopias*, ed. Angela Jones (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013): 245-267; Kath Weston. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

² See, for example, Daniela Berghahn, “Queering the Family of Nation: Reassessing Fantasies of Purity, Celebrating Hybridity in Diasporic Cinema,” *Transnational Cinemas* 2, no. 2 (2011): 129-146; Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

³ See, for example, Leo Bersani, “Against Monogamy,” in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010): 85-101; Lee Edelman. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (London: Alison & Busby, 1978).

⁴ See, for example, Mathias Klitgård, “Family Time Gone Awry: Vogue Houses and Queer Repro-Generationality as the Intersection(s) of Race and Sexuality,” *Debate Feminista* 57 (2019): 108-133; Ramona Faith Oswald, Katherine A. Kuvalanka, Libby Balter Blume, and Dana Berkowitz, “Queering ‘The Family’,” in *Handbook of Feminist Family Studies*, ed. Sally A. Lloyd, April L. Few, and Katherine R. Allen (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009): 43-55; Jane Ward, “Radical Experiments Involving Innocent Children,” in *A Critical Inquiry Into Queer Utopias*, ed. Angela Jones (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013): 231-244.

⁵ “Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral.” AIDS Community Television: 1992, accessed January 10, 2024, <https://actuporalhistory.org/actions/political-funerals>. 36:26-36:42.

⁶ See, for example, Tina Fetner, “The Pro-Family Movement,” in *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies: Second Edition*, ed. Nancy L. Fischer, Laurel Westbrook, and Steven Seidman (London: Routledge, 2011): 479-485; Susan Harding, “Family Reform Movements: Recent Feminism and Its Opposition,” *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 1 (1981): 57-75; Steven K. Wisensale, “Think Tanks and Family Values,” *Dissent* 52, no. 2 (2005): 98-102.

⁷ See, for example, Laura W. Arnold and Herbert F. Weisberg, “Parenthood, Family Values, and the 1992 Presidential Election,” *American Politics Research* 24, no. 2 (1996): 194-220; James L. Guth and John C. Green, *The Bible and the Ballot Box: Religion and Politics in the 1988 Election* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Steven D. Johnson and Joseph B. Tamney, “The Political Impact of Traditional Family Values,” *Sociological Focus* 29, no. 2 (1996): 125-134.

⁸ Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 23. See also Judith Butler, *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024).

⁹ See, for example, Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservative* (New York: Zone Books, 2017); Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Jerry Falwell, “Ministers and Marches,” Sermon delivered at Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA., March 15, 1965. Available online at the Jerry Falwell Library, Liberty University.

¹¹ Moral Majority: Policy Documents, Family Manifesto folder, Archives, Pierre Guillermin Library, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA.

¹² Quoted in Robert Shogan, “The Right Seeks New Purpose,” *Los Angeles Times*. July 4, 1990.

¹³ Dana L. Cloud, “The Rhetoric of <Family Values>: Scapegoating, Utopia, and the Privatization of Social Responsibility,” *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 4 (1998): 398. See also Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Cooper, *Family Values*.

¹⁴ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). 5; 21.

¹⁵ Dowland, *Family Values*, 162; 173.

¹⁶ Dowland, *Family Values*, 158-159.

¹⁷ Quoted in Cloud, “The Rhetoric of <Family Values>,” 399.

¹⁸ Barbara P. Bush, “Remarks at the 1992 Republican National Committee—Aug. 19, 1992,” *Iowa State University Archives of Women’s Political Communication*, Accessed December 9, 2023, <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/remarks-at-the-1992-rnc-aug-19-1992/>.

¹⁹ Ashley McGuire, “President George H. W. Bush—A Family Man,” *Institute for Family Studies*, Published December 6, 2018, Accessed September 12, 2023, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/president-george-h-w-bush-a-family-man>. See also Will Bunch, “George H. W. Bush Was a Family Man and War Hero Who Gave America its Horribly Destructive Politics,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Published December 2, 2018, Accessed September 12, 2023, https://www.inquirer.com/philly/columnists/will_bunch/george-h-w-bush-1988-election-willie-horton-ad-michael-dukakis-lee-atwater-20181202.html; Todd J. Gillman and Carl P. Leubsdorf, “George H. W. Bush Dies at 94: President, Family Man, War Hero,” *The Dallas Morning News*, Published December 1, 2018, Accessed September 12, 2023, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2018/12/01/george-h-w-bush-dies-at-94-president-family-man-war-hero/>; Amisha Padnani, “George Bush: Points of Power,” *New York Times*, Published December 1, 2018, Accessed September 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/01/obituaries/george-hw-bush-points-of-power.html>.

²⁰ See, for example, Berlant, *The Queen of America*; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547-566; Bersani, “Against Monogamy.”

²¹ “Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral,” 31:50-32:50.

²² See, for example, Gillespie, *A Family By Any Other Name*; Nora Kassner, “Making Queer Families: Foster Family Activism in Los Angeles, 1977-1985,” In *Feminist and Queer Activism in Britain and the United States in the Long 1980s*, eds. Sarah Crook and Charlie Jeffries (New York: State University of New York Press, 2022): 147-169; Ward, “Radical Experiments Involving Innocent Children.”

²³ Marianne Kongerslev, “Queering the Family: Kinship, Blood Relations and Marriage in Showtime’s *Queer As Folk*,” *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film* 1, no. 2 (2010): 90.

²⁴ Gillespie, *A Family By Any Other Name*, 3.

²⁵ Weston, *Families We Choose*, xii.

²⁶ See, for example, Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); J. Halberstam. *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); J. Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Shane Phelan, “Queer Liberalism?,” *The American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (2000): 431-442.

²⁷ Lehr, *Queer Family Values*, 81; 94.

²⁸ Cindy Patton, “Tremble, Hetero Swine!,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 145. Author’s emphasis.

²⁹ Weston, *Families We Choose*, 6.

³⁰ Weston, *Families We Choose*, 28.

³¹ Patton, “Tremble, Hetero Swine!,” 145. See also Cindy Patton, “Refiguring the Social Space,” in *Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, eds. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 216-249.

³² Eric Sawyer, quoted in James Wentzy, “Political Funerals,” AIDS Community Television Weekly Series Program #109, originally telecast January 31, 1995, 10:05-10:27. Thanks to James Wentzy for providing me access to this footage.

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³⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982): 4.

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- ³⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge: New York, 1990): 169.
- ³⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 170-171.
- ⁴⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9; Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (Routledge: New York, 2011): xiii.
- ⁴¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3. Author's emphasis.
- ⁴² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 109.
- ⁴³ See, for example, Larissa Fleischmann, "More-Than-Human Political Geographies: Abjection and Sovereign Power," *Political Geography* 107 (2023): 1-11; Marita Gronnvoll and Kristen McCauliff, "Bodies That Shatter: A Rhetoric of Exteriors, the Abject, and Female Suicide Bombers in the 'War on Terrorism'," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2013): 335-354; Peter Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism: The Politics of Protection in the Anti-Deportation Movement," *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2003): 1069-1093.
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- ⁴⁵ See, for example, Jeffrey A. Bennett. *Banning Queer Blood: Rhetorics of Citizenship, Contagion, and Resistance* (Tuscaloosa, The University of Alabama Press: 2009); Daniel C. Brouwer, "The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization: The Case of HIV/AIDS Tattoos," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1998): 114-136; Karen Zivi, "Constituting the 'Clean and Proper' Body: Convergences Between Abjection and AIDS," in *Gendered Epidemic*, eds. Nancy L. Roth and Katie Hogan (New York: Routledge, 1998): 33-62.
- ⁴⁶ Quoted in Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 616.
- ⁴⁷ "Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral," 31:55-31:57.
- ⁴⁸ Mark Fisher, "Bury Me Furiously," quoted in Debra Levine, "You Are Witness to a Crime," 45. Emphasis added.
- ⁴⁹ Barbara A. Biesecker, "From General History to Philosophy: Black Lives Matter, Late Neoliberal Molecular Biopolitics, and Rhetoric," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, no. 4 (2017): 427.
- ⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005): 4.
- ⁵¹ Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 4.

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- ⁵² Simon Morgan Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010): 50.
- ⁵³ Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 4.
- ⁵⁴ “Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral,” 35:09-35:50.
- ⁵⁵ “Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral.”
- ⁵⁶ Bennett, *Banning Queer Blood*, 24.
- ⁵⁷ Paul Elliot Johnson, *I The People: The Rhetoric of Conservative Populism in the United States* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2022): 2.
- ⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002): 46-54. See also Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary*, 191.
- ⁵⁹ Johnson, *I The People*, 2.
- ⁶⁰ “Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral,” 36:48; 31:57.
- ⁶¹ “Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral,” 4:55-5:13; Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 617.
- ⁶² Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010): 9.
- ⁶³ Michael Morgan, Susan Leggett, and James Shanahan, “Television and Family Values: Was Dan Quayle Right?” *Mass Communication and Society* 2, no. 1-2 (1999): 49.
- ⁶⁴ Edelman, *No Future*.
- ⁶⁵ Lisa Henderson, “Queer Theory, New Millenium,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2 (2003): 377; 378.
- ⁶⁶ Blood and marriage are also significant for considering the incest taboo, another important causal factor in the family’s make up. See, for example, Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?,” *Differences* 13, no. 1 (2002): 14-44; Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (Routledge: London, 1950); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1963); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Norton: New York, 1967).
- ⁶⁷ Weston, *Families We Choose*, 33.

⁶⁸ Bennett, *Banning Queer Blood*. See also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): 1-20; Simon Watney. *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and The Media*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

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⁷¹ See, for example, Rosi Bradiotti, "Sexual Difference Theory," in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, eds. Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishers, 1998): 298-306; Claire Colebrook, "Is Sexual Difference a Problem?," *Social Semiotics* 7, no. 2 (1997): 161-174; Elizabeth Grosz, "Ontology and Equivocation: Derrida's Politics of Sexual Difference," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (2005): 114-124; Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁷² See, for example, Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993).

⁷³ See, for example, Phillipe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage Books, 1962); Dowland, *Family Values*; Steven K. Wisensale, "Family Values and Presidential Elections: The Use and Abuse of the Family and Medical Leave Act in the 1992 and 1996 Campaigns," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 15, no. 1 (1999): 35-50.

⁷⁴ Harold W. Scheffler, "Kinship and Gender," in *Entrepreneurship and Family Business*, ed. Alex Stewart, G. T. Lumpkin, and Jerome A. Katz (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited: 2010): 285.

⁷⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 11.

⁷⁶ Catherine Nash, "Geographies of Relatedness," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30, no. 4 (2005): 450.

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⁷⁸ *The New York Times*, “State of the Union; Transcript of President Bush’s Address on the State of the Union,” January 29, 1992.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Judith Butler, “The End of Sexual Difference?” in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, ed. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001): 414-434.

⁸⁰ John D. Caputo, “Dreaming of the Innumerable: Derrida, Drucilla Cornell, and the Dance of Gender,” in *Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman*, ed. Ellen K. Feder, Mary C. Rawlinson, and Emily Zakin (New York: Routledge, 1997): 141-160.

⁸¹ Caputo, “Dreaming of the Innumerable,” 153.

⁸² Caputo, “Dreaming of the Innumerable,” 155.

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⁸⁶ Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public.” Author’s emphasis.

⁸⁷ Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004): 140.

⁸⁸ “Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral,” 4:55-5:05.

⁸⁹ “Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral,” 5:05-5:13.

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⁹¹ Bennett, *Banning Queer Blood*.

⁹² Lowery, *It Was Vulgar*, 317.

⁹³ Carole-Anne Tyler, "Passing: Narcissism, Identity, and Difference," *Differences* 6, no. 2+3 (1994): 222.

⁹⁴ "Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral," 36:10-36:18.

⁹⁵ "Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral," 37:38-37:44. Emphasis added.

⁹⁶ Anne-Emmauelle Berger, "Sexing Differences," *Differences* 16, no. 3 (2005): 56. Words in brackets are my addition.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Butler, *Antigone's Claim*; Thomas R. Dunn, "(Queer) Family Time: Brothers & Sisters and Managing Temporal Anxieties," *Western Journal of Communication* 79, no. 2 (2015): 133-150; Kath Weston, *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁹⁸ See, for example, E. Cram and Isaac West, "Shirts and Skins," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 108, no. 2 (2022): 209-213; Erin J. Rand, "A Disunited Nation and a Legacy of Contradiction: Queer Nation's Construction of Identity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 28, no. 4 (2004): 288-306; Isaac West, "PISSAR's Critical Queer and Disabled Politics," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2010): 156-175.

⁹⁹ R. Anthony Slagle, "In Defense of Queer Nation: From *Identity Politics* to a *Politics of Difference*," *Western Journal of Communication* 59, no. 2 (1995): 98.

¹⁰⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4; 71.

¹⁰¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): 6.

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¹⁰³ Barbara P. Bush, "Remarks at the 1992 Republican National Committee."

¹⁰⁴ Barbara P. Bush, "Remarks at the 1992 Republican National Committee."

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¹⁰⁶ "Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral," 5:19-5:31.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 616.

¹⁰⁸ Anna Blume, “Layers of Disaster,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 21, no. 2 (2021): 36.

¹⁰⁹ Lowery, *It Was Vulgar & It Was Beautiful*, 338.

¹¹⁰ “Mark Lowe Fisher Political Funeral,” 41:30-41:50.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Schulman, *Let The Record Show*, 617.

¹¹² Quoted in Lowery, *It Was Vulgar & It Was Beautiful*, 338.

¹¹³ Blume, “Layers of Disaster,” 41. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, trans. Pascale Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992): 41.

CHAPTER 4

THE GHOST, SPACE, AND TIME: MASON'S POLITICAL FUNERAL

This chapter's wager is that queer may be a temporal and spatial disjunction which complicates a linear AIDS progress story that declares the US AIDS crisis resolved in favor of a post-identity political orientation that perpetually conceptualizes HIV/AIDS as crisis. While many other scholars read queer temporal and spatial arrangements as hemmed in by a linear progression which nevertheless makes possible a liberatory rereading of texts, discourses, and relations throughout the past, present, and future,¹ here I understand queer as a specific configuration of space-time which eschews the very distinctions between different times and spaces that many tacitly or explicitly abide by. In particular, I suggest that a queer space-time is at once a weaponization of and alteration of a crisis modality which may help develop a post-identity political and communal relation oriented around the fight against HIV/AIDS. Rather than either a normalized time which marches uncritically onward or a distinct place in which queer as identity or performance may subsist, queer as I understand it here is wildly out of joint, off-kilter, and askew. Yet in this disarrayed space-time may lie the potential inroads to the development of a political and social relation which orients politics away from the question of individual identity and being and instead positions it around the questions of collective and collaborative life, praxis, and community.

I turn to Kiki Mason's political funeral to explain my argument. On June 27th, 1996, members of ACT UP took to the streets of New York City to stage a political funeral for Curtis "Kiki" Mason. Bearing torches and beating funeral drums as they blocked several lines of traffic and marched throughout the city, activists displayed a massive banner proclaiming "KIKI MASON/1960-1996 DIED OF AIDS/KILLED BY WHOSE INDIFFERENCE?"² The question

posed by this banner became the theme of this demonstration, as fingers were pointed at not only those straight people in political power whose nearly 20 years of indifference allowed AIDS to become an immense epidemic but also those “fake” AIDS activists and LGBTQ people who had sold out to the system. “As our community slipped further into denial and apathy, started by the election of our ‘AIDS president’ Clinton, and greased by preliminary data from the multi-drug cocktails, we true activists must raise the volume of our voices, for we are still experiencing our own genocide,” activist Eric Sawyer proclaimed during the demonstration.³ Referencing both the election of then president Bill Clinton, who was championed as the president to end the AIDS crisis by ACT UP and other groups,⁴ as well as the medical development of protease inhibitors, which initial estimates suggested would be capable of turning HIV/AIDS into a manageable disease,⁵ Sawyer’s statement, and activists’ message more broadly, sought to remind anyone who would listen that Mason’s death is indicative of the continuation of AIDS as crisis despite the official proclamation of the ending of the epidemic. This demonstration thus can be read as a moment out of joint from the march of linear HIV/AIDS progress through its refusal of the broader political and social tale which interpreted the disease as no longer of widespread concern.

What suggests that this demonstration operates as a moment out of joint is not just the protestors’ speeches refusing the predominant belief that AIDS was no longer a crisis but also at once a distinct and curious characteristic of the protest: the activists’ summoning of Mason’s ghost. Upon marching through the streets of New York City and stopping at a busy intersection, protestors conducted a séance for Mason, calling upon him to continue the fight against HIV/AIDS. “It feels like we’re calling Kiki here to be with us, to continue in the fight,” one protestor explained as nearly everybody at the demonstration began to hold hands, collectively

channeling their spiritual energy.⁶ “Kiki Mason, présenté! Kiki Mason, présenté! Kiki Mason, présenté!”⁷ activists chanted as they called upon Mason’s ghost to join in the demonstration. Once Mason’s ghost had been summoned, protestors dispersed, confident that they had their fallen comrade in arms to continue the fight.

My interest lies not in whether a spiritual “presence” existed at the protest but rather in an interpretation of Mason’s summoned ghost as trace. Mason’s ghost as trace, I will argue, invites a reading of the demonstration as rendering indeterminate both the divide between past, present, and future and the spatial arrangements underlying the then prominent linear AIDS progress tale that disregarded HIV/AIDS as no longer a relevant concern. If the predominant belief at the time of Mason’s political funeral was that the development of protease inhibitors meant that AIDS as crisis was resolved, a reading of Mason’s ghost as trace instead points toward a temporal and spatial aporia both within and between the past, present, and future places of HIV/AIDS such that this predominant belief could not possibly be true. As I will explain, rather than a linear progression placing AIDS in the past and a place without AIDS in the present and future, Mason’s ghost suspends the time and space of AIDS within a perpetually repeating crisis such that the space-time of the disease could not have progressed in the manner that most in mainstream American society believed it had. Thus, a reading of Mason’s ghost as trace may help us better understand the queer temporal and spatial disjunction facilitating these activists’ demands.

If Mason’s ghost provides inroads to a queer space-time that understands AIDS to be a perpetual crisis rather than a resolved problem, then what is made possible by Mason’s political funeral is a post-identity coalition whose attachment to the continued crisis of AIDS facilitates an orientation toward politics which does not revolve around questions of identity or being but

rather those of collective life and community. As perpetual crisis, AIDS both continually harms and prevents healing from the epidemic. What this space-time facilitates, then, is an affixation to the pain of AIDS which begets a particular set of political and social demands that orients politics around the disease itself. This post-identity politics is distinct from an identity politics in two ways: by coalescing around not an identity but rather an understanding of AIDS as continual crisis, and through its post-identitarian conception of community founded upon critique. Thus, to return to Sawyer's comment above, where he and other activists declared themselves true demonstrators in opposition to those fake or false ones who had bought into the hegemonic belief that AIDS was no longer a crisis, I argue that activists at Mason's political funeral point toward a post-identity political orientation whose attachment to the existence of AIDS as crisis may help us consider a different kind of politics than currently exists.

My argument unfolds as follows. I begin by extrapolating two competing space-times of HIV/AIDS during Mason's political funeral by both detailing an understanding of AIDS as crisis and the then dominant linear AIDS progress story which declared the development of protease inhibitors to be the solution to AIDS. Next, I provide a reading of Mason's ghost as trace which contradicts the linear AIDS progress story by understanding AIDS as perpetual and repeating crisis. As I will explain, reading Mason's ghost as trace provides inroads to a queered crisis space-time by pointing toward a temporal and spatial disjunction which serves as condition of possibility of Mason's political funeral. This space-time, I will explain, eschews the distinctions between different times (past/present/future) and places (here/there) to present an understanding of HIV/AIDS which exists within a perpetual crisis. In the following section, I will argue that this alternative space-time makes possible a reading of the protestors as presenting a post-identity coalition which both revolves about AIDS as crisis and a post-identitarian conception of

community which is founded upon critique. I conclude by returning to the question of what queer may do, be, and mean as a spatial and temporal disjunction.

Progress and Crisis

A crisis is a particular spatiotemporal configuration in which a heightened sense of urgency is utilized to facilitate action of some sort, whether that be protest, the delivery of a speech, the passing of a policy, or a myriad of other possible responses.⁸ By describing crisis as spatiotemporal, I mean to suggest that there is not just a distinct temporal configuration of crisis but also a spatial one. That is to say, the urgency with which a crisis is marked is at once temporal (action must be taken *now*) and spatial (action must be taken *here*).⁹ Etymologically deriving from the Greek word *krinô*, meaning “to decide or to judge,” the term crisis has shifted in modern vernacular to signal “a turning point”¹⁰ or “a critical, decisive moment.”¹¹ Thus, the urgency facilitated by crisis is a crucial aspect of the term, signaling that some kind of response must occur; by definition, then, a crisis is punctual. As Benjamin Noys puts it, “a tone of urgency” becomes “apparent and understandable as this rhythm of crisis accelerates and intensifies.”¹² A crisis space-time demands quick activity take place.¹³

Yet the urgency of crisis requires that not just any action be taken. Creating what Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani describe as “exception,” crisis necessitates drastic and severe measures in order to come to resolution.¹⁴ As a result, actions which may not normally be justified suddenly are, and those responses may have an array of positive and negative effects. As Bishnupriya Ghosh says, “crisis can be immediately productive in establishing a moral demand....No business as usual, as we say....Crisis as a perceived ‘event’ is enabling critique, and it marks a new time to come.”¹⁵ Crisis, then, opens up the possibility for different responses; it facilitates wildly different policies, individual actions, and communal

relations—for better or for worse. For example, the COVID-19 crisis, on the one hand, made possible anti-neoliberal local and communal relations which point toward a different way of living, facilitating further investment in provincial relations and wellbeing contra globalization.¹⁶ Yet on the other hand, the COVID-19 crisis has fueled corporatization, incentivized new investment in international supply lines, and facilitated the development of both “essential workers” and new work-from-home policies which strengthen neoliberal ways of living and being.¹⁷ New policies, relations, and modes of being thus arise as possible answers to the urgency and punctuality marked by crisis, and those possibilities often contradict one another.

Throughout the 1980s and early to mid-1990s, American society broadly believed that AIDS was a crisis, reflecting a spatiotemporal configuration which demanded immediate and urgent response. This belief in AIDS as crisis spanned across America, signaling a crisis that was “in every case medical, and most places moral and political.”¹⁸ AIDS, then, was a crisis for Americans in multiple senses: it was a perplexing disease which seemed to outwit the medical establishment at every turn, it facilitated religious and moral dilemmas as conservative Christians declared the disease God’s wrath upon a heathenish society, it sucked up much political and legislative focus as politicians both defended and attacked various policies addressing the disease, and it forced many (if not all) lesbians and gay men to rethink sexual intimacy, bodily conduct, and interpersonal relations.¹⁹ This urgency was so widespread that the first AIDS Service Organization, the Gay Men's Health Crisis, was developed in the name of AIDS as crisis. Even ACT UP’s famous self-description as a “diverse, non-partisan group of individuals, united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis” clearly interpreted AIDS to be a crisis.²⁰ To suggest that AIDS was understood as a crisis is thus no exaggeration as the disease took up much attention across an array of both public and private spheres.

Much like other crises, many conflicting and previously unthinkable solutions to AIDS were proposed during the 1980s and early to mid-1990s. Some of these solutions were wildly conservative (internment camps and proposals to tattoo every HIV-positive person in the United States being some of the most drastic)²¹ while others were leftist and liberal (free and easily accessible universal health care, reduced-price housing, and dramatically expanded social services being three such examples).²² Because the AIDS crisis both “changed the relationship between illness, people who are sick, and political structures” as well as “fundamentally transformed the lives of LGBTQ people,” it facilitated a variety of possible solutions.²³ Despite this array of potential answers, the crisis was never quite resolved—and thankfully internment camps and mandatory tattooing were never implemented as policies—and AIDS continued to kill.

Yet by the time of Mason’s political funeral, AIDS was no longer understood as a crisis by the majority of American society. The approval and deployment of protease inhibitors in the mid-1990s facilitated a widespread rhetorical shift in HIV/AIDS discourse by heralding the disease as a livable yet lifelong syndrome rather than a death sentence.²⁴ That is, protease inhibitors facilitated such a major change in the way that people spoke about, reacted to, and understood HIV/AIDS that, for most of America, this new class of drugs signaled the end of AIDS as crisis. As David Román puts it, “reports both in the popular media and in lesbian and gay publications have suggested that we have reached the end of the AIDS epidemic. While acknowledging that most people across the world do not have access to the new drugs, these accounts put forward the idea that the AIDS crisis is over.”²⁵ In other words, the AIDS crisis was resolved both temporally (the crisis was placed in the past) and spatially (something for people in other places to be concerned with).

Doctors, politicians, and activists alike understood protease inhibitors as marking a turning point, forever changing how people may understand and respond to the disease. For example, researcher John Leonard of Abbott Laboratories, one of the initial developers of protease inhibitors, suggested he was “very optimistic” and that he believed “we are really turning the corner in dealing with H.I.V. infections” due to the development of this new class of drugs.²⁶ Deborah Gould tells us something similar, stating that the deployment of protease inhibitors in the mid-1990s marked “the decisive shift away from despair” toward a “new, and longer-lasting, surge in optimism” among activists fighting for people living with AIDS.²⁷ *The New York Times* reported a “profound transformation in the social nature of the epidemic” as a result of protease inhibitors such that many infected with HIV/AIDS “began finding themselves back in the business of living [rather than dying].”²⁸ *Time Magazine* even named Dr. David Ho, who “pioneered” the AIDS antiretroviral cocktail, its man of the year in 1996, stating that his breakthrough “might, just might, lead to a cure.”²⁹ “After the advent of effective treatment for AIDS in 1996,” Jonathan Catlin tells us, “there was far less uncertainty about the disease itself...and those with sufficient resources could gain access to life-saving drugs. The sense of crisis waned accordingly.”³⁰ Román thus concludes that, because of protease inhibitors, “there has been a great deal of talk in the United States about the end of AIDS, and much of it [that talk] has implied that the need to talk about AIDS has ended as well.”³¹ By the mid-1990s, then, AIDS was no longer a widespread concern among American society as the development of protease inhibitors became the solution to the crisis.

We may thus understand the hegemonic linear progress story of the AIDS crisis as such: AIDS arose as crisis in the 1980s, killing with a near perfect fatality rate those it infected. Its urgency was both temporal (people are dying at a rapid pace and solutions are needed now) and

spatial (those people are dying here, in and throughout America, and solutions are needed in this country for those most affected by the disease). While many solutions were proposed throughout the roughly fifteen years that AIDS was understood as a crisis, it was resolved in the mid-1990s when protease inhibitors were developed and deployed, turning the disease into a life sentence rather than a death sentence. American society collectively decided that AIDS as a condition rather than a killer was acceptable and AIDS as crisis was over.

I begin this chapter by detailing the hegemonic linear AIDS progress story because, as I will explain in the next section, I argue that we may read Mason's political funeral as a rejection of this predominant tale through the protestors' simultaneous torquing of and weaponization of an understanding of AIDS as crisis. Rather than a story of linear progress ending with the development of protease inhibitors, protestors at Mason's political funeral provide an understanding of the AIDS crisis whose end could not possibly have arrived because its space-time was at once suspended, unresolved, and placed in perpetual loop. If a crisis is marked by a sense of urgency in the here and now, then my suggestion will be that we may read Mason's political funeral as suggesting that what constitutes both "here" and "now" are thrown into wild disarray. The urgency of crisis remains, yet the where and when targeted by that urgency is impossible to delineate or define; as a result, a "solution" to the AIDS crisis becomes unthinkable. To make this argument, I turn toward a reading of Mason's ghost as trace during Mason's political funeral.

Kiki Mason's Ghost

The final speech given during Mason's political funeral makes explicit the ghost which haunts this demonstration: "in Latin American countries, when someone falls in the struggle, people say 'présenté' to say that they're here and still with us. *And I feel like Kiki is very much*

still with us.”³² Toward the conclusion of this speech, protestors were invited to repeat the invoking phrase three times—“Kiki Mason, présenté! Kiki Mason, présenté! Kiki Mason, présenté!”—to summon this ghost as a part of the continued fight against AIDS. Activists then briefly cheered before dispersing. Upon considering this curious aspect of the demonstration, I want to ask, how might rhetoricians approach Mason’s ghost as it is invoked by protestors at this political funeral? What are we to make of this specter which haunts the demonstrators, this protest, and the AIDS crisis itself?

Much academic work has been written about how ghosts may be conceptualized.³³ For a variety of scholars in rhetorical studies and similar fields, the ghost is an angry “white-clad figure” riddled with murderous aim in much the way that a variety of horror movies portray.³⁴ Chris Dent, for example, places ghosts into three categories: those that are “merely incorporeal,” those that “interact with their environment” (generally in order to scare the living), and those that “speak with” the living whom they haunt.³⁵ Arthur Redding tells us something similar, suggesting that ghosts “exist in their own right....and refuse fully to be explained away as figments of diseased or troubled imaginations.”³⁶ For these scholars, the ghost is a manifestation of the dead’s ill intent, come back for revenge upon the living who, in some manner, facilitated the initial death of the being who is now manifested as the ghost. This “preoccupation with ghosts,” Kas Saghafi summarizes, “has always been associated with obscurantism, occultism, mysticism, and superstition.”³⁷

Here I diverge from that more conventional interpretation in favor of a reading of Mason’s ghost as trace. My interest is not in whether there really “is” a ghost at this political demonstration but rather in what it may mean that protestors summoned the ghost at all. In other words, I am curious about what the ghost does for demonstrators rather than what the ghost “is.”

If, as Samuel Chambers tells us, “there can be no brute sense-data of the ghost,” then I find questions about who or what the ghost is to be less significant for the argument that I am advancing here.³⁸ Instead, for the purposes of this chapter, I want to explicitly agree with Jacques Derrida who simply adopts the position that “in fact, the dead are dead.”³⁹ Mason’s ghost, then, may not be a manifestation of Mason’s psyche, spirit, or soul returned to haunt, scare, or kill, but may still have rhetorical meaning if we consider a reading of the ghost which understands it as trace.

Through a reading of the protestors’ speeches, I argue that Mason’s ghost throws the space-time of HIV/AIDS out of joint, at once pulling together and making indiscriminate the supposedly distinct places and times of the disease. In contradiction to the linear progress story which understands AIDS as finally resolved, Mason’s ghost suggests an aporetic understanding of AIDS’ space-time which is stuck, suspended, and forced to repeat. This is a space-time, then, which is “*disarticulated*, dislocated, dislodged...on the run and run down [*traqué et détraqué*], *deranged*, both out of order and mad....off its hinges...off course, beside itself, disadjusted.”⁴⁰ Mason’s ghost suggests that the space-time of the AIDS crisis flows in unpredictable and unknowable ways such that we may find flashes of past, present, and future places at once, rendering impossible any easily conceptualizable understanding of the “end” of the disease. What this distorted space-time suggests, then, is that the linear progress story declaring the AIDS crisis over is false and that the AIDS crisis continues.

Many of the speeches that the protestors at Mason’s political funeral gave were fragmented and disorganized, reflecting a space-time thrown out of joint by Mason’s ghost. For example, a central part of activist Eric Sawyer’s speech involved reading excerpts from Mason’s now infamous manifesto “By Any Means Necessary,” in which Mason advocates for radical

AIDS activism: “hold the president of a drug company hostage. Splatter your blood across the desk of a politician. Trash an AIDS-researcher’s home.”⁴¹ In reading this essay aloud, the grammatical and syntactical form of Mason-cum-Sawyer’s sentences morph such that the past is brought into the present and a listener can no longer tell the speech’s time. “I am *being* murdered,” Sawyer proclaimed, “just as surely as if my body *was* tossed into a gas chamber.”⁴² The present process of being murdered is conjoined with the past event of a body flung into a gas chamber, creating at once a current execution and a previous asphyxiation, throwing time out of joint and, thus, denying a linear AIDS progress story. Importantly, Sawyer here says that he is “being” murdered, using the imperfective tense to bring the past into the present. The imperfective, Patricia Dunmire, Joan Bybee, and Suzanne Fleischman tell us, is a tense used to describe an ongoing process; it is a tense which has no beginning, end, or fixed point in time.⁴³ Instead, the imperfective “renders actions and situations as ‘unbounded,’ ‘without endpoints,’ as ‘incomplete.’”⁴⁴ Sawyer’s statement thus does not only bring the past into the present but at once renders his past-cum-present murder a recurring and continual process; as this murder recurs, AIDS continues to kill and therefore cannot be relegated to the past.

It is not just this grammatical scrambling which disarranges linear space-time in Sawyer’s reading of Mason’s manifesto but also and at once a muddled authorship and citationality. Indeed, there are points during Sawyer’s speech in which it is no longer clear whether the words being spoken are Sawyer’s or Mason’s, and therefore whether the words come from the past or the present, the living or the dead, the here or the there. Sawyer liberally jumps around the text of Mason’s manifesto, deciding which parts to quote in an unpredictable manner, throwing Sawyer’s reading of Mason’s work out of joint from its writing. Even as Sawyer signposts his movements with the phrase “he [Mason] continues” between slight pauses, the way Sawyer

moves throughout the text is erratic and very difficult to follow, eschewing a linear reading pattern. For example, while Sawyer reads the initial two paragraphs of Mason's essay nearly verbatim,⁴⁵ he then skips several paragraphs before taking up the text again. At several points throughout the speech, Sawyer even rewrites Mason's words (referring, for example, to "our" lives instead of the written "your" lives) and declares them Mason's own. Sawyer even attributes full lines to Mason which do not exist in the written text at all, such as the directive "and this is my message to people with AIDS" before detailing the instances of radical AIDS activism Mason advocated.⁴⁶ The uncertainty surrounding whose words are being said—whether they are Sawyer's or Mason's—makes it seem as if Mason is talking through Sawyer himself, forcing those who listen to Sawyer's speech into a position of uncertainty about who is speaking—is it the living or the dead activist?—and throwing the space-time of AIDS out of joint, off-kilter, and askew.

The fragmented and disorganized characteristics of this demonstration "disrupts linearity and our notion of a chronological order" and thereby denies the societal belief that the AIDS crisis was in the past.⁴⁷ Mason's ghost muddles and renders the time and space of AIDS incomplete, unfinished, and perpetually open. As a result, we cannot consider AIDS' space-time in term of presents (the "past-present, present-present, and future-present") but instead as a scrambled space-time which subsists "outside the flow" of linear temporality.⁴⁸ The present is never present but defined by both past and future places, the past is understood and re-understood by the present and the future, and the future is differently imaginable depending on those past and present places. This aporetic relationship thus suggests that what is marked as "here" and "now" is not separable from what is marked as "there" and "then." There is a difference, then, not just between time and space, but *within them*—time and space themselves

are internally divided signs, made possible by *différance* and their *différential* relationships with each other. Mason's ghost suggests that time and space have "to be thought as a process of differentiation,"⁴⁹ made possible by an *aporia* which prevents their normal or conventional passage and differences; as a result, "we would have to understand that the present is not a stable category, it mixes past, future, live, and non-live, into itself."⁵⁰

The past and present of the AIDS crisis are thrown into disarray as protestors at Mason's political funeral both bring the past into the present and the present into the past. One such way that this linear temporality is eschewed is through the protestors' adoption of overly hyperbolic language which mimicked many of Larry Kramer's early speeches comparing the AIDS crisis to the Holocaust.⁵¹ By the mid-1990s, the comparison between AIDS and the Holocaust had fallen out of popularity among those interested in fighting against AIDS, as "AIDS treatment activist groups had 'won a seat at the table'[and this comparison] seemed ill-suited for the practical work that needed to be accomplished, if biomedical research was to be transformed as the activists desired."⁵² Nevertheless, protestors such as Sawyer powerfully declared that the ongoing AIDS crisis was akin to the Holocaust. "People with AIDS, like myself, can never escape. For we are watching our slow and constant murder, like drugged corpses at a conveyer belt waiting to be dropped in a furnace....Like the famous statement about standing silent while the Nazis came for the Jews....We must fight our genocide now, by any means necessary."⁵³

This time does not march forward, then, but repeats, stuck in and by an incommensurate violence. The Holocaust is an event whose time is thrown out of joint, forever marred by an insurmountable injustice;⁵⁴ as David Clarke tells us, the Holocaust is "an irreducible disjuncture in time-space" and "a silence that ceaselessly h(a)unt[s]."⁵⁵ Thus, if the AIDS crisis is akin to the Holocaust, it too is an event whose time is suspended and incapable of moving forward.

Furthermore, scholars such as Deborah Gould and Steven Epstein tell us that the comparison between the AIDS crisis and the Holocaust cuts across time to connect seemingly disparate events; between the 1970s gay rights movements' adoption of the pink triangle that male homosexual prisoners wore in Nazi concentration camps, frequent comparisons between the rise of the American New Right in the late 1970s to the Third Reich, and calls for quarantining gays and lesbians in the wake of the 1987 Supreme Court decision in *Hardwick v. Bowers* (which declared sodomy illegal), many events are linked together by this Holocaust comparison.⁵⁶ The comparison between the AIDS crisis and the Holocaust thus suggests that there is no "clear delineation between past and present," signifying "the permanent disruption of the usual oppositions that render our world coherent."⁵⁷

We may also read Mason's ghost as rendering incoherent a future space separated from the present/past of the AIDS crisis. Indeed, Mason's ghost may actually come from the future, despite being invoked in the name of someone who had already died at the time of this demonstration. Because the ghost is both revenant ("invoking what was") and arrivant ("announcing what will come"), it traverses time backward and forward and, as a result, Mason's ghost is constantly both coming and going.⁵⁸ During her speech at Mason's political funeral, one activist proclaimed that "I'm really sad he's [Kiki] gone, and I'm really mad that this is still happening and people are still dying. And I wish it hadn't been Kiki, and I wish it hadn't been everybody else who *has* and *will*. It's just really sad."⁵⁹ Explicitly invoking the AIDS deaths that are to come, this protestor's statement suggests that this political funeral is not just for Kiki Mason but for all those who will die from AIDS. In his work on the death penalty, Derrida tells us that "where the anticipation of my death becomes the anticipation of a calculable instant, there is no longer any future."⁶⁰ In other words, when one can calculate one's moment of death—as in

the case of AIDS, whose near-perfect mortality rate rendered death predictable within a few months to a few years in those who seroconverted⁶¹—the future is foreclosed. Indeed, many of those who seroconverted saw no future, as suggested by the countless horror stories of people taking their own lives upon receiving an AIDS diagnosis rather than suffering from the disease.⁶² In this demonstration, Mason as object of funerary lamentation is rendered substitutable with future AIDS deaths in a rhetorical maneuver which denies a separation between present and future, as AIDS as crisis traverses the simple distinctions between those two supposedly different times. As a result, Mason's ghost "recast[s] the relation of past, present, and future, thereby disrupting linear time, progressive time, casual time, predictive time, and hence the very periodicity that a division into past, present, and future requires."⁶³

Another protestor is even more explicit in the way his speech cuts across space-time to muddle the separation between the future and the present. Rather than speaking to those gathered at this demonstration, this activist speaks to the camera recording the protest and his future audiences who will watch the footage of the event in a different place and time. "In walking along the street here, I'm really not talking to the people who marched together tonight, but to the others who may see a video of this. If you think this is about us and not about you, you're wrong."⁶⁴ This demonstrator continues by proclaiming that, "if you think the bell is not tolling for you, wake up. It tolls for thee and it tolls for everyone you care about."⁶⁵ Speaking not to those activists at the demonstration but those of us who may watch or read about Mason's political funeral, this protestor's statement at once hails an audience from sometime in the future and brings that audience back to 1996 and projects the then current tolling of the AIDS' bell into the future. If "it would seem the specter is always coming from the future even if it is from the

past,” then we may understand this protestor’s statement as having taken on a spectral quality, traversing a present/future divide.⁶⁶

In scrambling the past/present/future of the AIDS crisis, Mason’s ghost at once disrupts a spatial teleology declaring the AIDS crisis over. It is thus not just a temporal but also a spatial aporia at this political funeral which must be attended to. To explain this argument requires I draw attention to the fact that the place of Mason’s political funeral—a street corner in New York City—had very little importance for any of the demonstrators or Mason himself. A funeral (and especially a political one) is generally conducted at a site of some significance: the Ashes Action at the White House and Fisher’s political funeral ending at Bush’s reelection headquarters are two apt examples. However, during Mason’s political funeral, it appears as if the protestors stopped at the street corner where they invoked Mason’s ghost almost at random, with the only impetus being that they no longer wanted to bother a police officer riding his bicycle. Protestors even made jokes with the officer, telling him to not worry about the protest because they had decided that they were in the right spot. “Don’t worry, it’s fine. We’re relaxed. It’s a surprise,” they told him.⁶⁷ How, then, are we to think this place which was seemingly chosen at random?

Rather than dismissing the location as irrelevant, I want to suggest that its seeming meaninglessness is itself indicative of the force of Mason’s ghost and the spatial aporia that is the HIV/AIDS crisis: the epidemic had become so widespread, so commonplace, that the place could not matter because the crisis itself was stuck and suspended. In other words, the fact that the location of the funeral did not matter is exactly what matters, suggesting the widespread continuation of AIDS as crisis despite the broader narrative declaring the disease a thing of the past. That is, even in a mundane street corner in New York City, the space-time of AIDS could not advance, placed out of joint by the insurmountable violence that is the AIDS crisis itself. The

brief conversation that the police officer had with protestors points toward this interpretation, as he stated that, despite not being political, he understood and agreed with the message that they were saying; the police officer himself, then, recognized that AIDS was still a crisis despite the predominant belief that it was resolved.⁶⁸ Thus, we find this place mattering exactly for its mundanity, as indicative of the irresolvability of HIV/AIDS.

Space itself is so dislodged by Mason's ghost that, even as protestors intended to summon this specter at this political funeral, the ghost transcends that aim through its comings and goings, rendering incoherent even the attempt to keep it in this particular protest. Because, as Derrida tells us, "a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and its goings because it *begins by coming back*," it inevitably appears and reappears in supposedly distinct places and times.⁶⁹ Thus, Mason's ghost emerges in other moments and locations, as suggested by activist Anne-Christine D'Adesky, one of Mason's best friends. In her memoir, D'Adesky weaves a tale haunted by Mason's ghost and the out-of-joint space-time of the AIDS crisis: "what day is it? What week? What month? It's all a blur....And I realized I skipped over a very important event....It's Kiki. He's left us too."⁷⁰ This haunting is repeated for D'Adesky, as she describes her experience with activism: "I take my place in the picket line, holding up a familiar sign....How many times have I held signs identical to this one? I've totally lost count.

Berlin....Amsterdam...City Hall and Grand Central Station in New York...the White House....Kennebunkport, Maine....Wall Street...the CDC...the NIH in Bethesda...the INS in lower Manhattan....Et voilà, here we go again."⁷¹ While each of these protests occurred in different times and locations, Mason's ghost makes D'Adesky feel as if they all happened at once in the same place. As such, this activist's space-time is stuck, forced to repeat indefinitely as the AIDS crisis accumulates rather than progresses toward resolution. Additionally,

D'Adesky's list of protests here are not in chronological order—the infamous NIH protest took place in 1990, while the protest at Bush's home in Kennebunkport took place in 1991—suggesting a time and space thrown out of joint.

If the conventional AIDS progress narrative had popularized the catchphrase that protease inhibitors meant that “the cure is here” (as read in a variety of newspaper articles and heard on televisions across the United States at this point in time),⁷² then we may read the spatial scrambling made possible by Mason's ghost and defended by protestors at Mason's political funeral as a challenge to this message. That is to say, the statement “the cure is here” could not possibly be true because the very idea of “here” was being called into question; the cure was *not* here, and, in fact, could not be *here* because the “here” of the AIDS crisis could not be delineated or separated from a “there” outside of the crisis. As Sawyer put it during his speech at this demonstration, “the cure is not here....And even if the cure is found, the cure will not help the majority of people with AIDS living in this country, nor especially the majority of people with AIDS from the developing world, because few can afford or gain access to these expensive cocktails.”⁷³ Implicitly denying the geographical distinctions rendering the United States as separate from “the developing world,” Sawyer's statement affirms an alternative spatial arrangement which refuses to separate the “here” from the “there” embedded in the common refrain that it calls into question. That “here” was rendered impossible due to a spatial aporia which stopped the crisis from being placed elsewhere.

Through Mason's ghost thus arises a temporal and spatial disjunction which renders the conventional AIDS progress story false via a calling into question of the very distinctions between distinct times and places required for that belief to be. If the popularized fable placed AIDS in the past, then protestors' message was that the past was simultaneously present and

future; if AIDS was to be a disease placed over there, then protestors argued that “there” and “here” are actually interchangeable. What makes this protest possible, then, is a queered space-time of AIDS, one which perpetually remains within a crisis modality as a means to continually mobilize action against the disease. If, for Carla Freccero, queer occupies “an interstitial space between binary oppositions,” then here I have suggested that queer’s “interstitial space” may be understood as a disruption of linear space-time.⁷⁴ In other words, “the mutual recognition, entanglement, and disentanglement” that a queer space-time facilitates “suggest[s] a more complex relationship between difference and resemblance, alterity and identity” such that the linear progress story of HIV/AIDS is called into question and an attachment to the continued existence of AIDS as crisis makes possible a post-identity political orientation.⁷⁵ To that end, protestors at Mason’s political funeral signaled a different understanding of politics, one which at once revolves around the continued existence of AIDS as crisis and a post-identitarian conception of community founded upon critique. I turn now to an explication of that post-identity politics.

A Post-Identity AIDS Coalition

The development of protease inhibitors and a post-AIDS-crisis America facilitated the rise of what many call gay liberalism, or an individualistic affirmation of a gay identity politics that aligns with the state’s liberal values.⁷⁶ Gay liberalism signals a disavowal of structural heteronormativity and homophobia in favor of an individualism that aligns with normative culture to affirm the banal platitude that gays and lesbians are “just like everyone else.”⁷⁷ As Dagmawi Woubshet describes it, “gay liberalism is a post-AIDS discourse....This new discourse displaced AIDS both temporally, as a demarcated past against which a new normative gay identity could be forged, and spatially, as an issue that now mattered only in communities of

color in the United States or beyond in the global south.”⁷⁸ Due to the rise of gay liberalism, topics such as the legalization of gay marriage and allowing gays and lesbians to serve in the military became issues of primary concern while AIDS became less relevant. Thus, as former ACT UP member Peter Staley says, “in 1996....Mainstream LGBT rights groups pivoted from AIDS to gays in the military and gay marriage so quickly and thoroughly it felt like the surviving activists, our history, indeed AIDS itself had been purged.”⁷⁹

ACT UP activists at Mason’s political funeral rejected this liberal gay identity politics and instead coalesced around a vision of politics that focused upon the physical, psychic, political, and social violence facilitated by the continued AIDS crisis. What separates activists at this demonstration from many others who have taken to the streets, in other words, is not just the impetus for action but also the epistemic and political commitments undergirding these protestors’ radical demands for change. These activists, then, “sought political redress of a problem rather than recognition of an identity and simultaneously sought to revalue and empower marginalized or disparaged populations.”⁸⁰ Rather than a commitment to “being” a particular sexuality, gender, or race, it is an affixation to the repeating crisis of AIDS in the face of a broader belief declaring that crisis resolved which makes Mason’s political funeral possible.

A variety of scholars express concern with a political orientation and praxis revolving around identity, suggesting that this alignment necessitates the existence of those very power structures that it aims to challenge.⁸¹ The very condition for an identity-based social movement, then, is the perpetuation of that which the movement calls into question, creating an inescapable bind which prevents these movements from being successful. As Juana María Rodríguez puts it, identity politics “remains implicated in the perpetuation of the narratives upon which it is founded, specifically the conflation of identity, ideology, and political practices and the lived

ramifications of the constructed and problematic duality of insider/outsider.”⁸² Additionally, the very concept of identity is not natural but rather a construction facilitated by a variety of institutions, structures, and discourses throughout history.⁸³ For Wendy Brown, then, “identitarian political projects are very real effects of late modern modalities of power, but as effects, they do not fully express its character and so do not adequately articulate their own condition.”⁸⁴ Thus, identity politics has limited capacity to create change because of its belief in fixed and stable assumptions about the identities and concomitant political and social praxes of those whom it seeks to help; identity as basis of politics, then, is assimilatory, rather than radical such that, as Brown tersely puts it, “suffering cannot be resolved at the identitarian level.”⁸⁵

I do not discuss these critiques of identity politics to suggest that identity is irrelevant for the personal or the political.⁸⁶ My aim is not to ignore the particular political and social benefits that an identity-focused politics may garner; nor is it to devolve into an ahistorical politics which denies that differences exist among peoples. Yet given the limitations of identity politics, I do believe that it is worthwhile to explore what a more radical political demand which does not take identity as its center may look like. I am in agreement with Cathy Cohen who argues that, while identities are important, they at once “must be complicated and destabilized.”⁸⁷ Thus, to re-pose the question that Rodriguez asked of us over twenty years ago, “what possibilities for political and social intervention are opened up outside the discourse of identity politics?”⁸⁸

I understand the activists at Mason’s political funeral as providing a version of a post-identity politics. For these activists, a post-identity political orientation consists of both a coalescing around the continued existence of AIDS as crisis rather than any particular identity and a post-identitarian conception of community which is founded upon critique. It is not the identities of any individual activist which matter at Mason’s political funeral but rather the

adopted political vision that centers AIDS as crisis as well as uses that crisis modality to articulate a distinct conception of community. My suggestion, then, is that we may categorize these activists' post-identity politics as having two identifiable characteristics: the centralization of AIDS as a continued crisis, and community founded upon critique.

First, these activists orient their politics around the subsistence of AIDS as crisis rather than a particular identity. It is not that any of the protestors at Mason's political funeral are gay or any other identity that matters here but rather the shared and collective understanding that AIDS still constitutes a crisis. Thus, as one activist at the political funeral put it, "we need to keep being here, even though we seem to be small, even though we're tired, even though it's hard to keep doing this, because people seem to still need to keep being reminded that people are still dying, and we need to keep fighting."⁸⁹ What matters for this activist is that the AIDS crisis is continuing and nothing else. Another protestor points out that "people don't want to believe that [AIDS is still a crisis], and they're still in denial about this epidemic," thereby defending a political orientation revolving around the fight against AIDS.⁹⁰ Cohen tells us that ACT UP demonstrations consisted of "individuals from numerous identities—heterosexual, gay, poor, wealthy, white, black, Latino—[who] came together to challenge dominant constructions of who should be allowed and who deserved care" such that "no particular identity exclusively determined the shared political commitments of these activists."⁹¹ What replaces these identity claims as determining "the shared political commitments" of activists at Mason's political funeral is the existence of AIDS as crisis.

Furthermore, these protestors draw attention to the broader structural and systemic conditions which allow AIDS as crisis to continue. Thus, these activists signal "a politics where one's relation to power, not some homogenized identity, is privileged."⁹² For example, one

protestor spoke about the inaccessibility of protease inhibitors due to the lack of health care for millions of Americans. “What good will it do to have protease inhibitors that no one can afford? I don’t have health insurance—I haven’t had it for three years—I don’t know how many people who hear me now have it.”⁹³ Even if this new class of drug were to be as effective as many in America believed, its inaccessibility remains a significant concern. What this protestor calls attention to, then, is the structural barriers that prevent people from acquiring this new class of drug. Another activist argued something similar by pointing toward the difficulty that people living with AIDS face in their everyday lives. As such, this activist called for people to “do everything we can to make a difference...in the delivery of daily services to people living with AIDS.”⁹⁴ This activist continues by stating that “we must do everything we can to stop the spread of HIV. We must do everything we can to give everyone equal access to health care.”⁹⁵ By reminding those listening that people living with AIDS still have trouble getting crucial services, that HIV continues to spread, and that health care is still inaccessible, this activist invites people to consider the systemic barriers which contribute to the continuation of the AIDS crisis. Cohen asks us to “begin to envision a new political formation in which one’s relation to dominant power serves as the basis of unity for radical coalitional work.”⁹⁶ Activists at Mason’s political funeral serve as example of that “new political formation” insofar as they at once disconnect AIDS from identity and connect the disease to broader social inequalities which allow the crisis to continue.

Second, protestors provide a post-identitarian conception of community which is founded upon not similarity nor difference but rather critique. This is a community, then, which is not defined by any collective commonality or dissimilarity but rather the very act of disagreement as an opening up to a continual analysis of and attention toward the AIDS crisis itself. Throughout

this demonstration, a community is referenced in order to denounce those people who had bought into the belief that AIDS was no longer a crisis. For example, Sawyer expresses concern both with “those members of our community who willfully participate in our own genocide” and “our community slip[ping] further into denial and apathy.”⁹⁷ The sense of community that these activists talk about is vague, as there is never a moment when any of the protestors define who or what constitutes that community being discussed. No names are said, no organizations are listed, and no particular people or groups of people are attacked. Instead, the only two characteristics of this community that is provided is that these activists are a part of it (they do consistently refer to it as “our” community) and that there are members of this community who ought to be criticized for no longer believing that AIDS is a crisis. The very notion of community as it is discussed by these protestors, then, is made possible not by a particular identity but rather by an engagement in the process of critique. In other words, it is in the act of indicting those members of the community who have come to agree with the linear AIDS progress story through which the very idea of “community” is constructed by these protestors.

I use the word “critique” here purposefully. “To critique is not to judge the truth or lies,” Stuart Murray tells us, but rather to “seek to understand their moral and rhetorical conditions of possibility, the powers by which they propagate, and the ways these [powers] are mobilized to silence and suppress the deaths of those we (will) have let die.”⁹⁸ To suggest that this community is made possible by critique, then, is to argue that this community is formulated by a particular form of inquiry which attempts to understand not only the conditions by which its members have come to certain conclusions about AIDS as or not as crisis but also to consider the people who will have been relegated to death by the disease; it is to suggest that this community is formed by the very act of questioning not only those community members who disagree with the claim that

AIDS remains a crisis but also the conditions by which AIDS can continue to kill. In other words, what protestors at Mason's political funeral do when they denounce those members of their community who have understood AIDS as no longer of relevant concern is not just disagree with those people but also and at once question the conditions by which HIV/AIDS deaths will be propagated.

This conception of community founded by critique is significant when considering the protestors' speeches. Throughout the demonstration, activists refer to the "genocide" which is the AIDS crisis in the same breath that they denounce those community members with problematic beliefs. For example, Sawyer expressed concern that "our community's genocide" would continue to be "swept under the rug" by community members and proclaimed that "we must allow our genocide to surface above our denial."⁹⁹ Importantly, these protestors are not suggesting that these community members are directly causing this genocide, but rather that they are complicit in it because they have bought into the belief that the AIDS crisis is resolved. There is not just a denunciation of certain community members, then, but also and at once an act of calling attention to the social and political configuration which continues to relegate those with AIDS to death. Calling the ongoing AIDS crisis a genocide has particular meaning; as Thomas Simon reminds us, an act of genocide is intentional, purposeful, and deliberate, perpetuated by those who have political power or authority upon a marginalized group of people.¹⁰⁰ Thus, these protestors' point is not just to denounce those community members who believed the AIDS crisis was resolved but to at once provide a reminder of the social and political conditions causing continued AIDS deaths. This verbal connection drawn between these community members and a broader societal genocide is indicative of a community founded upon critique.

We thus may read activists at Mason's political funeral as providing a post-identity politics which is at once oriented around the fight against HIV/AIDS rather than any particular identity and a community which is not founded on identity but rather on critique. This post-identity political orientation fights for not the recognition of any particular identity category or a liberal defense of state-based rights but rather a radical reconfiguration of collective life and praxis such that justice for those affected by HIV/AIDS may become possible. Through a reading of activism at Mason's political funeral, then, we may begin to glimpse how politics may look different.

A Suspended AIDS Space-Time

This chapter has provided a reading of Mason's ghost as trace which disrupts the hegemonic linear AIDS progress story in favor of an interpretation of AIDS as perpetual crisis. Rather than an understanding of AIDS which believes that the 1996 development of protease inhibitors relegated the AIDS crisis to past places, Mason's ghost throws AIDS' space-time out of joint such that the past/present/future and here/there of the disease could not be separated and AIDS as crisis was forced to repeat. AIDS could not be a thing of the past because the very idea of the past as distinct from the present and the future was muddled; neither could the disease be a problem for other places because the distinction between different places was thrown into disarray. From this out-of-joint space-time arises a unique post-identity politics whose commitment to the continuation of AIDS as crisis makes possible both an orientation not around a particular identity but rather the continued fight against AIDS and a community which is founded not on similarity nor difference but rather critique. We may find, then, a different conceptualization and utilization of politics at Mason's political funeral.

To return to this dissertation's central question, I have argued that queer is a temporal and spatial disjunction which both renders impossible the AIDS progress story of the mid-1990s and provides inroads to considering a post-identity politics. Queer is neither straightforward nor linear, but rather the moniker I am attaching to the out of joint space-time haunted by Mason's ghost. My suggestion is that a turn toward a queer space-time calls into question how we may understand space-time itself such that supposedly different temporal and spatial movements are rendered indeterminate, befuddled, and unclear. This interpretation of queer as space-time differs from many other scholars. For most, queer space-times are meaningful because they provide inroads to reconceptualizing past, present, and future space and places as helping to develop queer relations and modes of being. The aim, for many, is to mine these different times and places to help facilitate queer survival in the face of heteronormativity in the here and now.¹⁰¹ Without aiming to malign or disregard the important work done by other scholars interested in queer space and time,¹⁰² my suggestion has been that we may push what queer space-time can do by thinking it as and through aporia.

In addition to its distinct interpretation of queer, this chapter provides three key takeaways for rhetorical studies. First, the ghost is a meaningful trope which deserves further attention within our field because it both makes possible different conceptualizations of many core rhetorical concepts and, in doing so, questions the central tenants of those very concepts. For example, Samuel Chambers argues that "the logic of the ghost, the reappearance of the specter, will always disrupt timeliness."¹⁰³ This untimeliness, Chambers tells us elsewhere, has the potential to call into question both agency and the subject by "show[ing] that agency, as that capacity to take political action, turns out to be possible *without* a strong, grounded theory of the subject."¹⁰⁴ We may notice this ungrounded understanding of both agency and subjectivity in the

activist's post-identity political orientation: it is no particular stable identity which facilitates the activists' demands but rather the continuation of AIDS as crisis and a commitment to critique. What different possibilities arise for considering agency and subjectivity, two important topics within rhetorical studies,¹⁰⁵ when considering the ghost as trope?

Additionally, the irrelevancy of the place of Mason's political funeral is a curious characteristic which may distinguish the ghost as trace from the ashes or the corpse of previous chapters and thus have significance for questions of agency and subjectivity. Because the ghost lacks corporeality, it may shift between and move in and out of space as we conventionally understand it. That is, because ghosts "*precede and exceed the subject's being-in-the-world and being-in-time,*"¹⁰⁶ they necessarily cannot take on a physical form in the same way that ashes or a corpse may. Thus, for example, if the ghost may come from the future, then it cannot be attached to a pile of ashes or a specific corpse (even as it is marked by the name Kiki Mason), suggesting that its usage for critique must be different. What the ghost may teach us, then, is that the proverbial final nail is never actually placed in the coffin: the ghost may haunt, perpetually, forever throwing the space and time of the AIDS crisis out of joint. As a result, the ghost may be a useful rhetorical tool for reconceptualizing agency and subjectivity.

Second, I want to suggest that scholars might reconsider the relationship between rhetoric and temporality. Most rhetoricians implicitly or explicitly consider rhetoric to exist within and be made possible by a coherent and comprehensible sense of time,¹⁰⁷ whether that coherency is explained as or through *kairos*,¹⁰⁸ *to prepon*,¹⁰⁹ or, more recently, *chronos*.¹¹⁰ Rhetoric, in other words, is conventionally understood to be well-timed, fitting, and suitable; as Nicole Allen puts it, "rhetoricians have often referred to rhetoric's place within a particular time, where time acts as the ultimate consideration of context."¹¹¹ What Mason's political funeral suggests is that we

may locate rhetoric within a time which is out of joint, off-kilter, and askew. Rhetoric, then, may not be timely, proper, or opportune, but subsist in a different temporal configuration than rhetoricians have already considered. Might this alternative temporal placement of rhetoric challenge our understandings of rhetoric's possibilities?

Third, my hope is that this post-identitarian conception of community pushes forward the conversation about post-identity politics by addressing some of the problems with the turn toward community that other scholars have suggested. For example, Miranda Joseph and Shane Phelan state that the problem with the activist turn toward community is that, much like the concern with identity politics, doing so capitulates to the liberal political formations that created the violences that community is meant to address.¹¹² My suggestion is that, by providing a different conception of community, one which is founded upon critique, these activists may help us begin to address the problems that these scholars have posited. Critique is very unlike identity, as it is not founded upon either sameness or difference but rather disagreement, disapproval, and infighting. Instead of identity, to critique is to "challenge what has come to be taken as second-nature or 'commonsense.'"¹¹³ Critique thus does not yield to the same liberal political formations in the ways that identity politics does and may help us conceptualize a different formulation of community.

In an interview aptly titled "The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over," Douglas Crimp tells us that the AIDS crisis is incommensurable. "Here's a personal example of what I mean by incommensurability," Crimp says. "I once was visiting a very, very sick friend in the hospital, and...coming out of the hospital, experienced a minor form of fag-bashing: somebody going by in a car, screaming, 'Fag, AIDS.'"¹¹⁴ In that moment when he most expected sympathy, Crimp tells us, he experienced a hate crime. From the incommensurability of AIDS, Crimp comes to the

conclusion that “certain people are experiencing the AIDS crisis while the society as a whole doesn’t appear to be experiencing it at all.”¹¹⁵ In other words, for Crimp, the AIDS crisis continues, despite the broader societal proclamation it has ended. Former ACT UP activist Ron Goldberg tells us something similar in his recent 2022 memoir, making explicit that, in terms of the AIDS crisis, not much has changed: “AIDS is still with us,” Goldberg declares, “not just internationally, but here in America, where poverty, prejudice, lack of AIDS education, and unequal access to health care continue to keep infection rates at unacceptably high levels.”¹¹⁶ Goldberg continues by powerfully proclaiming in all capitalized letters that “THERE IS STILL NO CURE.”¹¹⁷ The AIDS crisis, then, remains, despite widespread societal belief otherwise.

¹ See, for example, E. Cram, “Archival Ambience and Sensory memory: Generating Queer Intimacies in the Settler Colonial Archive,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (2016): 109-129; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Thomas Dunn, *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for Representing the GLBTQ Past* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2016); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Charles E. Morris III, “My Old Kentucky Homo: Lincoln and the Politics of Queer Public Memory,” in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall Phillips (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004): 89-114; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

² James Wentzy, “Kiki Mason Political Funeral Part 2,” June 27, 1996, Accessed January 4, 2024, <https://actuporalhistory.org/actions/political-funerals>.

³ James Wentzy, “Kiki Mason Political Funeral,” June 27, 1996, Accessed January 3, 2024, <https://actuporalhistory.org/actions/political-funerals>. 27:48-28:09.

⁴ See, for example, Cathleen Decker, “Elections ’92: Clinton Vows Better Efforts Against AIDS,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1992; Michael Isikoff, “Gays Mobilizing for Clinton as Rights Become an Issue,” *The Washington Post*, September 27, 1992; Mitchell S. McKinney and Bryan G. Pepper, “From Hope to Heartbreak: Bill Clinton and the Rhetoric of AIDS,” in *Power in Blood*, ed. William N. Elwood (New York: Routledge, 1998): 77-92.

⁵ See, for example, Elinor Burkett, *The Gravest Show on Earth: America in the Age of AIDS* (Picador: New York, 1995); David W. Dunlap and Lawrence M. Fisher, “Drug Companies Turn Aggressive in Promoting New Drugs for AIDS,” *New York Times*, July 5, 1996; John Schwartz,

“Three-Drug Treatment Shows Promise in Suppressing AIDS Virus,” *The Washington Post*, January 29, 1996.

⁶ Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 34:56-35:03.

⁷ Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 35:28-35:37.

⁸ See, for example, Eugene Brennan, “Crisis as Method: Politics, Temporality, and Agency,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2024): 231-254; Amos Kiewe, “Introduction,” in *The Modern Presidency and Crisis Rhetoric* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1993): xv-xxxvii; Kim Hensley Owens and Cathryn Molloy, “‘This Time is Crisis Time’: A Syndemic Approach,” *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine* 6, no. 1 (2023): 1-8.

⁹ Brennan, “Crisis as Method.” Deborah Cohen, “Crisis in Motion,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2024): 297-320.

¹⁰ Bishnupriya Ghosh, “The Costs of Living: Reflections on Global Health Crises,” in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, ed. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 61.

¹¹ Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013): 2.

¹² Benjamin Noys, “The Crisis of the Present Moment and the Crisis of Contemporary Theory,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2024): 344.

¹³ Carole Blair and Davis W. Houck, “Richard Nixon and the Personalization of Crisis,” in *The Modern Presidency and Crisis Rhetoric* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1993): 91-118.

¹⁴ Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani, “Introduction,” in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, ed. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 1.

¹⁵ Ghosh, “The Costs of Living,” 66.

¹⁶ See, for example, Beatriz Cardona, “The Pitfalls of Personalization Rhetoric in Time of Health Crisis: COVID-19 Pandemic and Cracks in Neoliberal Ideologies,” *Health Promotion International* 36, no. 3 (2021): 714-721; Cohen, “Crisis in Motion;” Henry A. Giroux, “The COVID-19 Pandemic is Exposing the Plague of Neoliberalism,” in *Collaborative Futures in Qualitative Inquiry*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Michael D. Giardina (New York: Routledge, 2021): 16-27.

¹⁷ See, for example, Ben A. Lohmeyer and Nik Taylor, “War, Heroes and Sacrifice: Masking Neoliberal Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Critical Sociology* 47, no. 5 (2021): 625-639; J. Michael Ryan, “The Blessings of COVID-19 for Neoliberalism, Nationalism, and Neoconservative Ideologies,” in *COVID 19 Volume 1: Global Pandemic, Societal Responses, Ideological Solutions*, ed. J. Michael Ryan (London: Routledge, 2020): 80-93; Miloš Šumonja,

“Neoliberalism is not Dead—On Political Implications of Covid-19,” *Capital & Class* 45, no. 2 (2021): 215-227.

¹⁸ Cindy Patton, “Foreword,” in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, eds. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): viii.

¹⁹ Cait McKinney, “Crisis Infrastructures: AIDS Activism Meets Internet Regulation,” in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, ed. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 164.

²⁰ See, for example, ACT UP/New York, “ACT UP FAQ,” Accessed June 26, 2024, <https://actupny.com/contact/>.

²¹ See, for example, Jeffrey A. Bennett. *Banning Queer Blood: Rhetorics of Citizenship, Contagion, and Resistance* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009); Daniel C. Brouwer, “The Precarious Visibility Politics of Self-Stigmatization: The Case of HIV/AIDS Tattoos,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1998): 114-136; William Haver, *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Simon Watney. *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and The Media*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

²² See, for example, Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); Jack Lowery, *It Was Vulgar & It Was Beautiful: How AIDS Activists Used Art to Fight a Pandemic* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2022); Charles E. Morris III, “ACT UP 25: HIV/AIDS, Archival Queers, and Mnemonic World Making,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 49-53.

²³ Jennifer Brier, “AIDS and Action (1980-1990s),” in *The Routledge History of Queer America*, ed. Don Romesburg (New York: Routledge, 2018): 95.

²⁴ See, for example, Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani, “Preface,” in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, ed. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): xvii-xxvi; Hawlan Ng, “AIDS in the Media,” *Harvard AIDS Review* (2000): 18-20.

²⁵ David Román, “Not-About-AIDS,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, no. 1 (2000): 1.

²⁶ Quoted in Gina Kolata, “Researchers Find Early Battlers of H.I.V.,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 1995.

²⁷ Gould, *Moving Politics*, 420.

²⁸ David W. Dunlap, “From AIDS Conference, Talk of Life, Not Death,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 1996, Accessed July 27, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/15/us/from-aids-conference-talk-of-life-not-death.html>.

²⁹ Los Angeles Times, “Time Names AIDS Scientist Man of the Year,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1996, Accessed on July 27, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-12-22-mn-11799-story.html>.

³⁰ Jonathon Catlin, “When Does an Epidemic Become a ‘Crisis’? Analogies Between COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS in American Public Memory,” *Memory Studies* 14, no. 6 (2021): 1461.

³¹ Román, “Not-About-AIDS,” 1.

³² Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 35:06-35:24. My emphasis.

³³ See Paul Draus and Juliette Roddy, “Ghosts, Devils, and the Undead City: Detroit and the Narrative of Monstrosity,” *Space and Culture* 19, no. 1 (2016): 67-79; Murray Leeder, *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality From Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); David Tyrer and Salman Sayyid, “Governing Ghosts: Race, Incorporeality and Difference in Post-Political Times,” *Current Sociology* 60, no. 3 (2012): 353-367.

³⁴ Kendall R. Phillips, *A Place of Darkness: The Rhetoric of Horror in Early American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018): 38.

³⁵ Chris Dent, “Ghosts, Emotions and Audiences; Foucault and Filmic Specters,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 39, no. 7 (2022): 1591.

³⁶ Arthur Redding, *Haints: American Ghosts, Millennial Passions, and Contemporary Gothic Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2011): 6.

³⁷ Kas Saghafi, *Apparitions—Of Derrida’s Other* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010): 81.

³⁸ Samuel Chambers, *Untimely Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2003): 82.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida. *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988): 64. See also Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, “Spectrographies,” in *Echographies of Television*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity, 2002): 113-134.

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Routledge Classics: New York, 2006). 20. Author’s emphasis.

⁴¹ Kiki Mason, “By Any Means Necessary,” available at <https://actupny.org/diva/CBnecessary.html>.

⁴² Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 23:44-23:51. My emphasis.

⁴³ Patricia L. Dunmire, “The Rhetoric of Temporality: The Future as Linguistic Construct and Rhetorical Resource,” in *Rhetoric in Detail: Discourse Analysis of Rhetorical Talk and Text*, ed. Barbara Johnstone and Christopher Eisenhart (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008): 81-112. See also Joan L. Bybee and Suzanne Fleischman, *Modality in Grammar and Discourse* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995).

⁴⁴ Dunmire, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 105.

⁴⁵ The full text of Mason’s essay is available online at <https://actupny.org/diva/CBnecessary.html>.

⁴⁶ Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 25:20-25:22.

⁴⁷ Owen Ware, “Dialectic of the Past/Disjuncture of the Future: Derrida and Benjamin on The Concept of Messianism,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 5, no. 2 (2004): 106.

⁴⁸ Ware, “Dialectic of the Past/Disjuncture of the Future,” 106.

⁴⁹ Françoise Dastur, “Derrida and the Question of Presence,” *Research in Phenomenology* 36, no. 1 (2006): 49.

⁵⁰ Marcus Bell, “Encountering Absence: Queer Traces, Ghosts, and Performance Otherwise,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Classics and Queer Theory*, ed. Ella Haselswerdt, Sara H. Lindheim, and Kirk Ormand (London: Routledge, 2023): 142.

⁵¹ Larry Kramer, *Reports From The Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989); Erin J. Rand, “An Inflammatory Fag and a Queer Form: Larry Kramer, Polemics, and Rhetorical Agency,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008): 297-319.

⁵² Steven Epstein, “Specificities: AIDS Activism and the Retreat from the ‘Genocide’ Frame,” *Social Identities* 3, no. 3 (1997): 416.

⁵³ Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 26:05-30:04.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Victoria Fareld, “(In) Between the Living and the Dead: New Perspectives on Time in History,” *History Compass* 14, no. 9 (2016): 430-440; Simon Jacobson, *Derrida and the Holocaust*, Ph.D. Diss. (Manchester: University of Manchester, 2001); Siobhan Kattago, *Encountering the Past Within the Present: Modern Experiences of Time* (London: Routledge, 2020).

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⁵⁶ See, for example, Epstein, “Specificities;” Gould, *Moving Politics*.

⁵⁷ Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 146.

⁵⁸ Justine Grønbaek Pors, Lena Olaison, and Birke Otto, “Ghostly Matters in Organizing,” *Ephemera* 19, no. 1 (2019): 19.

⁵⁹ Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 21:59-22:16. My emphasis.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Death Penalty, Volume 1*, eds. Geoffrey Bennington, Marc Crépon, and Thomas Dutoit, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012): 256.

⁶¹ See, for example, Erin Allday, “Last Men Standing,” *San Francisco Chronicles*, Published March 2016, Accessed August 13, 2024, <https://projects.sfchronicle.com/2016/living-with-aids/story/#:~:text=In%20the%20darkest%20years%20of,wounded%20physically%2C%20psychologically%20and%20economically>.

⁶² See, for example, Barbara M. Herringer, “Unruly Death: The Social Organization of AIDS Suicide,” PhD Diss., (University of Victoria, 1998).

⁶³ Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 150.

⁶⁴ Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 32:34-32:47.

⁶⁵ Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 33:56-34:05.

⁶⁶ Joshua Gunn, “Review Essay, Mourning Humanism, or, the Idiom of Haunting,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 1 (2006): 82. See also Laurence Simmons, “Jacques Derrida’s Ghostface,” *Angelaki* 16, no. 1 (2011): 129-141.

⁶⁷ Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 19:25-19:30.

⁶⁸ Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 19:15-19:25.

⁶⁹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 11. Author’s emphasis.

⁷⁰ Anne-Christine D’Adesky, *The Pox Lover: An Activist’s Decade in New York and Paris* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2017): 194.

⁷¹ D’Adesky, *The Pox Lover*, 51. Author’s emphasis.

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⁷³ Wentzy, “Mason Political Funeral,” 26:58-27:27.

⁷⁴ Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 18.

⁷⁵ Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*, 101.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Jonathan Bell, *Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American State Since the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Dagmawi Woubshet, *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexual, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

⁷⁷ See, for example, Mary L. Gray, “‘Queer Nation is Dead/Long Live Queer Nation’: The Politics and Poetics of Social Movement and Media Representation,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 3 (2009): 212-236; Julia Johnson and Kimberlee Pérez, “Queerness May Have Dodged a Bullet: Jodie Foster’s Neoliberal ‘Coming-Out’ Rhetoric and the Politics of Visibility,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 1 (2014): 199-208; Lisbeth Lipari, “Queering the Public Sphere: Liberalism and the Rhetoric of Rights,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 38, no. 3 (2002): 169-175.

⁷⁸ Woubshet, *The Calendar of Loss*, 23.

⁷⁹ Peter Staley, *Never Silent: ACT UP and My Life in Activism* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2022): 190.

⁸⁰ Wendy Brown, “Theorizing Power: Response to Critics,” *Polity* 54, no. 3 (2022): 624.

⁸¹ See, for example, Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, “Queer Nationality,” *boundary 2*, no. 19 (1992): 149-180; Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); L. A. Kauffman, “The Anti-Politics of Identity,” in *Identity Politics in the Women’s Movement*, ed. Barbara Ryan (New York: New York University Press, 2001): 23-34; Shane Phelan, “The Space of Justice: Lesbians and Democratic Politics,” in *Social postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, eds. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 332-356.

⁸² Juana María Rodríguez, “Activism and Identity in the Ruins of Representation,” in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, eds. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 257.

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⁸⁴ Brown, *Politics Out of History*. 39.

⁸⁵ Brown, *Politics Out of History*. 39. See also Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge: New York, 1999); Annamarie Jagose. *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Cindy Patton, "Refiguring the Social Space," in *Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, eds. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 216-249.

⁸⁶ For more on post-identity politics which does not forget identity see, for example, Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Nationality," *boundary 2*, no. 19 (1992): 149-180; Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (Routledge: New York, 1991): 13-31; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁸⁷ Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 459.

⁸⁸ Rodriguez, "Activism and Identity," 258.

⁸⁹ Wentzy, "Mason Political Funeral," 34:39-34:53.

⁹⁰ Wentzy, "Mason Political Funeral," 32:58-33:03.

⁹¹ Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 460. For other work on the post-identity politics of ACT UP as a group, see, for example, Stanely Aronowitz, "Against the Liberal State: ACT-UP and the Emergence of Postmodern Politics," in *Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, eds. Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 357-383; Gavin Brown, "Queer Movement," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Lesbian and Gay Activism*, ed. David Paternotte and Mason Tremblay (London: Routledge, 2015): 73-86; Douglas Crimp, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).

⁹² Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers," 438.

⁹³ Wentzy, "Mason Political Funeral," 33:39-33:48.

⁹⁴ Wentzy, "Mason Political Funeral," 30:51-31:03.

⁹⁵ Wentzy, "Mason Political Funeral," 31:03-31:14.

⁹⁶ Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers," 438; 452.

⁹⁷ Wentzy, "Mason Political Funeral," 23:00-23:10; 27:48-28:00.

⁹⁸ Stuart Murray. *The Living From the Dead: Disaffirming Biopolitics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022): 13; 23.

⁹⁹ Wentzy, "Mason Political Funeral," 23:25-23:32; 26:31-26:35.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas W. Simon, "Defining Genocide," *Wisconsin International Law Journal* 15 (1996): 243-256.

¹⁰¹ See for example, Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*; Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*; Morris, "My Old Kentucky Homo;" Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

¹⁰² Indeed, I am in agreement with Dinshaw who tells us that these various understandings of queer temporality understand "the historical past as a vibrant and heterogeneous source of self-fashioning as well as community building" such that "doing queer history becomes a profound act (and future source) of subject formation." Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 142; 170.

¹⁰³ Samuel A. Chambers, "Ghostly Rights," *Cultural Critique* 54 (2003): 158.

¹⁰⁴ Chambers, *Untimely Politics*, 22.

¹⁰⁵ For more on the ongoing conversation regarding agency and subjectivity in rhetorical studies, see, for example, Barbara Biesecker, "Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 2 (1992): 140-161; Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2005): 1-19; Cheryl Geisler, "How Ought We to Understand the Concept of Rhetorical Agency? Report from the ARS," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2004): 9-17; Michael Leff, "Tradition and Agency in Humanistic Rhetoric," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 26, no. 2 (2003): 135-147; Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Trashing the System: Social Movement, Intersectional Rhetoric, and Collective Agency in the Young Lords Organization's Garbage Offensive," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 2 (2006): 174-201.

¹⁰⁶ Gill-Peterson, "Haunting the Queer Spaces of AIDS," 287.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, Edwin Black, "Electing Time," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59, no. 2 (1973): 125-129; Celeste Michelle Condit, "Nixon's 'Fund': Time as Ideological Resource in the 'Checkers' Speech," in *Texts and Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, eds. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (David: Hermagoras Press, 1989): 219-241; Robert Cox, "The Fulfillment of Time: King's 'I Have a Dream Speech (August 23, 1963),' in *Texts and Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric*, eds. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (David: Hermagoras Press, 1989): 181-204; Thomas B. Farrell, "Knowledge in Time: Toward an Extension of Rhetorical Form," in *Advances in Argumentation Theory and Research*, eds. J. Robert Cox and Charles Arthur Willard (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982): 123-153; Matthew Houdek and Kendall R. Phillips, "Rhetoric and the Temporal Turn: Race, Gender, Temporalities," *Women's Studies in Communication* 43, no. 4 (2020): 369-383; Michael Leff, "Dimensions of Temporality in Lincoln's Second Inaugural," *Communication Reports* 1, no. 1

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¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Debra Hawhee, "Kairotic Encounters," in *Perspectives on Rhetorical Invention*, eds. Janet M. Atwill and Janice M. Lauer (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002): 16-35; John Poulakos, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16, no. 1 (1983): 35-48.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Dilip Parameshway Gaonkar, "The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science," *Southern Journal of Communication* 58, no. 4 (1993): 258-295; Michael J. Hyde, *The Ethos of Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004); John Poulakos, *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Nicole T. Allen, "A Reconsidering Chronos: Chronistic Criticism and the First 'Iraqi National Calendar'," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104, no. 4 (2018): 361-383; Matthew P. Brigham, "Chrono-Controversy: The Makah's Campaign to Resume the Whale Hunt," *Western Journal of Communication* 81, no. 2 (2017): 243-261; John R. Gallagher, "Machine Time: Unifying *Chronos* and *Kairos* in an Era of Ubiquitous Technologies," *Rhetoric Review* 39, no. 4 (2020): 522-535.

¹¹¹ Allen, "A Reconsidering Chronos," 363.

¹¹² Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Shane Phelan, *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

¹¹³ Stuart J. Murray, "Aporia: Towards an Ethic of Critique," *Aporia* 1, no. 1 (2009): 10.

¹¹⁴ Cathy Caruth et al., "'The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over': A Conversation with Gregg Bordowitz, Douglas Crimp, and Laura Pinsky," *American Imago* 48, no. 4 (1991): 539.

¹¹⁵ Caruth, "The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over," 539.

¹¹⁶ Ron Goldberg, *Boy with the Bullhorn: A Memoir and History of ACT UP New York* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022): 438.

¹¹⁷ Ron Goldberg, *Boy with the Bullhorn: A Memoir and History of ACT UP New York* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022). 438.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A QUEER THEORY OF JUSTICE

This dissertation has investigated what queer might do, be, and mean through a reading of three of ACT UP's political funerals. I have sought to explore the entangled web through which queer is constituted as adjective, noun, and verb, recognizing that the expansive uses and understandings of this term mean that it takes on a variety of grammatical forms and meanings. I have found three potential answers to the aforementioned question. One, queer may be a response to the impossible demands of the dead which challenges those in positions of political and social authority to acknowledge the insurmountable injustice surrounding those deaths. Two, queer may be a rearticulation of problematic terminology which disrupts the foundational assumptions of those terms not to move past concerns associated with those words but nevertheless to lay claim to that language. Three, queer may be an out of joint space-time which eschews the distinctions between ostensibly different spaces and times to inculcate a post-identity politics. I have come to these three answers through a reading of the trace as it appears in each of my three case studies: as the ashes thrown on the White House Lawns during the Ashes Action, as the corpse paraded throughout New York City at Fisher's political funeral, and as the ghost summoned at the end of Mason's political funeral. My goal has not been to provide a definitive answer to the question of "what can queer do, be, or mean" but rather to investigate three instances of ACT UP's political funerals as inroads to further examining and understanding queer's potentiality.

This dissertation has utilized rhetoric as a reading strategy which attends to both the radical contingency and context which make possible the queerness in each of my case studies. As I explained in the introduction, radical contingency suggests that we may consider queer as it

occurs within its particular manifestations while attending to context suggests that queer's surrounding circumstances are significant for the term's possibilities yet necessarily remain open due to the quasi-structure of iterability. Reading for radical contingency and context has been key both for understanding where the trace is located in each of these case studies and for explaining how these three objects serve as trace. Contingency and context help to delimit the conditions of possibility of each of these protests, what protestors are doing and saying, and how activists can communicate their messages.

I want to use this conclusion to do three things. First, I will summarize my key findings about what queer can do, be, and mean by explaining that queer is marked by undecidability. As I will explain, queer's undecidability serves as both condition of possibility and impossibility, facilitating queer's widespread usage for a variety of different meanings. Second, I will explore queer's relationship to justice, a topic implicitly discussed throughout each of my content chapters. My argument will be that queer in its myriad forms can be a useful tool for activist efforts toward justice. Third and finally, I will return to ACT UP to discuss their protest tactics, targets, and goals in the contemporary era, arguing that the group's continued existence serves as evidence that the insurmountable violence of AIDS continues to place protestors in a position of irreducible and aporetic indeterminacy.

Undecidability

These chapters have collectively pointed toward a common characteristic of queer: its undecidability. In each of my three case studies, protestors were wracked by undecidability, certain that they must act yet nevertheless uncertain that what they were doing could ever possibly be enough in the face of HIV/AIDS. The ashes must be hurled, the corpse must be displayed, and the ghost must be invoked; yet none of these actions would ever bring back the

dead or do their demands and memories justice. Protestors thus express uncertainty throughout each of these three demonstrations about the effects and intended results of activism. How, then, might we understand this undecidability?

To state that these protestors were wracked by undecidability is not to argue that they were indecisive about the necessity of protest or frozen by indecision but rather to suggest that, in the face of insurmountable AIDS violence, they could never be certain that their protests would be enough. “Undecidability,” Jacques Derrida tells us, “is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly *determined* in strictly *defined* situations.”¹ Derrida continues by stating that undecidability has to do with “relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely determinations in given situations.”² Undecidability, then, is not an archaic synonym for indecision but rather that which at once operates as the condition of possibility and condition of impossibility for these protestors’ actions; it is the economy of *différance* both by which protestors are forced into action and by which those actions cannot possibly be certain, final, or absolute. To state that these protestors were wracked by undecidability, then, is not to suggest that they were “simply paralyzed or neutralized because [they] [did] not know what to do,” but rather to argue that they had “to go through an ordeal of undecidability in order to decide.”³ Thus, as Aggie Hirst puts it, “this aporetic condition [of undecidability] means that the course of action one chooses (because one always chooses, even, and especially, if one attempts to evade the taking of a position) must be argued for, defended, and reflected upon constantly in light of new ideas and encounters.”⁴ Instead of absolute immobilization, then, undecidability signals that these demonstrations were never final nor complete but rather continue to necessitate constant revisitation, reconsideration, and reconceptualization in the face of the insurmountable

violence that is HIV/AIDS. Protestors did not, could not, and cannot know that each particular protest would ever be enough, but nevertheless were certain that action was (and, as I will explain in my final section, will continue to be) necessary.

From these three case studies I thus draw the suggestion that queer is marked by undecidability. In other words, I mean to claim undecidability as the moniker for the aporia at queer's "center" by which queer comes to mean, do, and be so many different things in so many different situations and for so many different people. Even as those of us committed to queer, queer theory, and queering are convinced that it is a useful analytic and rhetorical tool, its indeterminacy and inconclusiveness necessitates that we can never be entirely certain or definitively sure about what it does, can do, and can be; the term is constrained even as it is radical, limited even as it remains open. Yet in that undecidability queer is not necessarily indeterminate or paralyzing; instead, it is at once enabling and disabling, possible and impossible, forcing those of us who do queer theory into aporetic positions which are at once inescapable and capacitating. Queer, then, both remains an "open-ended construction...since it represents itself as unfixed, and as holding open a space whose potential can never be known" *and* a term which remains inconclusive and incomplete.⁵ Or, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick tells us, queer "is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, edifying, *troublant*."⁶ Both moment and movement, and quite troubling indeed, as undecidability facilitates queer's possibilities and impossibilities at once.⁷

Queer's undecidability may also help us conceptualize the aporetic tension between essentialist and non-essentialist understandings of queer. As I suggested in the introduction, each of my case studies forward an essentialist understanding of queer (the mourning of LGBT+ people) and a non-essentialist understanding of queer (the queering of the life/death binary).

What makes it possible for queer to at once be understood as an essentialist and a non-essentialist theory, study, or category is the undecidability by which queer is defined.

I am not the first to suggest that queer is marked by undecidability. As I explained in chapter two, Erin Rand quite clearly draws this connection when she argues that queerness is “the general economy of undecidability from which agency appears.”⁸ Rand expands on this statement by telling us that she is “claiming as queerness the lack of a necessary or predictable relation between an intending agent and the effects of an action” and “as the general economy of undecidability from which agency emerges.”⁹ Furthermore, Rand tells us that she is advancing “a de-essentialized notion of queerness that disconnects ‘queer’ from any particular referent, and instead refigures it as the undecidability from which rhetorical agency is actualized.”¹⁰

In chapter two, I added to Rand’s work by suggesting that it is aporia by which queerness’s undecidability is made possible; here I want to once again expand upon her work but, in doing so, trouble some of her arguments. For Rand, queer is very explicitly “the resource through which rhetorical agency is possible” and, as a result, that which facilitates unpredictable uptakes of texts and discourses.¹¹ In addition to Rand’s understanding, my suggestion is that queer’s undecidability makes possible each of the three aforementioned understandings of queer that I have explained throughout this dissertation. That is to say, queer may not solely be the indeterminate economy by which rhetorical agency and action become possible but also and at once function as undecidable demand, unsettled rearticulation, and out of joint space-time. And given that queer remains undecided, it may also function as so much more.

Furthermore, rather than “disconnect[ing] ‘queer’ from any particular referent” as Rand does, my argument is that the term is at once disconnected from *and* connected to those other referents. In other words, undecidability, as I have considered it throughout this dissertation,

necessitates that we both read with and against these activists at the same time—hence that, in each of my case studies, we find the protestors expressing uncertainty and doubt even as they simultaneously remain certain about the necessity of activism. Thus, if Rand is “working against the prevailing academic and popular trends to employ ‘queer’ either as an umbrella term for ‘gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered’ identities, or as a label for sexualities and politics that disrupt the hetero/homo binary,” then my suggestion is that we might instead *both* work against that trend *and* work with it at once.¹² As I suggested in the conclusion to chapter two, this aporetic approach to reading queer is a better way to help us understand queer’s fraught relationship with LGBT identities. What I hope the rest of this dissertation has shown is that queer’s undecidability necessitates that we remain open to its possibilities, even if and when those possibilities place us in a position of aporia, irresolvable uncertainty, and doubt.

If, as suggested in the introduction, we may understand queer worldmaking to be the utilization of queer in its myriad forms which seeks to develop a world without heteronormativity, then attending to queer’s undecidability is a necessary component of our queer worldmaking practices. We may remain in an aporetic position that necessitates doubt and uncertainty, yet nevertheless recognize as crucial decision and action. Each of the ACT UP demonstrations this dissertation investigates signal attempts at queer worldmaking through the creation of challenges to the social and political structures which allowed, and continue to allow, HIV/AIDS to spread. Through queerness’ undecidability, then, activists and scholars alike may find the potential for action.

Queer and Justice

If, on the one hand, we may find queerness wracked by undecidability in each of these case studies, then, on the other hand, we may find a particular demand for justice for the AIDS

dead within each of these case studies as well. The protestors that I have written about do not seek a banal political reform but rather a radically different politics, one which acknowledges the insurmountable violence that HIV/AIDS has wrought. Hence, politics looks quite different for these protestors. For example, in chapter four, I argued that ACT UP activists inculcated a post-identity politics whose attachment to the continuation of AIDS as crisis substitutes for identity as foundation of politics and that a commitment to critique operates as foundation of community; this political formation is quite different than modern identity-based social movements. Given these particular political demands and formations, I want to briefly explore a set of questions which, I believe, is irreducibly interrelated with this dissertation's initial set of questions: what is queerness' relationship to justice? In what ways might "queer" or "queering" be put to work for a sense of justice, however impossible it may be?

To ask about queerness' relationship to justice is not a simple question. Justice, Derrida tells us, "is not the infinitely remote idea of a goal to be reached, but is something which, here and now, gives us orders beyond any given set of legal concepts."¹³ Justice, then, is not an abstract or idealistic philosophical notion but rather an impetus for action, serving not as condition of possibility nor as particular political goal but instead a radical shift in how political, social, and cultural institutions operate. Justice "implies a break, an interruption, a disassociation....[which] is very uncomfortable, difficult;" it is a world-shattering shift which unsettles and disturbs everything as we have come to know and experience it and, as such, exceeds the realm of possibility. Because justice necessitates this break and subsists outside of possibility, we cannot ever conclusively say "'this is just' and even less 'I am just,' without immediately betraying justice."¹⁴ Justice, then, is unfeasible, impractical, and unimaginable, exceeding the very limits by which feasibility, practicality, and imaginability are constrained.

And yet, we must still strive for justice, for we have a responsibility toward justice, one which attempts the impossible for the better. This responsibility “is in fact irreducible, unsolvable;” it is an impetus which spurs action.¹⁵ ACT UP activists certainly experience and respond to this responsibility as they call for justice for the AIDS dead, experiencing “a responsibility to the unspeakable and the unspoken, to the silent and the silenced, a responsibility to the absent, the irreducibly other, and the dead.”¹⁶ Justice, then, is an “imperative,” spurring on activism for the sake of a more just world.¹⁷ Or, justice “is something which, here and now, gives us orders beyond any given set of legal concepts.”¹⁸ Justice as peremptory, inspiratory, and motivating, then, even as it is unactualizable.

But this understanding of justice as force or impetus is not meant to imply that justice is solely an abstract energy or potency impelling us toward making a more just world. “Justice isn’t justice...if it doesn’t have the force to be ‘enforced;’ a powerless justice is not justice.”¹⁹ In other words, there must be something actualizable in our current political and social reality which impels us toward justice. Where, then, might queer theory locate the force which enforces the force of justice? Derrida teaches us that one answer to this question is the law: “it is impossible to think justice without including it in the injunction to determine justice by law, that is, to produce just laws.”²⁰ Derrida continues by stating that “the law must be inspired by justice, it is a part of its concept, and justice must command the production of determined laws. So they are linked, they are indisassociable: infinitely different, yet indisassociable.”²¹ Legal and political reforms are necessary, then, as we strive for justice. Hence, for ACT UP activists, a significant target for political and legal demands is the state, that which makes and enforces the laws. In this sense, ACT UP places specific and particular demands for political and legal reforms on the government and those in political power. In my three case studies, those demands include an

increase in funding for AIDS research, finding a cure for HIV/AIDS, increasing funding and support for equitable access to health care, and developing new safety net programs which alleviate poverty. These three case studies thus demonstrate that the law may be one tool in queer theory's toolbox which may be used to push toward a sense of justice. "There is *progress*, there are *advances*, through juridico-political struggles against the experienced inadequacy of prevailing laws, and these advances are real and necessary."²²

Yet at the same time, these legal and political demands are never enough for the actualization of justice. There will always be something more that must be demanded and something more that must be done. A legal and political reform is not "a break, an interruption, a disassociation" as justice must be. Reforms do not facilitate radical shifts, nor do they exist outside the realm of possibility. "Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable."²³ We may determine and reason through the implications of a law and its attendant legal and political reforms and those changes may bring about a more just world, but we may not actualize or reach justice through legal reform. Justice, therefore, "exceeds but also requires the law."²⁴ As such, legal reform is a necessary but not sufficient condition for queer's push toward justice.

For justice to be necessary yet impossible is to suggest that it is only through aporia which we may begin to both conceptualize and approach justice. As Derrida puts it, "there is no justice without this experience, however impossible it may be, of aporia. Justice is an experience of the impossible. A will, a desire, a demand for justice whose structure wouldn't be an experience of aporia would have no chance to be what it is, namely, a call for justice."²⁵ The non-passage of the aporia means that, even as we may never actualize justice, it is something which opens a different way of thinking and being. We may not ever move past or through the

aporia to finally achieve justice, whatever that justice may be—yet it is at the aporetic impasse through which we may begin to glimpse justice, experience a horizon with which we may seek justice.

So, then, what is queering's relationship to justice, and how might queer be put to work for a sense of justice? The answer I want to provide is through queer's aporia: undecidability, the impossibility of coming to definitive resolution, which nevertheless facilitates the necessity of action, activism, and decision as queer critics, scholars, and activists seek a more just world. If justice subsists "against the background of the undecided and perhaps undecidable," facilitating the undecidability by which queer may operate, then it is by way of an insurmountable undecidability which queer may serve as a tool for justice.²⁶ Undecidability itself may not be justice, but it is in and through the experience of undecidability by which we may begin to glimpse justice within queering and queer theorizing. Scholars and critics engaging in queer theory may never know if their critiquing and theorizing is just, yet nevertheless ought to continually advance their queer scholarship toward justice.

AIDS and Its Insurmountable Violences

I want to end this dissertation by turning toward ACT UP as a social movement in our current political moment. In the name of justice, members of ACT UP continue to protest and respond to AIDS to this day. Even a cursory search through ACT UP/New York's website demonstrates that the group is committed to the continual fight against HIV/AIDS. As the group's webpage puts it, "HIV/AIDS is not history. HIV/AIDS is very much with us. And we call on you to join our fight to end AIDS."²⁷ Furthermore, ACT UP/New York's website continues to portray the same slogan that the group has had since the 1980s: "ACT UP—the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—is a diverse, non-partisan group of individuals, united in

anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis.”²⁸ The website adds to the initial slogan, however, with the following words: “We meet with government officials, we distribute the latest medical information, we protest and demonstrate. We are not silent.”²⁹ As such, the group continues to conduct various protests in their efforts to fight the disease.³⁰ Even though ACT UP is a significantly smaller group than it was during its heyday throughout the late 80s and early to mid-90s, its members continue to act. A continual commitment to fight the injustice of AIDS, then.

ACT UP continues to advocate for particular legal and political reforms, engaging the law because doing so is just. Some of these stated reforms include “sustained investment in research for new medicines and treatments for HIV/AIDS and related co-infections; equitable access to prevention and care for HIV/AIDS and healthcare, in general; [and] tackling the structural drivers of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, such as stigma, discrimination and poverty.”³¹ The group, then, calls for a more structural approach to addressing AIDS, understanding that it is not just the disease itself which matters but at once lack of healthcare, sustained stigma and discrimination, and rampant poverty which structurally facilitate the spread of the disease. Part of this broader structural approach to addressing AIDS is its connection to the spread of other diseases, such as COVID, Ebola, and Monkeypox, particularly as these different diseases infect at rampant rates in the developing world.³² The group has also expanded its legal goals to address seemingly non-related issues, such as the ending of United States military funding for the Israeli occupation of Gaza. As ACT UP member Jason Rosenberg puts it in a recent op-ed, “when people ask why ACT UP has taken on this current genocide as an advocacy issue...the answer should be easy to find: ending the [AIDS] epidemic means ending the epidemic for everyone. We do that by ensuring that we are fighting to build up health infrastructures. Not by

aiding weapons and funding their destruction.”³³ Justice for those with AIDS is thus not limited to a direct demand for more funding for AIDS research but is expanded to encapsulate a variety of other interrelated concerns.

Yet this justice is not and cannot solely be limited to the law; as such, ACT UP’s continued call for justice expands beyond particular legal changes to a broader disassociation with politics as we conventionally know it. “The issue is that we have to change the rules,” Asia Russell said in a recent interview.³⁴ “That is the system. The system is not broken, it’s working. We need a different system.”³⁵ A demand for a radical break with the conventional political system as we know it, then, in the name of a more just world. Eric Sawyer tells us something similar in a recent interview when he states that “I’m longing for a day when homophobia disappears and human rights are guaranteed for everyone in the world....That’s a lofty set of wishes for the world.”³⁶ Recognizing the impossibility of achieving a reality where “homophobia disappears and human rights are guaranteed,” Sawyer nevertheless continues to call for and demand this radical change as a form of justice. Additionally, ACT UP’s current interconnections with other advocacy groups signal a radical demand for justice. For example, members of ACT UP now work with Black Lives Matter,³⁷ fighting for a radical rearticulation of society in which black lives are valued.³⁸ Sawyer tells us that “today’s HIV response is trying to pick up the slack left by yesterday’s activists, to extend healthcare access overall, and push issues of social justice and health equality.”³⁹ At once, then, a defense of particular legal and political reforms *and* a broader push for justice which exceeds the law.

Recent data suggests that rates of HIV infection remain remarkably high, particularly among communities of color in the United States and throughout the developing world.⁴⁰ The World Health Organization has recently estimated that there are almost 40 million people living

with HIV worldwide, and that over 3% of all adults in Africa are infected with the disease.⁴¹ Despite the continued existence and spread of HIV/AIDS, much popular and political attention has been shifted away from the disease and toward other issues.⁴² As Peter Staley simply puts it in a recent interview, “we have the same rate of infections as we did in 1992....Entire new generations of gay men are becoming infected because nobody’s listening and nobody cares.”⁴³ Thus, there is much impetus for AIDS activism to continue into modern times. And, because of the disease’s continual spread, activists are still protesting. As Sawyer powerfully says, “I’m not going to stop raising my voice or fighting to give access to people, to medications to save their lives....We need to use our privilege, our legal protections, and our freedom...to fight for people who don’t have it.”⁴⁴ Sawyer continues by declaring that “the AIDS epidemic is not over and silence still kills. And we need to continue to raise our voice and demand action.”⁴⁵ What this dissertation’s analysis of queer suggests for scholars interested in continued AIDS activism is that we ought to remain open to these activist possibilities, even as they seem to conflict, reach logical limitations, and hit a breaking point. A continual fight, then, and a continual experience and experiment of the aporia.

¹ Jacques Derrida. *Limited, Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988): 148.

² Derrida, *Limited, Inc.*, 148.

³ Jacques Derrida, “Justice, Law and Philosophy—An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (1999): 280; 281.

⁴ Aggie Hirst, “Derrida and Political Resistance: The Radical Potential of Deconstruction,” *Globalizations* 12, no. 1 (2015): 20.

⁵ Annamarie Jagose. *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996): 107.

⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Foreword: T Times,” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): xii.

⁷ See also Daniel Brouwer and Adela Licona, who suggest that we “consider *both* the constraints *and* the possibilities” when thinking about queer. Daniel C. Brouwer and Adela C. Licona, “Trans(affective)mediation: Feeling Our Way from Paper to Digitized Zines and Back Again,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33, no. 1 (2016): 79.

⁸ Erin J. Rand, “An Inflammatory Fag and a Queer Form: Larry Kramer, Polemics, and Rhetorical Agency,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3 (2008): 314.

⁹ Rand, “An Inflammatory Fag,” 298; 314.

¹⁰ Rand, “An Inflammatory Fag,” 298-299.

¹¹ Rand, “An Inflammatory Fag,” 312.

¹² Rand, “An Inflammatory Fag,” 298.

¹³ Derrida, “Justice, Law and Philosophy,” 282.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’,” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992): 10.

¹⁵ Zeynep Direk, “Law, Justice, and Politics: Derrida on Deconstruction and Democracy to Come,” *The New Centennial Review* 14, no. 2 (2014): 122.

¹⁶ Willy Maley, “Beyond the Law? The Justice of Deconstruction,” *Law and Critique* 10 (1999): 68.

¹⁷ Derrida, “Force of Law,” 17.

¹⁸ Derrida, “Justice, Law and Philosophy,” 282.

¹⁹ Derrida, “Force of Law,” 11.

²⁰ Derrida, “Justice, Law and Philosophy,” 284.

²¹ Derrida, “Justice, Law and Philosophy,” 284.

²² Simon Glendinning, “Derrida and the Philosophy of Law and Justice,” *Law Critique* 27 (2016): 202.

²³ Derrida, “Force of Law,” 16.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996): 76.

²⁵ Derrida, “Force of Law,” 16.

²⁶ Fred Dallmayr, “Justice and Violence: A Response to Jacques Derrida,” *Cardozo Law Review* 13, no. 4 (1991): 1240.

²⁷ ACT UP/New York, “Contact,” Accessed September 5, 2024, <https://actupny.com/contact/>.

²⁸ ACT UP/New York, “Contact.”

²⁹ ACT UP/New York, “Contact.”

³⁰ See, for example, ACT UP/London, “Silence = Death,” Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://actuplondon.wordpress.com/>; Duncan Osborne, “ACT UP Calls on City to Reverse Proposed HIV/AIDS Cuts and Bolster COVID and Mpox Services,” *Gay City News*, Published June 4, 2024, Accessed September 6, 2024 <https://gaycitynews.com/act-up-ny-city-hiv-aids-cuts-covid-mpox/>; Barrett White, “The HIV Fight Has Changed. A New Generation of Activists is Here,” *Legacy Community Health*, Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://www.legacycommunityhealth.org/newsblog-the-hiv-fight-has-changed/>.

³¹ ACT UP/New York, “Contact.”

³² See, for example, ACT UP/New York, “COVID,” Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://actupny.com/tag/covid/>; Ria Modak, “‘We Have to Change the Rules’: What AIDS Activists Can Teach Us About the COVID Pandemic,” *In These Times*, Published August 21, 2021, Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/aids-activists-act-up-covid-pandemic-pharmaceutical-monopolies>.

³³ Jason Rosenberg, “It Is Our Duty as AIDS Activists to Oppose Genocide,” *The Body*, Published May 31, 2024, Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://www.thebody.com/article/our-duty-aids-activist-oppose-genocide>.

³⁴ Quoted in Modak, “‘We Have to Change the Rules’.”

³⁵ Asia Russell, quoted in Modak, “‘We Have to Change the Rules’.”

³⁶ Eric Sawyer, interviewed by Mason Funk, “Eric Sawyer Interview,” *Outwards Archive*, Published March 28, 2019, Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://theoutwardsarchive.org/interview/sawyer-eric/>. 2:11:38-2:12:15.

³⁷ See, for example, ACT UP/New York, “ACT UP Statement About Black Lives Matter Protests,” Accessed September 7, 2024, <https://actupny.com/act-up-blm/>; Julie Compton, “AIDS Activists, Black Lives Matter Share History of Grief, Outrage,” *NBC News*, Published August 8, 2016, Accessed September 7, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/aids-activists-black-lives-matter-share-history-outrage-n625291>.

³⁸ See, for example, Barbara Biesecker, "From General History to Philosophy: Black Lives Matter, Late Neoliberal Molecular Biopolitics, and Rhetoric," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 50, no. 4 (2017): 409-430; Catherine L. Langford and Montené Speight, "#BlackLivesMatter: Epistemic Positioning, Challenges, and Possibilities," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 3/4 (2015): 78-89.

³⁹ Eric Sawyer, "Eric Sawyer: Youth Engagement in HIV Activist," *International AIDS Society*, Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://www.iasociety.org/meet-our-members/eric-sawyer>.

⁴⁰ See, for example, The Center for Disease Control, "Fast Facts: HIV in the United States," Published April 22, 2024, Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/data-research/facts-stats/index.html>; Duncan Osborne, "NYC Sees Uptick in Estimated New HIV Infections Among Men Who Have Sex With Men," *Gay City News*, Published December 1, 2023, Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://gaycitynews.com/nyc-sees-uptick-in-estimated-new-hiv-infections-among-men-who-have-sex-with-men/>.

⁴¹ World Health Organization, "HIV Data and Statistics," Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://www.who.int/teams/global-hiv-hepatitis-and-stis-programmes/hiv/strategic-information/hiv-data-and-statistics>.

⁴² See, for example, Richard Parker, "Epidemics of Signification and Global Health Policy: From the End of AIDS to the End of Scale-Up of the Global AIDS Response," *Global Public Health* 19, no. 1 (2024): 1-17; Katy Sinka, "The Global Burden of Sexually Transmitted Infections," *Clinics in Dermatology* 42, no. 2 (2024): 110-118.

⁴³ Jennifer Brea, "Peter Staley: Lessons from the AIDS Movement," Accessed September 7, 2024, <https://www.meaction.net/how-to-survive-a-plague/peter-staley-transcript/>.

⁴⁴ Funk, "Eric Sawyer Interview," 1:57:00-1:57:58.

⁴⁵ Funk, "Eric Sawyer Interview," 2:00:05-2:00:25.

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