

# Secular Theology, Political Poetics, and ACT UP: On Meaning-making and Resistance

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## Abstract

This paper is a secular political theological reading of The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). It is oriented toward the poetic act of meaning-making, political resistance, and theology of desire. ACT UP was a non-religious, and at times anti-religious organization, so it might seem odd at first to write a theology of it. I justify this endeavor broadly by arguing for a theological thinking oriented toward desire, meaning-making, and the creation of alternate possible worlds. The implication is that theology is always already political. That allows for both political readings of the theological and, perhaps more controversially, theological readings of the political. In that spirit and examining ACT UP's general engagement with death and political funerals specifically, this paper will examine a secular political organization like ACT UP through a theological lens.

## Introduction

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religious, and at times anti-religious organization, so it might seem odd at first to write a theology of it. I justify this endeavor broadly by arguing for a theological thinking oriented toward desire, meaning-making, and the creation of alternate possible worlds. The implication is that theology is always already political. That allows for both political readings of the theological and, perhaps more controversially, theological readings of the political. In that spirit, this paper will examine a secular political organization like ACT UP through a theological lens.

The paper begins in section 1 with an examination of the relationship between the theological and the political and argues that theology always expresses a politics, but the inverse is also true: the political is always haunted or possessed by a theology. Section 2 uses the concepts developed in section 1 to examine ACT UP. One of ACT UP's most significant forms of demonstration was the political funeral wherein the ashes or body of a person who had died of AIDS was brought to the person or institution who contributed to their death through inaction or inappropriate action. Through engagements with Charles E. Winquist's desiring theology, José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer futurity, and Mark L. Taylor's theopoetic hauntology, I demonstrate a variety of ways in which ACT UP is expressive of a secular political theopoetics. ACT UP's desire for an alternate future, its poetic ability to produce new meaning, and its use of political funerals to haunt the American public are evidence of its theology. I also argue that the imperative of theology is to resist, and that resistance is theological activity. ACT UP exemplifies this notion of a secular, subjunctive political theology.<sup>1</sup> Finally, in light

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I am especially grateful to Jan Powers, Pam Monn, and Grady Crittendon for presenting me with the opportunity to fight back and to witness meaning-making in action.

of ACT UP's political funerals, I point toward the possibility of a theology of queerness.

### 1. Secular Political Theology

That which is theological is always already political. Traditionally, the discipline of political theology investigates *the theological that underlies the political*. But things move in the other direction as well. Marcella Althaus-Reid argues that while theologians tend to position themselves as exploring and interpreting *God's* will, all theology already puts forward a *political* agenda.<sup>2</sup> Theology has a tendency to disguise political interests with references to the divine. Instead of a political theology, then, the dominant theological discourse is a theological politics. In any case, theology is always already performed *in medias res*. There is no pure, apolitical position from which to do theology. *Theology is always political*. The question is whether one's theology underlies a politics—that is, if politics grows out of theology—or whether one's theology is simply a vehicle for a political agenda. Politics and theology always implicate each other. They just may not admit it. Theology has often been able to ignore its own political implications and imperatives, the political interests it affirms, reproduces, and conceals. If we are always already politically postured—either by accepting the status quo, advocating neutrality (which also accepts the status quo), or by resisting the status quo—then our theology is always already politically charged.

This is a work of political theology, but it understands political theology in what is perhaps an idiosyncratic way. Political theology is a hybrid branch of political philosophy, philosophy of religion, and theology that investigates ways in which religious concepts, postures, and thinking underlie political, social, economic, and cultural discourses and institutions. The variety of polit-

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<sup>2</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004).

ical theology here is a *methodological* political theology. Rather than examining existing phenomena for their hidden theological underpinnings or unacknowledged influences, what follows instead applies theological thinking as a way of understanding and interpreting acts, movements, and events of political resistance. It is not an attempt to chart a shift from theology to politics or vice versa, but rather to take these two together.

The common foundation for both the theological and the political is the subjunctive. In using that term, I'm appropriating a concept that refers to the grammatical mood of a verb used to express uncertainty, hypothesis, contingency, possibility, desire, potentiality, necessity, or hope.<sup>3</sup> In short, the subjunctive describes the world, not as it is, but as it might be.<sup>4</sup> I argue that this "might be" is the root of both movements of political resistance which seek to model life differently than the status quo and of religious world-construction through theology, myth, and ritual. The common ground between the political and the religious is the subjunctive. As such, it is appropriate to theologize political resistance. One of the primary points of entry into this line of thinking is the insistence on theology as a mode of interrogation.

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<sup>3</sup> See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, Volume XVII: Su-Thrivingly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 35-36. "Designating or relating to a verbal mood that refers to an action or state as conceived (rather than as a fact) and is therefore used chiefly to express a wish, command, exhortation, or a contingent, hypothetical, or prospective event."

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted here to both the work of the anthropologist, Roy A. Rappaport who had the insight that the ritual process produces a meaningful world by enacting alternate possible version of reality—ritual produces the world as it may be—and to Adam Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael K. Puett, and Bennett Simon who developed that insight into a full-fledged theoretical framework. See Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Here, I'm taking things yet another step further, broadening my understanding of subjunctivity to include both the theological generally and political resistance.

Theology is concerned with desire; political resistance is concerned with possibilities and improvement; subjunctivity encompasses both.<sup>5</sup> Religion's desire is an urge or a drive. Political possibility is a creativity. The former is an inspiration, a mode, or a method and the latter is about content and material (would-be) reality—the future. In my view, these both—the former as the why and whence, and the latter as the what or how—hinge on the same concept: subjunctivity. But not only do both political resistance and religion hinge on the subjunctive, they both need each other so as not to remain empty. The inspiration remains empty as long as it remains unfulfilled. Thus, theology relies on the political for its realization. The subjunctive makes the world. There would be no world without it. Reality itself drives towards its own difference.

Charles E. Winquist writes that, “There is no sanctuary for theological reflection. The locus of a theology is the space of the other... theology does not have a proper place of its own.”<sup>6</sup> Winquist was explaining theology's dislocation from academic and intellectual positions of dominance in a secular culture. But when we read Winquist in a different context, through Althaus-Reid, we notice that the discourse of theology, with its colonial genealogy, occurs in a colonized place. The place of the other is the place of those oppressed by an alliance of politics with theology itself. Althaus-Reid goes further still in explaining a kind of double theological colonization. Liberation theology did not only emerge out of a weapon of oppression in Latin America. It also became an object of consumption for North Atlantic academics. This is what prompts Althaus-Reid to ask, “How did Liberation Theology become commodified in the North Atlantic market, and how did

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<sup>5</sup> My understanding of theology is heavily indebted to Charles E. Winquist who defines theology as the desire for a thinking that doesn't disappoint. See his *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). For Winquist, theology is a desire, but desire is also religion's method and object.

<sup>6</sup> Winquist, 127-9.

the selling of theological books and fashion become the death of a theology originally done with courage and risk? In this, there is almost a process of ‘re-colonizing’ Liberation Theology by converting it into an exotic product for the North Atlantic academic market.”<sup>7</sup> Theology’s relationship with economics is thus deepened in liberation theology. Not only does liberation theology reproduce certain economies—certain inter-human relations—it has become an object of consumption and exploitation itself.

On the other hand, the kind of secular political theology I am advancing in this paper—the kind of theology that, after Winquist, is conscious that it has no place of its own—is a hermeneutic of suspicion. Its critical approach goes to the end. As a result, a critical theology produces religious community without God. Radical and relentless critique is not antithetical to the production of social solidarity. Winquist elaborates on this idea when he writes, “We want to be able to talk about life in the critical wake of the hermeneutics of suspicion... This speaking requires ongoing radical criticism and interrogation of all conceptual formulations. Radical criticism is, in this perspective, an ethical formulation and a possibility for meaningful community.”<sup>8</sup>

Liberation thought should not, however, be abandoned entirely. Althaus-Reid argues that the challenge of liberation theology is to abandon its problematic ideological background, lest it reproduce alienation, patriarchy, and capitalist structures of society.

[This challenge] will take us to reconsider the whole basis of our theological enterprise of liberation, but this time the liberation of theology would be costlier than ... during the 1970s. It could be a liberation which may kill theology, or at least empty theology of ideological methodologies and

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<sup>7</sup> Althaus-Reid, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Winquist, 143.

therefore transform its message deeply. A *kenosis* of theology. Who knows, but perhaps we are only going to know if theology is more than ideology when and if this *kenosis* happens.<sup>9</sup>

Any honest theology is a threat to itself. Like the physician whose healing work would ultimately render the need for a physician obsolete since health requires no doctor, the goal of the theologian should always be to put theology out of business. Honest theology—to use Philip Goodchild’s words, theology that is “a critical engagement with the actual fundamental forces and structures that shape our lives, rather than simply a reflection upon past traditions”<sup>10</sup> and “Theology, concerned with the ultimate criteria of life, is the most fundamental and radical inquiry”<sup>11</sup>—is charged with resisting theology.

Theology is an imperative. Theology must recognize its homelessness and its dependence upon other, secular discourses. As the depth-dimension of life (Tillich), the desire for a thinking that doesn’t disappoint (Winqvist), and a liberated and tactical enterprise emptied of ideology (Althaus-Reid), theology becomes free to engage with what is politically liberating, regardless of its explicitly religious or nonreligious content. Theology is a thinking that resists the here and now and it is thought through other discourses not of its own kind or making. It is simultaneously empty of its own content and open to creating an alternate, meaningful future. This is what I mean when I say that the theology I am advancing is a methodological theology. Secular political theology is subjunctive. Put politically, theology must *resist* itself. Put theologically, theology must *risk* itself.

Theology’s imperative is to resist. Resistance is theological activity.

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<sup>9</sup> Althaus-Reid, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Goodchild, interview for Rorotoko, November 30, 2009. Accessed November 12, 2014. [http://rorotoko.com/interview/20091130\\_goodchiled\\_philip\\_on\\_theology\\_of\\_money/?page=1](http://rorotoko.com/interview/20091130_goodchiled_philip_on_theology_of_money/?page=1).

<sup>11</sup> Philip Goodchild, *Theology of Money* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), 4.

## 2. Act Up

Fall 1993. We poured the ashes of friends we'd lost to the virus all over the steps in front of the California State House...

– Benjamin Shepard<sup>12</sup>

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was a theological movement. That is a controversial claim. It may not be immediately apparent why a New York-based, anarchically structured organization of gay activists and artists living with HIV and their allies operating most successfully in the late 1980s and early '90s, engaging in various forms of direct action with the principal goal of forcing the US government and pharmaceutical companies to invest in the research and development of drugs to treat AIDS and cure HIV is theologically relevant. Theology as the most fundamental and radical inquiry into the ultimate criteria of life makes of theology an imperative. It is for these reasons that ACT UP represented people that we should take as our theological measure. Or, at least, we might consider that ACT UP should re-orient how we conceive of our own concerns. This in itself is theological activity. I will make the case in the pages that follow that ACT UP's actions were theological in nature, despite the secularity of the group, due to the sub-junctivity of its activities and statements. ACT UP poetically produced and clarified meaning in the face of absurdity, expressed utopian desire, and haunted the American public consciousness. These acts of political resistance are expressive of theology's imperative.

“ACT UP is a diverse, non-partisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis. We advise and inform. We demon-

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Shepard, “Introduction,” 10-16 in *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*, eds. Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk (Verso: London and New York, 2002), 12.



strate. WE ARE NOT SILENT,” reads ACT UP’s statement of purpose.<sup>13</sup> A more accurate and succinct description of the group would be difficult to find or make. ACT UP was formed in 1987 as the AIDS epidemic was plaguing major US cities like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Francisco. It was borne of frustration with the lack of developments in HIV and AIDS treatments. Pharmaceutical companies, the federal government, and research institutions lacked the sense of urgency that a plague requires. What treatments were available were prohibitively expensive. The collective negligence of government, business, and research was killing people. ACT UP was fed up and angry, but also thoughtful and creative. Benjamin Shepard, a member almost from its inception, explains that, “The group offered an outlet for an otherwise horrendous situation. Sometimes it was through humor, style, and camp; sometimes it was through direct action. The group recognized the subversive effectiveness of a joke, as well as the sentiment that many were tired of spending their days mourning lost friends, possibilities, and sexual communities. ‘Don’t mourn, organize’...”<sup>14</sup> One of ACT UP’s founders, Eric Sawyer, continues, “We realized early in our ACT UP experience the importance of street theater, witty chants, slick graphics, and sound bites. Often the coverage we received was limited to fifteen seconds on the television news. Reporters seldom covered our issues accurately. We learned that witty chants and slick graphics were a better way to make sure that the media reported the facts correctly.”<sup>15</sup> Sawyer then continues by providing an example:

...we were pushing for the development of housing for homeless people living with AIDS. We collected old furniture, loaded it into my pickup

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<sup>13</sup> ACT UP’s statement of purpose, *ACT UP NY*, accessed November 12, 2014. <http://actupny.org>.

<sup>14</sup> Shepard, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Sawyer, “An ACT UP Founder ‘Acts Up’ for Africa’s Access to AIDS,” 88-102 in *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*, eds. Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk (Verso: London and New York, 2002), 90.

truck, and placed the furniture in the middle of the street in front of the New York City housing commissioner's office. We hung a big banner between two streetlights that read, "Squatters Camp for Homeless People with AIDS." Then we sat on the furniture while rush-hour traffic tried to drive around us, until we were arrested. The police had to cart our old furniture away in garbage trucks and tow my old pickup truck to the police vehicle pound; the demonstration kept city employees busy for more than an hour. This gave reporters time to ask sufficient questions to understand the dangers of homelessness for people with AIDS and to communicate these dangers to the public. The next month the housing commissioner announced that the city was budgeting \$25 million dollars for new AIDS housing programs.<sup>16</sup>

From the very beginning, ACT UP wielded a mastery of direct action through its remarkable ability to create scenes, images, slogans, and chants that commanded attention from the media and the public. For the purposes of this essay, I will restrict my analysis primarily to a particularly striking, poetic response to the trauma of the epidemic in the form of protest. The political funeral, which ACT UP borrowed from the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, was a potent media spectacle and also a profoundly meaningful and affective expression of a community in mourning. Sawyer recalls that, "... we carried the ashes of people who had died of AIDS, or the actual bodies of the dead, to the feet of those who contributed to their deaths through inaction or inappropriate action."<sup>17</sup> David Wojnarowicz, a prominent early member of the group, explained political funerals this way:

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<sup>16</sup> Sawyer, 90-1.

<sup>17</sup> Sawyer, 92.

I imagine what it would be like if friends had a demonstration each time a lover or a friend or a stranger died of AIDS. I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lovers or neighbors would take the dead body and drive with it in a car a hundred miles an hour to Washington D.C. and blast through the gates of the White House and come to a screeching halt before the entrance and dump their lifeless form on the front steps.<sup>18</sup>

In the sections that follow, I will perform a secular political-theological reading of ACT UP by examining its responses to the crisis of meaning that the AIDS epidemic created, the role and function of desire—as a personal, political, and theological category—in ACT UP’s activities, and the role that haunting plays in political funerals.

## **2. A. Subjunctivity**

### **i. Crisis of meaning**

Paula A. Treichler’s *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* is a cultural study of the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. In it, Treichler makes the case that HIV/AIDS should be viewed not simply as a virus and its effects, but also as a cultural construction.<sup>19</sup> Treichler continues to explain that at the end of the 1980s, the dominant medical wisdom of the 20th century was being unraveled by the AIDS epidemic. While previously, it may have made sense to emphasize that, “AIDS represented an ‘epidemic of

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<sup>18</sup> David Wojnarowicz, “Political Funerals,” *ACT UP NY*, accessed November 12, 2014. <http://actupny.org/diva/polfunsyn.html>

<sup>19</sup> She writes, “The AIDS epidemic is cultural and linguistic as well as biological and biomedical.” Paula A. Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

infectious disease and nothing more,” the moral and social issues at work with this epidemic could not be contained by such a tidy encapsulation. Treichler thus argues that, “the AIDS epidemic has produced a parallel epidemic of meanings, definitions, and attributions. This [is a] semantic epidemic, which I have come to call an *epidemic of signification*...”<sup>20</sup> AIDS caused a traumatic rupture in American culture. It was terrifying and not only new, but something that the discourses of medicine and science, public health, politics, religion, and culture did not know how to engage or explain. AIDS was intimate, but unknown. AIDS didn’t make sense. But it didn’t produce that meaninglessness—it shined a spotlight on it. AIDS forced us to give something up against our will, opening up a void. Again, Treichler writes:

In multiple, fragmentary, and often contradictory ways, we struggle to achieve some sort of understanding of AIDS, a reality that is frightening, widely publicized, yet finally neither directly nor fully knowable. AIDS is no different in this respect from other linguistic constructions that, in the commonsense view of language, are thought to transmit preexisting ideas and represent real-world entities yet in fact do neither. The nature of the relation between language and reality is highly problematic; and AIDS is not merely an invented label, provided to us by science and scientific naming practices, for a clear-cut disease entity caused by a virus. Rather, the very nature of AIDS is constructed through language and in particular through the discourses of medicine and science; this construction is “true” or “real” only in certain specific ways—for example, insofar as it successfully guides research or facilitates clinical control over the illness. The name AIDS in part *constructs* the disease and helps make it intelligible. We cannot therefore look “through” language to determine what AIDS “really” is. Rather, we must explore the site where such determinations *re-*

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<sup>20</sup> Treichler, 1.

*ally* occur and intervene at the point where meaning is created: in language. [...] Of course, AIDS is a real disease syndrome, damaging and killing real human beings. Because of this, it is tempting—perhaps in some instances imperative—to view science and medicine as providing a discourse about AIDS closer to its “reality” than what we can provide ourselves. Yet, with its genuine potential for global devastation, the AIDS epidemic is simultaneously an epidemic of transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification. Both epidemics are equally crucial for us to understand, for, try as we may to treat AIDS as “an infectious disease” and nothing more, meanings continue to multiply wildly and at an extraordinary rate. This epidemic of meanings is readily apparent in the chaotic assemblage of understandings of AIDS that by now exists. The mere enumeration of some of the ways AIDS has been characterized suggests its enormous power to generate meanings.<sup>21</sup>

This is a description of the theological problem at its core. The world is inherently meaningless; it’s a lump of stuff. Language itself cannot solve the problem of its own legitimacy; Treichler was wrong on that point. Language can propose meaning, but only take us as far as an argument. As the epidemic of meanings during the early years of the AIDS crisis demonstrates, language may signify truth or falsehood. Not every statement is true, believable, or found to be authoritative. Language may open us up to the possibility of meaning, but it is our actions—how we perform—that may provide that meaning with legitimacy. Treichler either missteps in the end or isn’t clear. The disease hasn’t had the power to generate meanings; the language of AIDS as developed, deployed, and performed by its poets has that power. But this is not a simple or clean process.

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<sup>21</sup> Treichler, 11-2.

The AIDS epidemic forced society to reckon with this meaninglessness. But, as Clifford Geertz has taught, we cannot live in a world we do not understand. In shining a spotlight on the meaninglessness of things, AIDS insisted that meaning be produced. This is the sense in which AIDS was an epidemic of signification. The meaninglessness illuminated by AIDS produced a glut of possible meanings. One possibility—maybe the dominant cultural narrative—was that biology itself had vindicated the opponents of the licentiousness of the 1960s and gender and sexuality liberation movements. This “sense” of AIDS wasn’t just something that the religious right embraced (AIDS as a punishment from God). It was widely embraced within the conservative movement in general, even among atheist Ayn Randers. More widely, it was embraced by ordinary people who weren’t particularly religious. Even gay AIDS activists like Michael Callen, who explicitly rejected the “punishment from God” nonsense, nevertheless associated AIDS not with a virus but with a “lifestyle” that involved, crucially, receptive anal sex.<sup>22</sup> The “traumatic rupture” of AIDS among queers was precisely its destruction of the narrative of gay liberation, and the imposition of the narrative of the “unnatural lifestyle” that this movement had opposed. In other words, all the sense-making around AIDS in the early days of the epidemic had to be overcome in order for ACT UP to carry forward any liberatory hope. Of AIDS was made a sad sense. Rendering AIDS senseless—which in fact it was, as is the world—was an effortful act, not something that happened automatically.

There is a double movement here. On the one hand, the world is inherently meaningless already—it’s absurd. But on the other, we live in a meaningful world. It is subjunctive action that produces the meaning, but only upon the possibility created by absurdity. The old world must either fall apart or be destroyed before the new one may be built on the rubble. One could nei-

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen, *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach, with Medical and Scientific Consultation from Joseph Sonnabend, M.D.* (New York: Tower Press, N.Y.C., 1983)

ther reduce AIDS to a disease of signification nor find a way out of its stigmatizing significance except by going through that stigmatizing significance and reinscribing it otherwise. Doing so involves rigorous, close, and intentional attention to senselessness. Only then and out of that comes the inevitable reinscription of sense. This is a way in which theology is a transgressive re-inscribing: it renders senseless the so-called “common sense” by drawing attention to the senselessness that this sense produces but in doing so it shapes a new sense. The AIDS epidemic and its accompanying epidemic of signification led to a resisting theology that made a new world.

ACT UP functioned as the religious authority creating the liturgy—the peoples’ work—that made sense of AIDS. In the words of Charles E. Morris III, “ACT UP materially transformed with bodies and words and graphics the definition and meanings and visibilities of AIDS, development of and access to its treatment and prevention, its politics and politicization. If SILENCE=DEATH, as its brilliant mantra exhorted, then, even as activists succumbed, ACT UP=LIVING.”<sup>23</sup> In so doing, ACT UP’s subjunctive practices created a world in which AIDS was placed, found meaning, and pointed toward a future yet to dawn. “In many significant senses,” writes Morris, “we are here because of ACT UP.”<sup>24</sup> ACT UP created the once-future in which we now live by performing a meaningful and alternative reality to the one in which so many were dying.

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<sup>23</sup> Charles E. Morris III, “ACT UP 25: HIV/AIDS, Archival Queers, and Mnemonic World Making,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (Vol. 98, No. 1, February 2012, pp. 49-53), 50.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, 50.

## 2. A. SUBJUNCTIVITY

### ii. Poetry

I DON'T WANT AN ANGRY POLITICAL FUNERAL.  
I JUST WANT YOU TO BURN ME IN THE STREET  
AND EAT MY FLESH.

– Jon Greenberg, announcing to all of his friends on many occasions—  
especially in crowded elevators and in the presence of small children.<sup>25</sup>

For Mark Lewis Taylor, poetry is political. And when it enters into an agonistic fray, it becomes or reveals the theological latent within the political. But this is a peculiar sense of what poetry might be. It is both open and practiced, according to Taylor. It isn't just words. Poetry that fully expresses the theological is the practice of an art-force that interconnects the individual artistic act through solidarity to a network of others who also have "borne the weight of the world."<sup>26</sup> It is this weightedness as expressed through poetic action that Taylor argues is the theological latent within the political. One might say then that this sense of poetry-as-theological-practice is resistance. Taylor prefers the term "agonistic" to "resistance," but it strikes me as an unfortunate vestigial example of an intellectual elitism and a reluctance to move from the discourse of high theory to the discourse of those very heroes of *The Theological and the Political* that concern Taylor throughout: poets, prisoners, the tortured, and the defiant.

Nevertheless, Taylor describes the activities of poet-resisters this way:

... their weighing-in is a *practice*. The prodigious art-force that is the fullest expression of the theological is not only an individual creative performance, as necessary and impressive and as cunning and brilliant a display of individual resilience though it may be. As a practice of weighing-in, the

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<sup>25</sup> ACT UP, "Political Funerals," *ACT UP NY*, accessed November 12, 2014. <http://actupny.org/diva/polfunsyn.html>

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, 165.



creators of these art-full forms take on their force through the ways humans organize actions with and through them... we will know that the individual's resilient art-force has its force *as linked* in practical activity, to other persons, structures, and practices.<sup>27</sup>

Mark Lowe Fisher's corpse was carried in an open casket procession in the pouring rain from Judson Memorial Church for almost forty blocks to 43rd Street in front of the New York City Republican Headquarters on the day before Election Day in November, 1992.<sup>28</sup> Before he died, he explained his desire for a political funeral in a document entitled "Bury Me Furiously." In it, he explains,

I have decided that when I die I want my fellow AIDS activists to execute my wishes for my political funeral. I suspect—I know—my funeral will shock people when it happens. We Americans are terrified of death. Death takes place behind closed doors and is removed from reality, from the living. I want to show the reality 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, fiends and families. And we are dying of a disease maintained by a degree of criminal neglect so enormous that it amounts to genocide. I want my death to be as strong a statement as my life continues to be. I want my own funeral to be fierce and defiant, to make the public statement that

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<sup>27</sup> Taylor, 164-5.

<sup>28</sup> See Joy Episalla's interview with Sarah Schulman from December 6, 2003 for the ACT UP Oral History Project. Episalla—a close friend of Fisher as well as Tim Bailey—described Fisher's political funeral on pp. 39-41 of the transcript of the interview. Accessed November 12, 2014. <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/episalla.pdf>

my death from AIDS is a form of political assassination. We are taking this action out of love and rage.<sup>29</sup>

Fisher's funeral is forceful in the way its defiance, love, and rage is linked, through ACT UP, to the public. Following Taylor, we may say that ACT UP's political funerals were acts of interconnected art-force. Political funerals are poetic acts that express the theological within the political. Fisher's pall-bearer's carried the weight of the world on their shoulders that day.

## 2. A. SUBJUNCTIVITY

### iii. Desire

Charles E. Winquist defines theology as the desire for a thinking that doesn't disappoint.<sup>30</sup> For Winquist, theology is a desire, but desire is also both religion's method and object. He bases this formulation in part upon Paul Tillich's assertion that religion is the depth-dimension of life.<sup>31</sup> Winquist explains his desiring theology this way:

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<sup>29</sup> Mark Lowe Fisher, "Bury Me Furiously," *ACT UP NY*, accessed November 12, 2014. <http://actupny.org/diva/polfunsyn.html>

<sup>30</sup> Charles E. Winquist, *Desiring Theology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Tillich writes, "Religion is the dimension of depth in all [functions of man's spiritual life].... What does the metaphor depth mean? It means that the religious aspect points to that which is ultimate, infinite, unconditional in man's spiritual life. Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. And ultimate concern is manifest in all creative functions of the human spirit. It is manifest in the moral sphere as the unconditional seriousness of the moral demand. Therefore, if someone rejects religion in the name of the moral function of the human spirit, he rejects religion in the name of religion. Ultimate concern is manifest in the realm of knowledge as the passionate longing for ultimate reality. Therefore, if anyone rejects religion in the name of the cognitive function of the human spirit, he rejects religion in the name of religion. Ultimate concern is manifest in the aesthetic function of the human spirit as the infinite desire to express ultimate meaning. Therefore, if anyone rejects religion in the name of the aesthetic function of the human spirit, he rejects religion in the name of religion. You cannot reject religion with ultimate seriousness, because

...I have equated the desire for a thinking which does not disappoint with a desire to think theologically... to seek depth today is to desire a complex association of meanings that are weighted with a sense of being real and important. This is a desire to know an “other” in and of language that can be valued in the forming of personal and communal identity. This is a desire to think the singularities of experience that can exfoliate themselves in the production of new meaning. What remains of Tillich’s formulation of depth is the desire for a thinking that resists the trivialization of ultimate questions. There is in this formulation a secular mandate for theology even in the context of the transitoriness, contingency, and dissimulations of postmodern thinking.<sup>32</sup>

There are many resonances in this short passage with the discussion unfolding on these pages including the weightedness, the sense of reality and importance, the formation of personal and communal identity by making the private public, the production of new meaning, and the notion of a secular mandate for theology. Each of these resonate with the way I’ve been using the term “subjunctivity” that runs throughout this project. All of this is to say that, if theology is desire, there is a queer desire at work in ACT UP.

This queer desire is part of what makes ACT UP worthy of theological interpretation. That desire is closely related to José Esteban Muñoz’s key operative concept: queer futurity. Queerness, in Muñoz’s sense, is “a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can

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ultimate seriousness, or the state of being ultimately concerned, is itself religion. Religion is the substance, the ground, and the depth of man’s spiritual life. This is the religious aspect of the human spirit.” Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7-8.

<sup>32</sup> Winqvist, ix-x.

act in the present in the service of a new futurity.”<sup>33</sup> Further, “The time of the past helps mount a critique of the space of the present. This is not revisionary history or metahistory; it is a critical deployment of the past for the purpose of engaging the present and imagining the future.”<sup>34</sup> It is worth quoting the opening passage of Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* at length:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing....Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>34</sup> Muñoz, 116.

<sup>35</sup> Muñoz, 1.

Muñoz's concept of queer futurity is particularly useful for understanding ACT UP's political funerals. Rather than emphasizing the present or the closure of the future as many queer theorists have done,<sup>36</sup> Muñoz instead points to queer performativity's openness to alternate realities and alternate futures that are generated, in part, by reflecting on the past.<sup>37</sup> Similar to the double-movement in the meaning-making response to the absurdity illuminated by the epidemic, political funerals also enact a kind of double movement. They have functioned as ritualized reflections upon what had been and what was lost for the purpose of energizing and mobilizing present actors to produce an alternate future that might never come. Muñoz's concept of queerness is embodied desire for what might be other than the here and now. Queerness is subjunctive. The points of contact with Winquist should be clear. "Queerness as utopian formation is a formation based on an economy of desire and desiring. This desire is always directed at that thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise."<sup>38</sup> Queerness's subjunctive desire means that we may begin to see queerness as theological.

I have been making the controversial claim that ACT UP was a theological movement. Religion is the thing that makes sense of a meaningless world. During the epidemic of signification that accompanied the plague of AIDS in the 1980s, ACT UP's demonstrations began to ritually generate meaningful

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<sup>36</sup> The two most notable examples are Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, eds. Douglas Crimp and Leo Bersani (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988) and Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> This is what has led historians examining what today's activists might learn from ACT UP to argue that, "In reflecting on ACT UP's 25th anniversary, we need a 'critical nostalgia' regarding not just what histories we tell but how this very telling structures the rules of engagement between queer leftist generations. Such considerations complement Muñoz's 'critically utopian' desire for a relationality that animates queer futurity." Pascal Emmer, "Talkin' 'Bout Meta-Generation: ACT UP History and Queer Futurity," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (Vol. 98, No. 1, February 2012, pp. 89-96), 93.

<sup>38</sup> Muñoz, 26.

public experiences and language. It did so, in part, through political funerals. These funerals simultaneously looked backward to what had been lost, but also forward toward the future. Tim Bailey was an ACT UP member who, according to his epitaph, died in 1993, “of AIDS complications: government neglect, greed, and indifference.” This is ACT UP’s eulogy for Bailey given at his political funeral in Washington, DC:

He was a friend, a lover, a brother, and a son. He was also an AIDS activist—a hero in the fight against the epidemic. We’re giving him a hero’s funeral. When he was alive, Tim told us he wanted his body thrown over the White House gates. Because he was enraged by the government’s lethargy—outright inhumanity—in confronting the AIDS crisis. Because he wanted his death to help more Americans understand that while the government drags its heels, real people are dying. We told him we couldn’t throw his body over the gates. Not because we didn’t share his fury. But because we loved him too much to treat his mortal remains that way. During his last days he said, “All right. Do something formal and aesthetic in front of the White House. I won’t be there anyway. It’ll be for you.” This procession, then, is for us. Not just those of us who knew and cared for Tim. For all of us; for everybody. Because we’re all living with AIDS. Every man, woman, and child.<sup>39</sup>

Bailey’s political funeral was a performance that generated new meaning within the traumatic experience of a community’s loss of a beloved friend who died too young under infuriating circumstances. But rituals such as fu-

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<sup>39</sup> Tim Bailey’s political funeral, held on July 1, 1993 in Washington, D.C. *ACT UP NY*, accessed November 12, 2014. [http://actupny.org/divatv/netcasts/tim\\_bailey.html](http://actupny.org/divatv/netcasts/tim_bailey.html). Also, see the same interview with Joy Episalla as mentioned in note #33 above. Episalla was Bailey’s healthcare proxy and describes his political funeral on pp. 55-59 of the transcript of the interview. <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/episalla.pdf>

nerals are not only undertaken for their explicit purposes—to mourn the dead, to celebrate the life of the deceased. Political funerals also serve to reinforce or create social solidarity and to generate new meaning through the act of publicly shaming—in a most dramatic fashion—those in positions of power and responsibility. Bailey’s political funeral was an act of mourning of the life lost, and a celebration of his heroism. It emphasized both the past and the present. But in invoking Bailey’s own words that the event not be for him, but for the living, the funeral ironically pointed to the future. It was a performative act of queer futurity. Muñoz recognizes the potential pitfalls here. In emphasizing the future, one temptation—a classic theological problem—is to deny or ignore the present and, consequently, to use the future as an empty escape. But for Muñoz, an overemphasis on the present to the neglect of the future is potentially just as dangerous. “The way to deal with the asymmetries and violent frenzies that mark the present is not to forget the future,” Muñoz explains. “The here and now is simply not enough. Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough.”<sup>40</sup> We will emphasize the subjunctive: queerness might be other than it is, desiring of a world that might be enough. This is why queerness needs theology. Or better, this is why queerness—which itself is not yet—is already theological. Queerness is a desiring theology, and as such needs to heed theology’s secular mandate. That is, queerness requires theological desire expressed politically as resistance.

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<sup>40</sup> Muñoz, 96.

## 2. B. Ghosts

I want thus to make the following proposition: theology is not knowledge of God. How could we know God, if the sacred name is a secret? Theology is the poem we sing before this mysterious Absence, in order to resurrect the dead. Not theo-logy: theo-poetics.

– Rubem Alves<sup>41</sup>

ACT UP haunts us. It's an assembly of ghosts. This is most explicit in its political funerals and die-ins where human bodies, whether dead or alive, became specters.<sup>42</sup> According to Mark L. Taylor, "The specter is haunting congealed into a portentous promise or threat, one that carries and suggests an accountability, a demand upon the present to remember, often to effect a liberation for the effaced ones."<sup>43</sup> ACT UP activists used their deaths—biological or metaphorical—as political and moral statements meant to jar us into action. There is a danger when emphasizing the spectral nature of this kind of political action. According to Muñoz, "One of the things one risks when one talks of ghosts is the charge of ignoring the living, the real, and the material."<sup>44</sup> This sentiment is echoed by David Wojnarowicz: "I worry that friends will slowly become professional pallbearers, waiting for each death, of

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<sup>41</sup> Rubem Alves, "Theopoetics: Longing and Liberation" in *Struggles for Solidarity: Liberation Theologies in Tension*, ed. Lorine M. Getz and Ruy O. Costa, 159-171 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> ACT UP's most notable die-in occurred during the "Stop the Church" action. On December 10, 1989, almost 5000 people associated with ACT UP gathered outside St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City to protest the Roman Catholic Archdiocese's public stand against AIDS education and condom distribution, and its opposition to abortion. A few dozen people entered the cathedral and interrupted mass, chanting "stop killing us!" Others fell to the floor and remained limp, miming death, and were removed on stretchers like corpses. One hundred and eleven people were arrested. See Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 143. Also the ACT UP archives at <http://www.actupny.org/YELL/stopchurch99.html> and <http://www.actupny.org/documents/cron-89.html>

<sup>43</sup> Taylor, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Muñoz, 41.



their lovers, friends and neighbors, and polishing their funeral speeches; perfecting their rituals of death rather than a relatively simple ritual of life such as screaming in the streets.”<sup>45</sup> Wojnarowicz died in 1992 of government neglect. His body was carried through the East Village on July 29. ACT UP resists falling into the trap of neglecting the living. Die-ins and political funerals haunt the living *for* the living. Screaming in the streets is a ritual of *life*. The streets are for celebration. It is worth repeating the words from Tim Bailey’s eulogy: “This procession, then, is for us. Not just those of us who knew and cared for Tim. For all of us; for everybody. Because we’re all *living* with AIDS. Every man, woman, and child.”<sup>46</sup>

Shortly after its inception in 1987, ACT UP created a Treatment and Data Committee (T&D) to research the science behind potential HIV/AIDS treatments. At the T&D group’s first meeting, Iris Long, a PhD in chemistry, explained a clinical trial carried out on HIV positive patients by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID). She was able to effectively communicate the complexity of the science, research, and process. The T&D group would then review the medical information and report back to the rest of ACT UP.<sup>47</sup>

Echoing the logic of liberation theology’s self-educating base communities, ACT UP consciously identified its need to learn about the science and business of drug development if it wanted to be able to advocate for better and cheaper HIV/AIDS treatment development. This self-education process helped the organization to contextualize a number of protests that were aimed at drug companies, the NIH, and the FDA who had been sluggish in getting drugs to market. One of the most powerful scenes in the ACT UP documentary, *How to Survive a Plague*, is when a small group of ACT UP

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<sup>45</sup> David Wojnarowicz, “Ashes Action,” *ACT UP NY*, accessed November 12, 2014. <http://actupny.org/reports/reportashes.html>

<sup>46</sup> Tim Bailey’s political funeral. Emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> *How to Survive a Plague*. Directed by David France. Public Square Films, 2012. DVD.

members, including Bob Rafsky,<sup>48</sup> enter the offices of Daiichi Pharmaceuticals on October 29, 1992 and handcuff themselves to each other through PVC tubes. They're protesting Daiichi's slow development of an anti-Kaposi's sarcoma drug. A researcher walks into the room occupied by the activists and Rafsky calls out to him. "See this dark mark on my forehead? That's Kaposi's sarcoma. It's gonna spread. It's gonna kill me. Are you coming to my funeral? Because you're the man fucking responsible. You are my murderer, in your shirt and tie!"<sup>49</sup> Rafsky died four months later on February 20, 1993.

Only ghosts may address their own killers. Further, the activists participating in political funerals and die-ins not only haunt us by addressing our accountability and demanding our remembrance, but by virtue of their queerness. For instance, Muñoz argues that haunting is an especially useful concept for queer theory. "The double ontology of ghosts and ghostliness, the manner in which ghosts exist inside and out and traverse categorical distinctions, seems especially useful for a queer criticism that attempts to understand communal mourning, group psychologies, and the need for a politics that 'carries' our dead with us into battles for the present and future."<sup>50</sup> The ritualization and politicization of queer death simultaneously stand outside of easy conceptual boxes while also weighing on public witnesses. It is precisely this queerness of both content and form that opens up the possibility of alternate realities. The queer art-force of the political funeral is thus poetic in its form, and subjunctively theological in its content. Or, in the words of Muñoz,

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<sup>48</sup> Rafsky gained notoriety in March of 1992 when he heckled then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton by interrupting him in the middle of his stump speech to say, "This is the center of the epidemic. What are you doing about it?" When Clinton asked Rafsky to calm down, Rafsky responded, "I can't calm down. I'm dying of AIDS while you're dying of ambition." Jay Mathews, "Robert Rafsky, Writer and Activist in AIDS Fight, Dies," February 23, 1993. The Washington Post as found at [http://www.actupny.org/divatv/netcasts/rafsky\\_reads.html](http://www.actupny.org/divatv/netcasts/rafsky_reads.html).

<sup>49</sup> Bob Rafsky speaking at a protest at the offices of Daiichi Pharmaceuticals as seen in the documentary film, *How to Survive a Plague*.

<sup>50</sup> Muñoz, 46.

“...our remembrances and their ritualized tellings—through film, video, performance, writing, and visual culture—[have] world-making potentialities.”<sup>51</sup> David Wojnarowicz explains that the world-making potentiality of the ritualized telling is in the way it makes public what had been private.

To make the private into something public is an action that has terrific repercussions in the reinvented world. The government has the job of maintaining the day-to-day illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference; thus each public disclosure of a fragment of private reality serves as a dismantling tool against the illusion of a ONE-TRIBE NATION; it lifts the curtains for a brief peek and reveals the probable existence of literally millions of tribes. The term “general public” disintegrates. What happens next is the possibility of an X-ray of Civilization, an examination of its foundations. To turn our private grief for the loss of friends, family, lovers and strangers into something public would serve as another powerful dismantling tool.<sup>52</sup>

The private reality made public is thus an act of resistance with the potential to not only dismantle our problematic conceptual illusions, but to rebuild the world in a new and more meaningful way. Winquist writes that, “What is special about theology as a discursive practice is that its extreme formulations are intensive uses of language that can and often do transgress the repressive totalizations of dominant discourse.”<sup>53</sup> ACT UP’s political funerals are thus theological acts of resistance.

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<sup>51</sup> Muñoz, 35.

<sup>52</sup> David Wojnarowicz, “David Wojnarowicz Readings,” *ACT UP NY*, accessed November 12, 2014. <http://www.actupny.org/diva/synWoj.html>

<sup>53</sup> Winquist, x.

## Conclusion

Disseminate information! Agitate! Resist!

– an ACT UP slogan<sup>54</sup>

Putting ACT UP with Muñoz’s concept of queer futurity into a conversation with Taylor’s theopoetics and Winquist’s desiring theology may not only appear queer, but possibly offensive. Doing a secular theology with non-theological material is a risk. But there is justification for appropriating Muñoz for this political theological project. At the end of *Cruising Utopia* Muñoz offers his book “as a resource for the political imagination” and “something of a flight plan for a collective political becoming.”<sup>55</sup> Additionally, it is in the spirit of queering both the theological with the political and the political with the theological through the mechanism of resistance that I think this kind of project is not only warranted, but necessary. The world might be otherwise than it is if we were more open to its possibilities. Within the context of the AIDS epidemic, Muñoz proposes that, “...queer politics, in my understanding, needs a real dose of utopianism. Utopia ...permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and institutionalized homophobia. More important, utopia offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*.<sup>56</sup>

I am arguing that the use of the subjunctive mood in that final sentence is not coincidental. Subjunctivity—living and thinking as if the world were otherwise than it is—makes alternate worlds possible. I have been articulating an odd thing: a secular, political theology of a queer activist organization that put its faith in the possibility of turning AIDS into a chronic illness, rather than a

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<sup>54</sup> *ACT UP NY*, accessed November 12, 2014. <http://www.actupny.org/>

<sup>55</sup> Muñoz, 189.

<sup>56</sup> Muñoz, 35.

death sentence. Perhaps I have been articulating it *as if it were a thing to be articulated*. Perhaps a secular political theology of ACT UP is not something that exists, but something that might. “I have insisted that there has always been something queer about utopia and utopian thinkers,” writes Muñoz.<sup>57</sup> What he has been calling “utopian,” Mark L. Taylor might call “the theological.” It is that within the political that haunts it, pointing out toward alternatives. The utopian, then, is thepoetical. Further,

Because the theological traces and theorizes ways that persons and groups who are traditionally rendered subordinate under the concentrated weight of the world are able, nevertheless, to haunt, unsettle, and perhaps dissolve the structures of those systems of knowledge and power, the theological also haunts the Theology whose effects often participate in the world’s weight as concentrated.<sup>58</sup>

The art-force of the theological haunts us and also haunts the discipline of theology. So, ACT UP embodies and performs a secular, subjunctive political theology. But additionally, we may now propose that theology is embodied by that which is queer. What we might learn from ACT UP is that there is both a queerness and a resistance to theology itself.

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<sup>57</sup> Muñoz 169-70.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, 62.

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