

RACE AND SEXUALITY IN AIDS NARRATIVES

BLACK BODIES, QUEER PLEASURES:
RACE AND SEXUALITY IN AIDS NARRATIVES

By

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Abstract

A now significant body of biographical and autobiographical narratives about HIV and AIDS reminds us that the pandemic can be represented and reconsidered in ways that are significantly different from how the crisis has hitherto often been imagined. The complex ways in which the pandemic is caught up in the question of race is one of the many pressing questions raised by AIDS narratives, and it is to that question that my thesis responds. Particularly useful to my argument will be contemporary theoretical articulations of the AIDS “subject” that treat the “body” not only as the embodied site of viral loads and parasitic infections but also as the discursive location of layered inscriptions that fully reflect anxieties about sexuality, race, class, and health.

I intend to explore the diverse ways in which race and sexuality articulate each other within AIDS discourses by examining two important texts that explore the lives of AIDS subjects in powerfully racially inflected terms: Jamaica Kincaid’s autobiographical narrative about the life and AIDS death of her sibling, *My Brother*, and Gary Fisher’s collection of journal entries, short stories, and poems entitled *Gary in Your Pocket*. Each text raises intriguing and often troubling questions about the AIDS crisis in cultures that are already trapped in unresolved and perhaps unresolvable crises of race. Kincaid’s mother, in effect, says it all when she observes that “the disease has made [her son] so black” (Kincaid, 9). What post-colonial and racial conditions must be in place for an Antiguan mother to render her son as the diseased man of colour, where race and illness are mutually substitutable figures for abjection? *Gary in Your Pocket*, written by Fisher but edited and brought to publication by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick after his death, becomes, in part, a work of endless mourning. What kind of political and ethical work does Sedgwick seem to want Fisher’s writing to bear? By viewing the AIDS-body in a specific cultural and historical context, it may be possible to gain clearer insight into the ways in which the body becomes both a surface to be inscribed or written on, as well as a site of the production of ideologies and discourses.

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Table of Contents

Introduction..... 1

Chapter One

“How Not to Colonize the PWA”: The post-colonial position and the difficulties
of articulating AIDS in Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother*..... 14

Chapter Two

“Slaves of Sexuality”: Slave Histories and the Performativity of the PWA..... 57

Conclusions..... 91

Works Cited..... 93

Introduction

AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it, and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through those practices. This assertion does not contest the existence of viruses, antibodies, infections, or transmission routes. Least of all does it contest the reality of illness, suffering, and death. What it *does* contest is the notion that there is an underlying reality of AIDS, upon which are constructed the representations, or the culture, or the politics of AIDS. If we recognize that AIDS exists only in and through these constructions, then hopefully we can also recognize the imperative to know them, analyze them, and wrest control of them. (Crimp, 3)

Thus begins Douglas Crimp's investigation of the AIDS pandemic in the 1993 edition of *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/ Cultural Activism*. It is a statement that recognizes the power of thinking through "bodies" and "AIDS" as they exist as discursive entities; it is a statement that registers the most fundamental premise of this thesis. Crimp argues that AIDS is not merely about the experience of illness and death but that we only come to know AIDS through its discursive production; an understanding of AIDS is governed by cultural norms that are products of the reiterative power of discourse. The ways in which subjects and objects come into being is very much a part of the pandemic, an event that often takes place through the discursive representations of AIDS. AIDS is only knowable through the discursive and linguistic practices that form it, many of which include narratives and testimonies of the experiences of illness amid the pandemic. Perhaps by examining such accounts, the subject of AIDS can be identified in such a way as to support the cultural and medical agendas that seek to eradicate HIV.

Before we can begin to examine these AIDS specific narratives, we must develop a consciousness of how it is we come to know subjects in the first place. Given that there are so many discussions from which to attempt developing further discourses on the subject, one useful point of departure would be examining the subject with respect to the

discursive constructions of sexuality. The rampant homophobia that has accompanied AIDS from the moment it emerged as “the gay disease” has made abjection by means of sexuality an all-too-real phenomenon. An examination of the ways in which we come to know sexualities in a time of such crisis thus becomes a means by which to understand the contemporary discursivity of the subject: “In the long run, people with AIDS’ heroic assertion of the intrinsically unremarkable diversity and complexity of human sexuality can only make our cultures stronger and more flexible, insofar as it obliges us all to think more seriously than ever before about the meaning and value of human life” (Watney, “Subject” 73).

Some of the many discussions regarding the nature of discourse as it inflects an understanding of sexuality are taken up quite persuasively by theorists such as Judith Butler. Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* lays the groundwork from which to consider the discursivity of the subject. This, in turn, will allow me to discuss the discursivity of the AIDS subject. Furthermore, I intend to understand how sexuality for the PWA (Person with AIDS) can be conceived as racially inflected. Butler’s discussion of bodies and sexuality emerges out of a critique of discourses of gender. By tracing Butler’s argument, I hope to uncover how it is that discourses of race come to shape and inform an understanding of sexuality.

Butler begins *Bodies That Matter* by asking the important question, “Is there a way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender?” (1). This opening move urges readers to think through the relationship between the materiality of the body and its discursive demarcations. A body is not merely a physical entity, but is simultaneously its discursive construction. Furthermore, discourse does not

cause an understanding of the body. The discourse of sexuality does not *cause* sexual difference just as discourses of race do not *cause* racial differences. Instead, the discursive categories of “race” and “sex” exist as regulatory practices that produce and govern bodies (Butler, *Bodies* 1). These regulatory forces are also the power to produce (by marking, distinguishing, and differentiating) the body it controls. Bodies are always in a process of being produced by such regulatory practices. “Race” and “sex” are ideals, discursively constructed, that are “forcibly materialized through time” (1). Butler begins by establishing that the materiality of the body is produced and policed by regulatory norms. She continues by explaining how it is that regulatory norms function.

What is key in Butler’s understanding of materiality is the temporal nature of regulatory norms. A body is perpetually reproduced and policed by these norms. Bodies are always in the process of being regulated and so cannot be considered as static entities. Bodies are materialized by a reiteration of regulatory ideals. This means that the discursive practices that produce and perpetually reproduce “sex” or “race” materialize the body by a process of reiteration. Butler defines the process by which regulatory norms are reiterated as “performativity.”

What is performativity and how does it function with respect to the materialization of the body? Before this question can be answered, a few things need to be established. First of all, Butler establishes that “the materiality of the body will not be unthinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm” (2). What this means for Butler is that “sex” is not merely a “thing” one has or a “thing” one is. Rather, “sex” is made a “thing” only by virtue of its cultural or discursive intelligibility. Using a similar logic, I would contend that “race” is not simply what one is. A body is not

“black” simply because it *appears* dark in colour. Instead, a body is considered to be “black” by virtue of discursive practices that necessitate an understanding of what “black” is and what a “body” is. “Race” is not just a cultural construct that is imposed onto a body. “Race” itself must be understood as a product of regulatory norms that must be materialized in order to be able to think the materiality of the body. Regulatory norms are, of course, enforceable only through relationships of power. If bodies are indissociable from the reiteration of regulatory norms, then they can not be thought apart from a dynamic of power. The materiality of the body is always an effect of power.

Secondly, it is essential to understand how power functions with respect to a materialization of the body. Power plays into the understanding of bodies in fairly complex ways. For the purposes of my argument, one of the most important things it enables is production of “exclusionary matrices.” An exclusionary matrix is the mechanism by which subjects are formed and

thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (3)

Exclusionary matrices which might be configured through the discourses of “racism” and “sexism” are responsible for the ways in which subjects come into being. I use the term “subject” as Butler defines it in *The Psychic Life of Power* as a “linguistic category, a place-holder, a structure in formation”(10) that bodies come to occupy. Bodies are only granted intelligibility by virtue of occupying a subject position. The violent silences and omissions that pervade discourses of queer identities do not allow for such identifications

as “gay” or “lesbian” to occupy a subject position. Abjected by exclusionary matrices that reinforce regulatory norms, queer identities still await a different kind of discursive production so that the materiality of certain bodies cannot be thought apart from queer sexualities. The forming of the queer subject is as yet a work in progress.

According to Butler, the forming of a subject requires a process she calls “phantasmatic identification.” As she describes it: “The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of ‘sex,’ and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge” (3). Regulatory norms are so powerful because they have the ability to produce the “normative phantasms” by which subjects are circumscribed into a cultural intelligibility. Regulatory norms construct and reiteratively secure certain phantasms or imaginings of identity. The phantasm of “masculinity” is a construction that has emerged out of the discourses that inform it. Undoubtedly, “masculinity” can mean a number of things. The layers of meaning ascribed to the term are what make it an imaginary construct. The discourses that reiterate the authority of regulatory ideals contribute to the sustenance of the imaginary phantasms. By forming an identification with a subject position, there simultaneously occurs a disavowal of abjection. Not only does an identification with a normative phantasm produce a subject, but it also produces a domain of abjection. This domain of abjection must be disavowed in order to form a subject. For example, if a subject is formed by an identification with “heterosexuality” then this process occurs by a disavowal of a domain of abjection that might include “homosexuality” among other things. In order to retain and sustain a subject position achieved by an identification with a normative “heterosexuality,” the materialization of

sex will always be policed by a “regulation of identificatory process” (3). This means that the domain of abjection must be perpetually and persistently disavowed. “Homosexuality” can be constantly disavowed if it is not permitted an entrance into the domain of cultural and discursive intelligibility. Similarly, if “blackness” is not made culturally intelligible, its radical unknowability could render it as a domain of abjection, the repudiation of which would be necessary for the formation of the subject. Furthermore, the possibility of understanding a queer sexuality through “blackness” becomes even more urgent and complex.

Butler also recognizes the slipperiness of categories of identification. What “white,” “black,” or “gay” might mean at a certain moment in time will shift. They will always shift with respect to regulatory norms. As Butler points to the *reiteration* of regulatory norms, she invokes the temporal nature of the categories that seek to materialize phantasmatic identifications. Each category is understood by the overlapping histories that have contributed to its conception. For example, the category “black” carries with it several histories that may point to slavery, colonialism, or sexuality. And as categories do not remain as distinct, autonomous entities, categories of identification and their histories seep into one another. This fact makes it possible to discuss the possibility of a “racialized sexuality” in which the reiterated discourses and power structures that are a part of “race” and “sexuality” come to articulate each other. While I intend to unpack this term throughout my discussion of AIDS narratives, I introduce it here so that it may be understood within the logic of Butler’s analysis of gender and sexuality.

Although categories and phantasms of identification are themselves not static in nature, they do compel a materialization of the subject. The regulatory norms that police and sustain identificatory practices allow for the materialization of bodies. Since regulatory ideals must police bodies that are not considered to be static entities, normative constraints act reiteratively. For Butler, this reiteration of regulatory norms that allows for the materialization of a phantasmatic identification is known as “performativity.” Performativity must not be thought of as a “conscious” act. A subject does not *decide* to reiterate a performative. Rather, performativity is impelled and sustained by social constraints. As Butler defines it, “a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (13). What this means, is that in identifying with certain norms, a subject is monitored by regulatory ideals in such a way as to impel and reiterate a performativity that sustains a subject position. Reiteration is not performed *by* a subject. Rather, reiteration is what makes the subject possible. Without it, the subject could be rendered radically unthinkable or abject.

Identifying with a phantasmatic ideal is never a complete process. A phantasmatic identification is an effort of alignment that attempts to avoid abjection. For example, the process of occupying the subject position of “boy” requires an identification with this phantasm that in turn impels a performativity of the ideal of “boy.” Since the performativity is reiterative by virtue of being policed by regulatory norms and having perpetually to disavow abjection, the “boy” is always in the process of “boying.” There is no final achievement or complete “being” of the phantasm “boy.” Rather, the subject must always be “boyed” in order to sustain an identification with the regulatory ideal.

By virtue of having a process of identification that never attains completion, the issues of mourning and melancholia enter this discussion. Performativity is the mechanism by which the body gets materialized, but the materialization is never a completed process. As Butler suggests in *The Psychic Life of Power*, performativities of “sex” and “gender” are completely caught up in melancholic acts of disavowal. What this means is that a “disavowal” involves a loss of attachment that is simultaneously a preserving of the attachment. For example, “heterosexual” identification attempts to ensure the loss of any “homosexual” attachment. The fact that a disavowal of homosexual attachment must be reiterated suggests that without the reiteration, a subject may be faced with its own homosexual desires, desires that threaten abjection. As Butler defines it, melancholy is “both the refusal of grief and the incorporation of loss, a miming of the death it cannot mourn” (142). The melancholic “heterosexual” refuses to mourn the loss of the “homosexual.” By “mourning,” I mean a complete breaking of attachment, one that allows for the making of new attachments (134). The “heterosexual” cannot completely break its attachment to the “homosexual” but can attempt to do so by a process of reiteration that becomes a disavowal of abjection.

What *is* a “racialized sexuality” then, or what could this term *mean*? Abdul R. Jan Mohamed provides us with a broad but useful definition by describing it as “the point where the deployment of sexuality intersects with the deployment of race” (94). But what exactly happens at this “intersection” and how is it recognizable? In what ways does this point of intersection allow for the materialization of bodies? And can a “racialized sexuality” be thought apart from the institutionalized voices of racism and sexism? Should it be?

While I recognize the heterogeneity inherent within categories of race and sexuality, I hope to explore certain aspects of the overlapping of these spheres of phantasmatic identification by examining some representations of black gay men with AIDS. I also hope to offer up the possibility of discussing the convergence of these categories for multiple subject positions. Much of the current discourse surrounding the idea of a “racialized sexuality” centres on miscegenation. While this is an important area of inquiry, I will resist focussing my argument on the politics and history surrounding this situation as I do not want to risk re-centering the discussion of a “racialized sexuality” on binary oppositions. The category of “race” is inclusive of a “normative” white racial identity. “White” will also be considered a “race.” Furthermore, a racialized sexuality is not only concerned with interracial sexuality. Since even the racialized category of “black” is complexly heterogeneous, therein lies a reinscription of marked and unmarked bodies. As Cornel West aptly articulates the situation with respect to black sexuality:

On the one hand, black sexuality among blacks simply does not include whites, nor does it make them a central point of reference. It proceeds as if whites do not exist, as if whites are invisible and simply don't matter...On the other hand, black sexuality between blacks and whites proceeds based on underground desires that Americans deny or ignore in public and over which laws have no effective control...Of course, neither scenario fully accounts for the complex elements that determine how any particular relationship involving black sexuality *actually* takes place. Yet they do accent the crucial link between black sexuality and black power in America. (87)

When considering black sexualities, we must be conscious of the fact that they exist both within and outside of racist discourses. In the case of the post-colonial subject, sexuality is undoubtedly understood, to a certain degree, by colonialist discourses that have made

“gender,” “power,” and “sexuality” come to mean in different ways. However, there also exist the more local or insular dimensions of the post-colonial subject. The post-colonial subject also exists in and around discourses that emerge out of local cultures. These discourses may have little to do with “interracial” relationships but still have the ability to inform an understanding of “racialized sexuality.” Sexual relationships occur within categories of race that must not be omitted in discussing a “racialized sexuality.”

The categorical spheres of race and sexuality have both been overwrought by silences to such a degree that at times, no linguistic arrangement of discourse is able to articulate certain positions, thoughts, bodies, or subjectivities. As a result, understanding a “racialized sexuality” becomes increasingly difficult because it is, in part, a product of various cultural and discursive omissions and repressions. In his discussion of black sexuality, West claims that black bodies are materialized by the sexual myths that intend to reinscribe race-based power relations. West cites the myths of Jezebel (the seductive temptress), Jack Johnson (the super performer) and Aunt Jemima (the long-suffering nurturer) among others in order to demonstrate what he believes to be the intrigue and mystique with which white America has gazed upon black sexuality. Undoubtedly, several power relations are inherent in these discursive constructions. Just as black sexuality becomes mythologized, so too does white sexuality as with the myth and mystery of a pristine white bourgeois sexuality. And while this construction undeniably arises from a completely different social position of power, it is still a sexual myth articulatable by a racial identification (or repudiation, as the case may be). Although subject to varying positions of power and authority, racial identities are undeniably ascribed with sexual mysticism, be it South Asians in the “exotic East” or black men with

excessive sexual prowess. Whether it is by force of idealization or denigration, myth inevitably becomes a part of a race-based sexuality and is responsible for silencing certain “truths” about race and sexuality. When the category of race is superimposed onto the category of sexuality, a cloud of erotic mystery erupts, holding racial identities prisoner to sexual mythology.

Undoubtedly, many races and many sexualities are at stake in a discussion of “racialized sexuality.” But in order to shed light on the various complexities that must be taken into account when evaluating the histories of “racialized sexuality,” I will take on the example of the “black gay man,” a category that has been further complicated by AIDS discourses. The “black gay man” is an exceedingly complex discursive (and silenced) construction. But to *begin* an understanding of the abjection of the black gay male, I will use accounts of accounts of the black gay PWA that emerge from American-based narratives. Two issues of particular relevance to the histories of race in America are the hauntings by the spectres of “post-colonialism” and “slavery.” Both situations carry with them complex histories that have the ability to inform the materialization of different kinds of sexuality.

My first chapter will address the nature of language as it relates to the post-colonial situation in the articulation of AIDS. Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother* self-consciously criticizes the problem of understanding AIDS without reinscribing colonialist discourses. Kincaid illustrates the virtual impossibility of knowing AIDS by critiquing narratives of “self-discovery,” a journey that can never realize its goals. “Knowing” AIDS is as difficult and problematic as attempting to comprehend the self in a post-colonial position. The second chapter will build on the issues of “inarticulability” as

presented in the first chapter. Gary Fisher's *Gary in Your Pocket* is a book that consists of a series of personal journal entries, short stories, and poems that trace the attempts to make identity comprehensible through language. Fisher's efforts to make sense of the histories that have compelled the performativity of his sexuality simultaneously become his attempts to understand his subjectivity with respect to AIDS.

For Fisher, the black slave is the materialization of a disavowed abject that allowed for a specific white subjectivity to be reiterated for over a century when slavery was a state-supported event. It is also the means by which AIDS becomes articulated for him. While slavery may have been abolished (in some senses), exclusionary matrices still exist in such a way as to create sexual domains of abjection based on race. They still persist in instances of heterosexual relationships but are becoming increasingly visible as AIDS discourses attempt to articulate homosexual and queer relationships.

The conflation of the categories of "race" and "sexuality" allows for the argument that subjects are formed by a *series* of exclusionary matrices that open up the possibility for the creation of further zones of abjection. The discourses that are responsible for the sustenance of these exclusionary matrices are infected with silences and linguistic inaccuracies. Our inability to articulate certain elements of subjectivity alongside the consequently emerging myths inflecting identity produce certain silences in discourses that remain dangerously unexamined. Attempts to overcome the silences have resulted in often irresponsible and careless linguistic substitutions. We must become more self-conscious about the ways in which we allow race and sexuality to articulate one another as inherent in these co-articulations are violent silences that go unnoticed and yet seek to

regulate the subject. Silences themselves are discursive practices that have the ability to materialize the subject in a performative fashion.

As categories of race and sexuality become disrupted through critical cultural study, I wonder if it is possible to “keep” an experience of a racialized sexuality. The more we consider how not to speak of being “black” or “gay,” undoubtedly important cultural work, the more urgent it becomes to locate ways in which a black or gay experience can be articulated. What are the ways in which a black gay subjectivity comes into being? While I don’t believe there exists an autonomous homogenous black gay identity, I wonder how it is possible to “keep” the experience of being black and gay in such a way as to open up a new politics for AIDS-related discourses. One way in which the experience is preserved and simultaneously held up for debate is through AIDS memoirs and narratives. And while they can only offer up a small glimpse into the situation (as the insight is extended only by and to those who have the ability, time, and privilege to read or write), they invite audiences to take on the responsibility of engaging in the work required to better understand the social conditions of HIV.

Chapter One

“How Not to Colonize the PWA”: The post-colonial position and the difficulties of articulating AIDS in Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother*

How soft is the blackness as it falls. It falls in silence and yet it is deafening, for no other sound except the blackness falling can be heard. The blackness falls like soot from a lamp with an untrimmed wick. The blackness is visible and yet it is invisible, for I see that I cannot see it. The blackness fills up a small room, a large field, an island, my own being. The blackness cannot bring me joy but often I am made glad in it. The blackness cannot be separated from me but often I can stand outside it. The blackness is not the air, though I breathe it. The blackness is not the earth, though I walk on it. The blackness is not water or food, though I drink and eat it. The blackness is not my blood, though it flows through my veins. The blackness enters my many-tiered spaces and soon the significant word and event recede and eventually vanish: in this way I am annihilated and my form becomes formless and I am absorbed into a vastness of free-flowing matter. In the blackness, then, I have been erased. I can no longer say my own name. I can no longer point to myself and say “I.” In the blackness my voice is silent. First, then, I have been my individual self, carefully banishing randomness from my existence, then I am swallowed up in the blackness so that I am one with it...

-Jamaica Kincaid
At the Bottom of the River

In the story “Blackness”, part of Kincaid’s collection entitled *At the Bottom of the River*, “blackness” disrupts the “I” while also being an integral part of identity. “blackness” has no coherent, autonomous definition, but its slipperiness is essential to understanding subjectivity. The subject does not exist without “blackness,” and yet what this “blackness” is remains to be seen. Here, subjectivity itself is experienced as a “blackness.” The experience of race, the understanding of “blackness,” finds itself in almost every narrative. Even the absence of “blackness” is part of the experience of

“blackness.” In this passage, Kincaid invokes “blackness” through repetition, constantly claiming an attachment to “blackness” just before disavowing any understanding of it. It becomes at first “visible” and then “invisible.” It becomes both the condition for a “voice” as well as the possibility for “silence.” As it informs the subject, it begs recognition, understanding, and questioning. It finds itself amidst many different discourses, and must be examined in these various locations. But how to find it? How to locate “blackness,” and how does its location inform a certain understanding of it? Perhaps the issue of race is always already present, and the difficulty lies in understanding how it came to be so.

In the early eighties, the American Centers for Disease Control developed the “4-H Club,” a list of groups believed to be at “high-risk” for contracting AIDS. Scientific research motivated by a belief that AIDS was acquired by a certain type of person rather than certain forms of behaviour provided evidence that allowed for the 4-H list to be conceived of as an authoritative discursive construction. The 4-H’s included homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, and Haitians. While the CDC held steadfast to this “club” that was supposed to help develop a social understanding of the pandemic, it became clear that something was wrong with this configuration. The CDC’s list suggested that AIDS had more to do with identity and “who you are” rather than the processes by which HIV gets transmitted. This problematic claim had the potential to essentialize identities in such a way as to attribute the AIDS subject with guilt and blame. By linking AIDS with identity, the possibility of creating abjected beings was introduced into AIDS discourses. Years after the “4-H Club” was abolished, we find that the knowledge of AIDS is multi-dimensional in nature. In addition to posing the scientific

problems of epidemiology to medical communities, AIDS requires us to think questioningly about the issues of representation, identity, and relationships of power. AIDS calls into question the nature of the subject and the forming of subjectivities at the convergence of the overlapping discourses of science, medicine, culture, and politics. The CDC's carelessness in articulating the "4-H Club," a carelessness that had the potential to police as essential the discourses surrounding subjectivity, has brought to light the necessity of examining the discourses of race and sexuality as they inform an understanding of AIDS. While the categories of "homosexuals," "hemophiliacs," and "heroin addicts" are severely problematic in that they essentialize identities by attributing certain behaviours with imaginary categories of identification, the inclusion of "Haitian" into the club implies a risk based on nationality; properly speaking, this problematic claim should oblige us to ask how it is that colonialist discourses get appropriated by AIDS discourses and reinscribed into our knowledge of the pandemic. The CDC's 4-H list was announced around a time when a large number of Haitians emigrated to the United States; the political moment seemed to take this community as prey, an easy scapegoat for American medical institutions. But the reiteration of colonialist discourses is glaringly obvious, evidence that AIDS is very much a problem of discourse and race, among other things.

Colonialist assumptions and rhetoric powerfully inflect certain AIDS discourses in and about the Third World. While the category of "Third World" itself has been the subject of much debate, it cannot be denied that the narratives emerging from, out of, and in regards to post-colonial nations differ significantly from those held by the more economically powerful nations of the West. While "First World" nations have greater

economic means with which to fund the creation and sustenance of knowledge banks about “AIDS,” “Third World” nations maintain similar social investments in and concerns about the pandemic. Both worlds...this *entire* world is losing lives, and something must be done.

The powerful political and economic institutions of the West have consequently succeeded in privileging the cultural narratives of AIDS in the West. As such, the discourses emanating from Western medical institutions carry with them an incredible authority, an authority that must nevertheless be questioned. As Paula Treichler argues, “Western medical science is conceived as a transhistorical, transcultural model of reality; when cultural differences among human communities are taken into account, they tend to be enlisted in the service of this reality, but their status remains utilitarian” (119). For example, the ways in which African men are educated about the use and effectiveness of condoms may be exceedingly different from the ways in which an American audience is targeted with such education. Here, “culture” is taken into account in the recognition that AIDS education must consider strategies that would be most effective and receptive within various cultural contexts. In support of much of the work of Western medicine, Treichler continues to suggest that we “can certainly support a global anti-AIDS strategy that mobilizes the scientific model of AIDS in culturally specific ways yet acknowledge imperialist aspects of a strategy that valorizes itself as universal rather than as culturally produced” (119). While many strategies employed by Western health care education are useful and effective in promoting preventative measures, we cannot blindly follow the command of Western medicine. Western medicine does provide communities and individuals with important and useful information, but the authority invested in this

institution must be examined. What goes unquestioned in this example is the authority of Western medicine that privileges the use of condoms and that does not consider the practices of naturopathic or “alternative” medicines that might also prohibit the spread of HIV. The privileging of Western medical and health care practices, including the use of AZT, must be recognized in order to avoid a silencing of “alternative” (often “non-Western”) medical practices that may also have the potential to put a stop to the spread of HIV. The narratives of “Third World” medical sciences must be considered with equal importance. PWA testimonies and narratives coming out of the “Third World” can provide medical and cultural researchers with vast amounts of insight into the AIDS body, especially, vitally, that there is no “AIDS body” as such, no single, ideal “patient” floating around in a “transnational” vacuum, i.e. that there are AIDS bodies, each intelligible only in their contexts¹.

But just as “Third World” accounts are important in the understanding of AIDS and HIV in the “Third World,” so too are the narratives that emerge from “First World” nations in response to AIDS in post-colonial nations. The CDC’s articulation of “Haitian AIDS” is only one example of a First World configuration of AIDS in a post-colonial nation. Since then, many political, medical, autobiographical, and quasi-fictional narratives, such as Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother*, have emerged regarding AIDS; all of them demand to be read with a scrutinizing and critical eye in order to illuminate the nature of AIDS today. The subject of AIDS has been constructed by a series of exclusions that seek to create better-understood divisions within the human race. As it is, people have been divided across boundaries of gender, sexuality, and nationality. Seeking to understand the “divisions” AIDS discourses set-up in an already economically

¹ I would like to thank Dr. David L. Clark for reminding me of this important point.

and culturally divided post-colonial world has the potential to lend insight into the various political and discursive configurations of human subjects and abjects. For example, Simon Watney argues that the story of “African AIDS” is found to be a construction of Western commentary that dangerously seeks to reinscribe colonialist ideals. An imaginary “Africa” is created under the spectacle of AIDS by emphasizing “exotic” and “promiscuous” sexual behaviour, never accounting for the varied nature of the virus. The appeal of colonialist discourses that attempt to essentialize identities based on race or nation is all-too-great in the configuring of AIDS discourses: “It is as if HIV were a disease of ‘African-ness,’ the viral embodiment of a long legacy of colonial imagery which naturalizes the devastating economic and social effects of European colonialism” (Watney, “Missionary” 86). In many cases, AIDS discourses reiterate and reformulate the social divisions that were a part of colonialist agendas. If AIDS discourses reveal to us how the ever-present colonial structures play themselves out, then it becomes possible to reconfigure and rethink social agendas such that the creation of abjected figures is disavowed. Evidence of colonial structures apparent in AIDS discourses would be most readily available in First World accounts of the situation of AIDS in the Third World. One such powerful narrative that emerges from America is Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother*.

In *My Brother*, Kincaid tells the story of her relationship with her brother Devon after he had been diagnosed with AIDS. Upon hearing of her brother’s diagnosis, Kincaid travels back and forth between Antigua, her place of birth, and her present home in Vermont. In the process, she takes on many care-giving responsibilities by providing Devon with the expensive and inaccessible AZT, by educating herself, and by attempting

to mourn his death. Having left Antigua for the United States at a young age, Kincaid had to become reacquainted with her younger brother, her mother, the “Antigua(s)” of her memory, and the Antigua that now existed without her. At times a biography of her brother and at times an autobiographical journey that is self-consciously critical of the possibility of “self discovery,” *My Brother* in many ways narrates a First World account of a Third World AIDS. Kincaid’s identification with either the “United States” or “Antigua” is somewhat problematic. Born and raised in Antigua, she is familiar with many aspects of Caribbean culture that are a part of her daily lived experience. However, having created a home in America, she finds many elements of Western culture more immediate and comfortable to her. She must mediate her identity with respect to an Antigua of her memory and experiences, an Antigua she knows through the American discourses she lives amidst, and the Antigua she is introduced to upon her return home, one that has also been developed apart from colonialist structures.

In order to understand Caribbean women’s writing, we must maintain a consciousness of the volatility of the post-colonial position. Paravisini-Gebert argues that in a post-colonial reading of Caribbean societies we must consider “a reality that may have been influenced by Euro-American cultural patterns, but which developed in fairly *local* ways in response to a collision between autochthonous and foreign cultures” (163). This would mean that while the influence of global and historical colonialist discourses must be examined in a reading of *My Brother*, we must not neglect the fact that Antigua is also a nation that develops from within. Individuals and communities in Antigua do formulate responses to “global” issues such as AIDS and international politics in ways that might be influenced by factors other than a post-colonial predicament. Furthermore,

the people of the Caribbean also maintain concerns for their own politics, communities, and social structures that may have been developed locally, apart from post-colonial histories. In recognizing the complexity of Caribbean post-colonial culture, the problem of Kincaid's post-colonial narration takes on many dimensions. In any case, Kincaid's positionality as a post-colonial writer becomes significant when examining the language she uses and the discourses she invokes in making sense of her own identity and the nature of Devon's AIDS.

One of the ways in which a "First World" perspective is privileged in the post-colonial positionality of Kincaid's writing is by the primary use of Standard English. Merle Hodge explores the implications of the use of Standard English as opposed to a Creole language in the narratives of Caribbean writers:

In most Caribbean countries the main medium of spoken communication is a Creole language which is the product of contact between European and West African languages. However, in every case the official language, the language of education and the written word, is a European language....The Anglophone Caribbean presents not a cut-and-dried bilingual situation of two languages confined to separate compartments, but a spread of variations which can more accurately be likened to a continuum, with Creole at one extreme and Standard English at the other, and a range of nuances between....Moreover, Caribbean writers are themselves the product of an education process which may have alienated them from their first language so that they are not as proficient in it as in the standard language. (47)

Separated from Antiguan culture, Kincaid makes use of Standard English in her writing, a decision that aligns her with First World modes of understanding. Undoubtedly, she is writing in a medium and a tradition that has been heavily influenced and informed by Standard English and so cannot escape the voice of Western educational institutions. In order to resist reinscribing post-colonial hierarchies, Kincaid has the complicated task of

situating her narrative voice on a continuum that extends between Creole and Standard English. Instead of “undoing” her Western education, she must go beyond it so that she is able to use a language that neither artificially reproduces an attempt to speak/write an unfamiliar dialect nor is itself dominated by the discourse of colonial regimes. She must situate her narrative voice within a Creole continuum. While it is important to examine both First World and Third World accounts of “AIDS in the Third World”, it would appear that some narratives do not quite fit into either category. Kincaid’s writing is heavily influenced by her American education and the Western discourses that command and shape her daily life. At the same time, Kincaid’s writing always emerges out of her Antiguan roots, as can be seen with *Annie John* and *Lucy*. Neither she nor her writing can escape a haunting by the Antigua she knows and imagines. The narrative offered in *My Brother* cannot be easily classified as a “First World” or “Third World” account. Instead, it is informed by both worlds in complicated ways that nevertheless perform a kind of experience of AIDS.

Rosanne Kanhai and Trinh T. Minh-ha question the position of the woman minority writer within American academic and literary institutions. As Kanhai writes, “To a large extent, women of color writers remain native informants of their own cultures and communities, with white women taking for themselves the roles of major theorists and critics” (122). Women of colour are always already held responsible for cultures they might seem to hold an affiliation with; sometimes this responsibility is unwanted and provides obstacles to the exploration of other cultural work. Trinh takes this point a step further to describe a possible “double-bind” for minority women who are also professional writers. She suggests that in many cases, some minority women who are

presumed to be “native informants” become “Third World representatives.” These women who speak out in academic or literary circles feel a pressure to offer up a *more* native construction of the native in order to remain a part of these circles, by providing audiences with the much sought-after “possibility of difference” and the continued possibility of discussing the “other.” She continues:

...the Third World representative the modern sophisticated public ideally seeks is the *unspoiled* African, Asian, or Native American, who remains more preoccupied with her/his image of the *real* native – the *truly different* – than with the issues of hegemony, racism, feminism, and social change (which s/he lightly touches on in conformance to the reigning fashion of liberal discourse). A Japanese actually looks more Japanese in America than in Japan, but the “real” type of Japanism ought to be Japan. (Trinh, 88)

We must not neglect the possibility for post-colonial writers to be doing just that: making the Third World more “Third World” than it is. Could Kincaid be guilty of making Third World AIDS more “Third World AIDS” than it is? In other words, can Kincaid’s position as a post-colonial writer contribute to the spectacularization of AIDS as it exists for her brother? Then again, Kincaid could be more self-conscious than this. She does appear to be self-conscious about her First World position as she recognizes that her use of Standard English informs her construction of Devon. Though the title of her book suggests that the book is somewhat biographical, Kincaid uses herself as the central figure in the novel. She does not attempt to write or appropriate Devon’s experience. She writes a narrative about her brother with herself as the central character in order to avoid discursively reiterating post-colonial structures of power. At the same time, she does not silence her brother as the narrative is sprinkled with some of his dialogue in spoken Creole. Kincaid carefully writes Devon’s Creole in parenthesis separating and

securing it from her own prose. She ensures that his voice is heard but presents it in such a way as to suggest that it cannot be read critically because it remains, by the implications of punctuation, somewhat out of context. I will come back to the complexities of Kincaid's use of parentheses later on. My point here is that Kincaid shows evidence of being a very self-conscious writer. It is possible that she recognizes the potential for her writing to construct a "more native" native, or a highly spectacularized vision of AIDS in Antigua. In this chapter, I hope to consider both possibilities: the possibility that Kincaid is offering a more spectacularized vision of AIDS and the possibility that she is self-conscious about this possibility. In considering the former, I hope to be able to locate the possibility of the creation of the spectacle of AIDS from within the local Antiguan community, apart from the history of post-colonial discourses that will always, to some degree, inform an understanding of AIDS. In considering the latter, I will explore the ways in which articulating AIDS becomes complicated by the position of the post-colonial writer.

The Most "Native" Native: The Problems of Representing the Post-Colonial Body

In her analysis of the situation of AIDS and HIV in the Third World, Paula Treichler emphasizes the necessity of examining the culturally diverse articulations surrounding AIDS. Paying attention to the complex AIDS narratives emerging in and around the Third World facilitates in a conceptualization of the epidemic that would otherwise have been silenced by First World institutional agendas. She writes:

Diverse voices...represent not diverse accounts of reality but significant points of articulation for ongoing social and cultural struggles. Further, once we adopt the view that reality is inevitably mediated, we become ourselves participants in the mediation process; such voices may then

provide important models for challenging existing regimes of truth and disrupting their effects – in the Third World as in the First. (126)

AIDS narratives must be considered from within the cultural contexts of the Third World as well as in a turning back to the problem of AIDS in the First World. Post-colonial theory posits that the boundaries between the First World and the Third World are rather complex and often have a tendency to seep into one another. For Kincaid, whose sense of self lies somewhere between her experiences of America and Antigua, the task of making the narratives of post-colonial AIDS bodies accessible to the multiple interests of the AIDS crisis is no small task. As her narrative shows, making the post-colonial AIDS body knowable to herself is an exceedingly complex discursive project.

One of the primary factors that complicates any discursive body is the intrusion of silence. As Cindy Patton writes, “The AIDS narrative exists as a technology of social repression: it is a representation that attempts to silence not only the claims of identity politics, but the people marginalized by AIDS” (159). Silences often come to take the place of the unspeakable, the difficult, and the ignored. They make meaning and understanding almost entirely inaccessible. And yet, repeated silences seem to uncover much more. In the opening pages of the book, Kincaid narrates the moment when she came to learn of her brother’s AIDS. It was the repeated silences that invited her to become an involved and active participant in the pandemic:

When I spoke to this friend of my mother’s she said that there was something wrong with my brother and that I should call my mother to find out what it was. I said, What is wrong? She said, Call your mother. I asked her, using those exact words, three times, and three times she replied the same way. And then I said, He has AIDS, and she said, Yes.
(7)

In the opening pages of the book, the narrative immediately sets itself up in such a way as to introduce the limitations of AIDS discourses. For Kincaid, AIDS is about silences and what is going unsaid. Kincaid's narration suggests that the silences are that aspect of AIDS that remain somewhat local; the silences are not exclusive to either a Third World understanding of AIDS or a First World conception of it. Kincaid resists writing out the dialogue that may have been spoken between her mother's friend and herself. In so doing, the narrative performs the very silences Kincaid encountered at that moment. By avoiding the use of quotation marks and the conventions of formal English grammar, Kincaid implies that "AIDS" has not yet been made comprehensible to linguistic order. It cannot be written as yet. In avoiding the use of dialogue, Kincaid shows that AIDS cannot be spoken either. All she knew was that "there was something wrong," the silences offered to her by her mother's friend told her the rest. But now all she knows is that "he has AIDS". What that meant had yet to be determined (and always remains as such throughout the narrative).

Kincaid then goes to Antigua to be with her mother and brother and thus begins her "AIDS education". Within the opening pages of the book, Kincaid recalls a moment when she went to visit her brother in the hospital. Unable to recognize visually Devon's medical condition, unable to "see" what AIDS "looks" like, Kincaid is immediately paralysed by the entire spectacle she must take in. Her inability to "know" the AIDS Devon has instinctively leads her to react to what is immediately recognizable and already constructed and materialized for her through her hallucination of who she believes her brother to be; her initial reaction appears to be in response to Devon's skin

colour. But as her narrative suggests, she seems also to recognize that Devon's skin is but a surface containing and withholding several layers of inscription:

His skin was a deep black color, I noticed that, and I thought perhaps I noticed that because I live in a place where no one is of his complexion, except for me, and I am not really of his complexion, I am only of his complexion in the way of race. But many days later my mother said to me, He has gotten so black, the disease has made him so black (she said this to me in this kind of English, she makes an effort to speak to me in the kind of English that I now immediately understand). (9)

For Kincaid and her mother Mrs. Drew, Devon's sensational blackness is the means by which he becomes produced, marked, and differentiated from them. But what "blackness" means for Kincaid is quite different from what it means for Mrs. Drew. Like Kincaid, Mrs. Drew tries to make sense of Devon's body by attempting to articulate it with discourses that are familiar to her. They cannot articulate AIDS, but they can attempt to access its articulation through other more immediate discourses: in this case, the signifying potential of race. The meaning of their responses differ because Mrs. Drew's could be considered as more local or insular while Kincaid's are informed by her lifestyle and socio-economic situation in America.² For Mrs. Drew, the "blackness" is evidence of some kind of medical alien influence on her son's body. Her response remains local, comparing Devon's new skin with what his skin used to look like. She can make such an observation because of her familiarity with her son's body and daily life. She responds to "insular" issues (as defined by Parvinsini-Gerbert) such as skin pigmentation and maternal care giving.³ The "differences" Mrs. Drew notes, such as the

² I use the terms "local" and "insular" in the way Parvinsini-Gerbert defines them in her effort to underscore the limits of a "post-colonial" consideration in Caribbean women's writing. She uses the terms to locate the more internal, local concerns of Caribbean women which she believes to be equally or more influential than a continued consciousness of a colonial past.

³ See Parvinsini-Gerbert, Lizabeth. "Women Against the Grain: Theorizing Caribbean Women's Writing".

increased “blackness,” are not between people, but rather come about from within Devon’s body over time. Mrs. Drew does not compare Devon’s AIDS to anything else, a comparison that would set one thing against another and inevitably risk invoking relationships of power, authority, authenticity, or privilege. Instead, she notes change and transformation as it occurs temporally.

Kincaid’s narration is careful to point out Mrs. Drew’s shift in language as it might occur along a Creole continuum. Kincaid makes a point to say that her mother spoke in a way she would more immediately understand, and yet undermines the assertion by placing it in parentheses. Mrs. Drew herself is not formally quoted here, but Kincaid cleverly ensures that her mother’s words are on the page. The rhetorical strategy employed here simultaneously privileges the *content* of the character’s speech and denies any significance to individual speaking styles. For Kincaid, at this specific instance, what a kind of speech or style of speaking may reveal about an individual character is irrelevant. What is of significance is the content of the utterance; Kincaid’s narration provides us with this. In stating the fact of her mother’s effort to speak in a dialect closer to Standard English than to Creole, Kincaid is perhaps demonstrating the ways in which family ties can strengthen when faced with a crisis. Or perhaps the exact opposite is going on. More likely, she is just emphasizing the fact that she cannot ever escape her post-colonial positionality, that she is, on many levels not “like” the Antiguan woman her mother is. The *effort* on her mother’s part is evidence that they are distanced from one another in many different ways. As the narration goes on, it becomes increasingly evident that Kincaid becomes more aware of what distinguishes her from the people around her.

Mrs. Drew's construction of blackness, as it relates to Devon's body, becomes a construction without which she could not think AIDS at all. While there is no evidence to suggest that Mrs. Drew ever develops any detailed knowledge of the disease apart from her care-giving relationship to her son, somehow a body's race becomes the means by which a medical condition gets materialized. The "change" she sees in Devon comes as a result of the way AIDS has consumed his body. What precisely this "change" is eludes linguistic construction. Instead, the "change" becomes articulatable by what is immediately visible and discursively available: race. The limited discourses available for discussing AIDS inspire a series of discursive substitutions. "Race" and "AIDS" come to articulate one another, each displacing their discursive limitations onto one another.

The only way to distinguish the AIDS body from the non-AIDS body is to mark it. For Mrs. Drew, skin colour qualifies as a visible marking, and so the marked body becomes that which is "so black" in relation to unmarked bodies (namely, hers and her daughter's at that moment in time). It is only under the condition of his AIDS diagnosis that Devon's race gets named and articulated by his mother. It was not until Kincaid returned from a white American community that she "saw" that Devon was black, or noticed that they were of the same complexion "in the way of race." It was not until her mother attempted to articulate Devon's medical condition that she noticed that Devon was "so black." In so doing, Kincaid and Mrs. Drew dissociate their blackness from Devon's, a blackness that is now intricately caught up in every political and social implication or stigma that HIV carries with it. It is the AIDS that allows Kincaid to "see" his race by reconfiguring it. In the opening pages of the book, Kincaid remembers the

birth of her brother and recalls that “[t]he color of his skin when he was born was a reddish-yellow” (4). Devon’s skin colour is of great importance from the first paragraph of the book. But that he begins his life as neither black nor white but rather as some blend of brighter colours allows Kincaid’s narrative to take Devon’s body and its passing through the stages of AIDS, being lead by his skin colour. By noting the evolution or evolving nature of Devon’s race, Devon’s race becomes performed relative to his medical condition. Kincaid’s narrative performs the AIDS subject by having the subject reiteratively constituted by its race. And while race is performed repeatedly by its association with the AIDS subject(s) of the text, race is reiterated in such a way as to emphasize the transforming nature of the subject. Devon is born reddish-yellow, becomes black, and then becomes “so black.” In part, the threat of death of the AIDS subject compels the racialized production of it.

For Kincaid, Devon’s exceptional blackness is something quite other than what it was for Mrs. Drew. Understanding her brother’s AIDS required a reformulation of the materiality of the body she knew to be Devon. And as her narrative passes through descriptions of Antiguan life, personal and familial anecdotes, as well as her research into this medical condition, it seems as though a potentially infinite number of factors could play into shaping the contours of Devon’s body. In noticing her brother’s skin colour during her visit to the hospital, Kincaid makes it a point to differentiate herself from Devon. She writes, “I am not really of his complexion, I am only of his complexion in the way of race”(9). Kincaid vaguely contrasts *her* race with that of her brother. It is not quite clear *how* it is that she is different from Devon with respect to “race” or “complexion.” What *is* important however, is Kincaid’s decision to make a distinction

between her brother and herself explicit. She makes it clear that they are different, but fails to articulate what differences she refers to or how they manifest themselves. There is an emphasis again on Kincaid's post-colonial positionality. Kincaid suggests that perhaps she is conscious of Devon's blackness because she lives "in a place where no one is of his complexion." Unlike her mother's response to Devon's sick body, Kincaid's response is heavily influenced by her post-colonial positionality. Kincaid remains self-conscious about this, and introduces the influence of her First World gaze upon AIDS as it stands to resonate throughout the novel.

But what *is* this other "blackness" that both Kincaid and Mrs. Drew allude to? Clearly, both Kincaid and her brother are black. What it means for Kincaid to be "black" is obviously very different from what it means for Devon to be "black." But that their blackness becomes distinguished and set apart from one another by virtue of a sexually transmitted disease seems to suggest that Devon's "so black" is a linguistic displacement for a sexuality that Mrs. Drew is as yet unable to articulate. Devon's sexuality, Devon's sexual behaviour, the means by which he contracted the virus that has made him so sick are also what have rendered him "so black." The "so black" is evidence of the limitations of discourses of sexuality as the gaps therein become replaced with other vague signifiers appropriated from discourses of race; "so black" replaces that which cannot be spoken, bringing us to the unconscious of AIDS commentary.

Within the course of the short but significant passage cited above, Kincaid begins by noting her own personal observation of Devon's skin colour. But then the "blackness" is given meaning by what her mother says about Devon's skin. Kincaid's observation notices the "blackness" and Mrs. Drew's observation ascribes the "blackness" with

meaning. Amidst these observations, Kincaid simultaneously makes note of her post-colonial positionality. In avoiding the use of dialogue, in avoiding giving “blackness” meaning, and in avoiding inscribing Devon’s body with any understandings of AIDS, Kincaid is still able to show her reader the various complexities of her brother’s sick body. Coming from America with now American eyes, American words, and American ways of understanding bodies, Kincaid has the difficult job of attempting to articulate or discursively construct the AIDS subject without reinscribing colonialist power structures. Clearly, Kincaid is very self-conscious about the possibility of falling into that trap – especially when her narration is commanded by the influence and constraints of Standard English. If Kincaid were to suggest that she believed Devon’s “blackness” was evidence of the toll AIDS had taken on him, she could be accused of maintaining a First World gaze and reiterating a colonial performative that places the black man into a state of abjection. She could, in a sense, be reinscribing colonialist agendas. At the same time, if she quoted her mother’s explanation of Devon’s “blackness,” she could be held responsible for transferring blame onto Mrs. Drew for spectacularizing Devon’s AIDS. Kincaid’s carefully contrived sentences ensure that this does not happen. What becomes increasingly apparent in a close and critical reading of Kincaid’s prose are the difficulties involved in representing AIDS from a post-colonial position. Both the AIDS subject and the mourner or witness can have exceedingly different affiliations with the First World or Third World, affiliations which nevertheless complicate a representation of AIDS that attempts to avoid reinscribing colonialist power structures.

Mourning AIDS/Mourning Antigua

Does the inclusion of Devon's "exceptional blackness" into Kincaid's narrative invoke notions of difference that succeed in creating a more "native" native? Does the "so black" depiction of her brother make Kincaid the "native informant" or "Third World representative" that Trinh and Kanhai remain critical of? Is it even possible for a writer in a post-colonial position *not* to speak of a more "native" native? Even to begin thinking about these questions as they relate to AIDS subjectivity, a closer examination of Kincaid's narrative structure is required. Kincaid's relationship with "blackness" and "the native" becomes further complicated when the narrative is regarded as a work of mourning.

At the most basic level, Kincaid's narrative is divided into two parts, neither separated by chapter titles nor section numbers. However, each section is marked by a shift in perspective regarding Kincaid's experience of Devon's death. The first part begins with Kincaid's return to Antigua when she goes to visit her brother. She writes: "When I saw my brother again after a long while, he was lying in a bed...and he was said to be dying of AIDS" (3). Though by the time Kincaid had begun writing *My Brother* Devon was already dead, she opens the narrative by saying that he was *dying* of AIDS. The verb invokes a process that has yet to be completed. Since the book is about Devon's death only in so far as it is a narration of Kincaid's *experience* of Devon's death, Kincaid positions herself as one who is as yet unable to announce her brother as dead, as having completed the process of dying. For Kincaid, Devon is not yet *dead*, but is dying, or rather, "*said* to be dying" (my emphasis). These lines invoke a certain disbelief in death, as though one could never die, but could always be "said to be dying".

The shift in perspective that takes over the second part of the book is invoked by the blunt but powerful line: “My brother died” (87). As though she is finally able to move away from a *dying* brother to one who has already *died*, Kincaid begins a chapter that actually proves the exact opposite. Just at the moment she is finally able to say that her brother died, she finds that he is actually very much alive. In fact, stating his death only opens up a further experience of him. A section that begins with death only proceeds to show that if “death” is meant to signify an end of a life, then it is as yet impossible, as Devon goes on living through Kincaid’s narrative and the reader’s experience of *My Brother*.

The openings of the two sections of the book introduce the book not as a book about death, but rather a book about experiencing the death a loved one. It is about the experience of loss and the process of grieving. In other words, *My Brother* is a work of mourning as Kincaid attempts to grieve the loss of her brother. She attempts to make sense of his death in order to be able to “[r]esume the life that his death had interrupted” (151). Towards the end of the book, she explicitly states how writing this book was necessary in her process of mourning: “When I heard about my brother’s illness and his dying, I knew, instinctively, that to understand it, or to make an attempt at understanding his dying, and not to die with him, I would write about it” (196). In order to “mourn” instead of “die,” she would have to write the subject. But as Kincaid appears to never complete a process of mourning, she remains as always mourning in order to avoid dying.

In the first part of the narrative, when Devon is “said to be dying,” Kincaid recounts her various efforts at keeping her brother alive. She narrates the process by which she was able to provide her brother with AZT. She discusses her relationship with

Dr. Ramsey, the only man on the island who might know how to treat Devon. Kincaid attempts to keep her brother “alive” by writing his life: his life as a singer, his life as a seducer of women, his love for gardening, his wanting Kentucky Fried Chicken when his body got stronger after taking AZT. The first part of Kincaid’s narrative is very much about keeping Devon alive.

Kincaid begins the second part as though somewhere along her narrative thus far she brought Devon back to life. “He died” as though he had never died before, as though he was not dead when the narrative began. And yet in the second part, Kincaid explicitly tells her reader that she began writing after the death of her brother as an attempt to mourn her loss. She even points to the fact that her narrative is distanced from her experience of Devon’s death by virtue of the fact that she is not offering a daily account or log of Devon’s life: “For a long time after my brother died I could not write about him, I could not think about him in a purposeful way” (91). While the first section of the book tries to preserve Kincaid’s experience of Devon’s life, the second part seems to attempt to preserve Kincaid’s experience of Devon’s death. This second part narrates Kincaid’s experience of the process of Devon’s funeral, a process that brings a “gay Devon” to life as it is only then that Kincaid comes to learn of her brother’s homosexuality. It is during Devon’s funeral, a ritual meant to put the dead to rest, that Kincaid says, “his life unfolded before me not like a map just found, or a piece of old paper just found, his life unfolded and there was everything to see and there was nothing to see” (162). Kincaid cannot completely put her brother to rest as his life continues to unfold before her. Devon is not made “immortal” simply through what might appear to be a commemoration of his life in Kincaid’s narrative. Though Devon is dead, he goes

on “living” by way of Kincaid’s experience of mourning: a mourning that remains incomplete, as demonstrated by Kincaid’s non-linear narrative structure. Kincaid discusses her own writing as a means of coming to terms with Devon’s death. She writes about the experience of her father’s death and her own experiences of memory, love, and sickness. The second part of the book is about trying to put “death” to rest.

In addition to being divided into two parts, Kincaid’s narrative proceeds in a non-linear style as events do not follow one another in chronological order. The narrative shuttles back and forth between Kincaid’s childhood days, her visits with her brother, and her life after his death. Kincaid’s travel between America and Antigua is coupled with sporadic time travel that circles in and around itself, always centering on Devon’s death. In the second part alone, Kincaid takes her narrative through “[t]wo months before I saw him alive for the last time” (109), to “one day during the time when my brother was dying” (121), to when “[m]y brother, the one who was dying, who has died...as a little boy, two years old” (130), to “[n]ot really more than a week after he was buried” (151) to “that day that he was buried” (91). Kincaid’s narrative shifts back and forth through time, all the while keeping her experience of Devon’s death central to this movement.

How does the non-linear style play into an understanding of the narrative that has been split into two parts? How to make sense of Kincaid’s loss by examining the narrative structure of *My Brother*? Kincaid composes a work of mourning that remains incomplete. She remains deeply attached to her brother and unable to proceed in her narrative without coming back to him. In so doing, Kincaid’s work of mourning becomes “melancholic.” The discussions that emanate out of Freud’s consideration of the melancholic are quite complex and often play significant roles in the cultural

understanding of AIDS. But for the purposes of this discussion, I intend to refer to the situation of melancholia as a means by which to demonstrate the ungrievable losses experienced by the post-colonial writer. As Butler defines it, “[m]elancholy is both the refusal of grief and the incorporation of loss, a miming of the death it cannot mourn” (Butler, *Psychic* 142). These two elements of melancholia are performed by the two parts of Kincaid’s narrative. Devon’s “dying” and Kincaid’s stories of AZT, medicines, and care-giving are all demonstrative of a refusal to grieve, a rejecting of mourning. In wanting to keep her brother alive, Kincaid refuses to let him die for fear that she will die with him. In the second part, Devon dies and dies again, and Kincaid’s narrative structure mimes the incorporation of her loss by constantly *coming back* to his death: “And my brother died...” (148). Kincaid’s narrative becomes melancholic as she remains unable to completely mourn the loss of her brother. For Kincaid, “mourning” is something she is incapable of doing, a process that she sees only her mother capable of achieving. Kincaid imagines that if her mother had to mourn her death, it would involve “taking in my actual existence and then its erasure” (131). So mourning becomes a process by which a complete erasure becomes possible. Clearly, Kincaid is not able to mourn Devon’s death in this sense. It is the experience of melancholia, the perpetual and never-ending re-mourning that make it impossible to “let go” of the AIDS subject.

Similarly, Kincaid is unable to completely mourn the loss of her Antiguan homeland by virtue of her melancholic attachment to the Caribbean. In addition to her constantly returning to Antigua as well as her various experiences of Antigua, Kincaid performs the melancholic who maintains a desire for the lost object. For the melancholic, there is a simultaneous “breaking of attachment” as well as “the incorporation of the

attachment *as* identification, where identification becomes a magical, a psychic form of preserving the object” (Butler, *Psychic* 134). For Kincaid, this translates into a situation whereby she wants to hold Antiguan cultures at a distance from her own sense of self while simultaneously being able to ground her identity in some element of the nation. When Dr. Ramsey first comes to meet Devon, Kincaid notes that “he spoke to him in broken English; I could not understand what they were saying” (33). She constantly makes note of how distanced she has become from this culture. By making note of her “loss” of Antiguan identity, she is also able to say such things as “I am not really of his complexion” and agree with such assertions as “the disease has made him so black.” This becomes a means by which she can “let go” of Antigua. However, Kincaid still takes on the role of “native informant” in that she is able to make such assertions as “Antiguans are at once prudish and licentious” (41) without offering any explanation for making such a claim. Her heritage provides her with the authority to make such a statement.

Kincaid’s melancholic narrative attempts to mourn both Devon’s death as well as a loss of “homeland.” Kincaid must distance herself from both “AIDS” and “Antigua” in order to be able to come back to them. And come back to them again. Kincaid does this through her writing, a process that performs the melancholia that is almost always a part of AIDS. Holding her brother at a distance, a distance that also allows her to come back to him and be haunted by him, is necessary so that she does not die with him. In other words, she must be allowed to always mourn him. But why? Why must she *always* mourn? Of what import is melancholia? As Adam Phillips explains, “[m]ourning is immensely reassuring because it convinces us of something we might otherwise doubt;

our attachment to the other” (Butler, 153). Kincaid remains self-conscious about her post-colonial position by constantly pointing out that there are certain things about Antigua that she no longer understands. She notes the various barriers between Devon and herself and even concedes that she “might have seemed like a ridiculous person to him” (8). At the same time, however, she succeeds in creating a more “native” native by calling upon the spectacle of Devon’s “so black” body (9). She even turns him into something of a monster when he attacks her with a “disorienting” and grotesque image of a “grown-up-man penis...looking like that” (91). Indeed, the more “native” native is brought to light as Kincaid highlights images of difference. At the same time, Kincaid’s mourning indicates her attachment to Devon as he exists as the most “native” native.

Kincaid mourns Devon’s death in a way that reaffirms her attachment to him. She is so attached to him that her experience of him becomes melancholic; she is never able to let him go. At the same time, she is distanced from him by virtue of his AIDS. Devon is marked as an “AIDS body,” a “so black” body, and is thus distinguished from Kincaid. Furthermore, as Kincaid holds on to the image of the “native” native, she is able to align her own identity with her native land through a melancholic identification of her post-colonial positionality. The “native” native not only allows Kincaid to let go of an Antigua she left behind, but it also allows her to return to it. Holding onto the image of the “native” native also allows Kincaid to hold onto the AIDS subject, to always be able to come back to it. And so Kincaid *does* become the “native informant” who creates the “native” native by means of a melancholic attachment. But it is only through this post-colonial position that Kincaid can constantly mourn the loss of the AIDS subject.

“Dis Course” and “Dis Chupidness”

Kincaid’s own cautious and self-conscious prose sheds light on the many problems of language that come in attempting to articulate the complexities of AIDS. The discourses surrounding AIDS emerge out of and are informed by many overlapping discourses including those of “medicine,” “science,” and “culture.” More specifically, in considering the discourses of marginalized peoples, the discourses of “race” and “sexuality” come to be of particular relevance when examining the various exclusionary matrices that create the abjected figures that have informed many images of “AIDS.” The discourses of “race” and “sexuality,” “queer sexuality” in particular, are infused with silences, exclusions, and omissions that come out of the experience of repression. Much of the work of cultural theory has been to examine and disrupt these silences that threaten to sustain the reiteration of oppressive relationships of power.

The question of what goes unspoken is raised throughout *My Brother* as the inability to articulate AIDS is contextualized within Antiguan local cultures. Devon constantly refers to AIDS as “dis chupidness” (Kincaid, 29), and Kincaid places much of Devon’s dialogue in parenthesis both drawing attention to his words but simultaneously rendering them as secondary, or lacking in importance, as though had those words never been spoken, they would have had little impact on her narration. The parentheses draw attention to the fact Creole or Antiguan speech patterns are somewhat irrelevant to Kincaid’s purpose. The meaning of Devon’s words are important, but the utterance itself is not. Devon’s speech is not silenced. Rather, it becomes knowable only through the experience of the narrator. My argument echoes Merle Hodge’s analysis of the function of Creole dialogue in *Annie John*. She writes: “the specificity of Antiguan experience is

not in itself a major preoccupation of the writer. *Annie John* is not primarily about collective experience. It is about individual experience, which in the telling expands into universal experience, often approaching the mythological in its dimensions” (53). I would contend that a similar thing is happening in *My Brother*. The story of Devon is told self-consciously through Kincaid’s experience of her brother. Kincaid always remains the central figure of the novel emphasizing that her experience of AIDS is individual and unique. Perhaps this is the only kind of account of AIDS that testimony offers us: one that remains specific to its witness. In an epidemic that points to over forty distinct clinical manifestations (Treichler, 124), perhaps “AIDS” resists being understood as any kind of “collective experience” either medically or culturally. It is through the specificity of the individual experience of AIDS that medical communities must respond to. On the other hand, the evidence of the experience of melancholia in Kincaid’s narrative suggests that perhaps it is possible to move from the absolute particularity of one person’s experience of witnessing AIDS to more general or “collective” points of understanding. It is more likely that any such “collective experience” must be accessed through an individual understanding of AIDS.

Parvisini-Gebert argues that many Caribbean societies are able to turn inwards to address local concerns in such a way as to have “responded to their former colonization with myriad strategies for subverting the very history and identity imposed upon them by their metropolitan masters” (162). A turn inward may have the power to address much-needed social work. It may have the power to absolve PWA’s of their status as abjected figures by attributing AIDS discourses with the power and authority they need to responsibly address the pandemic. AIDS is “dis chupidness” in that it still remains at

once absurd and incomprehensible, yet still located in the here and now as Devon's "dis" might point out. Devon resists using the word "AIDS", not only because of the social stigma attached to it, but also because the word itself cannot signify anything definite for him. He is ill, and that is all "AIDS" can tell him. But as Kincaid writes, "illness" seems to be something more knowable than "AIDS". The word "AIDS" carries with it implications that extend beyond conventional understandings of "illness": "[Devon] looked just like an ordinary sick person; an ordinary sick person was something [fellow hospital patients] knew about, a person with AIDS was not"(52). The unknowability of AIDS makes it nothing more than "chupidness" in Devon's eyes. Throughout the book, AIDS remains as that which is completely inarticulatable. "AIDS" undergoes a number of linguistic displacements, being "blackness" and "dis chupidness". It is through these discursive constructions that Kincaid comes to know what AIDS is for her family. Her exposure to these articulations of AIDS introduces her to a way of understanding AIDS by seeing the pandemic through the optic of the individual experience. In exposing herself to many different discourses on AIDS throughout her narrative journey, Kincaid becomes further educated on the nature of the pandemic.

Sex 101: The Miseducation of AIDS

In order to learn more about AIDS in a way that might be useful in addressing her brother's illness, Kincaid calls upon Dr. Ramsey, "the only doctor in Antigua who was publicly involved with this disease" (31). Ramsey not only helped PWA's in Antigua to the best of his abilities, but also held lectures and group workshops in order to educate the people of Antigua about AIDS. Kincaid attends his lectures and group sessions,

which seem to have a powerful impact on the way she comes to understand sexuality. And while it seems as though at times Ramsey attempted to shock people into awareness, the technique did not always prove effective. In one particular lecture, Ramsey explains the nature of HIV and then shows his audience some extraordinary slides of people afflicted with AIDS and other STD's. As Kincaid describes the impact the talk had on her: "These images of suffering and death were the result of sexual activity, and at the end of Dr. Ramsey's talk, I felt I would never have sex again, not even with myself" (38). Ramsey's talk addressed issues of illness, disease, and the body. While Kincaid's narration suggests that Ramsey does address methods of contraception, it doesn't seem to make notice of any discussion of desire. The issue of sexual desire only surfaces when Kincaid points out the instances where Ramsey's educational strategies did not prove effective. The issue of male sexual desire becomes a problem in need of attention in AIDS education. Many of the men in Ramsey's seminars would jokingly suggest that the doctor may have had ulterior motives: "Me no go wid Ramsey, you know, 'e just want to keep all de women fo' 'eself" (Kincaid, 39). Though the men are merely cracking jokes, they do respond to "AIDS" as though it were a local concern – it had to do with Ramsey, the men in the lecture room, and the women they had access to (conceived of as also a local group if Ramsey could keep "all" the women to himself). Local concerns regarding male desire emerge and overshadow the education Ramsey offers them. For these men, what was immediate was that AIDS might have something to do with their sexuality, rather than what it could do to their health.

Ramsey also tells Kincaid about another time when the immediate local concerns of male sexuality proved to be a more important issue than AIDS. After giving

presumably a similar educational talk to some young people, a couple of the young men asked for a lift to the part of town where prostitutes lived. As Kincaid tells the story:

[Dr. Ramsey] asked them if they had not listened to anything he had just told them, and they said to him yes, but they would rather die than leave the butter women alone (“Me rather dead dan leave butta women ‘lone”). The prostitutes in Antigua are from Santo Domingo. They are mostly light-brown-skinned black women. Because of their complexion, Antiguan men call them butter women. It is believed that a majority of them are HIV-positive. (40)

The sexual desire these young men had for the butter women was more powerful than anything Ramsey could tell them. Once again, the power of local concerns takes precedence. In Antigua, the butter women’s light-brown complexion becomes the sign that signifies an appealing and desirable sexuality. The very mention of their skin invokes sexual desire. And while many of them may be HIV-positive, the AIDS has not made them “so black,” and so they are not gazed upon with the kind of contempt and disgust that Devon’s body experiences. While contact with Devon’s “so black” body is avoided by almost everyone around Devon, the butter women still retain their sexual appeal. The young men’s desire for the light-skinned women is even greater than their will to live, the body’s performance of health becomes the materialization of a healthy body. The sexual history of these women is covered over by a surface of inscription, namely their golden-coloured skin.

It would almost seem as though the butter women become fetishized by the young men who attend Ramsey’s lecture. Even though the men might know that many of the butter women are HIV-positive, they desire them all the same as they maintain the desire to have the butter women *as* healthy women. They have the desire to desire healthy women and so the butter women come to be those healthy women. The butter women

become fetishized as their lack of “blackness”, or their being not “so black” becomes an exotic source of sexual fantasy. The spectacle of their bodies further eroticizes them, making them more beautiful than ever before. Ramsey’s talk only seemed to further illuminate the appeal of these whiter women; it is their racial difference or racial ambiguity that determines their sexual appeal. Because the light-skinned women are still seen as the “butter women”, they retain their sexuality and their health. Devon, on the other hand, is seen as “so black” to his mother as she maintains the desire to have her children helplessly dependent upon her. In many ways he becomes “colonized” by the “colonized” in that the shade of his skin comes to signify inferiority. He is not “seen” as a “healthy body” and so the “colonizer,” his mother as care-giver, who as an Antiguan is also “colonized,” subjects her son to an inferior position of power. Her insatiable desire to sustain her position as matriarchal caregiver facilitates a rematerialization of Devon that makes him less healthy than ever before. Both the young men from Ramsey’s talk as well as Mrs. Drew see what they choose to see and configure and materialize the AIDS subject accordingly.

In pointing out the various responses to AIDS education, Kincaid remains supportive but critical. AIDS education is no easy task. Even Kincaid found herself so overwhelmed by the spectacle of AIDS that “education” did not make any sense:

Dr. Ramsey explained to us what the HIV virus is, how it behaves in the body, how a virus behaves and how the HIV virus, a retrovirus, differs from a normal virus, but I cannot really remember any of it because he showed extraordinary slides of people in various stages of affliction from sexually transmitted diseases. (37)

The visions of AIDS proved so powerful as to undermine the important knowledge of HIV Ramsey offered to his audience. In Ramsey’s lectures, the spectacle

of AIDS and the sexual desire of workshop participants undermined the educational information offered up because AIDS could not be made accessible through local concerns. While many people tried to offer and find support in Ramsey's workshops, the issues of local sexuality and the sexual lifestyles of the local communities needed to be addressed with greater concern. Perhaps the problem is that not enough is known about AIDS to address education on a more local, individual level. For communities in which sexuality is intricately caught up or articulated by discourses of race, the nature of desire and sexuality as it is racially inflected needs to be addressed in order to provide more persuasive education methods.

* * *

Just as Ramsey's lectures neglect to address explicitly issues of sexuality until after someone else inadvertently brings it up in ways to point out the failures in education programs, *My Brother* shows how Kincaid neglects to address Devon's sexuality until after his death. While Ramsey fails to bring up the issue of male desire, Kincaid silences the issue of homosexual desire until the end of the book. Kincaid does make off-hand references and suppositions with respect to Devon's sexuality throughout the narrative, but fails to address the issue extensively. Homosexuality remains silenced until someone else brings it up. It is *after* Devon's death and *before* the writing of the book that Kincaid's brother becomes articulated as a "gay man." At Devon's funeral, Kincaid meets a woman who only claims that "she knew" about Devon's condition. Her "knowing" something about Devon struck Kincaid unexpectedly. The woman was a

lesbian woman who opened her home up to homosexual men who could come to enjoy each other's company. She tells Kincaid that Devon frequented her home, thus "outing" his sexuality. Even though his sexuality has been "outed," Kincaid's response to this discovery suggests that his sexuality will always remain unknowable to her. She writes: "A great sadness overcame me, and the source of the sadness was the deep feeling I had always had about him: that he had died without ever understanding or knowing, or being able to let the world in which he lived know, who he was" (162). But it was not that at all. It was that the world around him would never understand "who he was" not because he couldn't let them, but because they rendered him abject and invisible by failing to produce a discourse by which his subjectivity could be comprehensible.

Kincaid could "see" that her brother was black, and perhaps blacker than ever before. However, after learning of Devon's homosexuality, Kincaid felt the sudden need to rethink his body, an impulsive desire to reformulate the materiality of Devon's body by beginning to think through his sexuality. When Kincaid's mother looks down into the coffin at Devon's dead body, she felt that the body did not look like her son at all. And while the body in the coffin had been made-up, and did not resemble Devon's body as it had been in the later stages of his illness, Kincaid believes that her mother

forgot that for a long time he did not look like Devon, the Rastafarian, the reggae singer, the seducer of women (we did not and cannot now know what he looked like as the seducer of men), that the body in the coffin was of someone we did not know, the body lying there would never become familiar to us, it would have no likes and dislikes, it would never say anything memorable, we would never quarrel with it, he was dead. (181)

While many things are being said here, it seems imperative to note "the look" of AIDS. For Kincaid, Devon did not have "the look" of a homosexual. She did not know of his

homosexuality before his death, and so Devon's sexuality was not materialized for Kincaid on his living body. While Kincaid confesses to being saddened by the fact that she could not incorporate Devon's sexuality into the contours of his materialized living body, Devon's body still undergoes a post-mortem rematerialization through Kincaid's narrative. Devon's body will experience two deaths – the physical death and then a psychological one. Kincaid attempts to re-conceptualize “Devon” as he existed as a “gay man.” She feels that she did not know her brother as a “gay man” and so must revisit her understanding of him (as it occurs through her relationships with him and her writing him) through a queer optic. She must, in a sense, give re-birth to her brother now as a gay man. He has become rematerialized through Kincaid's narrative – and as yet, the AIDS body lives on. The “Devon” of Kincaid's narrative lives on although his body is already dead.

Kincaid goes on to draw parallels between Devon's identity as a homosexual with her own identity as a writer: “His homosexuality is one thing, and my becoming a writer is another altogether, but this truth is not lost to me: I could not have become a writer while living among the people I knew best, I could not have become myself while living among the people I knew best...” (162). In likening becoming a writer to homosexuality, Kincaid implies that both “the writer” and “the homosexual” are responsible for the production of a great many discourses today. But in declaring that she could not have become a writer if she had stayed amongst the black people she knew, she implies that a number of discourses could have been withheld from her, placing discursive limits on her ability to know herself. However, the passage suggests that she still is unable to develop an accurate sense of self despite having left Antigua by the irony of her referring to her

Antiguan family as “the people she knew best.” Her entire narrative suggests that she does not know either her mother or her brother “best” in any sense. In any case, she suggests that the discourses of her Antigua would limit the production of knowledge around her (though she fails to realize that despite being exposed to many other varied discourses, discursive limitations still abound in her North American life of education and privilege). Similarly, Devon’s homosexuality became limited and confined by the discourses surrounding him in Antigua. And perhaps his identity would have been limited in some other way by discourses in North America. What is important here is the recognition of the limits of discourses to articulate identities and the ways in which discourses produce and police identities.

As mentioned earlier, the narrative structure of the book seems to perform a kind of melancholia with respect to the loss of the AIDS subject and the colonial subject. The repetitive and circular unfolding of Kincaid’s story appears to critique the chronological order that is the normative shapeliness of narrative. So why keep Devon’s sexuality a “secret” until the later part of the book? Why reiterate this seemingly normative way of “coming out?” It would seem as though Kincaid is not merely reiterating normative ways of knowing. The entire text is haunted by Devon’s sexuality and Kincaid often lets “the secret” of “gayness” slip through her narrative. For example, in the opening pages of the book, she writes: “he lived a life that is said to be typical in contracting the virus that causes AIDS: he used drugs (I was only sure of marijuana and cocaine) and he had many sexual partners (I only knew of women)” (7). By emphasizing that she *only* knew of women, she identifies herself as someone who did not “know” everything about her brother, and also introduces the possibility of there not being “only women” among

Devon's "many sexual partners." She draws attention to the gaps in her knowledge with respect to Devon's sexuality but also suggests that she now recognizes the gaps as such. In so doing, she implies that inherent in her articulation of "many sexual partners" is a heterosexual imperative that needs to be broken down. Kincaid's words *say* that she could only presume that her brother was heterosexual. But what her words *do* is something quite other; they actually point out the existence of "a secret" beneath an assumed heterosexuality.

So again: Why is Devon's homosexuality not "outed" until the final stages of the book? If it were made explicit at the beginning, would Kincaid run the risk of rendering the "native" native into a further state of abjection? Is "coming out" too early a dangerous thing? If so, when is it still "too early?" What Kincaid cleverly establishes before Devon's being "outed" is how her self is intricately caught up in every aspect of Devon and AIDS. While attending Dr. Ramsey's lectures, she feels she would not have sex with herself. When she attempts to understand Devon's new "blackness," she can only do so by considering her own. When she discusses Devon's death, she can only do so by demonstrating her inability to mourn it. When she finally learns of Devon's homosexuality, she instinctively sees it as caught up in her identity as a writer. Devon's homosexuality is very much a part of her own identity. In many ways, she must show how she is implicated in a black homosexuality before she can "out" Devon (or herself as the case may be). Before outing Devon in a way that might render him abjected from the beginning of the narrative, she must "come out" herself. She must show how every aspect of her life is caught up in Devon's sexuality and his "most native" self.

By keeping Devon's sexuality a "secret," a secret that also seems to reveal itself through the text *as* a secret, Kincaid critiques the normative desire to keep homosexuality silenced. His sexuality is always hidden from view and so Kincaid faces his loss in such a way as it is "experienced as 'blackness.'" ⁴ By making her readers aware that she is withholding a secret from them, Kincaid critiques the desire to have homosexuality kept as a secret. While Devon is not explicitly "outed" until the end, Kincaid asks her reader to question who is it that actually *needs* to be outed? If Devon's "secret" is known to be "a secret" from the start (though what that secret *is* is not explicitly stated until the end), then Kincaid is asking her reader to consider what is the *real* "secret" in this narrative? By this I mean, what is the secret that is truly a secret because it escapes the narrative and is concealed completely? The "truest" secret is one that does not reveal itself *as* a secret. So, what is the "truest" secret in this text? Is it that Kincaid is being "outed?" Is it that the reader is being "outed?" Is it that the reader needs to be "outed?" Every time Devon dies in the narrative, more is revealed about Kincaid, Antigua, America, and the reader. With the funeral, what is being revealed in addition to Devon's homosexuality? And more importantly, what is *not* being revealed? By "outing" Devon in the final stages of the novel within a melancholic narrative, Kincaid asks her readers to circle back and to mourn the loss of the homosexual as well as recover the homosexual that is as yet not "outed."

My Brother performs the means by which black gay male subjectivity remains invisible until the event of the spectacle of AIDS renders it visible. Throughout the narrative, Devon is articulated as a black man, a brother, a son, a sexual man, a Rastafarian, and a reggae singer. Kincaid, as a critical writer, knew of Devon's

⁴ I borrow this expression from Dianne Simmon's discussion of *At the Bottom of the River*.

homosexuality before the conception of this book and yet strategically decided to make the declaration after she had narrated the event of Devon's death, performing the problem she found in Ramsey's work: that issues of sexuality are not sufficiently addressed until it is too late. Devon's homosexuality is invisible until his death makes it visible (though not necessarily "knowable"). The silences that make racialized sexualities inarticulatable make "the man" invisible as a "gay black man" until the spectacle of AIDS is located (in this case, through a physical death) on his body. Kincaid's narrative strategy denies the reader the ability to make Devon's sexuality knowable through anything but his race, articulations of which renders homosexuality invisible. As a result, the reader is denied any insight into how Devon's sexuality played into his daily life. The gay man was non-existent. He was replaced by a man who was "blacker" than his own black skin colour. Visual modes of acquiring knowledge allow for the "look" of AIDS to be made visible and spectacularized by such blackness. This way, the "'other' subject of AIDS," as Simon Watney puts it, becomes stamped with "the unmistakable and irrefutable signs of the innately degenerate" (Watney, "Subject" 70) and thus rendered into a domain of severe abjection.

The spectacle of AIDS allows for a furnishing of a healthy "general public" against an abject body of PWA's. And just as the limitations of the discursive categories of "race" and "sexuality" account for the silences that surface in articulating "racialized sexualities," the AIDS subject becomes articulated by highly problematic discourses that have the potential to perform violent erasures in the bodies of knowledge surrounding AIDS. By drawing attention to racialized sexualities in such a way as to uncover their discursive limitations, perhaps we can come to a new understanding of AIDS

subjectivity. The emergence of such constructs as “African AIDS” shows that contemporary discourses have the ability to use “AIDS” as a means by which to reintroduce colonial ideals into the authority of medical discourses. Contemporary North American discourses seem to still maintain the desire to “other” and oppress based on race or sexual orientation. The violent erasures inherent in contemporary discourses that emerged from a history of repression and silencing allow for the possibility of letting the PWA slip under the immense weight of overlapping domains of abjection. We must render the invisible visible and develop an understanding of AIDS subjectivity that does not automatically submit unarticulated or invisible identities into a domain of inescapable abjection.

* * *

By way of conclusion, I would like to circle back through my argument in such a way as to emphasize how it is that a “racialized sexuality” emerges in this text. For the purposes of this thesis, a “racialized sexuality” refers to the mechanisms by which sexuality is understood through the power relations that are performed through the (mis)understandings of race. As I have demonstrated above, “race” means many different things. For Kincaid, “race” is not only about skin colour. When she recognizes that she is of the same complexion as Devon, but of a different race, she implies that race has something to do with nationality. Devon is, of course, Antiguan. Kincaid, on the other hand, understands her nationality as lying somewhere between Antigua and America. Kincaid, now not quite “Antiguan,” understands “race” as it comes to inform

an understanding of national identity. For Mrs. Drew and some of the men in Dr. Ramsey's lectures, "race" seems to be more about skin colour than nationality. The local Antiguan in Kincaid's narrative do not recognize race as an issue of nationality, but rather conceive of differences in race as differences in skin colour. Kincaid's narrative gives evidence of this in everything from Devon's "so black" to the light-skinned butter women. Skin colour, for the local Antiguan of Kincaid's narrative, seems to signify notions of a clean and health body. Devon's sick body became "so black" while the butter women's light skin allowed men to forget that many were actually HIV-positive. Devon's "so black" is Mrs. Drew's displacement for articulating Devon's homosexuality. Devon refers to AIDS as "dis chupidness" in order to avoid the abjection that a link to AIDS, "the gay disease", may warrant him. By displacing "AIDS" with "dis chupidness," Devon gives evidence of the anxieties surrounded in articulating homosexual identities. Mrs. Drew does a similar thing by disavowing any possibility of using queer discourses to understand her son's illness. Instead, she articulates Devon's sexuality in racialized terms. So Devon's homosexuality becomes understood through the discourses of race. Locally, "so black" bodies are abjected while lighter skin becomes eroticized as in the case of the butter women. The racial hierarchy, where "the lighter" you are the more powerful and healthy you are, now comes to make sexuality comprehensible. Sexuality becomes understood through recognizable power relations based on race.

The men in Dr. Ramsey's lecture understood race and sexuality in a "local" way and so could not accept the AIDS education offered to them. Dr. Ramsey associates "AIDS" with diseased and mutilated bodies by showing slides of inflicted bodies during

his presentations. He also presumably discusses “safe sex.” What becomes evident to the men attending the lecture is that somehow their sexualities are being policed. They are being policed by the discourses of AIDS that emanate predominantly from “First World” nations. By responding that Ramsey “just want to keep all de women fo’ ‘eself,” they recognize that the “First World” policing of sexuality through discourses of AIDS has the potential to regulate their sexuality even on a local level. So as the “First World” comes to police “Third World” sexuality, the issues of nationhood and nationality become an integral part of local Antiguan sexualities. “Nationality,” or “race” as Kincaid understands it, provides the constraints by which sexual behaviour is policed and monitored for local Antiguan.

So whether “race” is thought of in terms of skin colour or nationality, it is now intricately caught up in an understanding of “sexuality” and the ideals of a “healthy body.” The reiteration of discourses of race has allowed for the production of racialized discourses of sexuality. More specifically, the discourses of race in Antigua are now intricately caught up in an understanding of sexuality. This “Antiguan” understanding of “race” complicates Kincaid’s mourning of her homeland in her post-colonial position. Kincaid appears to understand her nationality in terms of race. As she occupies the melancholic position of both desiring and disavowing an identification with Antigua, Kincaid mourns her racial identity. She is neither Antiguan nor American. In America, her race is defined by her blackness. In Antigua, her race is understood, in part, by her “Americanness.” Kincaid distinguishes her race through an American understanding of racial differences that take nationality into account. What Kincaid begins to mourn is her inability to access Antiguan discourses of race, discourses that may now have more to do

with sexuality and ideas of ideal healthy bodies than with nationality. Kincaid mourns her inability to use Antiguan ways of understanding race to describe her post-colonial situation. If she is to understand her racial identity within an Antiguan understanding of race, she must abandon certain meanings of race that she knows through her American education.

Kincaid only knows “Antigua” through her relationships with her family. In mourning the death of her brother, Kincaid mourns her belief that she never knew Devon as a “gay man.” In revisiting Devon’s life in her narrative, a work of mourning, Kincaid realizes that she must understand her entire history with Devon through his sexuality. In order to mourn her brother, Kincaid believes that she must revisit her relationship with Devon by viewing it through the lens of queer sexuality. And if it is through Devon that some of Kincaid’s understanding of “Antigua” is made possible, then Kincaid must view her relationship with “Antigua” through an understanding of queer sexuality. Kincaid’s race, her nationality, and her post-colonial positionality all necessitate a re-configuration under an understanding and a recognition of queer sexuality.

Chapter Two

“Slaves of Sexuality”: Slave Histories and the Performativity of the PWA

Words empty out with age. Die and rise again, accordingly invested with new meanings,
and always equipped with a secondhand memory.

-Trinh T. Minh-ha
“‘Difference’: A Special Third World Women Issue”

As gay men and lesbians, we are the sexual niggers of our society.

-Melvin Dixon
“I’ll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name”

How are we to make sense of AIDS? How do we come to know AIDS and how will we know when we “know?” Undoubtedly, AIDS is as much a cultural and linguistic issue as it is a scientific and medical problem. Its scientific discourses have produced an equally large body of cultural meaning and signification. And in order to think carefully about the crisis, we must be able to think through the narratives and politics that envelop it. All the narratives, political agendas, and medical research that surround AIDS are in some way responses to the subject of AIDS, the PWA. It is the identity of the PWA (as well as the “non-PWA”) that has always been of concern to those who engage in cultural and scientific research. How to make sense of an epidemic that threatens the lives of millions? Perhaps the subject position of the PWA is a place to start. Understanding the multitude of identities that could fall under “PWA” is an on-going process that will always require responsible monitoring, re-thinking, and re-writing. Paula Treichler eloquently articulates the necessity of pursuing the study of identity as it relates to theoretical discussions of AIDS: “An effective response to an epidemic (as to any widespread cultural crisis) depends on the existence of identities for whom that epidemic

is meaningful – and stories in which those identities are taken up and animated” (235). The task she offers up involves rendering identities, particularly those of the most abjected beings, into discourses that will help in the promotion of powerful political and social responses to AIDS. How must we think identity in order to be able to respond responsibly to the epidemic? An examination of AIDS discourses allows for a critique of the formation of identity: a critique that would ideally lead to a productive way of thinking the PWA. Some of the most candid accounts of the PWA are offered by testimonies found in biographical and autobiographical texts. And while these genres are complex in themselves, they allow for the possibility of developing an understanding of the ways in which we come to know disease, desire, and ourselves. These narrative genres represent some of the ways we are able to make sense of being. In the case of AIDS, they provide linguistic configurations of the AIDS subject that make the PWA knowable.

In the case of autobiographical journals, the author has the opportunity simultaneously to recreate and preserve experience. Autobiography is the means by which an author becomes knowable for a reader. A traditional critical understanding of autobiography focuses on the ways in which the self is mediated by linguistic production and the anxieties underlying attempts at self-production. Autobiography has often been seen as a problematic attempt at self-representation and so often qualifies as “quasi-fictional” because “memories,” “truths,” and “reliable narrators” are perpetually called into question. The purposes and instabilities of autobiography are further problematized by many critics who consider the influence of race on writing. In “On the Ends of Afro-American ‘Modernist’ Autobiography”, Craig Werner briefly outlines the dual project of

African American autobiography by suggesting that it is both an attempt at writing the self into being as well as an intent to write the black community into freedom. The black writer carries with him/her an inescapable legacy and experience of racism, a history that discursively informs the materialization of the self. R. Baxter Miller sheds light on the possible motivations behind autobiographies by African Americans that have been “enslaved by the historical script” of cultural and political agendas to show how autobiographers have the potential to rewrite the “scripts” by which we allow our lives to be performed. I would contest that any author is not without an identity that has been informed by overlapping and mediated histories that have been reiterated and passed down through generations. In the case of the African American writer, the inheritance will always be haunted by the spectres of slavery: images and phantasms that provide the condition for the performativity of the raced subject.

The debate over the “reliability,” “accuracy,” or “truthfulness” of autobiography can bring the critical reader to an impasse. By merely being an “autobiography,” a text does not become an indisputable authority. Instead, it gives insight to questions surrounding subjectivity by providing readers with valuable testimony. For understanding the PWA, such testimony is invaluable. For understanding the African American PWA, such testimony must be considered within the context of the histories of slavery that inform it. But for many African American PWA’s, other overlapping histories are also at play. In Gary Fisher’s *Gary in Your Pocket*, the African American gay man takes on identities that lie at the convergence of many different axes of categorization, each axis haunted by the spectres of “history.” For the gay man, an understanding of queer histories must be called into his being. For Fisher, the history of

the PWA becomes of the utmost relevance in attempting to articulate his being, a history that spirals back on itself to point to the legacies left by racism and sexism. Fisher's autobiography leads readers to some of the converging points of the overlapping discourses of "race" and "sexuality." An examination of this overlap will then open up the possibility for considering the identity of the PWA for whom a "racialized sexuality," the means by which a racialized subject comes to understand sexuality, is a lived experience. In Fisher's autobiography, the understanding of "racialized sexuality" remains lodged within the testimony of a black gay man with AIDS. As the competing histories of "race" and "sexuality" converge in Fisher's narrative, so emerges the possibility of thinking through the identity of the PWA in terms of a racialized sexuality.

In the case of a "racialized sexuality," at the point of the converging discourses and silences around "race" and "sexuality," it becomes possible that certain subjects remain inarticulatable, unknowable. And for the PWA, a subject whose discursive materialization has always already been challenging, identity is formed by a series of successive discursive displacements, displacements that *become* the discourses of AIDS. As a result, the discourses surrounding AIDS become highly problematic and succeed in summoning up overlapping sets of exclusionary matrices that have the potential to render the "PWA" into an inescapable abjection. Consequently, "AIDS" becomes responsible for the creation and sustenance of exclusionary matrices. It allows for the creation of subjects and abjected beings. In other words, it provides the conditions for identity; it has the potential to make subjects knowable. But if we are not careful, it also has the potential to sustain the abjection of other figures. Given the unstable nature of the category of "AIDS," its violent omissions and dangerous assumptions, subjectivity itself

is at risk of remaining completely incomprehensible. One way to avoid such an event would be to take on the responsibility of addressing the issues of abjected figures, many of which lie at the convergence of the discourses of “race” and “sexuality.” If a knowledge of the PWA can be traced through an examination of a “racialized sexuality,” then perhaps the convergence of the discourses of “race” and “sexuality” warrants critique. We must develop an understanding of a “racialized sexuality” or else we risk reinscribing discourses of racism or sexism back into reconfigured AIDS discourses. These discourses have the potential to render certain humans into an inescapable abjection to such a degree that they become unable to respond to the epidemic of which they are an integral part. As a result, it becomes possible to allow “AIDS,” as problematic a category as it is, to define their identity, evidently a dangerous event given the many misunderstandings inherent in this category. Perhaps if we can begin with “identity,” we can possibly imagine making sense of the pandemic.

The overall project of *Gary in Your Pocket* consists of a set of stories and poems followed by a series of personal journal entries all written by Fisher with a Foreword by Don Belton and an Afterword by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Compiled and edited by Sedgwick and some of her colleagues, the book provides a collection of writings that traces Fisher’s life from the age of sixteen until his AIDS-related death in 1993 at the age of thirty-two. Fisher’s personal musings and anecdotes candidly reveal a young man coming into a knowledge of his identity as a black gay man, and eventually as a black gay man with AIDS. Much of the work provided in the collection narrates Fisher’s struggles and triumphs in understanding his sexuality in and around his identity as a black man, a student, a gay man, a brother, and a son. The editors have presented Fisher’s

work chronologically, but in such a way as to bring a focus on to the issues of “sexuality” and “race” as they inform Fisher’s exploration of his own identity. Naturally, this book can only provide its reader with a limited access to Fisher’s life; an accessibility mediated by narrative structures, the many limitations on authorship, and the motivations of its editors. *Gary in Your Pocket* is not “autobiography” in the conventional sense of the purposive writing of a life. If anything, it is an aggregate of life fragments, one created (produced, policed) by the hands of many. [In this case, it becomes the embodiment of “identity” itself: that “thing” that is always critiqued, scrutinized, and even materialized by everyone and everything around the subject.] That said, the testimony offered up by *Gary in Your Pocket* makes it possible to experience how a “racialized sexuality” can be both articulated for the scrutinizing eyes of the reader as well as for the author who is attempting to understand the materialization of his identity.

Throughout the course of his writings, Fisher summons up the histories of racism and sexism in the ways they have come to materialize his identity. He sees himself simultaneously as a “nigger,” a “slave,” and a “cocksucker” and in so doing identifies with certain phantasms that individually lack the ability to accurately define who he is. Fisher simultaneously identifies with and repudiates these discursive spheres of categorization. [At times, Fisher is “proud” to be a “nigger” (239) and maintains a desire to “be” a “slave,” while at other times (or even simultaneously), Fisher is nauseated and frustrated by the racial identity that is often forcibly thrust upon him in his experience of sexuality.] The meaning of categorical signifiers changes from moment to moment. By invoking such phantasmatic identities as “slave” or “nigger” in an effort to make sense of a queer sexuality, Fisher’s narrative reinvents the terms, inscribing them with new

meanings, suggestions, and nuances. The categories of “slave” or “nigger” are created by and carry with them the histories of racism and sexism. At the same time, they are inscribed with new meaning when appropriated by certain narratives in attempts to explain the seemingly inexplicable, in attempts to understand a “racialized sexuality”, in attempts to understand “AIDS.” Consequently, the meaning of the categorical signifier folds in on itself. The present understanding or configuration of the term circles back to re-materialize, re-reiterate, and re-perform the “histories” of the categories of “race” and “sexuality.” The present invents the past just as much as it is dependent upon it for its materialization. And as the present is a narrative in process, an event that is as always yet to be invented, the “past” becomes reiterated and reformulated alongside it. The histories of “racism” and “sexism” have been formed, to a certain degree, by a series of repressions and silences that are the result of relationships of power and oppression. As a result, the discourses surrounding “race” and “sexuality” are replete with omissions and linguistic inaccuracies in which words themselves are incapable of producing and offering access to any kind of knowledge or experience which may have been essential to understanding the human subject.

Fisher’s *Gary in Your Pocket* is an account of the ways in which one PWA, an African American gay man, comes to mediate his identity with respect to “AIDS” through the experience of a racialized sexuality. In this chapter, I intend to explore the ways in which a “racialized sexuality” unfolds itself with respect to the epidemic. I will begin by addressing the ways in which the histories of “race” and “sexuality,” the legacy of slavery for Fisher, materialize a kind of “racialized sexuality.” I will then proceed to demonstrate how it is, as evidenced in Fisher’s narrative, that the present invents the past

in order to show how the histories of “race” and “sexuality” are reconfigured and subsumed back into discourses of AIDS that attempt to trace the history of the epidemic. Here, I will be examining the ways in which AIDS narratives, Fisher’s in particular, are created by the reconfigured “histories” of race. And finally, I hope to explore what happens to identities ground in a “racialized sexuality” when “AIDS” becomes an integral and immediate part of that identity. I hope to draw from this a new way of understanding and thinking the AIDS subject and the AIDS body that may allow for the possibility of disrupting and renegotiating many of the other powerful narratives surrounding AIDS.

The Histories of Black Sexuality

In *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, bell hooks reflects on the overlapping discourses of racism and sexism as they exist under the organizing rubric of the history of American slavery. hooks suggests that the convergence of the discourses produced in America as a consequence of this overlap had its origins in slavery. hooks’ brief outline of the history of “racialized sexuality” argues that gendered sexual domination has always stood as a metaphor for colonization, allowing for “freedom” to be equated with a phantasmatic ideal of “masculinity.” During slavery, rape was considered the right of white men, men who were considered to be free and empowered. Consequently, hooks suggests, freedom from racial domination became equated with this phantasm of masculinity that expressed power as sexual access to women’s bodies. It is by this mechanism that the image of black men as rapists became dominant. The race-based power relations that were integral to the institution of slavery attributed to the identity of the white man social and political freedom as well as a “masculinity” that was

defined by an ability/permission to rape and sexually dominate both black and white women. As the spectres of the “free white man” came to haunt black liberation struggle, the “free black man” became constructed and then sensationalized as a rapist. hooks writes:

[the] story, invented by white men, is about the overwhelming desperate longing black men have to sexually violate the bodies of white women. The central character in this story is the black male rapist...As the story goes, this desire is not based on longing for sexual pleasure. It is a story of revenge, rape as the weapon by which black men, the dominated, reverse their circumstance, regain power over white men. (58)

What is important about this passage is the nature of the performative of “rape” in race-based sexualities. The act of rape between races comes to signify a sexuality that is about the ability to assert identity rather than fulfil sexual desire. While hooks’ focus on the images of rapists, the histories of slavery, and the subsequent gender conflicts within the black liberation movement is useful, she dangerously presupposes a historical heterosexual imperative. She suggests that the discourses of racism converge to evoke a black male sexuality that is violent, dangerous, and above all sexist as relationships of power become gendered and materialized through a heterosexual performative.

While hooks does call for the “need to uncover, restore, and even invent black gay history” (200), her history of sexuality neglects the historical possibility of black queer sexuality in the time of slavery. She does note the lack of many psychosexual histories of slavery; no work has been done on the racialization of sexual sado-masochism or the white male sexual exploitation of black women when slavery was a state-supported event. However, she never mentions the mechanisms by which African American same-sex desire is left out of the histories of slavery. This is a significant oversight as many theorists have repeatedly claimed that every African American will always already be

haunted by the legacies of slavery; the spectres of slavery are the inheritance of every black American. The fact that queer identities are still being neglected in discussions of race and sexuality suggest that there is still much work to be done for both queer and race studies.

hooks traces one sexual history of the black male slave, the heterosexual history of the “nigger.” This heterosexual history, one of the histories that configured the phantasm of the “nigger,” is one of the legacies that haunt black American sexuality today. But the omissions in this history as well as the many other neglected sexual histories have also found their way into the spectre of the “nigger.” The word “nigger” has been reiterated and reconfigured through time and carries with it resonances of many different articulatable and inarticulatable sexualities. In Fisher’s world, the identification with “nigger” was an integral part of coming to terms with a queer sexuality. Fisher’s performance of a phantasmatic ideal of “nigger” materialized a kind of queer sexuality in which a desire to be dominated and abused become apparent. This leads me to ask: What happens to rape, slavery, and racism when a heterosexual imperative is disavowed? If the reiteration of “slavery” is an integral part of African American sexuality, then how does it figure its way into a queer sexuality? hooks reminds us of the social status of rape “as a weapon of terrorism men might use to express rage about other forms of domination, about their struggle for power with other men” (58). And so does homosexual rape become a means by which rage over racial domination can be understood? Undoubtedly, the figure of the “nigger” and the performative of rape find their way into African American gay sexuality; the history of slavery becomes crucial in the understanding of African American sexuality, and especially so in the case of queer

sexuality, a sexuality which has been repressed and omitted in the histories of slavery as well as the histories of black sexuality.

Heterosexual Niggers and Gay Power

In her chapter entitled “Phantasmatic Identification and the Assumption of Sex,” Butler traces the nature of constructivism as it compels different kinds of sexualities. She explains that while we must think of sexuality as constructed, we must not presume that sexual identities are either deterministic or fixed. A subject becomes knowable by means of overlapping exclusionary matrices that allow for certain kinds of identities to be articulatable. It is those identities that are inarticulatable that provide the constraints by which performativity is impelled: “constructivism needs to take account of the domain of constraints without which a certain living and desiring being cannot make its way. And every such being is constrained by not only what is difficult to imagine, but what remains radically unthinkable” (Butler, *Bodies* 94). It is the forced reiteration of norms that constitutes the condition for the subject, norms that are produced by constraints that compel a certain performativity to be reiterated. While the performativity of a subject may be sustained by constraining forces, we must question the nature of these constraints and how they come into being in order to imagine the possibilities of reworking them.

In tracing the Lacanian category of sex, Butler claims that the fixity of constraints is held by a symbolic law that threatens the subject with an identification with a spectral figure of abjection. Constraints insist on a performativity by virtue of an imaginary threat or punishment. Regulatory norms are so powerful because they are able to produce constraints that threaten to punish a subject. For example, the “threat” that compels the

performative of “femininity” is a descent into abjection by means of an identification with the phallicized woman. The performativity of the body, that which provides the conditions for the materiality of the body, is policed by a fear of punishment, a fear concocted by the imaginary that has the power to create figures of abjection. Consequently, “identification” is a reiterative process of alignment with regulatory norms. Identifications are never complete, and are always in the process of being remade. Butler develops her discussion of the possibility of imaginary identifications that compel the performativity of the subject by tracing the behaviour of a heterosexual imperative. However, as Fisher’s journals show, phantasmatic identifications with racial identities not only provide the constraints for certain sexual identities but also provide the possibilities of reworking those constraints.

In the journal entry marked “12/11/90 Wednesday (by an hour and a few seconds”, Fisher attempts to make sense of his sexuality by a symbolic substitution of a racial identity. This entry seems to recount a performance of the many anxieties regarding racial and sexual identities that Fisher has experienced throughout his journal entries. Fisher’s tone in this passage is both violent and frustrated as he simultaneously identifies with and repudiates a phantasmatic “nigger slave,” a figure of abjection that provides the condition for his articulation of a racialized sexuality. He begins the entry by telling of the experience of having his sexuality forcibly constrained by the spectre of the black slave:

...give up everything to the pursuit of cocks, to the consumption of sperm and piss for no other reason than the fact that I’m a nigger and that’s what God put niggers on this earth to do. I truly love and savor the taste of sperm and of hot piss whether hot salty morning piss or piss from beer-drinkers who swell their bladders for the sole purpose of emptying their waste into my nigger body. I’ve thought about the philosophical

foundation for my activity, my vocation and duty. The simplicity of it astounds me and yet I have no words for it, just an image, at once holy and profane, of the nigger on his knees taking cock juices into this body, particularly piss as a kind of spiritual cleanser, an erasure of whatever else he may aspire to beyond his being a nigger. (238-9)

The histories of racism, as carried by the resonances of the imaginary “nigger,” are what allow Fisher to make a phantasmatic identification that urges his sexuality into a state of abjection. For Fisher, the word “nigger” is meant here to invoke the histories of American slavery. Fisher explicitly states that a “nigger” is but a slave. However, for Fisher, the “nigger” is a highly sexualized abjected being: “A nigger cocksucker is a slave to sperm” (239), a point I will develop a little later. First, I want to establish how it is that slavery comes to matter in the articulation and materialization of sexuality. If, as hooks suggests, freedom from racial inequality under a regime of slavery meant an identification with the phantasm of a heteronormative white male sexuality, then the body of the black gay man is held as severely abjected. In many cases, “freedom” for the black male slave meant that he now had access to the bodies of both black and white women. He became empowered by a reiteration and a reaffirmation of heterosexual norms. But what happens to the black gay man, himself racially held under the signifying identity marker of “nigger?” Erased from the histories of slavery, he has no means to a freedom which is offered only by a reaffirmation of heterosexual ideals, and consequently remains abjected. He becomes the “truest” nigger, still enslaved by a white heterosexual imperative. I make this argument with the understanding that the referent “nigger” is, as always unstable in nature. Its reiteration provides temporal meanings; while it may have initially been a racial referent, over time, it takes on many different meanings and itself

becomes the possibility by which different identities, including sexual identities, become both articulatable and inarticulatable.

The passage here directly points to the constraints by which a racialized sexuality is performed. To repeat some of Butler's insights, a being is "constrained by not only what is difficult to imagine, but what remains radically unthinkable" (94). In *Gary in Your Pocket*, that which remains "radically unthinkable" is the figure of the gay black man that may be freed from abjection. Fisher imagines the function of the black gay male, his "nigger," to be a slave to white male sexual desire. As a consumer of white "waste," the figure of the black gay male becomes the means by which a white male subjectivity gets reaffirmed. The "black gay male," as yet unthinkable, performs a phantasmatic identification with the "nigger," the black slave. This identification reinscribes race-based power relations into the materialization of homosexual acts. As Fisher so aptly articulates that there are no words to describe what it is that compels and constrains the materialization of his sexuality, he is able to envision a performative of slavery through the merging discourses of "race" and "sexuality." Simon Watney writes: "AIDS evidently threatens the fragile stability of the most fundamental organizing categories for both individual and collective identities, insofar as it raises the reality of sexual diversity" (Watney, "Subject" 69). With "the nigger on his knees," a phantasmatic hallucination of what a "nigger" might look like is invoked. The immediate suggestion here is that "history" spectrally haunts Fisher's performativity of "nigger." The history of the African American slave allows for this haunting and for the reiteration of racial identities. However, in appropriating the term "nigger" to facilitate in the articulation of an as yet unknowable racialized sexuality, the word is ascribed with new meanings,

meanings that are articulated in the present but succeed in reformulating the past. If the reiteration of the word “nigger” allowed for the possibility of the articulation of a sexuality, then somewhere in the history of slavery lies the origins of the sexuality of the nigger – the “nigger” has always been about sexuality, and perhaps even a queer sexuality...and so the histories of the “nigger” become reconfigured, allowing for the erupting of some of the silences and repressions pervading the discourses of racism and sexuality.

In his discussion of African American self-creation and the reformation of fragmented historical narratives, Kimberley W. Benston describes the branding of black people by the term “nigger” as a “gesture of ambivalent defiance against the white impulse to define itself by both designating and repudiating the ‘other’” (Benston, 156). He suggests that the brand of “nigger” was meant to disavow the possibility of inscribing black bodies with any kind of meaning or identity. As a result, the “nigger” body became an abjected figure. She writes:

“Nigger” is a mechanism of control by contraction; it subsumes the complexities of human experience into a tractable sign while manifesting an essential inability to *see* (to grasp, to apprehend) the signified... “Nigger”, as the white name for the blackness of blackness, is a name for difference which serves the ideological function of imbuing “whiteness” with a “sense” it primordially lacks. (157)

In Fisher’s reiteration of “nigger,” the term still refers to some kind of abjection that simultaneously takes into account both blackness and homosexuality. If “nigger” is a term that “indicates a desire to void the possibility of meaning within the ‘blackened’ shell of selfhood, thereby reducing substance to the repetitive echo of a catachresis” (Benston, 156), then Fisher’s use of the term within the context of a personal journal

could potentially reflect a desire to void the possibility of meaning to his own individual sexuality. In his desire to occupy the racialized subject position of “nigger,” Fisher suggests that identification with his sexuality, a sexuality as yet severely abjected, would imprison his identity by a state of meaninglessness or radical unthinkability. Fisher’s journal shows that at an early point in his life, he is somewhat aware of some “disease going around...killing gay males” (164). He seems to recognize that both his race and his sexuality “threaten” to inscribe him with meaning that is intricately caught up in the AIDS pandemic, meaning that is, in fact, meaninglessness. It is possible that he sees that the performativity of his black gay body is being heavily policed by AIDS discourses that impose a fear of punishment by illness. He can feel his body being inscribed with meaning and so makes an identification with the phantasm of the “nigger” in order to disavow or “void the possibility of meaning” that impels abjection.

What is also important in this passage is the way in which a racial identity, or rather a signifier for a racial identity comes to substitute or signify that which remains inarticulatable about a sexual identity. We must note “what cannot be said in that which is being said” (Rose, 1984). Fisher’s readers must note how what is being said hides what cannot be said. Many times in his journals, Fisher tells of instances in which he voluntarily engaged in and enjoyed oral sex. These situations were complemented by many instances in which oral sex was forcibly demanded of him. How to make sense of such violence? At times, for Fisher, the sexual act of oral sex is a performative that reinscribes a social hierarchy that renders the “nigger,” the black gay male, into a state of inescapable abjection, “an erasure of whatever else he may aspire to beyond his being a nigger” (239). It is the “being a nigger” that renders him abjected, and it is his being both

black and gay that makes him a nigger (by a phantasmatic identification) in the first place.

Gary in Your Pocket is very much a book about desire: the desire for sex, love, companionship, freedom, and understanding. But for Fisher, the “nigger” seems to experience a disavowal of desire. The only pleasure he has is in “reaffirming that I AM PROUD TO BE A NIGGER”, which is simply an affirmation of the voiding of desire. There is no desire for the phallus, no desire for power or freedom. The “pursuit of cocks” has everything to do with the reason “God put niggers on this earth” and demonstrates a desire for a void, a self that is utterly debased and emptied out. Perhaps this is so that the void can be filled with other and newer bodily fluids, ones that might have the potential to reconfigure Fisher’s subjectivity. Fisher seems to suggest that the materialization of the nigger body comes about by a heavily constrained forced reiteration of norms, norms that compel the black gay man to reiterate the performative of the African American slave. Fisher speaks of the “duty” of the nigger, a duty that governs the identity of the nigger, but that remains remarkably the object of his desire. Still Fisher makes his confession, “I have no words for it, just an image”. The black gay male sexuality, a sexuality that at times, for Fisher, is a void of desire and overcome by the power of reiteration of regulatory norms, is as yet inarticulatable, and consequently radically unthinkable.

This “radical unthinkability” of Fisher’s identity becomes increasingly significant as Fisher attempts to make sense of his status as HIV+. Fisher cannot even speak of his own identity as it makes itself known to him through the performance of a racialized sexuality. If, as Paula Treichler argues, “[l]anguage is not a substitute for reality; it is one

of the most significant ways we know reality, experience it, and articulate it; indeed, language plays a powerful role in producing experience and in certifying that experience as 'authentic'" (Treichler, 4), then the only way for Fisher's sexuality to be authenticated in the discourses surrounding AIDS is to make it knowable by language. Configuring his identity into recognizable discourses is perhaps one of the motivating desires behind Fisher's writing. After all, when Fisher was writing in these personal journals, he was presumably writing for himself. As Sedgwick tells readers in her Afterword, Fisher had no intent of publishing his writing until the final stages of his life. Writing became a means of attempting self-affirmation. By this I mean that Fisher's desire to write was much stronger than his need to be read by a greater audience. In his writing he recognized himself as the audience of the text, making his journal a very private and personal memoir. But could there be something else going on here? Ross Chambers argues: "There is both a fierce affirmation of self in Fisher's writing and a certain surprise, even a bafflement or bewilderment, about his existence" (138). Fisher's journals are more complex than pieces of "self-affirmation." In addition to providing a means of discursively organizing experience, Fisher's journals show how "affirmation" is complexly caught up with radical "negation." At the moment Fisher affirms his identity as a "nigger," he also negates his identity as "gay." While "nigger" can serve as a displacement for certain elements of sexuality, the term is still reiterated within constraints that limit its signifying potential.

As it stands, Fisher's sexual identity is itself never articulated as it gets written over with the seemingly more tangible signifier of "nigger." His sexuality is never spoken of, and it is perhaps in part for this reason that "knowing" AIDS becomes

exceedingly frustrating for Fisher. Stuart Hall echoes the necessity for articulating abjected identities in order to begin to come to terms with what AIDS might be:

The question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are the many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not? AIDS is the site at which the advance of sexual politics is being rolled back. It's a site at which not only people will die, but desire and pleasure will also die if certain metaphors do not survive, or survive in the wrong way. Unless we operate in this tension, we don't know what cultural studies can do, can't, can never do; but also, what it has to do, what it alone has a privileged capacity to do. (Hall, 285)

Throughout Fisher's journal are many instances in which anxieties over articulating subjectivity are expressed within the discourses of race and sexuality. In his search for appropriate signifiers that might help him understand how it is that he was repeatedly rendered an abjected figure by his race, sexuality, and AIDS, Fisher attempts to understand what it might mean to be "black" or "gay" or both through his understanding of racialized discourses. Many of Fisher's frustrations come about due to the limitations of discourses of race to articulate queer sexualities. In a journal entry marked "Sunday January 4th, 1987", Fisher tries to make sense of the frustrations of illness by likening them to the frustrations that come with attempting to understand race. Before any medical tests that might affirm Fisher's HIV status had been performed, he has begun to suspect that he might be "positive," in fact, the state of his body allows him to be "convinced." But what he cannot make sense of is the inevitability of a quickly approaching death. Fighting death. Fighting AIDS.

Fisher's inability to understand the horror that plagues his body leads him to liken it to something seemingly more knowable. For Fisher, the "frustration of fighting death" has its example in race. He writes,

The frustration has its example in race. For me. I've begun a spiral of self-esteem (sexually anyway). Blackness is a state of frustration. There's no way out of this racial depression (I don't feel the frustration personally, but as a part of a people I know that I am being fucked, abused). Sexually I want (desire, fantasize myself) to be (being) used. I want to be a slave, sexually and perhaps otherwise. (199)

"Blackness" is that phantasm that deploys the regulatory norms that constrain and confine his identity. As he says, it is inescapable, "there's no way out". The performative reiteration that allows for his materialization as a black man is impelled and policed by such powerful regulatory regimes that the thought of identity otherwise remains completely unthinkable. And so too does AIDS remain radically unthinkable. Fisher is experiencing the frustration of attempting to "fight death," a situation that his possible HIV status forces him to engage in. The frustration lies in positioning himself with respect to his approaching death, a death impelled by AIDS. But he does not completely understand the AIDS, that which now grounds his identity. The bodily materialization of AIDS has begun to take place without an understanding of the constraints that produce such a body. The body is being inscribed with AIDS but as yet remains illegible. "AIDS" as the constraining force that is responsible for a materialization of Fisher's body, is as yet unthinkable. Fisher attempts to make sense of it by inscribing it or *ascribing to it* discourses of race. The AIDS body, the matter that *is* the AIDS body, becomes materialized through a certain interpretation of race.

In this passage, Fisher denies the experience of "racial depression," presumably a race-based oppression. However, by being constrained by regulatory norms, he makes a phantasmatic identification with "blackness," a "blackness" he believes promotes the performativity of a "slave." And for Fisher, the performative of the "slave" is carried out through a sexual subordination. Being a "slave" for Fisher is first and foremost sexual.

He suggests that his desire to have his body “used” or exploited sexually arises as a result of the fact that his identity as a black person has been so powerfully constrained and policed that reworking a subjectivity under such constraints remains impossible. The structures of power, as set up by the oppressive regimes of racism provide the constraints for a sexual performativity. For Fisher, the histories of racism have compelled the performativity of the “slave,” a position of sexual subordination.

Death, the inevitability of the AIDS condition, becomes symbolically comprehensible by the figure of the “white man.” Fisher writes, “I can’t beat death, I can’t beat the white man...But it’s not gratification I’m after; it’s the frustration that I want. I *think* that I like the frustration. I *think* that I like death. Maybe by liking it it will spare me” (199). The “white man,” the power, the identity that makes the abjection of “blackness” and “AIDS” possible, becomes a symbolic substitution for “AIDS.” By making such a displacement, Fisher suggests that the discourses produced by “AIDS” have all the powers of the phantasm of the “white man.” Both have the power to create a vast number of abjected beings by means of the deployment of exclusionary matrices. Both are imagined to be extraordinarily powerful, such that they can’t be “beat.” Both serve as a “threat” by which the black gay male becomes a figure of abjection, they have the power to instil fear. But what could Fisher mean when he says that he might actually appreciate the frustration? This entire passage is cast in terms of desire, suggesting Fisher’s attachment to a certain kind of abjection. What is it that necessitates the experience of frustration, a desire for death? Perhaps the phantasms of “AIDS” and the “white man” provide the possibility of grounding Fisher’s radically unthinkable “racialized sexuality.” If “maybe by liking [frustration/death] it will spare [him]”, Fisher

might be suggesting that grounding the unknowability of his identity provides him with the possibility of beginning to “know” his subjectivity in such a way as to compel a reworking of the constraints on the performativity that materializes his body. “Liking” death and frustration is a means by which Fisher can align his identity with respect to AIDS and the “white man.” “Liking” it, as opposed to being ambivalent to it or victimized by it impels a possible identification with the “white man,” an identification that repudiates a position of abjection. Fisher grounds the “knowability” of his identity as a black gay male in the repudiation of his identity as a black gay male.

But what to make of the fact that Fisher writes his desire for death by miming the nigger who “can’t beat the white man”? Perhaps a desire for the “undesirable” urges a reconfiguration of the subject. If the subject is understood, in part, by its attachments and desires, then any shifts, displacements, or substitutions in desired objects demand a reconfiguration of the self. As Jay Clayton explains, “[n]arrative and mimesis tend to pin desire down” and in so doing “tend to disrupt the self” (44). By what Leo Bersani might call the “redemptive reinvention of sex,” Fisher maintains a desire for death as it becomes a means for disrupting the self. Perhaps it is only by this disruption that Fisher can destabilize the histories of “race” and “sexuality” so that the silences within these discourses can be uncovered. By redistributing the “loci of pleasure” (Bersani, 215), the self demands reconstitution. Consequently, the identity of the black gay male or the subject place holder for “Gary Fisher” becomes further complicated.

* * *

In *There Ain't No Black in the Unionjack*, Paul Gilroy calls into question the possibility of a common African diasporic consciousness. The history of African Americans, to a certain degree, is rooted in the African diaspora during which Blacks were brought to America to be traded or sold. While several generations have since passed, many African Americans still maintain strong emotions or feelings of attachment to Africa, or of being descended from the African continent. This phantasmatic identification with an imaginary "Africa," one that at times seems void of its own intercontinental national boundaries and diverse cultures, seek to displace the "I" of African American identities with a more politically powerful "we." As Gilroy explains:

Ties of affect and affiliation have sharpened knowledge of anti-colonial struggles which have sharpened contemporary understanding of 'race.' These feelings, of being descended from or belonging to Africa and of longing for its liberation from imperialist rule, can be linked loosely by the term 'Pan Africanism' (Geiss, 1974; Padmore, 1956). The term is inadequate as anything other than the most preliminary description, particularly as it can suggest mystical unity outside the process of history or even a common culture or ethnicity which will assert itself regardless of determinate political and economic circumstances. The sense of interconnectedness felt by blacks to which it refers, has in some recent manifestations become partially detached from any primary affiliation to African from the aspiration to a homogeneous African culture...It may be that a common experience of powerlessness somehow transcending history and experienced in *racial* categories; in the antagonism between white and black rather European and African, is enough to secure affinity between these divergent patterns of subordination. (158-9)

It is by these mechanisms that "blackness" comes to mean something in the United States. While "black" culture in America has been produced and temporally reiterated by the conditions of the most horrifying oppression, its various calls to "slavery" must be seen as subjective alignments with the phantasms and spectres of slavery.

Fisher's phantasmatic identification with slavery allows for the possibility for Fisher to articulate his sexuality. But in order to do this, a number of things must happen.

First of all, Fisher's desire to articulate his sexuality must be seen as an attempt to make sense of his abjection. Fisher instinctively employs the discourses that are at once seemingly and immediately available to him: the discourses of racism and sexism. As I've mentioned before, each of these discourses (though I don't believe they exist as distinct, identifiable or quantifiable units) carries with it a history. The violent power relations and experiences of oppression and repression have allowed these discourses to be reiterated with and plagued by silences, symbolic omissions, and linguistic inaccuracies. So when Fisher proceeds to attempt to articulate his identity, he must make an identification that renders his articulation knowable and recognizable. Fisher makes an identification with the imaginary "slave" by first imagining the figure of the slave and then inscribing the figure with layers of meaning. This "meaning," for Fisher, arises from the converging discourses of "race" and "sexuality" at the particular point when rape becomes a performative by which relationships of power are materialized. Fisher imagines a slave, a slave that mirrors Fisher's own self-imagining. In a sense, Fisher creates a "slave" figure for his own purposes. Or rather, the slave figure is created for him by means of fixed constraints that impel the performativity of Fisher's sexuality. Throughout this entire process, the phantasm of the "slave" is being reconfigured. It has been inscribed with an entirely new set of meanings. Although it invokes certain cultural histories, it also succeeds in reconfiguring them. This "new" figure of the slave creates a revised history of the "slave." Fisher's narrative alludes to a queer sexual history of the "slave" – what was this? What was the situation of queer black slave? In allowing for the opening up of such questions, it becomes possible to question historical narratives.

Because of the discursive gaps and silences, and because of its linguistic volatility, the term “slave” or “nigger” will always already be incapable of accurately signifying identity. Identity, like the terms that could call it into being, is forever volatile. As a result, we can approach a knowledge of it, but will always fail to completely constitute it. The subject is always in the process of being made, of being materialized. Simultaneously, the histories that allow for the creation of discursive bodies are also always being made. Another way to put this is that the histories that call discourses into being are themselves volatile entities that are constantly being reconfigured. The histories of race and sexuality are constantly being remade just as they are constantly remaking AIDS discourses. And just as the discourses of race and sexuality overlap, converge, and come to articulate one another, AIDS discourses also remain subject to such volatility.

What is absent and unspoken in the identification of “slave” is what fills the pages of Fisher’s journal: an understanding of the AIDS subject. This “understanding” consists of attempting simultaneously to make sense of race, sexuality, death, desire, and illness (keeping in mind that there is no one “sense” to be made). It is an attempt to organize experience within the parameters of the rule of language. The AIDS subject lies where these discourses converge. The AIDS subject becomes reiterated by the linguistic failures of these discourses, the inaccuracies and silences that have made AIDS radically unthinkable. The physical body of the AIDS subject has been inscribed with an illness that, by its very spectacle, threatens to articulate or be entirely responsible for the identity of the PWA. When identities are so volatile to begin with, and when some identities have been silenced or made almost completely invisible, the spectacle of the diseased body

becomes so powerful as to deploy a range of discourses that in turn attempt to materialize the AIDS body. This phenomenon can be seen especially in Fisher's final journal entry in which Fisher entirely submits any cognisance of his "AIDS" subjectivity:

...I want to write about KS. I haven't really written about what I look like now. I have a new skin. I have a new identity. They are not the same, but they do on occasion converge, even eclipse one another. First it's odd to be writing so specifically about things so specific when the largeness of my situation is what impresses me. I want to write large. Don't I want to write large? Can I get to the large through an analysis of these many small things? So I want to talk about KS. (271)

For Fisher, it has always been his skin that comes to inscribe his identity and his sexuality. It was his black skin that motivates a phantasmatic identification with the slave nigger. Now that his skin has been inscribed with Kaposy's Sarcoma, he feels he has a new identity. This new identity comes about through a phantasmatic identification with the "AIDS subject," a category as yet not understood. He does, however, recognize that the AIDS subject is constituted by the discourses of race and sex (among others) that have always been a part of his identity. Fisher's wanting to "get to the large" "through an analysis of these many small things" seems to accurately comment on the nature of the work of anyone who studies, researches, or attempts to make sense of AIDS. The scientist must begin by examining "the cell" or "the virus" while the cultural theorist might begin by exploring the psychologies and histories of "disease," "sexuality," or "race." All, however, must begin with "the small" (though they are really anything but small or simple problems) in order to access "the large." It is the bringing together of the understandings of these "small things" that each contribute to an understanding of AIDS. For Fisher, the daunting task begins by reading his body that has been marked by Kaposy's sarcoma:

The spots, the lesions, patches – they are so random (Even the name is slippery. What should I call these things, individually, I mean. One KS. Look, there's a KS. I have a KS on my hand, under my thumb). They refuse a common shape or texture or size and they sprout-spring-develop-appear unpredictably, time and location. (Backtrack: even the action of the disease is slippery.) Some are clustered; some are island-like. Some are small-just dots. Some are large, sprawling, giraffe-like. (271)

Fisher's passage directly points out the inaccuracies and limits of AIDS discourses. He knows the "spots" are KS, but cannot figure KS into grammatical structures. As a result, the impact of KS remains unknowable – it can be inscribed onto the body, but is not so easily inscribed into language. As a result, the AIDS body is inscribed with lesions while the AIDS subject lurks, or seems to lurk, in a hidden interiority. These inscriptions may seem to constitute the body as skin colour might. The lesions point to the discourses of "AIDS" while skin materializes the discourses of "race." But as Fisher shows, the discourses remain at times incomprehensible and thus inarticulable.

The "island-like" clusters of Kaposi's Sarcoma provide a map for accessing the AIDS body. The lesions become powerful marks that have the potential to impel phantasmatic identifications with an imagined community of PWAs. As Elizabeth Grosz examines the nature of the body as an inscriptive surface, she writes: "Cicatrizations and scarifications mark the body as a public, collective, social category, in modes of inclusion or membership; they form maps of social needs, requirements, and excesses" (140). It is by a mode of inclusion, an imagined membership into an imaginary community that Fisher becomes ascribed with "a new identity," an identity that aligns itself with a community of PWAs. Once again, the dangers of imagining an autonomous "we" become evident. AIDS is no one thing and cannot constitute a cohesive set of meanings. "AIDS" represents and is responsible for many different illnesses and medical conditions

and addresses many different race, class, and sexual identities. And so, the community, the “we” of AIDS must be critically examined.

I do believe in the necessity of responsibly addressing the often individualistic and unique manifestations of the disease. AIDS is many different things to many different people. But at the same time, I could never deny the comforts of a “we.” And if there is ever a moment when anyone caught up in any aspect of the pandemic can feel comfort, even if it is by a problematic “we,” then I support such an indulgence. Undoubtedly, they do not come by very often. For the sake of finding *some* comfort in living amidst the pandemic, holding on to “we” is essential. While the final excerpt offered from Fisher’s journal is hauntingly ironic, it does seem to locate a moment, even if it is just one instant, in which serenity surfaces amidst a storm:

40 million people will have it by the end of the decade. I’m in good company. I’m in plenty of company. I’m less afraid. It’s a big big room and it’s full of everybody’s hope I’m sure. (272)

Mourning This Death

Fisher’s desire was to “get to the large” “through an analysis of these many small things”. Whether or not Fisher’s own writing was able to achieve this is an issue that warrants re-questioning. While Fisher’s writing is rich and intricately nuanced by an issue that seems larger than himself, *Gary in Your Pocket* itself is much more than the issues of AIDS, racialized sexuality, and identity. In *Gary in Your Pocket*, these issues, presented by Fisher’s writing, are framed by voices that are trying to mourn the loss of Fisher. Belton, who begins the work, and Sedgwick, who attempts to “end” it, present Fisher’s work and are also very much a part of it. The mourning of the countless number of AIDS-related deaths and the mourning of this AIDS-related death, Fisher’s AIDS-

related deaths, are part of “the large” that Fisher’s journals access. More than a series of journal entries, short stories, and poems, *Gary in Your Pocket* is a work of mourning. More than self-affirmation and self-negation, *Gary in Your Pocket* is about organizing the experience of mourning. It is about mourning the individual who is complexly made the subject of “AIDS.” As such, the structure of the book warrants further inspection. By Belton’s Foreword and Sedgwick’s Afterword, the book exceeds an understanding of the nature of autobiography or journal writing. As a result, Fisher’s writing becomes further complicated when considering its status as part of a work of mourning.

Gary in Your Pocket is structured in such a way as to have Fisher’s own work framed by the voices of Belton and Sedgwick. Belton’s introduction is followed by a brief collection of Fisher’s short stories and poems, then Fisher’s journal entries, and finally an Afterword by Sedgwick that also describes the process of putting the book together. It is necessary that Fisher’s work be read in and out of the context of these “other” two writers as what they say heavily informs any reader’s understanding of “Gary Fisher.”

Belton begins by locating Fisher’s death as one that “came in a season of deaths of young black men” (vii), immediately bringing together the issues of race and death. He cites the deaths of men who were actively engaged in important cultural work, thus mourning not only the deaths of these men, but also the continuance of their vital work. As Fisher’s story shows, so much work remains (and perhaps will always remain) to be done with respect to knowing the subject position of the black gay man. Unless this work is taken up responsibly by other individuals, then it will never be possible to think the “black gay male” apart from his abjection.

Belton and Fisher were introduced to one another by Sedgwick and their friendship grew out of their mutual concerns for understanding “black” and “queer” identities. Belton offers up his own personal experiences of Gary and in so doing suggests certain reading strategies for Fisher’s work. He allows his own personal relationship with Gary to authorize his claim that this collection of Fisher’s work “is a good vessel of Gary’s voice” (xi). By lending such authority to Fisher’s writing Belton affirms its authenticity. By this I mean that Fisher’s writing cannot have its narrative structure or rhetorical strategies critiqued to uncover its deepest motivations. In fact, there is even the implication that Gary’s writing lies somewhat outside the institution of publishing, only linked to it by virtue of having Sedgwick linked to the process. The reading strategy that Belton introduces that Fisher’s “stories and diaries galvanize the project of disrupting the presentation of black gay masculinity as always without agency” (xi), becomes a necessary lens through which to read the entire text. Introducing Fisher’s work by pointing to interracial desire and black/white relationships ensures that race will always be at the forefront of any reading of this book. Furthermore, it constructs Fisher as a self-conscious writer *before* his writing is allowed to give evidence of this. Thus any discussion of race that proceeds this chapter must take into account Belton’s construction of Fisher as a critical writer (if only to refute it). In having Belton write Fisher before Fisher can write himself, the book directs a reading of the text that discusses “Fisher,” the discursive place holder for the living, breathing Fisher. The book becomes about the subject position of “Gary Fisher” rather than any lived experience of Gary Fisher. It is only in this way that a “self” can be imagined, affirmed, or negated. It is only by this

mechanism that “identity” as a means of understanding such axes of categorization as “race” and “sexuality” can be discussed.

The inclusion of Sedgwick’s Afterword is necessary for many reasons, one of which being the necessity of explaining Fisher’s unusual position within the institution of publication. Sedgwick explains how Fisher approached her and asked her to help bring his writing to publication. It leaves us to wonder what would have happened to his rich work had Fisher not had the backing of Sedgwick’s academic celebrity. As Ross Chambers points out, “one is acutely conscious of the fact that Fisher’s extraordinary writing might easily have remained obscure, gone unread because unpublished, and thus been denied access to the very elusiveness of readability” (140). The possibility that this work might not have been published without Sedgwick’s celebrity and clout reintroduces *Gary in Your Pocket* as Sedgwick’s work of mourning. Afterall, it was Sedgwick who brought it to publication. Only she could insist on its being published. In the final lines of the book, Sedgwick confesses “I don’t know whether this has been more a way of mourning or of failing to mourn; of growing steeped in, or of refusing the news of his death” (291). Sedgwick mourns Gary Fisher, “Gary Fisher”, and the continuance of the great cultural work Fisher’s writing began; Sedgwick engages in a mourning of unlived possibilities. By being so self-conscious about the entire publication, editing, and sifting process she and her colleagues engaged in while assembling *Gary in Your Pocket*, Sedgwick offers the book as evidence of a forever-incomplete mourning. She could begin mourning Fisher only by publishing this book. This mourning is impelled by considering the “subject” of AIDS as introduced by Belton. The book’s publication ensures that the black gay male with AIDS is always mourned, inspiring such

melancholics as Ross Chambers or myself to address the issues Fisher's subjectivity brings up.

Sedgwick's presence in the book forces readers to make note of the "black gay man" in the text. Who *is* the "black gay man" in the text? Who is it that necessitates an understanding of the "black gay man" and a "racialized sexuality" as I have outlined above? Who is it that is being crushed by the matrices of abjection I have only begun to discuss in this thesis? Is it Fisher? Is it Sedgwick who claims to dream *as* Fisher, to "have moved through one and another world clothed in the restless, elastic skin of his beautiful idiom" (291). Is it the reader? The presence of Sedgwick in this book brings out the black gay man in a way Fisher himself would never be able to do. Sedgwick's presence in the novel is best described in a part of Fisher's short story "The Villains of Necessity." Fisher writes:

No one had ever noticed how black that black doll was until Jilly pressed it against Ken. Bug had always thought of color as something separating ball teams, or gangs, maybe white boys from black boys in the cafeteria, but never girls; and still it took a boy thing to bring it to her attention. (108)

Perhaps it took "Sedgwick" to bring "Fisher" to our attention. Perhaps it took an understanding of the "separation" to realize that the plight of the "black gay man" is not his struggle alone. Sedgwick's inclusion shows how several other identities (including her own) are implicated in Gary's work and life. Sedgwick's presence in the narrative necessitates an examination of that "thing," that "something separating" her from Fisher and yet "pressing" them together even more. For now, it is that Sedgwick is mourning Fisher and that he is being mourned. Sedgwick's mourning separates them, but also brings them together with greater strength. The problematic configurations of the "black

gay man” which arise as a result of the silences and omissions inherent in the discourses of “race” and “sexuality” are evidence that mourning this figure will never be complete. Until those silences are disrupted, the work of mourning will always be necessary.

* * *

A 1996 Special Edition of the Harvard AIDS Review addresses the issue of HIV with respect to communities of colour. In an effort to dispel many of the myths surrounding HIV and race, the contributors suggest how, where, and when categories of race might be useful for politics and activism. Robert Fullilove, Associate Dean at the Columbia University School of Public Health suggests that “African American” as a category of racial identification is not useful as a means by which to understand “high risk groups.” Instead, he suggests, “A better model for examining what’s going on with HIV in communities of colour is not related to race, but to social realities that are the legacies of slavery and segregation” (Washington, www.hsph.harvard.edu/hai). While I question what *is* race if not the legacies of history, Fullilove’s point is important in that he emphasizes the histories of racism as a means by which to understand HIV. What *matters* with respect to race in understanding AIDS is the ways in which racial histories produce figures of abjection that in turn reproduce relationships of power with respect to sexuality.

In *Gary in Your Pocket*, the histories of slavery seep into the materialization of Fisher’s sexuality in such a way as to simultaneously reverse, reproduce, and re-perform historical race-based relationships of power, more precisely those that were in place

during American slavery. After reading Fisher's journal entries from his teens to his early thirties, it would seem as though the issue of race has always been present in his life. Whether it be feeling frustrated as to how "black" he should be, or being implicated in a stabbing crime simply because of his skin colour (225), Fisher cannot escape the histories of race that have been so inscribed on his skin. Fisher's experience of the history of slavery as it informs his sexuality can be seen throughout his writings in many different shapes and forms. For Fisher, the "nigger" becomes reincarnated into his own identity several times over.

What Fisher's journal shows us is the evolving nature of language as it applies to the articulation of identities. Language is, indeed volatile. In recognizing this, we must proceed with great caution when discussing subjectivity as it exists or ceases to exist amidst a time of crisis. Crises, like subjects, are not without histories, in fact, as the AIDS pandemic shows us, the two are often co-dependent and have common histories. These histories, always in the process of re-creation are only knowable through language. As we strive for a better understanding of the AIDS pandemic, we are also always in process of creating its history, new discourses, and new ways of articulation. And it will be through language and the articulation of a foreseeable end to the pandemic that will allow us to begin to make sense of AIDS.

Conclusion

In the narratives I take up in this thesis, there is evidence of a refusal to mourn certain understandings of “race.” As discourses of “race” become inflected by issues of sexuality and health, the reiteration of certain racial identities become complicated. A phantasmatic identification with specific racial identities becomes difficult by virtue of a refusal to mourn the loss of other racially inflected identities. For example, Jamaica Kincaid’s work of mourning attempts to realign an understanding of race with queer sexualities. While Kincaid, living in America, reiterated a process by which her race was understood through the disavowal of certain national identities (be it Antiguan, American, or both), she became incapable of conceiving of “race” otherwise. In Antigua, race came to create abjected beings through understandings of sexuality and health rather than nationality. Kincaid demonstrates in her narrative how she was unable to mourn her loss of “American” ways of understanding race. She remains completely attached to “American” ways of understanding “race” and so cannot see the implications in her mother’s comment of Devon as being “so black.” The possibility that race has more to do with sexuality than nationality in this instance and Kincaid’s inability initially to recognize this possibility is evidence of her failure to mourn “non-sexualized” ways of understanding race.

In *Gary in Your Pocket*, Sedgwick attempts to mourn the loss of Fisher and the lost potential of a gifted writer, while Fisher is unable to mourn his identification with slavery. As Fisher attempts to mourn his identity as a “nigger,” he also sees the potential for this figure to subvert power structures. The “nigger” becomes the possibility for materializing sexual dominance. Sedgwick, on the other hand, mourns her inability as a

teacher and friend to encourage Fisher's publication. She mourns the fact that Fisher could never get published until after his death. She mourns the possibility of never making the "black gay man" accessible through publication. What Sedgwick mourns is the lost potential of creating a subject position for the black gay man, a potential of making the category of "race" intelligible by queer voices.

If, as Butler tells us, subjectivity is contingent upon the reiterated disavowal of abjection, then the work of providing a subject space for the black gay man has only begun. The "black gay man" must also be made to disavow abjection by ensuring that attempts to make it culturally intelligible are not prohibited. As the "black gay man" makes itself present in various discourses, it warrants critique through an optic of the possibilities of a racially inflected sexuality.

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