

Sense and Sexuality: Foucault, Wojnarowicz, and Biopower.

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Since its initial appearance in *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, Michel Foucault's concept of biopower has indeed taken on a *bios* of its own.¹ Ubiquitous in recent academic analyses of the contemporary socio-political landscape, the concept and its kin (biopolitics, governmentality) find their most provocative—though, as I hope to show, misguided—articulation in the collaborative work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (*The Labor of Dionysius, Empire, and Multitude*).² Shifting Foucault's focus from population and social management to labor, globalization, and sovereignty, these authors conceive of biopolitics in economic terms, detailing the consequences of the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist labor practices. Significantly, whereas Foucault designates sexuality the principal apparatus in the functioning of biopower, Hardt and Negri argue that sexuality in the post-Fordist era is no longer the privileged site of biopolitical control: when human affect, language, and cooperation are subsumed into the productive processes of capital, the gestures, expressions, and movements—indeed, the very flesh—of the social body become commodities. Their thesis raises a number of pressing questions that bear on the future of sexuality studies: Has sexuality itself been totally subsumed into the productive processes of postmodern capital? Is Foucault's "deployment of sexuality" too blunt an analytical tool to understand biopower in post-Fordism? Indeed, is sexuality any longer a productive category for social analysis at all?

Although such questions are not the primary focus of this paper (my aim here is far more modest), they take on quite different meanings in the face of AIDS—a subject that receives no serious discussion in Hardt and Negri's work. If, as I argue, AIDS is understood as a primary locus of biopolitical struggle, sexuality simply cannot be ignored or subsumed into a generalized concept of *bios*. Even a cursory glance at the focus and scope of recent HIV-prevention research reveals that the "life" valorized in biopower continues to turn on that most stubborn of discursive constructions: the homo-/heterosexual binary. A 2006 study by the US National Institutes of Health concerning male circumcision as an HIV-preventative for men engaging in "heterosexual intercourse," for example, appears more invested in naturalizing the homo/hetero binary than in disseminating accurate and practical HIV-prevention information.³ Although AIDS education campaigns have attempted for

decades to distinguish high-risk behavior from high-risk groups and identity-specific sexual behavior from corporeal acts ("gay sex" vs. vaginal, anal, oral sex, etc.), the very use of the phrase "heterosexual intercourse" in the NIH press release, as I will demonstrate, reveals the persistence of heteronormative assumptions and objectives in contemporary AIDS research and funding.

The scientific research which proved definitively that HIV does not discriminate based on sexual orientation, ironically, then, often serves to perpetuate discrimination against sexual minorities. The memoirs of David Wojnarowicz, written from the frontlines of AIDS activist battlefield in the 1980s and 90s, are instructive here in that they remind us of our continued failure to understand HIV as distinct from sexual identity and of our seeming incapacity to disentangle "sexuality" from subjective truth. In highlighting the importance of sexuality for biopower Wojnarowicz's life-writings, though thirty-plus years old, remain salient for an interrogation into sexuality's key role in contemporary AIDS treatment and funding. Moreover, with his concept of "sense" Wojnarowicz offers a strategy of resistance unwedded to the identitarian logic of biopolitical governance.⁴ Building upon Foucault's insight that the discursive link between sexual desire and self-truth is a formidable tool of control that ultimately ends up repressing movements of collective revolt, Wojnarowicz's "sense" ruptures the link between sexuality and individual truth and deterritorializes, or "communizes," affect. A slippery and polyvalent term in his usage, "sense" emerges at the point of indistinguishability between life and death, between private emotion and common affect, and between rational understanding and a "body-knowledge" gleaned from sexual/sensual encounters. With "sense," Wojnarowicz reveals the affective motor fueling his own AIDS activism and simultaneously calls attention to the political potential of sexual affect for contemporary queer social movements. By situating Wojnarowicz's life-writings on a larger historical-theoretical grid concerning biopolitics, AIDS, and rituals of public mourning, I understand them as consistent with the Foucaultian project of toppling "the monarchy of sex"⁵ and useful for mapping sites of resistance to biopolitical administration in the present.

I. The Life of Biopower

At the risk of rehearsing the familiar story of biopower's conceptual life, I begin by doing so for two reasons: first, to emphasize the centrality of sexuality in Foucault's rendering of the concept; and second, to show precisely how Hardt and Negri desexualize it. Foucault begins his account in the seventeenth century when a "power over life" emerges as a tendency alongside an earlier, overtly

repressive, penal form of power that disciplined subjects through juridical systems. In contrast to a negative form of freedom predicated upon "thou shalt not," which found its logical conclusion in public spectacles of death, biopower encourages an art of living: thou shalt live a good life as devised by state-informed expert knowledge; thou shalt do what is best for you, which conveniently coincides with what is best for biopolitical administration. The family, medicine, psychiatry, education, and employers cooperate with state apparatuses to ensure a uniform standard of living, to produce subjectivities and forms of life that secure a "vital population." A docile subject is produced when procedures of totalization combine with techniques of individualization, or, in Foucault's vocabulary, when the anatomo-politics of the body and the biopolitics of the population become two poles in the art of governance. These poles correspond chronologically to different historical moments: the anatomo-politics of the body, "the first to be formed it seems [...] centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces," while the biopolitics of the population, "formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes."⁶ The anatomo-politics of the body and the biopolitics of the population play two roles in the operation of biopower: the former, analytical, concerning the individual, the latter, quantitative, concerning the population. In an essay entitled "The Subject and Power" we learn that biopower derives from a form of power implemented in archaic Christian institutions—what Foucault designates pastoral power.⁷ Christian pastoral power promised individuals salvation in the afterlife while anchoring one's earthly life in a community of believers. Its efficacy lay in its ability to govern a population both as individuals and as a mass. Now secularized, techniques of pastoral power function under biopower to ensure a worldly salvation of health, security, sufficient wealth, and citizenship (334-5).

On Foucault's view, sexuality is the central *dispositif* deployed by the modern state and capital to manage life directly, the site at which biopower's individuating and totalizing techniques converge. In the psychiatrization and medicalization of sexuality the individual becomes legible, recordable, disciplined: sexuality is mobilized as a hermeneutic of desire to reveal the truth of the subject and fasten it to an identity. At the same time this marker of individuality becomes useful in administering a social totality. Techniques of the state such as the population census, fertility rates, and statistics of life expectancy appeal to this hermeneutic to organize individual subjects into a manageable whole. The discursive link between sexual desire and self-identity—that is, "sexuality"—is thus implemented as a

means of social control, deterring movements of collective revolt and imprisoning bodies and pleasures. In order to resist the biopolitical administration of life, according to Foucault, the link between sex and truth must be broken.⁸

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, by contrast, argue that biopower no longer utilizes sexuality as the principal apparatus in the social management of life. Whereas Foucault limits his analysis to the state's across-the-board use of biopower, Hardt and Negri develop his insights, above all in *Empire*, to argue that the reach of biopower extends beyond the nation-state, which comes to play second fiddle in the supranational march of capital. They analyze in *Empire* the multiple processes of globalization—the worldwide saturation of capital, the steady “bourgeoisification” of the globe, the withering of the nation-state, the post-imperialist political landscape, etc.—and argue that the new sovereign, the new order of the globalized world, is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule they designate (capital ‘E’) Empire. Empire is neither a metaphor nor a term by which other historical empires can be characterized. Rather, distinguished by a lack of boundaries and a suspension of history, Empire is an extreme form—or the logical conclusion—of Foucaultian biopower. Though accorded a privileged status in the logic of Empire, neither the United States nor any other single nation-state is the superpower Svengali pulling the strings behind the scenes. Gliding on a smooth, unstriated plane of fluid boundaries and hybrid identities, Empire operates beyond the nation-state, beyond imperialism, unlimited and unbound by any geographical region—a topography at once liberating and daunting for any progressive political project. In a historical moment, “when language and communication, [...] when immaterial labor and cooperation, become the dominant productive force,”⁹ a moment in which the material effects of global capitalism are mystified perhaps more than ever due to—not in spite of—the explosion of information technologies, exploitation proliferates in increasingly protean forms. As Hardt and Negri traverse this postmodern terrain of exploitation, they discern an emerging multitude seeking an alternative global society and examine political sites and phenomena in which the immanent workings of biopower are not so much countered as comprehended and redirected toward alternative ends (e.g., demonstrations against immigration policies as a move toward global citizenship; the generality of biopolitical production prompting a demand for a new social wage, etc.). In doing so, the authors affirm and nurture the potentialities of a new constituent power in the form of a multitude.¹⁰

The concept of multitude is the result of Hardt and Negri's attempt to think beyond the limits of political models founded upon either identity or difference. These authors locate an organizational form for their multitude in the *network*, a configuration that emerges at the point of contiguity between identity and difference. As they write in *Multitude*:

The two dominant models posed a clear choice: either united struggle under the central identity or separate struggles that affirm our differences. The new network model of the multitude displaces both of these options—or, rather, it does not so much negate the old forms as give them new life in a different form. [...] In conceptual terms, the multitude replaces the contradictory couple identity-difference with the complementary couple commonality-singularity. In practice the multitude provides a model whereby expressions of singularity are not reduced or diminished in our communication and collaboration with others in struggle, with our forming ever greater common habits, practices, conduct, desires—with, in short, the global mobilization and extension of the common.¹¹

The commonality-singularity dyad cuts a transversal line through the dialectic of identity-difference. The network form, characterized by decentralized leadership and horizontal linkages between autonomous nodes, is most effective in the struggle for (and the dismantling of) democracy in a biopolitical world. Resistance movements organized as networks are distributed, open, and thus mimic, or, at times, take advantage of, the dispersed structure of biopower. These struggles come into view on the political horizon in an era when life forms previously held in common—e.g., affect, language, indigenous knowledges; what Marx in the *Grundrisse* designated "the general intellect"¹²—become increasingly privatized and commodified. Because biopower promotes a standard of life and a form of individuality for all citizens and plays a part in realizing the capitalist dream of a "global village" of consumers, it likewise brings into being new forms of community, new power structures, and new avenues for creative cooperation. Progressive networks use the tools of biopolitical production to work towards an alternative form of globalization. Counterpoised by the G20 and the World Trade Organization, the multitude is formed "from below" through communicative networks that collaborate to actualize common goals. The small-scale Creative Commons project (software engineers who exchange ideas over the internet to create the best possible version of a free computer application) as well as the large-scale convergence movement (composed of diverse progressive groups protesting together, most famously in the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle, 1999) implement biopolitical strategy [*biopotenza*]¹³ to reclaim the common and to resist the inhumane, profit-making imperatives of the market.

While much can be gained from such a Marxian undertaking, questions remain concerning the status of sexuality in the age of Empire. In a published conversation between Antonio Negri and Cesare Casarino entitled "It's a Powerful Life," Casarino raises such questions. Concerning Foucault's theorization of sexuality in relation to politics, Negri notes: "[R]ather than disregarding or neglecting Foucault's elaboration of biopolitics in the context of the deployment of sexuality, I assumed such an elaboration and expanded it so as to account for the overall construction of the body in the indistinguishable realms of production and reproduction, that is, the realm of immaterial labor."¹⁴ Building upon a crucial insight of standpoint feminism—i.e. that labor power reproduces itself through sexuality—Negri argues that when immaterial labor is the primary productive force, production and reproduction collapse into one, and corporeality *tout court*—including but not limited to sexuality—becomes the link between individualizing and totalizing techniques of biopower. In a succinct formulation of this crucial shift in production, Sylvère Lotringer explains in his foreword to Paolo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude*:

In the post-Fordist economy, surplus value is no longer extracted from labor materialized in a product, it resides in the discrepancy between paid and unpaid work—the idle time of the mind that keeps enriching, unacknowledged, the fruits of immaterial labor. [...] Workers used to work in servile conditions, leaving them just enough time to replenish. Now their entire life is live labor, an invisible and indivisible commodity.¹⁵

By extension, when thoughts, affect, and human cooperation are for sale, when life itself is the chief agent of production, biopower "from above" [*biopotere*], according to Negri, no longer needs to deploy sexuality *qua* sexuality to achieve its ends.

Our multitude theorists, however, can de-emphasize the importance of sexuality for biopower only because the politics of AIDS figures so marginally in their analyses. When it comes to AIDS funding and research, sexuality remains without question a determining factor in the distribution of resources. A 2006 US National Institutes of Health HIV-prevention study, for example, calls attention to the continued relevance of sexuality for biopower. The study, conducted in Kenya and Uganda with 7,780 heterosexually-identified, HIV-negative men divided into circumcised and uncircumcised groups, tested the effectiveness of male circumcision in the prevention of HIV transmission from a woman to a man. Its press release concludes that "medically performed circumcision significantly reduces a man's risk of acquiring HIV through heterosexual intercourse." Tellingly, however, "the amount of benefit provided by circumcision is unknown" for men who have sex with men, among whom, at least in the United States, most new HIV infections occur.¹⁶

The rationale for the study rests squarely on heteronormative assumptions and its findings obscure rather than illuminate the basic facts of HIV transmission. Its focus on "heterosexual intercourse," as opposed to identity-less sexual behavior, for example, is vague to a fault. "Heterosexual" in the study's wording qualifies an act, "intercourse." Although the presumed behavior here is penile-vaginal intercourse, this is in no way clarified or specified. "Heterosexual intercourse" can be taken to mean, willfully or unconsciously, oral, anal, and/or vaginal penetrative sex between men and women—even though these behaviors carry radically different levels of risk and are understood in proper safer-sex education as unique and discrete acts. As we learned in the early days of AIDS panic, the use of sexual-identity terminology in HIV prevention has done more to demonize sexual minorities than prevent the virus's spread. In failing to use more precise language (penile-vaginal intercourse) and the less discriminatory, more scientifically accurate term "risk behavior," this study, at worst, insinuates that risky *types of people* transmit HIV: sexually-specific "risk groups" become the infectious agents, not the ordinary, average citizens who do risky things when having sex. The effect of this casual slippage is that entire social groups are blamed for the transmission of a virus that cares little about the sexual or national identity of its transmitter. As Jan Zita Grover pointed out almost twenty years ago, the medical term "risk group," when taken out of its epidemiological context, "has been used to stereotype and stigmatize people already seen as outside the moral and economic parameters of 'the general population.' [...] [It is used] to isolate and condemn people rather than to contact and protect them."¹⁷ While reliable HIV-prevention campaigns discuss high-risk behavior instead of high-risk groups and corporeal acts instead of identity-specific "homo" or "hetero" sex, this study does more to naturalize the homo/hetero binary than to disseminate scientifically sound health information.

Indeed, quite disturbing questions follow the study's conclusions: Following the identitarian logic of this study, is anal or oral sex between a man and a woman "heterosexual intercourse?" Or, are these activities by default "homosexual intercourse?" Is penetrative vaginal sex—apparently, the sole focus of the study—more important or more prevalent than these other acts? Do these findings intimate that unprotected vaginal sex is now safer sex for circumcised men? What is unspoken here speaks volumes. Do the categories "homosexual" and "heterosexual" hold the same meaning in Africa as they do in the US? Are women in general, or, perhaps even female sexuality itself—historically associated with insatiability and contamination—held symbolically responsible for the spread of sexually-transmitted disease? Would such an experiment—in which certain subjects are given a hypothetical

advantage over others in protecting themselves from HIV—be conducted in the US? Bearing in mind the potential harm to the trial's subjects, is an African life less valuable than an American one?

To add insult to injury, in *The New York Times* report on the study risk groups expand exponentially into "risk countries" and "heterosexual intercourse" becomes the vaguer—and more dangerous—"heterosexual sex."¹⁸ The result is an even more confusing jumble of heteronormative disinformation and Western cultural bias: unprotected "heterosexual sex" is forty-eight percent safer with male circumcision; heterosexual sex is in general safer than homosexual sex, which remains unexplored. Kenya and Uganda are perilous and potentially contagious in their very existence as nations; Africa, by extension, remains—no surprise here—"The Dark Continent:" the dangerous, libidinal underbelly of the rational and enlightened West.

It is clear, then, that the rationale of the NIH study and the reportage surrounding it betray a patriarchal, heterosexist, and colonialist bias. Moreover, the conception of sexuality upon which this study rests and which it indisputably affirms is precisely the one Foucault understood as crucial to the functioning of biopower. Practicing two completely different types of sex, according to this study, heterosexuals and homosexuals become distinct species. Sexual behavior is assumed to be naturally linked to personal identity and the lives of the social groups associated with these sexual identities—one, heterosexual: comprehensible and worthy of study; the other, homosexual: "unknown" and mysterious—are valued hierarchically and treated unequally. It is thus clear that in the distribution of AIDS treatment and funding, sexuality has *not*, contrary to Negri's claim, been completely assimilated into a generalized concept of "life."

Although in their first collaboration, *The Labor of Dionysius*, Hardt and Negri praise AIDS activists for calling into being a new form of subjectivity "that has not only developed the affective capacities necessary to live with the disease and nurture others, but also incorporated the advanced scientific capacities within its figure,"¹⁹ in *Empire* and *Multitude* such praise is by and large directed toward the organizational innovations of contemporary labor movements. The shift of focus raises further questions: what has become of these AIDS-activist subjectivities? Is their work only relevant for its influence on the "new," apparently "post-sexual" multitude? Does the absence of AIDS from these discussions speak to the same historicidal "will to forget" that motivates the ideological relegation of the

syndrome to the Third World?; the same will that fostered the false sense of security in the West after the discovery of the protease-inhibitor cocktail? In *Empire* and *Multitude* AIDS, when it is mentioned, is appropriated as a useful metaphor for the boundlessness of global capital, the fear of HIV's spread becoming the symbolic crystallization of postcolonial anxiety surrounding "the new dangers of global contagion."²⁰ Such a rendering, to put it mildly, is somewhat cavalier: lest we forget, from its very inception AIDS was and continues to be a matter of life and death. And the new forms of life invented in AIDS activism still inhabit—and irrevocably alter—the global biopolitical landscape. Especially in regards to AIDS care, sexuality remains a vital factor in determining the value of life (and hence the time and money it should be allocated) and thus must be included in any and all discussion of biopolitics. In contradistinction to Hardt and Negri, then, I take seriously Foucault's claim that sexuality is a linchpin between the individualizing and totalizing techniques of biopower and find in the writings of David Wojnarowicz a more productive strategy for resistance than our multitude theorists can muster.

II. Common Sense

Although Hardt and Negri rely upon a concept of affect for forging the multitude's biopolitical networks "from below," their rendering of this concept, like their understanding of biopower, is ultimately desexualized. For David Wojnarowicz, by contrast, sex, affect and politics are indivisible. His diaries, published in part as *In the Shadow of the American Dream*, foreground the importance of rethinking sexuality as a marker of truth in order to resist biopolitical administration.²¹ In particular, the entries from the mid- to late-1980s, chronicling his involvement in AIDS activism, include meditations on sex and affect, life and death that reveal the uniqueness and power of his political vision. In his excessive use of the word "sense," significantly appearing most often in post-coital reflections (of which there is no shortage in the diaries), we see Wojnarowicz come to an awareness of the political potential of sexual affect. The politics emergent in his various sexual escapades involve a breakdown of the boundaries between self and Other, a de-linking of sexual desire and truth, and, later, an understanding of death's immanence to life. These knowledges, all of which seem to culminate in his political activism, not only give insight into a singular political awakening but also offer a primer of sorts on contemporary queer activist strategy. Understood in relation to Foucault's writings on biopolitics, Wojnarowicz's "sense" opens on to a politics *against* "sexuality."

As noted earlier, Foucault argues, especially in his late interviews, that in order to resist the biopolitical administration of life the link between sex and truth must be broken. He writes in "The End of the Monarchy of Sex:"

They [sexologists, doctors, vice squads] basically tell us: 'You have a sexuality, this sexuality is both frustrated and mute, hypocritical prohibitions repress it. So, come to us, show us, confide in us your unhappy secrets...' This type of discourse is in fact a formidable tool of control and power. As always, it uses what people say, feel and hope for. It exploits their temptation to believe that to be happy, it suffices to cross the threshold of discourse and remove a few prohibitions. It ends up in fact repressing and controlling movements of revolt and liberation.²²

And later, in the same interview:

A movement seems to be taking shape today which seems to be reversing the trend of 'always more sex,' of 'always more truth in sex,' a trend which has doomed us for centuries: it's a matter, I don't say of rediscovering, but rather of fabricating other forms of pleasure, of relationships, coexistences, attachments, loves, intensities. (218)

Foucault's thoughts on sexuality thus pressure the in/out, repressed/liberated mentality of gay rights struggles and prompt some uncomfortable questions. Are gays ensnared within the truth-telling game of out-politics? Are they perhaps most enslaved to the historical construct of sexuality which in its deployment severely impoverishes the very sexual/relational life for which they are fighting? If Foucault finds worth in "fabricating other forms of pleasure, of relationships, coexistences, attachments, loves, intensities," he is certainly critical, although never disparaging, of a liberationist politics that links truth and sexuality. His work demands, however, that we continually question the strategies and objectives of such a politics.

The use of the terms "gay" and "lesbian" in the political arena, for instance, runs the risk of reifying the categories that have historically disciplined and pathologized same-sex desire.²³ Of course the deployment of these terms has proven quite successful in garnering rights and changing laws. The recent legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada, Spain, and an increasing number of US states reveals the effectiveness of GLBT identity-politics for institutional legitimacy. And while such victories are hard-won and worthy of celebration, the legalization of gay marriage should not, contrary to conservative critic Andrew Sullivan's insistence,²⁴ put an end to queer politics. As Foucault notes in "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will:"

[I]f you ask [gay and lesbian] people to reproduce the marriage bond for their personal relationship to be recognized, the progress made is slight. We live in a relational world that institutions have considerably impoverished. Society and the institutions which frame it have limited the possibility of relationships because a rich relational world would be very complex to manage. We should fight against the impoverishment of the relational fabric.²⁵

Fighting for a richer relational world involves the creation of unconventional forms of "union" and community. Privatizing and "normalizing" the radically indefinable relationships that comprise queer culture runs counter to this fight. Operating under the confessional imperatives of "out" politics, queer couples have deservedly earned State recognition, but in the process have also arguably become "better" neoliberal subjects. Sexuality, while not subsumed completely into the productive processes of postmodern capital as a mere tenet of commodified affect, as Negri argues, is redeemed in biopolitics as a site of neoliberal exploitation, primed for privatization. Armed with Foucault's historicization of sexual identity, however, queers might invent relational worlds less amenable to the "morality" of the market and less in step with neoliberalism's march. With an understanding of the "common sense" that moves amid and beyond the sexual encounter, David Wojnarowicz begins to build such worlds. Indifferent to sexuality, especially in its conjugal straitjacket, his excessive, unruly "sense" unlocks doors to new ways of relating, living, and resisting. In short, a politics of "sexuality" works well in the service of same-sex marriage; a politics of "sense" valorizes those intimacies and worlds that cannot be contained in privatized unions.

"Sense" in Wojnarowicz's usage is utterly overdetermined: in its repetition it becomes a catchword for matters pertaining to the perceptual (data gathered through the five senses), the rational (a conscious understanding), the emotional (a feeling or mood), the signifiable (concerning the meaning or gist of something), and a sensibility (a mode of being). In the following passage, written in a romantic frenzy after an anonymous sexual encounter with a man from Texas at the Chelsea Piers, we see all of these "senses" at play:

Realizing with the Texan man, the sense he evoked in the meeting, the senses I've been left with that are a bit unsettling, unsettling in their intoxicating beauty, in their rarity, the sense that I'd gladly give this stranger my soul my life my time in movement in living for the rest of my life, would live with him immediately, the giving away of preoccupation or routine to be finely held in the mind and rough hands of a stranger, this produced in the meeting a series of movements along a darkening hall, the heavy sound of footsteps, the casual swagger of a character turning on the silent balls of his feet, the motion toward me erasing the definition of "stranger" making us less than strangers, the cocking of his head to the side, healthiness of the light in his eyes, the broad face, nose. How it is I'd give my life for/to him, not a sense of ego or egolessness, my life being very important to me in my personal freedoms, but like riding in a truck through the images of Texas, the badlands, the rolling vistas the buttes the cactus and fine sands of timelessness, the ever-present rouge line on metal, the continuous dusk at our feet, the guns over the visors, the bullets in the dashboard, the riding motion of the senses [...].²⁶

And soon after this road-trip fantasy, Wojnarowicz laments the inadequacy of words in relaying his experiences:

[I]n the construction of words is the inherent failure to obtain the living sense of the desire. So although I've lived forms of movement that approach or start to come close to the scenes I desire, still when all is said and done, just as in the construction of these words I have still not touched the edge of it. (129)

The rawness of the language, the lack of grammatical structure, and the nearly punctuation-less run-on sentences bespeak an inspired, if somewhat adolescent, urgency to communicate ideas and feelings before they pass into neurological ether. At the same time I find in Wojnarowicz's style a more studied attempt, apparent throughout his *oeuvre*, to extricate some truth from the snares of linguistic and grammatical structure. A literary approach akin to Genet's excessive prose (repeatedly referenced in Wojnarowicz's diaries) or even Nietzsche's poetic aphorisms, Wojnarowicz's style works to wrest life from the gallows of language, urging the escape of a perhaps extra-discursive, affective force from language's proverbial prison-house. But although his manic and surrealistic prose reads well as an attempt to escape the death-grip of language, the author himself deems his efforts a failure. What goes unacknowledged in this passage, however, is the way in which the word "sense" in all of its semantic richness and polymorphous perversity arguably escapes the mortification of language as it mutates and reanimates at every turn. One moment a function of the mind, another of the body, at once the most intimate of personal feelings and the most public of shared sentiment, "sense" here approaches meaninglessness in its very excess of meaning. The "living sense of desire" that Wojnarowicz feels unable to communicate in his diaries indeed comes to life in a word that resists a singular meaning. The result, what I am calling a "common sense," emerges through the production of "a series of movements" that give rise to an extra-linguistic form of communication at the interstices of self and Other—a sensibility emanating from the sexual encounter but irreducible to one or the other lover.

And here the very "identityless-ness" of the Texan Man becomes important. Shielded from the Other's identity, Wojnarowicz is allowed to enter into the man's life with an intensity that a personal knowingness might never engender. The Texan's non-identity motivates Wojnarowicz to invent this stranger, their future together, and also, a new, extraordinary self. Anonymity and non-identity in this encounter thus open up a rhetorical space for a new political sensibility. Michel Foucault understands this process as the movement from subjection to desubjection: the undoing of socially, historically determined selves and the creation of new ones. He discusses this form of political awakening in an essay titled "Le Gai Savoir:"

I think it is politically important that sexuality be able to function the way it functions in saunas [in Wojnarowicz's case, warehouses], where, without having to submit to the condition of being imprisoned in one's own identity, in one's own past, in one's own face, one can meet people who are to you what one is to them: nothing else but bodies with which combinations, fabrications of pleasure will be possible. These places afford an exceptional possibility of desubjectivization, of desubjection, perhaps not the most radical but in any case sufficiently intense to be worth taking note of. [Anonymity is important] because of the intensity of the pleasure that follows from it. It's not the affirmation of identity that's important, it's the affirmation of non-identity. [...] It's an important experience in which one invents, for as long as one wants, pleasures which one fabricates together [with others].²⁷

It is necessary to highlight here the emphasis Foucault places on the *political* importance of the desubjection. He offers here a concrete relational strategy for the cultivation of the self which might in turn lead to the formation of non-normative communities and resistant networks. In *The Trouble with Normal* Michael Warner likewise highlights the political potentialities and world-making capacities of impersonal intimacy. He writes:

When gay men or lesbians cruise, when they develop a love of strangers, they directly eroticize participation in the public world of their privacy. Contrary to myth, what one relishes in loving strangers is not mere anonymity, nor meaningless release. It is the pleasure of belonging to a sexual world, in which one's sexuality finds an answering resonance not just in one other, but in a world of others.²⁸

Wojnarowicz's "sense" gives name to the affective rush produced in such encounters, and in it can be found the seeds of an activist life. If Hardt and Negri replace the identity-difference couple with a completely desexualized concept of commonality-singularity, Wojnarowicz restores a lusty desire to this couple with his politics of anonymity. Loving strangers, the Texan one among many, allows Wojnarowicz to free himself from the shackles of identity and to relate in ways that run counter to the modern demand for navel-gazing self-knowledge. The affects produced in such these sexual encounters encourage cooperative and consensual interactivity over a private comprehension of self-truth. As such, "sense" becomes the opposite or perhaps the "overcoming" of sexuality: creativity, community, and politics take precedence over privatized pleasure and normative relationality. In communizing sexual affect, "sense" breaks the link between sexual desire and self-truth—the first step, according to Foucault, in resisting the administration of life in biopower.

To better understand Wojnarowicz's "common sense" as biopolitical strategy [*biopotenza*], it is necessary to analyze more closely the *bios* valorized in biopower. In Foucault's estimation, this "life" is first and foremost the opposite of death: "Now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its dominion: death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most

secret aspect of existence, the most 'private.'"²⁹ As long as death is made to mean the opposite of life, it perpetually hangs like a menacing storm cloud over the heads of a people. When conceived as life's limit—rather than as immanent to it—death makes us all its subjects: living becomes an exercise in avoiding death, outsmarting it, foregoing its arrival. The state and its annexes offer training in normative life-management in the service of their own survival. Biopower thus operates not on the principle of taking life away, but of investing it with the highest value—promising a heaven on earth, a life worth living. Death, by contrast, is necessarily relegated to the category of pure negation and constitutes the normative framework of life's value. In short, the biopolitical state does not turn away from death; it simply mobilizes it in a different manner.

If biopolitical disciplinarity functions through lived behavioral norms which aid in reproducing the status quo, it likewise benefits from a normative conception of death. Taking into account Lee Edelman's claim in *No Future* that queerness plays the fantasmatic role of the death drive in a politics of reproductive futurism,³⁰ we can see that the "death" so important to biopower is not only physiological but also imbued with a sexual, relational and communal essence. When AIDS emerges on the biopolitical landscape, the normative criteria of biopower's "life" come to the fore. A statement made by Margaret Heckler, director of the Department of Health and Human Services in the Reagan administration, reveals precisely the forms of life deemed worthy of investment:

We must conquer AIDS before it affects the heterosexual population, the general population. We have a very strong public interest in stopping AIDS before it spreads outside the risk groups, before it becomes an overwhelming problem.³¹

Shocking for its eugenic implications, this announcement makes clear that those lives initially affected by AIDS—gay men, IV drug users, prostitutes, by and large racial minorities—are utterly dispensable, unworthy of biopower's "life" because of their very form of life. AIDS' deaths from this vantage point are only tragic when they terminate a "life worth living," a form of life consonant with the normative standards upon which the reproduction of biopower depends. Wojnarowicz clearly comprehends this aspect of biopower in his later writings and calls into question the strict division of life and death.

In a diary entry from 1988 written shortly after his best friend and artistic mentor Peter Hujar died from AIDS-related complications, Wojnarowicz notes the importance yet ultimate ineffectiveness of memorial services. Writing in capital letters, he notes:

THE THING THAT'S IMPORTANT ABOUT MEMORIALS IS THEY BRING A PRIVATE GRIEF OUT OF THE SELF AND MAKE IT A LITTLE MORE PUBLIC WHICH ALLOWS FOR COMMUNICATIVE TRANSITION, PEELS AWAY ISOLATION, BUT THE MEMORIAL IS IN ITSELF STILL AN ACCEPTANCE OF IMMOBILITY, INACTIVITY. TOO MANY TIMES I'VE SEEN THE COMMUNITY BRUSH OFF ITS MEMORIAL CLOTHES, ITS GRIEVING CLOTHES, AND GATHER IN THE CONFINES OF AT LEAST FOUR WALLS AND UTTER WORDS OR SONGS OF BEAUTY TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE PASSING OF ONE OF ITS CHILDREN/PARENTS/LOVERS BUT AFTER THE MEMORIAL THEY RETURN HOME AND WAIT FOR THE NEXT PASSING, THE NEXT DEATH. IT'S HEALTHY TO MAKE THE PRIVATE PUBLIC, BUT THE WALLS OF THE ROOM OR CHAPEL ARE THIN AND UNNECESSARY. ONE SIMPLE STEP CAN BRING IT OUT INTO A MORE PUBLIC SPACE. DON'T GIVE ME A MEMORIAL IF I DIE. GIVE ME A DEMONSTRATION.³²

This passage gives pause less for its ACT UP sloganeering and its caps-lock boldness—all of these qualities are typical of Wojnarowicz's late style—but rather for two curious fragments that demand further investigation: "one simple step" and "if I die" from the consecutive sentences, "One simple step can bring it [grief] out into a more public space. Don't give me a memorial if I die." The latter phrase, "if I die," must first be understood in its biographical context: written at a moment in the author's life when memorial services were *de rigueur* due to the devastation wrought by AIDS on his New York community of friends, lovers, and artists, the implied meaning here seems, "If I too die from AIDS, like Peter, my memorial service should be a demonstration." Unsurprising, especially coming from a man who was both an inspiration for and a participant in ACT UP actions, yet the unconscious of this likely slip reads more interestingly. The making-contingent of the inevitable in the phrase "if I die" speaks to an incomprehensibility or even a willed amnesia concerning the inescapability of death—a forgetting, that is, possibly crucial to survival and continued creativity amid death's ubiquity. Nietzsche perhaps best describes this forgetfulness, what he calls an *active* forgetfulness, in an aphorism from *The Gay Science*. In the "The Thought of Death," he marvels at people's simultaneous incognizance of and perseverance to live within what he names, in typically masculinist fashion, the "brotherhood of death":

How strange it is that this sole certainty and common element [i.e., death] makes almost no impression on people, and that nothing is further from their minds than the feeling that they form a brotherhood of death. It makes me happy that men do not want at all to think the thought of death! I should like very much like to do something that would make the thought of life even a hundred times more appealing to them.³³

For Wojnarowicz, living through the early days of AIDS panic, witnessing the death of friends and lovers, himself succumbing to AIDS-related complications in 1992, this forgetting is not or not only a deliberate ignorance, but also an acceptance of death's immanence to life. While life might become "a hundred times more appealing" when death is omnipresent, in the age of AIDS a clear separation

between the two realms becomes a fantasy no longer sustainable. To return, then, to Wojnarowicz's second curious phrase concerning the "one simple step" needed to transform private grieving into public outrage, such a step involves not only the destruction of the walls that house the rooms in which memorial services take place, but likewise and more importantly the destruction of the conceptual barriers between both private/public and life/death. The physical movement from the chapel into the streets and the mental leap from the individual life to the "brotherhood of death" follows, both conceptually and chronologically, Wojnarowicz's political comprehension of the "common sense" between him, his lovers, his friends. This "sense" develops from the sexual encounter into an unprecedented form of activism that puts death to work in the service of a biopolitics "from below."

Insofar as public AIDS mourning rituals make death communal and political, they render visible the forms of life against which normative life is defined in biopower. Moreover, these rituals foil the biopolitical imperative to keep death a secret, personal matter. Wojnarowicz insists that death must be brought out of the closet in order to expose the biopolitical manipulation of life. Echoing the earlier passage quoted from his diaries, he writes in *Close to the Knives*:

I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, a friend, or a 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. It would be comforting to see how those friends, neighbors, lovers, and strangers mark time and place and history in such a public way.³⁴

On October 11, 1992, Wojnarowicz's dream became reality in the Ashes Action.³⁵ Chanting "Bringing death to your door/We won't take it anymore," ACT UP members stormed the White House gate armed with urns containing the remains of friends and lovers. Citing Wojnarowicz as an inspiration for this "political funeral," these rageful mourners threw the remains, urns and all, over the heads of the ever-present police force and onto the South Lawn, ashes flying in every direction. This blatant refusal to keep death tucked away in the private sphere is emblematic of ACT UP's most radical gesture: the transformation of life's morbidity into a politics of constituent potentiality. By forcing biological death in the service of a politics of life, these activists become their most dangerous and most creative. When death is mobilized in such a way, living deliberately, passionately, as Wojnarowicz's life-writings demonstrate, is nothing to fear.

Symbolic of a radical acceptance of finitude wherein life itself is at stake in living, the Ashes Action serves as merely one example of the kind of politics that can emerge when death's finality is

incorporated as a source of potentiality. Wojnarowicz's life-writings are nothing if not manifestos of the political potency of both sexual affect and death's immanence to life. Exploding the conceptual boundaries between self and Other, between public life and private death, his "common sense" remains vital to a queer constituent power.

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Notes

1. Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).
2. Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysius: A Critique of the State-Form*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000); Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Adult Male Circumcision Significantly Reduces Risk of Acquiring HIV: Trials Kenya and Uganda Stopped Early," in *National Institutes of Health News on the Web*, December 13, 2006. http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/news/newsreleases/2006/AMC12_06.htm (accessed June 20, 2008). I analyze this study in detail below.
4. My sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this essay for helping me clarify this point here and in the pages to come.
5. Michel Foucault, "The End of the Monarchy of Sex" in *Foucault Live: Interviews 1966-84*. ed. by Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 214-225. I discuss the meaning of Foucault's titular call-to-arms in Section II.
6. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139.
7. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power" in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume Three: Power*, ed. by James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000), 326-348.
8. This project remains unfinished and urgent; as I will demonstrate in Section II, David Wojnarowicz recognizes the salience of sexuality for biopolitical production and works to delink sex from truth with his concept of "sense."
9. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 385.
10. A portion of this paragraph has been published as a book review.
11. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 217-8.
12. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 693-706.
13. The distinction between a biopower "from above" [*biopotere*] and "from

below" [*biopotenza*] in Hardt and Negri's formulation is crucial in understanding the anti-authoritarian political forms emergent in biopolitics. *Biopotere* delineates a constituted power, and *biopotenza* a constituting one. Cesare Casarino describes these forms in the following way: "*Potenza* [*pouvoir* in French] can often resonate with implications of potentiality as well as the decentralized or mass conceptions of force and strength. *Potere* [*puissance* in French], on the other hand, refers to the might or authority of an already structured and centralized capacity, often an institutional apparatus such as the state." See Casarino, Cesare and Antonio Negri, "It's a Powerful Life: A Conversation on Contemporary Philosophy," *Cultural Critique* 57 (Spring 2004, 151-183): 181. I find this distinction especially useful for articulating the politics emergent—the biopower "from below"—in Wojnarowicz's concept of "sense."

14. Casarino and Negri, "It's a Powerful Life," 167.
15. Lotringer, Sylvère, "Foreword: We, the Multitude" in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, by Paolo Virno (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004, 7-19), 12.
16. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Adult Male Circumcision," http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/news/newsreleases/2006/AMC12_06.htm
17. Grover, Jan Zita, "AIDS: Keywords" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. by Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988, 17-30), 28-9.
18. McNeil, Jr., Donald G. "Circumcision Halves H.I.V. Risk, U.S. Agency Finds," *New York Times*, December 14, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/14/health/14hiv.html> (accessed June 15, 2008).
19. Hardt and Negri, *Labor of Dionysius*, 13.
20. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 136.
21. Wojnarowicz, David, *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz*, ed. by Amy Scholder (New York: Grove Press, 1999).
22. Foucault, "The End of the Monarchy," 217.
23. For a more detailed discussion of this dilemma, see Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: The Discursive Limits of 'Sex,'* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 227-8.
24. See, among other places, Richard Kim, "Andrew Sullivan, Overexposed" in *The Nation*, June 18, 2001, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20010618/kim20010605> (accessed June 15, 2008).
25. Foucault, Michel, "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will" in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume One: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 158.
26. Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow*, 127-8.
27. Foucault, Michel, "Le gai savoir," as quoted in Halperin, David M. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 94.
28. Warner, Michael, *The Trouble with Normal*, (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 179.
29. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 138.
30. Lee Edelman argues in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004) that the constitutive ground of modern politics is the promise of a reproductive futurism embodied in the figure of the Child. The protection of innocent life, a value so unquestioned that it becomes morally unquestionable, is the only politically responsible position. And yet, the fantasy of the future affixed to the Child delineates and authenticates a vision of social order that necessarily excludes queerness. In Edelman's words, the terms of reproductive futurism

"impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2). Edelman's polemic thus embraces the queer force of negativity, disavows futural hope, and puts stock in a self- and social-negating *jouissance*.

31. Heckler, Margaret as quoted in Ranogajec, Paul, "Letter from the Editor: A Shameful Budget," *Common Sense*, February 2002, http://www.nd.edu/~com_sens/issues/old/v16/v16_n4.html#budget (accessed June 15, 2008).
32. Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow*, 206.
33. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 225.
34. Wojnarowicz, David, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 122.
35. A video of this action can be found in the New York Public Library's "AIDS Activist Video Preservation Project." See *Ashes Action*, dir. by Jim Hubbard, AIDS Activist Video Preservation Project (New York: New York Public Library, 1993).

