

AIDS MEMOIRS AND THE POLITICS OF INCONSOLABILITY

STRANGE BURDENS: AIDS MEMOIRS
AND THE POLITICS OF INCONSOLABILITY

By

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the significance of unresolved grief in memoirs written in the context of the AIDS pandemic during the 1990s. While many recent memoirs are characterized by guilt, anger, despair, and self-beratement, by no means should this affective inflection lead us to categorize them as incomplete or inferior works of mourning. Rather, this melancholic orientation gives rise to questions about the ethics of a rush to consolation, and, correspondingly, contests the ways in which such hasty closure may collaborate in the proliferation of voyeuristic, objectifying images and narratives of HIV/AIDS in the media. Attending closely to the rhetorical and structural dimensions of three memorializing texts in particular, this study considers how, through their melancholic embrace of the “abject” body of HIV/AIDS, they address – and intervene in — the pandemic’s continuing crises of representation, ethics, and social justice. Chapter 1 (“Queering the Kaddish”) explores Amy Hoffman’s concern in *Hospital Time* about what would constitute a faithful memorial for her friend Mike Riegler; the practice of critical memory, occurring across gender and sexuality, initiates the renovation of seemingly inhospitable institutions (specifically, familial and religious traditions). Chapter 2 (“Angels in Antigua”) demonstrates how the power of melancholy roughens Jamaica Kincaid’s writing about her brother Devon, with the result of bringing *My Brother* (however ambivalently on Kincaid’s part) into the realm of the political; Devon is a ghost Kincaid

cannot exorcise, and his suffering persists in her memory, coming to stand, ultimately, as a metonym for Antigua's (and America's) social inequities. Finally, Chapter 3, "Flowers, Boys, and Childhood Memories," considers Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature*, arguing that Jarman's revised journals respond to the experience of despair and the temptation of self-hatred by modeling a stylistics of existence motivated by what we may call (following Eve Sedgwick) an ethics of reparation.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION:	
AIDS Memoirs and “Impossible Mourning”: Affect, Representation, Reading	1-80
i) Preface	1-9
ii) Questions of Rhetoric, Questions of Ethics	9-24
iii) Theorizing Mourning and Melancholia	24-44
iv) Reading Abjection in Eric Michaels’ <i>Unbecoming</i>	44-57
v) Testing Boundaries: Editing Gary Fisher	57-70
vi) Affect, Representation, Reading: Three Readings	71-80
 CHAPTER ONE:	
Queering the Kaddish: Amy Hoffman’s <i>Hospital Time</i> and the Practice of Critical Memory	81-135
i) Melancholia as Critical Memory	81-92
ii) Re/collecting Mike	93-110
iii) A Contemporary Antigone? Theorizing Sororal Obligation	110-127
iv) Queering the Kaddish	127-135
 CHAPTER TWO:	
Angels in Antigua: The Power of Melancholy in Jamaica Kincaid’s <i>My Brother</i>	136-197
i) The AIDS Memoir Meets Postcolonial Botany: Situating Jamaica Kincaid	136-153
ii) Bearing Witness to Devon Drew	154-171
iii) <i>My Brother</i> ’s Critique of the AIDS Closet	171-194
iv) Angels in Antigua, or Walter Benjamin in the Tropics	194-197

	Page
CHAPTER THREE:	
“Flowers, Boys, and Childhood Memories”: Derek Jarman’s Pedagogy	198-293
- ii) “Politics in the First Person”: Writing HIV+	198-217
ii) Rereading the Quilt: Recuperation or Reparation?	217-233
iii) “Through Sick Eyes”: Inhabiting a Body with AIDS	233-253
iv) Derek Jarman’s Pedagogy	253-270
CONCLUSION	271-279
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED	280-293

INTRODUCTION

AIDS Memoirs and “Impossible Mourning”: Affect, Representation, Reading

Is there a possibility of being elsewhere or otherwise, without denying our complicity in the law that we oppose? Such possibility would require a different kind of turn, one that, enabled by the law, turns away from the law, resisting its lure of identity, an agency that outruns and counters the conditions of its emergence. Such a turn demands a willingness not to be — a critical desubjectivation — in order to expose the law as less powerful than it seems. What forms might linguistic survival take in this desubjectivized domain? How would one know one's existence? Through what terms would it be recognized and recognizeable?

Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (130)

Preface

Political essays and letters constitute a privileged cultural location where the rhetoric of the AIDS pandemic may be read, and it is by examining the most recent controversial turn in this species of political and public health discourse that I wish to preface my discussion. Preparations for the July 2000 meeting of the World AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa have prompted a flurry of correspondence and political declarations that foreground the way in which AIDS constitutes a discursive field — that is, a field of significations, figures, social practices, and economic power. In a five-page public letter addressed to President Bill Clinton, President Thabo Mbeki justifies the African National Congress's decision to invite so-called AIDS dissidents — those who

dispute that HIV (the human immunodeficiency virus) causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome — to the conference. Essentially, the letter condemns Western medicine's efforts to address the pandemic, and announces a commitment to look for an indigenous African solution. "It is obvious," writes Mbeki, "that whatever lessons we have to and may draw from the West about the grave issue of HIV/AIDS, a simple superimposition of Western experience on African reality would be absurd and illogical" ("Mbeki's letter to world leaders"). Calling for "specific and targeted responses" to AIDS in Africa, Mbeki not only raises doubts about the existence of the HIV virus but also questions whether the current antiretroviral treatments are too toxic — especially in the long term — to be conscionable. In formulating this skeptical stance, however, he recycles certain entrenched myths about HIV/AIDS (such as the categorical belief that "in developed Western countries it is largely confined to a section of the male homosexual population" and only "heterosexually transmitted in Africa") and in this and other ways risks foreclosing on potentially life-saving strategies and treatments.

What lies at the source of such publicly staged skepticism about the science of AIDS by a prominent African politician? Is it the dangerous petulance it seems on the surface? Referring to the "unique" impact of HIV and AIDS in African nations, Mbeki's letter renounces Western science as unable to address the reality of the pandemic in Africa, and, in some senses, his critique is indeed a chastening one. The questions he raises about the causes and treatments of AIDS take on a profound (and probably intended) irony in light of the fact that the treatments developed within the Western

medical model are for the most part unavailable in Africa. Although antiretroviral combination therapies are proving highly successful in many affluent Western countries, South Africans cannot, on the whole, afford them, nor are there adequate resources to administer them safely; meanwhile, the American Congress under pressure from lobbyists continues to oppose the manufacture and distribution of generic versions of patented drugs.¹ Even the most progressive developments in Western science — such as a recent study that projects the “immediate and substantial” benefits of using antiretroviral drugs prophylactically in the Third World by targeting HIV positive pregnant women — remain enmeshed in prejudicial discursive and economic systems.² In Mbeki’s renunciation of

¹At the end of the 1990s, 70 per cent of the 33 million people infected with HIV worldwide live in sub-Saharan Africa (UN AIDS / WHO 1998 global AIDS statistics published in *AIDS Care*, October 1999). According to Hein Marais’ report for *The Globe and Mail*, “A year of treatment costs about \$15,000 a person in South Africa, a country where almost half the population earns less than \$1,400 a year” (April 20, 2000, A11). On May 13, 2000, however, the story changed with the announcement of a UN AIDS initiative to lower drug prices worldwide (“Price of AIDS Drugs to Drop, Firms Say,” *The Globe and Mail* A27.) Five major drug companies have apparently agreed to cut their prices by as much as 85%. Has Mbeki’s strategy begun to work? It seems only prudent to withhold conclusions until a clearer sense emerges of the impact of this very new deal. health care infrastructure remains a problem, as does the toxicity of many of the drugs in question.

²A recent study published in the *Lancet* projects that between 2000-2005 “110 000 HIV-1-positive births [in South Africa] could be prevented by short-course antiretroviral prophylaxis, as well as a decline of up to 1 year of life expectancy” (Evan Wood et al., “Extent to which low-level use of antiretroviral treatment could curb the AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa”). This proposition raises, however, at least two major ethical dilemmas. First, given the difficulty of identifying (confidentially) which pregnant women are HIV+, the scenario was modelled on “universal treatment without testing or counselling,” raising the possibility that this proposal can only present itself as a solution by defining women on a completely instrumental basis. Second, the advantage of

Western and particularly American “solutions,” two agendas, the health crisis and political emancipation from the vestiges of colonialism, become crossed, and the confrontation is transposed to the register of global political economies, cast, that is, as a battle against American imperialism. Mbeki’s position is thus a mix of things: at once salutary *and* something much less ethical, perhaps even murderous, in that it may forestall dialogue about potentially life-saving public health strategies as well as legitimize people’s doubts about proven paths of transmission, thus undoing the progress made by advocates of safer sex practices. Given its excessiveness and mixed motivations, it is bound to be threatening to Western medical science’s self-construction as the special guardians of the “truth” and “reality” of AIDS, and may perhaps (all too conveniently) provide another excuse for indulging in the fantasy of a West whose mission it is to save the “mad” and “sick” continent of Africa from itself.³

prophylactic use is weighed against the cost per year of life gained were 25% of HIV+ people in South Africa to be given triple-combination treatment to prevent the onset of AIDS (the difference being \$19 for prophylactic use and \$15 000 for triple-combination treatment use, all taking into account the recently announced UN-brokered price reductions). What this calculation of the cost of human lives points to is not only the fact that (even with recent price reductions) “interventions other than triple-combination treatment will probably be more cost effective,” but also that the value placed by Western institutions on human lives in Africa remains highly contingent on the West’s perception of what it can “afford” to give to its beleaguered former colonies.

³The publication in *Nature* of the “Durban Declaration” renouncing the AIDS dissidents adumbrates the complex implications of Mbeki’s skepticism. Signed by thousands of prominent scientists, the declaration confirms that HIV causes AIDS (according to the criteria generally applied to viral diseases). Emphasizing that the doubters’ “position will cost countless lives,” the declaration insists that “the prevention of HIV infection must be

But there is another context in which we may read Mbeki's letter. It is possible also to treat it as part of the larger — albeit heterogeneous — open letter of AIDS activist discourse. Of course, to read Mbeki's letter in this context is not to ignore its specificity; in some ways, the differences between Mbeki's statements and Western AIDS activist discourse could not be more palpable or crucial. Still, certain common features are apparent. Mbeki's letter anticipates loss of life on a vast scale, grieving these deaths in advance and worrying about how to take a stand that is at odds with the epidemic, that could resist complicity in AIDS-related deaths (though his skepticism may indeed risk the very complicity that concerns him). "We will not, ourselves," he insists, "condemn our own people to death by giving up the search for specific and targeted responses to the specifically African incidence of HIV-AIDS" ("Mbeki's letter to world leaders"). With such mournful statements, Mbeki rages against the likelihood that, in the face of the indifference of the power elite, loss will be followed not by a "solution" but only by more loss; and he points implicitly to the urgency of the work of remembering and mourning (and to the ways in which grief is subject to widespread cultural amnesia, disavowal, to systematic forgetting).⁴ These affective and political registers also distinguish the writings

our greatest worldwide public-health priority" (David Brown, "Statement Assures Doubters: HIV Causes AIDS" A02)

⁴In the field of North American culture, resistance to AIDS activist art is encapsulated in Arlene Croce's 1995 "non-review" of choreographer Bill T. Jones's piece *Still/Here* ("Discussing the Undiscussable"). Croce refused to see the piece on the grounds that it constituted "victim art" (22). "By working dying people into his act," writes Croce, "Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism" (20). But this stance did not

of many Western AIDS activists. I shall take one instance from among very many to substantiate the connection. Originally composed for magazines such as *Gay Community News*, *The Advocate*, and *Diseased Pariah News* and delivered at conferences such as *Out Write*, David Feinberg's essays take an irascible, even "perverse" stance that bears some similarity to Mbeki's. Reading Feinberg's collected essays,⁵ one is brought face to face with the impact of multiple losses, as experienced in the context of AIDS activism, and also with widespread cultural pressures to hasten the declaration of the epidemic's end in the face of contradictory evidence. In particular, Feinberg highlights the epidemic's resilience; there have been remarkable advances in drug therapy and preventative strategies, but infection rates in the North America remain high and the most advanced treatments are far from being equally available to all. He follows up his statistical references with a sarcastic barb representative of his style: "I guess we can all stop demonstrating and go home now: The epidemic is over, according to the government" (69). Writing in 1991, Feinberg presages the future explosion of the epidemic, insisting,

prevent her from publishing, in place of a review, a long, and unintentionally revealing, disquisition on her discomfort. Referring, in a manner reminiscent of Matthew Arnold, to the ideal of "disinterested art," Croce castigates Jones's work as "an aggressively personal extension of the anti-conventionalism of the sixties, when you were manipulated into accepting what you saw as art" (23-34). What makes her uncomfortable is the link between Jones's "accusatory" strategy and the emancipatory legacies of the "sixties"; an art of social protest does not make the critic "expendable" but rather demands a different kind of critic, one Croce is unable to imagine (28).

⁵Feinberg's essays have been collected in the volume *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone* (1994).

too, on its continuing relevance as a topic for writing: “But I have a sneaking suspicion that things will continue to get worse before they get better. I feel compelled to testify. I will continue to write about AIDS as long as I am able to because, in a sense, there is no other topic” (69). The call to testify supersedes official declarations about having passed some threshold that makes these experiences of suffering and loss less significant (because, according to the government, there had either never been a crisis, or there had only been an AIDS epidemic for a certain minority of the population). In turn, the ensuing testimony insists that to make such pronouncements is to create a framework in which the health crisis may be conveniently brushed aside. In his “Apologia Pro Vita Sua” (a subsection of an essay entitled “Queer and Loathing at the FDA”), Feinberg explains the purpose of his confrontational approach (here a gonzo-journalism style exposé of the American Food and Drug Administration, for its early systematic refusals to address AIDS and its resistance to funding programs that would help stem the tide of the epidemic): “Do you know why I am telling you all of this? Do you think I’m just trying to entertain you with these out-and-out lies? You couldn’t be farther from the truth. I want to terrorize you. I want to spur you into action. I want to show you how fucking angry I am” (26).

Feinberg’s at once bleakly humorous and *serious* address to the reader is as “inappropriate,” perhaps, as Mbeki’s invitation to the AIDS “dissidents.” Feinberg flirts with the distinction between “truth” and “lies” as a way of foregrounding the gap between his close-up perspective on illness and activism and the denials of the Reagan-Bush administrations; the essay thus shifts emphasis towards the question of who has the power

to construct what is taken to be the “truth” about the health crisis. One implication of such intimate accusations may be that, in Feinberg’s words, “It’s too late for a rational dialogue with the government” (26). This is the charge made, too, by Mbeki’s railing against the “superimposition of Western experience on African reality,” which flies so cantankerously in the face of received truths about the pandemic, its scientific foundations and epidemiology in particular. (While Feinberg adopts a performance of “perversity” and Mbeki would seem to be saying that Western AIDS discourse is perverse, what they share is their anticipation — and strategic manipulation of — the likelihood that each of their points of view will be read as pathological in any case.) But another, more complex, slightly less paranoid set of questions is raised, none the less, by these political testimonies. Self-conscious about the strategies they employ for representing HIV/AIDS, both Mbeki and Feinberg are committed to garnering attention for situations they believe require urgent action, as well as for a shift in the paradigm that is constructing what is considered valid knowledge. And if the overall effect is (in both cases, but more so in Mbeki’s) a fragmented one, then this in no way lessens the ethical questions that the affective fervor of these texts raises: this is a rhetoric on the edge. Indeed, in these two examples, it may be on the verge of sputtering into invective.

Held parenthetically here between the lines of these resistant — and yet complex and often contradictory — “rants” are two things then: an insistence that the crisis is not over *and* an insistence on being heard, regardless of whether or not the speakers’ messages will disturb their potential auditors (indeed, the explicit aim of these discourses

is to create “disturbance,” to fracture complacency about the pandemic). As Linda Singer observes, linking the lessons of AIDS activism to her own experience with breast cancer, “The tragedy of AIDS has given way to a resistance that does not cast itself within the imaginary of faith, optimism, and hope – it is a resistance cast in the language of *the demand*” (*Erotic Welfare* 106). If the AIDS crisis is declared increasingly to be “over,” then this is because of the different ways in which it is rendered in public discourse as being over: “over” through indifference or inaction, through a refusal to grieve, through its “Africanization,” which includes the sense of its being “over” here, in North America. The pandemic’s ghosts protest, we might say — through the hands and mouths of their spokespeople — against their being exorcized, rendered tractable, untroublesome by a public rhetoric of AIDS that would fast-forward public consciousness to a sometime future world, one purified of the scourge and its chosen “victims,” a world, in other words, fantasmatically purified of grief and of mourning.

I: Questions of Rhetoric, Questions of Ethics

This study addresses memoirs published in response to the AIDS epidemic in the 1990s. Even more than the kind of political discourse from which I have been sampling, autobiographical memoirs — sustained over the course of many pages, in the attempt to explore the significance of particular lives and deaths — meditate on questions of

representation and questions of ethics. I will be concerned with determining the characteristic features of AIDS memoirs and with developing a critical framework that will clarify the significance of the emphasis on unresolved grief in the work of three memoirists in particular: Amy Hoffman in *Hospital Time* (1997), Jamaica Kincaid in *My Brother* (1997), and Derek Jarman in *Modern Nature* (1991). First, a note on terminology. I employ the term “memoirs” to describe the autobiographical texts — first person testimonial and memorial accounts of HIV/AIDS — that interest me in this study. In this, my thesis has an important precedent in the recent work of Ross Chambers, who defines AIDS diaries as “‘nonnarrative texts’ of autobiographical witness,” arguing that

the retrospective orientation of memory, the question: ‘What did this life (or these events) mean? and the need to construct significance through discursive ordering are far less urgent than a need to answer the question how does it feel to be dying of AIDS? And a desire to make available to others, with some directness, the state of disintegration the experience entails. (6)

Though they do engage with the imperative to register a sense of “disintegration,” by contrast with Chambers’ account of AIDS diaries, Hoffman’s, Kincaid’s, and Jarman’s texts are perhaps more centrally concerned with — and troubled about — questions of the “meaning” and “significance” of the lives they undertake to represent. In these memoirs, an impulse to narrativization exists in tension with a marked inconsolability (the refusal to deny loss or to accede to the sufficiency of compensatory fictions). These conflicted

agendas inaugurate in AIDS memoirs a self-dividedness that calls for a reading strategy that attends to the pressures exerted by both of these imperatives.⁶

If, as Paul de Man has argued, “autobiographical discourse is a discourse of self-restoration,” then the texts in which I am interested do not sit comfortably in this (notoriously difficult to define) category of autobiography (“Autobiography as De-facement” 74). “Self-restoration,” while it is certainly one of their impulses, is thrown into crisis from the first moment by these texts’ commitment to exploring subjectivity as constitutively relational. This is not to deny that relationality is a constitutive feature of self-restoration in autobiographical writing: the other of the self can always be appropriated as the agonistic medium through which the self can imagine a return to itself. On the contrary, it is rather to emphasize that the memoirs in my study reconsider relationality in the specific context of the work of mourning, exposing these intimate relations of and with alterity, even and perhaps especially those that are motivated by a desire for self-restoration, as relations that, in Jacques Derrida’s words, “defy all reappropriation,” that are “beyond mournful memory” (*Memoires for Paul de Man* 38). Though Kincaid and Hoffman both write memorials that are ostensibly about lives and deaths other than their own, the experiences of their “brothers,” they are also preoccupied with reflecting on their own position as mourners, a situation that in the context of

⁶As I shall discuss in Chapter 3, Jarman’s *Modern Nature* may be considered a memoir in that Jarman revised his journals extensively for publication and contains considerable autobiographical reflection on his childhood and adolescence.

HIV/AIDS disrupts the autobiographical impulse to self-restoration. And Jarman is preoccupied both with the way in which his account of seropositivity stands as representative of a generation's struggle and with fears about the possibility that he will be misread after his own death. These texts bear out Leigh Gilmore's argument regarding women's self-representation, specifically her suggestion that the plural discourses "autobiographies pull together" are of such variety that "the 'unifying' *I* at their "center" is already fractured by its place in varying discourses (political, philosophical, psychological, aesthetic), and what frequently fractures such totalizing theories of identity is gender" (45). To reiterate, then, while none of the texts I discuss constitute diaries in the strict sense, neither are they organized in a coherent or unambiguous way around narrative patterns or organic metaphors characteristic of the "discourse of self-restoration" or completed mourning; it is, accordingly, difficult straightforwardly to read these memoirs "for the plot," for the fond evocation of personality, or for spiritual transcendence. Queerer reading strategies seem called for, and, in a sense, this thesis represents an attempt to outline these strategies. The memoirs considered here take up and reproduce the shifting dynamics of mourning and memory, blending this with a good deal of polemic, a tendency that often makes them seem like essays as much as life-stories and that indicates their rootedness in the AIDS crisis beyond what that crisis is for the memoirist (or her subject). Certainly, as Laura Marcus suggests, memoirs, like "other 'historical' or 'outer-directed' forms of life-writing," may be distinguished from autobiography in that

they “do not seem to exemplify self-analysis” (in the “saving,” humanistic sense) but rather are distinctively occasional in their impetus (183).⁷

To set the stage for in-depth discussions of individual works in the chapters to follow, I shall pursue several interrelated tasks. I will begin by establishing the particular rhetorical and political pressures that condition the writing of AIDS memoirs — and that shape so persistently, too, the cultural frameworks for their interpretation. Subsequently, by exploring examples from the wider body of personal writings on HIV/AIDS from the 1990s — specifically, Marie Howe and Michael Klein’s anthology *In the Company of My Solitude*, Eric Michaels’ *Unbecoming*, and Gary Fisher’s *Gary in Your Pocket* — I shall demonstrate the centrality of questions of mourning, abjection, and responsibility in memoirs about HIV/AIDS.⁸ Of central significance here is the project of remembering,

In this sense, AIDS memoirs may have as much in common with what John Beverley (1992) describes as “testimonio” as they do with autobiography (“The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* [Testimonial Narrative]”). Though Beverley emphasizes the origins of subaltern “resistance literature” in oral testimony (“in a legal or religious sense”), two of the key features he points to as characteristic of “testimonio” are possibly applicable to AIDS memoirs: 1) “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet ... form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant life experience”; 2) “a literature of personal witness and involvement designed to make the cause of these movements known to the outside world, to attract recruits, to reflect on the successes or failures of the struggle, and so on” (92-94).

⁸It is only the limitation of space, and my particular interest in how literary memoirs constitute themselves as reflections on narrative, that prevents me from discussing memoirs in visual form, including films such as Nan Goldin’s *I’ll Be Your Mirror* (1997) and Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman’s *Silverlake Life* (1993).

but the project is deeply fraught. What I want to argue is that many of the memoirs written in the 1990s theorize their projects as part of an imperative to “critical memory” that would pre-empt their easy assimilation to dynamics of nostalgia or premature declarations of an end to what is now most accurately described as a *pandemic*. Indeed, though the memoirs I discuss in this study are all written from positions of relative privilege (in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia), they are far from complacent about that positioning. Keeping in play a sense of the continuing urgency of the AIDS crisis, Hoffman, Kincaid, and Jarman, like Michaels and Fisher, have created texts that educate us about the discourses — often homophobic, racist, and otherwise discriminatory — that shape the representation of AIDS. At the same time, they attest in a complex, often tortuous, way to the dynamics of love, desire, and friendship that motivate such inquiries and that account, precisely, for their felt specificities.

The collective project of these memoirs, in other words, is to intervene in the collective, on-going cultural history of the pandemic, a field that, even in the context of the shifting terrain of epidemiological trends and pharmaceutical discoveries, remains indelibly affected by AIDS. Mapping the cultural productions linked to HIV/AIDS in the American context, Marita Sturken, in her recent study *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997), establishes the range of genres that have been engaged for the purpose of representing (and often contesting the representations of) AIDS. Among the non-literary genres surveyed by Sturken are memorials, public art, popular culture, literature, commodities, and activism; to be more

specific, we might gloss her list as including photography, film, independent video, dance, the AIDS quilt, and the red ribbon phenomenon (1). Confirming Sturken's sense of the pervasive, lasting impact of HIV/AIDS on culture, dance critic David Gere, in a 1998 *New York Times* article on the impact of AIDS on dance in the United States, argues for the profound and continuing impact of the grief inspired by AIDS losses on the "culture of the arts." He insists that "Death and grief, mourning and AIDS activism, have, in fact, become so integral to the culture of the arts at the end of the millennium that the stamp of AIDS will surely remain on us long after the epidemic actually comes to an end — assuming it does" (29).⁹

If the maps that Sturken and Gere provide are limited to the relatively privileged context of North America, and to the cultural responses to AIDS produced by gay men, the only caveat that needs to be made is that these commentators may be *underestimating* the impact of HIV/AIDS on the social fabric and its potential impact on culture in the years ahead. As Anne Hunsaker Hawkins points out in *Reconstructing Illness* (1993; repub. 1999), "the authorship" of AIDS memoirs in the 1990s "is no longer representative, epidemiologically, of those individuals with HIV/AIDS" in the United States (169) ¹⁰

⁹See Rob Baker, *The Art of AIDS: From Stigma to Conscience* (1994) for an overview of the impact of AIDS activism on North American and European culture. Baker discusses music, drama, dance, movies, and media.

¹⁰Though Hawkins occasionally makes some insightful remarks, her vehement rejection of what she calls "postmodernism" rings hollow in the context of autobiographical writings about HIV and AIDS. Particularly striking is her argument that "there seems to be a radical contradiction between the proliferation of literary narrative and the prevalence of

Together with the elevated rates of HIV infection among African Americans and among First Nations people in Canada, and the overall increasing infection rates amongst women in North America, the devastation that continues to increase in poorer countries worldwide means that to celebrate the overall decreased rates of infections in North America would be altogether reckless. In particular, to celebrate these advances would be to paper over the relation between HIV infection rates, linked death rates, and social, economic, and racial discrimination in less privileged parts of the world.¹¹ While this study addresses some of the social, racial, and economic asymmetries of HIV/AIDS in the context of Gary Fisher's reflections on being black in America and in the context of Jamaica Kincaid's invective against the inadequate social infrastructure in her country of

deconstructive practice and theory in literary criticism" (188) and her insistence that "in narratives describing illness and death, the reader is repeatedly confronted with the pragmatic reality and experiential unity of the autobiographical self" (17). She draws the hasty, and, I think, defensive, conclusion that "pathography [life-writing about illness based in what she calls "mythic thinking"] challenges the skepticism of critics and theorists about the self, making that skepticism seem artificial, mandarin and contrived" (17). Hawkins entirely ignores the critique of medical discourse that has been an integral part of AIDS activism and its related cultural productions; even Susan Sontag's wrist is slapped for presuming to suggest that metaphor has ideological valences. My study will demonstrate on the contrary that AIDS memoirs, written out of a rupture in the ontology of self, engage a set of concerns about representation and ethics that correspond to and complicate several strands of current theoretical discussion.

¹¹While the rate of infection for the adult population in sub-Saharan Africa is approximately eight times the global estimate (with 4 million people infected in 1998 alone), death rates are also elevated. "There were an estimated 2 million HIV/AIDS deaths in the region during the past year (80% of the global total), even though only one-tenth of the world population lives there" ("UN AIDS / WHO 1998 Global AIDS Statistics").

origin, Antigua, there remains much critical work to be done on the geopolitically diverse dimensions of the cultural representations of the pandemic.¹²

What recent studies suggest, in any case, is that the cultural response to HIV/AIDS continues at an urgent pace, even in what has been too hurriedly labeled the “second” or “later” phase of the pandemic. Given the persistence of the crisis, so-called “earlier” cultural analyses remain relevant; perhaps they even resonate prophetically. Beginning in 1986, and continuing through the 1990s, British cultural critic Simon Watney has sought to identify the several components — discursive, visual, and “moral” — of the public discourse of HIV/AIDS. According to Watney, who focuses on media representations in the United Kingdom, the “knowledge” or myth of AIDS has “duplicated the contours of other, previous ‘knowledges’ that speak confidently on behalf of the ‘general public,’ viewed as a homogenous entity” (“The Spectacle of AIDS” 73). In the Western media, the “spectacle of AIDS” is “constituted in a regime of massively overdetermined images” (78). They are “overdetermined” not only by “the dominant familial truth of AIDS,” which proclaims that only those outside the traditional family are vulnerable to HIV, but more particularly by “the projective ‘knowledge’ of [the spectacle’s] ideally interpellated spectator, who already ‘knows all he needs to know’

¹²In the 1990s, there have been several powerful films that address the topic of HIV/AIDS in its specific and disproportionate geographical and economic manifestations. I am thinking, for example, of films such as Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Everyone’s Child* (Zimbabwe, 1996), Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* (United States, 1991), and Allan Bibby’s *The Long Walk* (Canada, 1998).

about homosexuality and AIDS” (78). Why is the “moral etiology of disease” so persistent in the context of HIV/AIDS and its cultural representations? (73).¹³ Watney’s explanation for this situation draws together two strands of theoretical discourse, one Foucauldian, the other psychoanalytic, in the process of scrutinizing the often blurred realms of tabloid newspaper and the governmental discourse around “public health.” What is projected through the representation of the body with AIDS is a scene of depravity and of “suitable,” socially exorcizing punishment: “AIDS is thus embodied as an exemplary and admonitory drama, relayed between the image of the miraculous authority of clinical medicine and the faces and bodies of individuals who clearly disclose the stigmata of their guilt” (78). If we are to identify a central concern emerging from Watney’s studies, then “the ‘problem’” seems to be “the body itself, radically mute, yet rendered garrulous by projective, desiring fantasies all around it” (79).¹⁴

¹³ More recently, in a 1995 article on AIDS and photography, Watney has emphasized that the “requirement that AIDS be [portrayed as] painful, hideous, and uniformly fatal” remains intransigent, even in the face of “changing medical information” (“Lifelike Representing the Bodies of People with AIDS” 65).

¹⁴ Here I am taking Watney’s analysis (along with Eve Sedgwick’s and Linda Singer’s commentaries) as representative of the kind of analysis of discourse that has been brought to bear on AIDS and its cultural representations. It should be noted that the pandemic has been the subject of a number of trenchant analyses of the discourses shaping the representation of HIV/AIDS, especially media representations. Other helpful sources from the “early” years of cultural analysis that I will reference in the course of this study include essays by Douglas Crimp, Julia Epstein, Jeff Nunokawa, Cindy Patton, and Paula Treichler. More recent accounts included book-length analyses by Ross Chambers, Alexander García Düttmann, Lee Edelman, William Haver, Steven Kruger, Marita Sturken, and Thomas Yingling.

Critical writings about the cultural representations of HIV/AIDS corroborate and extend Watney's sense of the ways in which the visibility of the "body with AIDS" (whatever it might be) is cancelled out, so that it might serve as a screen for "projective, desiring fantasies." For the most part, these fantasies project "destruction" and "panic." In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and a series of subsequent essays, Eve Sedgwick ties the "problem" of the simultaneously "mute" and "garrulous" body to what she calls Western culture's "hygienic imperative" (42). Emphasizing how "the terrible accident of the HIV epidemic, and the terrifying societal threats constructed around it," gave new virulence to the category of "deviance" ("Gender Theory" 278), Sedgwick attributes the overlapping of the public (mis)representation of AIDS and homophobia to the prevalence of "a medicalized dream of the prevention of gay bodies" (*Epistemology* 43). If AIDS may be said to "fuel" a "public dream" of the "extirpation" of gay bodies, that dream is initiated and sustained by a more encompassing discourse of prohibition and disavowal vis-à-vis sexuality, a discourse that constitutes the panicked dream's "less visible, far more respectable underside" (43). At the foundation of this discourse of disease and deviancy is a widely held assumption that "the male homosexual" is, to borrow Watney's phrasing, "an impossible object, a monster that can only be engendered by a process of corruption through seduction" (77). It is only logical then that media representations — courting their imagined and policed "general public" — would play on "the forward slippage from corruption theories of homosexuality to contagion theories of AIDS" (77). It will be a central assertion of this thesis that activism — which is a far from homogeneous social

practice — has been successful in generating analyses that counter these discourses. As Sedgwick emphasizes, “It’s been one of the great ideological triumphs of AIDS activism that, for a whole series of overlapping communities, any person living with AIDS is now visible, not only as someone dealing with a particular, difficult cluster of pathogens, but equally, as someone who is by that very fact defined as a victim of state violence” (“White Glasses” 261).

In *Erotic Welfare* (1993) Linda Singer elucidates the political consequences of the panicked pattern of thought and fantasy outlined by Watney and Sedgwick, arguing that “the anxiety induced by the regulatory production of the epidemic is conducive to conservative political agendas” (29). Because the “general public” is not really universal after all, but rather “is viewed,” as Watney stresses, “as a homogenous entity organized into discrete family units,” this “same story of decay and death” would effectively erase those who do not sort with this “nationalistic fantasy” of the general public figured as a white, heterosexual nuclear family writ large.¹⁵ According to Singer, the particular form that this anxiety takes is “the increased fetishization of life as such” (29). By this phrase Singer aims to capture how “the anxiety produced through the epidemic is displaced and condensed in the regulation of sexual reproduction and the promotion of the family as the

¹⁵Supplementing Watney’s focus on visual representation, Julia Epstein has identified the role of cultural *narratives* in producing this scenario: “the production of stigmatizing explanatory narratives has been deployed largely to reassure the artificially invented ‘general population’ that they are ‘safe’ from taint, and to justify, thereby, a refusal to examine the underlying decay of social infrastructure” (“AIDS, Stigma, and Narratives of Containment” 298).

supposedly exclusive site of safe sex” (29). In other words, the “panic logic” leads to a pattern of “prophylactic protectionism” that reiterates pre-existing social exclusions. This pattern has, in turn, two major “logical” outcomes. First, “in a climate induced by epidemic, it becomes reasonable to intervene into the bodies of others” (28-30). Second, the AIDS epidemic has furnished opportunity for “the remarketing of the nuclear family as a prophylactic social device” (and this is despite the ironic way in which “history reveals,” according to Singer, “that the family has never been a particularly safe place for women and children”) (69).¹⁶ Singer’s analysis helps, furthermore, to explain why this discourse has become so pervasive: “Part of the appeal of the conservative position is that it offers a radical and totalizing form of explanatory closure” (31).¹⁷ As Marita Sturken

¹⁶And it is particularly “unsafe” in the context of the pandemic. As Cindy Patton argues, “Because the initial ‘risk behaviors’ were thought to be the exclusive domain of the ‘risk groups’ the public health strategies inadvertently fused the two types of approach,” resulting in very narrow definitions of the vulnerable (because deviant) and the invulnerable (because not deviant) (“‘With Champagne and Roses’: Women at Risk From/In AIDS Discourse” 167). Patton notes, moreover, the prevalence of “a kind of patriarchal self-obsession that has still not been able to admit that biologically speaking, women are indeed at far more risk of contracting HIV from men than vice versa” (169). Patton’s central concern is to highlight how these systematic denials of the risks of unsafe heterosexual intercourse endanger women: “The elision of a realistic subject position from which to assess what personal risk meant became the linchpin of the reconstruction of heterosexual identity, first by degendering women who had contracted HIV — pictured as women who shared needles — and second by reinforcing the idea that ‘normal’ sexual intercourse between ‘ordinary’ [ie. non-kinky] heterosexuals required no modifications, specifically, no condoms” (171).

¹⁷As Steven Kruger notes in *AIDS Narratives: Gender and Sexuality, Fiction and Science*, updating early analyses such as Watney’s and Treichler’s, gendered and sexualized discourses of AIDS shape narrative understanding of the epidemic. Focusing primarily on American novels about the pandemic, Kruger contends that epidemiological narratives

demonstrates, moreover, sentiment is but another, more “liberal” and “tolerant” version of this closure, and one that is remarkably insidious.¹⁸

But to ask only after the public, social dimensions of how HIV/AIDS is represented is perhaps to be complicit in the “panic logic” that comes under criticism within that model. Do we risk indulging in one more such “projective, desiring fantasy” when we launch in to speaking of the “body” as a “problem” without attempting to address the “subject”? (The projective fantasy in this case being the exclusion of the possibility that the “body” might “talk back” in ways we have not anticipated). As Thomas Yingling insists in his discussion of AIDS and “postmodern identity,” writing

may provide more hope than personal narratives; indeed, “the personal narrative threatens to reduce any story about someone with AIDS to the same story of decay and death” (77, 81).

¹⁸Sturken makes a strenuous argument against the sentimentality of many cultural responses to the AIDS pandemic but not all. See, for example, the praise she extends towards *Philadelphia*, despite her acknowledgment of the little room the film accords to the love between the central male couple. Perhaps Sturken’s focus on American popular culture leads her to adopt a point of view that buys into that culture’s logic of “tolerance” for the “marginal,” a logic that seems to merely reconfigure panic in a more palatable fashion. In this respect, Sedgwick’s argument in *Epistemology of the Closet* that there is in Euro-American culture “a kind of residue or remainder of erotic relations to the male body” may be salutary (180). She insists that as a result of this pattern of excluded relations “the underpinnings have long been in place for both a gay male sentimentality, and even more, a sentimental appropriation by the larger culture of male homosexuality as spectacle” (145). Because there is so much unacknowledged energy swirling beneath the surface, the project of filtering the sentimental out from the antisentimental can never be uncomplicated: “It may be only those who are themselves prone to these vicariating impulses who are equipped to detect them in the writing or being of others; but it is also they who for several reasons tend to be therefore perturbed in their presence” (153)

from his perspective as seropositive, “We must think of AIDS not only as a public issue of ideology, apparatus, and representation but also *as it is internalized and expressed* by those infected and affected” (“AIDS in America: Postmodern Governance, Identity, and Experience” 303). He argues that “we must do this [attend to how HIV/AIDS is “internalized and expressed”] not because disease is a matter of privacy nor because individual experience provides unmediated authority and knowledge but because ‘AIDS’ as a signifier lodges deep in subliminal zones of memory, loss, and (im)possibility” (303). Yingling’s argument for attending to subjectivity — to its turns, displacements, aggressions, and possibilities — is, as the above statement implies, twofold. The disciplinary and specularizing discourse of AIDS lives its power not just publically but “psychically,” that is, in and as registers that are social and phenomenological, in all the ways lives are lived. At the same time, the potential for resistance is tied up with “memory, loss, and (im)possibility,” with the ways in which the signifier “AIDS” lodges in affective zones that may not be fully available to its calculus, that may linger in reserve, as it were, to be unleashed for other purposes.¹⁹ In other contexts, however, we find this imperative expressed in less explicitly theoretical terms. In *My Brother*, for instance, Jamaica Kincaid marvels at the hold her brother’s death has on her emotions, asking “Why

¹⁹As Yingling further explains, providing a theoretical justification for this claim, “Only because experience is material, dialectical and collective can a critic like Benjamin be concerned about its atrophy, and we can employ ‘experience’ as a signifier to mark not private and interior knowledges but the intersection between such knowledges and the collective public structures that frame them” (303).

is it so new, why is this worn-out thing, death, so new, so new? (193). There are felt existential and ethical imperatives as well as more political ones for engaging in the project of writing — and of reading — memoirs, diaries, novels, poetry, and plays about HIV/AIDS. As I have been implying, however, and as I will be arguing in this thesis, first person “witness” accounts have a complicated relationship with the dynamics of narrativization and “spectacle” that typify the representation of HIV/AIDS in Western culture at large. They worry about the question of what it means to be “at odds with AIDS” (to borrow Alexander García Düttmann’s phrase) in the midst of a grief that seems new, unfathomable, even unbelievable, in the midst of a grief that may seem to threaten the rendering of all sense and, therefore, political opposition.

II: Theorizing Mourning and Melancholia

In his *New York Times* article, David Gere characterizes art produced in the context of HIV and AIDS as “melancholic” in its affective and psychological orientation (29). The terms “mourning” and “melancholia” have indeed served as crucial touchstones for critics seeking to understand how the AIDS pandemic has obliged artists to address its lived experiences, its social consequences, and its political ramifications. And indeed is cultural criticism, my own text included of course, not also caught up in grief and mourning? Does it not enact grief even as it is *about* grief? Judith Butler makes some of these connections, for instance, in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), when she reflects on

the “predicament of living in a culture which can mourn the loss of homosexual attachment only with great difficulty.” She argues that “This problematic is made all the more acute when we consider the ravages of AIDS, and the task of finding a public occasion and language in which to grieve this seemingly endless number of deaths” (138). The result of the cultural prohibition on mourning “homosexual attachment” is, according to Butler’s analysis, the internalization of the cruelty of a disciplinary logic that would elaborate this prohibition precisely where it is experienced as most painful. “Social categories” are not simply dispensable, Butler reminds us, and “the embrace of such categories, even as they work in the service of subjection, is often preferred to no social existence at all” (20). Sedgwick approaches the paradox outlined by Butler — “this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (*Psychic Life* 2) — from a more immediately personal point of view, observing the disturbing but not surprising irony that “at a time when I’ve need to make especially deep draughts on the reservoir of a desire to live and thrive [in the context of illness and loss] that resource has shown the cumulative effects of my culture’s wasting depletion of it” (“Queer and Now” 16). Registered on a personal level, the “prohibition” on love that Butler describes is experienced as a forced and devastating “depletion,” with the effect of multiplying the experience of loss. As Sedgwick summarizes, “all the brutality of a society’s big and tiny decisions, explicit and encoded ones, about which lives have or have not value,” are experienced with particular intensity from “the vantage point of one’s own bodily illness and need,” bringing into focus the “psychic” and “somatic

consequences” of these “decisions” — of these forced, multiple losses — as well as the “institutional and economic” ones (“Queer and Now” 16).

Douglas Crimp has argued, however, in “Mourning and Militancy” (1989) that melancholic tendencies ought to be deliberately and thoroughly transformed (9). Echoing Watney’s analysis of AIDS as “spectacle,” Crimp focuses on the way in which homophobia and its “violence of silence and omission” have prevented people from mourning losses to AIDS. The violences to which Crimp refers may be connected to the “desire for coherence and continuity” at work in the culture at large (Sturken 8). Desire for “coherence and continuity” “produces forgetting” in order to rejuvenate certain myths of the nation as an organic whole — and in the face of traumas that would show up the worst rifts in the fabric of such an imaginary collectivity (8). Crimp worries that a “melancholic” response to loss — that is, “capitulation” to the incompleteness of the mourning process, such that the individual and the community are overwhelmed by grief — would in effect collaborate in this forgetting by acceding to the loss of agency. Repudiating “melancholia” as “moralizing self-abasement” and for its association, in his words, with the “excoriation of gay culture” (12-13), he advocates for the “militant” reversal of this condition, arguing that “because this violence also desecrates the memories of our dead, we rise in anger to vindicate them. For many of us, mourning *becomes* militancy” (9). Likewise, citing Crimp’s rejection of the melancholia loss might inspire, Gere proposes that “The gay man transforms melancholia to activism in the crucible of his

righteous anger” (29).²⁰ The suspicions registered here are warranted: untheorized, the leap may indeed still seem too large between the derogatory cliché of the melancholic homosexual, itself derived from Freudian psychoanalytic theory, and the imperatives of activism. But can Crimp’s modelling of mourning and melancholia account for the complexities of AIDS memoirs, and, in particular, for their varying emphases on unresolved grief, on anger, guilt, despair and self-beratement, on the complexities of the imperative to memorialize the dead?

The debate about mourning and melancholia has given rise to theoretical arguments regarding what emotions are compatible with activist aims. Just as significantly, however, this debate has also been a prominent touchstone in memoirs and personal essays, texts which may themselves may be read as “theoretical” documents. The spectrum of responses is well represented in the 1995 anthology *In The Company of My Solitude*, edited by Marie Howe and Michael Klein, from which I will explore two examples in order to mark out the conflicting positions on this issue and to prepare for my discussion of Butler and Derrida’s remarks on mourning. Mark Doty, author of the book-length memoir *Heaven’s Coast* (1997), which documents his experience as lover, caregiver, and mourner for his partner, Wally, provides one of the anthology’s

²⁰Edmund White’s essay “Esthetics and Loss” (1987) also attempts to circumscribe the range of possible appropriate literary responses to AIDS; in particular, White argues that humour would be an inappropriate response because “like melodrama,” it entails “an assertion of bourgeois values; it falsely suggests that AIDS is all in the family” (71). As we shall see, however, melancholia and humour are not unconnected — and both have critical work to do.

introductory essays (later to become the preface of his memoir), entitled “Is There a Future?” Here, Doty identifies an obligation to memorialize the dead, asking “Is my future, then, remembering you? Inscribing the name, carrying the memory, being remembered as one who remembered?” (8).²¹ Emphasizing his conviction that “Wally is in my body; my body is in this text,” Doty proposes that the future may be filled, and thus restored to us, by awareness of being “part of this vast interchange of Being” (11). For Doty, then, fundamentally Romantic in his view of the world, it seems that the “intrinsic ontological primacy of the natural object” (7)²² promises consolation, as well as assurance that the text of grief will receive a “proper” reading when the text reaches others’ hands and eyes. But a juxtaposed essay by Deborah Salazar, entitled “The Bad News is the Bad News is the Same,” adumbrates quite another point of view. Intimate and confrontational in its tone, Salazar’s essay concludes by listing the actions and emotions forced upon the visitor to the sickroom, and by suggesting some of the psychic consequences of this positioning.

You deal with whatever needs to be dealt with then and there. You adjust I.V. tubes so they don’t bend, you pass the vomit bucket, you sit in the

²¹Doty’s elaboration is evocative. He continues by explaining that “The work of the living is remembering, and the collective project of memory is enormous; it involves the weight of all our dead, the ones we have known ourselves and the ones we know only from stories. It is necessarily to recall not just names but also faces, stories, incidents, gestures, tics, nuances, those particular human attributes that distinguish us as individuals” (8).

²²For de Man in this early essay, “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,” nothing is more seductive (or more important to resist) than the desire to identify with the apparently non-temporal, non-suffering world of beings-in-themselves, the things of “nature” (7).

hospital room and watch endless television, you listen to the medical machinery bleep and whir, and you answer the phone every time it rings and say “No change.” Even after the death happens, the bad news is that the bad news is still the same. It’s only been a few months since David’s died ... but I’m still waiting for something to happen, for some wisdom to emerge, for some revelation to shake the world. And I’m still waiting for David to haunt me. Imagine waiting for all these things while waiting for friends to die. You never know who’s next. It’s like it was all those days in David’s hospital room; you expect to learn a kind of saintlike patience, but you never do. You just *are* patient while you’re waiting to learn. (17)

While Doty shares with Salazar the impression that there is “a strange kind of physical permanence” to loss, their essays mark out paths for grief that are ultimately as divergent as are Crimp’s and Yingling’s. In Salazar’s rendering of the “future” of “remembering,” time has not progressed; she still lives in the sickroom. Her friend David’s death does not confer an unambiguous authority on her writing. Far from providing a “revelation” that would “shake the world” (as Doty’s essay suggests), Salazar’s loss has made her writing subject to the untimely contortions of a strange, unspeakable (and yet inescapable) burden: the burden of a body and a testimony, a position of witness into which she corrals her readers, too, by switching so rapidly between first and second person narration. To some degree, she measures herself against the regulatory ideal of “wisdom” as the necessary teleological destination of grief, as if death can only be “revealing,” a bringer of wisdom, if a “truth” is wrung from it, some story, narrative, or allegory is produced out of it, or as if the dis-possession of death must be fitted into a psychic-cultural economy so that it yields (or is imagined to yield) a possession, a getting of “wisdom,” consolation, forgiveness, or in the coarsest formulation, the assurance that the death was “not in vain.” What we *learn*

through Salazar's brave and smart counter-claim based on her life in the context of the sickroom, though, is something rather more oblique and ungrounding: that the security of "wisdom" never arrives, that the "world-shaking" that has been witnessed (and, importantly, is being witnessed now in her very words) cannot be economized, cannot be put to work. Indeed, while the psychic and cultural expectations of mourning work are such that one either has "wisdom" or does not, one mourns or is melancholic, for certain resistant griever, such as the memoirists I shall investigate in this study, that structure does not match the grief as it is experienced and written out.

Is a stance of completed mourning — in Crimp's terms, of loss sublimated entirely into anger — the only sure way of counteracting the "projective, desiring fantasies" that render the body with HIV/AIDS as though to reveal the "stigmata" of its "guilt"? Is it even possible? In other words, how may we begin to read a pessimism — and a self-doubt — so acute as Salazar's? Out of a suspicion of grief's absorption of energy, Crimp proposes a slightly reconfigured definition of mourning and melancholia as a way to retrieve a position of strength. In so doing, he aligns his argument with Freud's

privileging of completed mourning, specifically with the argument "that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (245). But by hinging this position of strength and activism on a relatively narrow definition of what might constitute strength and opposition, he may risk inscribing a normative masculinity for gay men. what is being proposed seems to be a new mournful "warrior" who must finish with grief before he can take up the torch of political action. Must he also finish

then with the erotic attachment that inspires his grief in the first place? Indeed, as Michael Moon asks us to consider, while Freud's theory of the work of mourning valorizes "moderation, resolution, and closure in the form of a return to 'health' and 'normalcy,'" the economizing of grief that the Freudian model valorizes "may seem to diminish the process and to foreclose its possible meanings instead of enriching it or making it more accessible to understanding" ("Memorial Rags" 234). Moreover, these "urgent needs and feelings" — and especially the "erotic component of grief and sorrow" — are already subject (given that they are "culturally constructed" as much as they are "felt") to cultural imperatives that would contain, repress, and deny them (235). Moon's point is an evocative one, not least because the plurality of his phrasing — "urgent needs and feelings" — suggests that this component is far from being singular. As my chapter length discussions will explore, what eros might be amid or as grief is far from obvious, despite what we may be accustomed to assuming, namely, that the romantic love of a couple, gay or straight, has exclusive rights to passionate love and remembrance. Overall, given that memoirs about HIV and AIDS by people "infected and affected" are embroiled in unresolved emotions (anger, which, *pace* Crimp, is far from being absolutely clear in its motivations or consequences) what I find myself asking along with Moon is this: might there be a way of rethinking mourning and melancholia that could allow for a reading both

of what critical insights unresolved grief may enable and of what affective bonds mourning (simultaneously) threatens to foreclose?²³

In contrast with diaries, memorializing texts seem particularly prone to these ambivalences. In *Facing It*, Chambers calls attention to the status of diaries as “‘nonnarrative texts’ of autobiographical witness” and considers the anxieties they actively cultivate for their potential readers (6). Perhaps the defining feature of this “emerging genre” is the tendency to offer a “chain of confrontations”: “Every reading confirms, condones, profits from, the death of the author, which is why every reader, as survivor, stands accused in advance of indifference to the author’s fate, through a failure to ensure the author’s survival adequately” (22-23). The form of anxiety Chambers here aptly identifies may be distinguished from the “panic logic” described by Singer; it is of a variety upon which we cannot turn our backs, at least if we are to keep reading. (The accusations proffered by these diaries are not available to the “panic logic” that would shift blame to the socially marginalized.) The outcome of this cultivation of anxiety is, Chambers argues, potentially “therapeutic” in that “the act of writing, or of filming, makes sense and becomes a form of preventive medicine, an act of decontamination that is directed both

²³Echoing (unintentionally) Arlene Croce’s criticisms of Bill T. Jones, in her chapter on AIDS “pathographies” or illness memoirs in *Reconstructing Illness* Hawkins picks and chooses amongst memoirs, praising those that suit her agenda, and vilifying “autobiographical narratives by homosexual men” when they seem to propose “an angry defense of the gay lifestyle, where AIDS is simply a dimension of being homosexual” (170).

outwardly, toward the contaminating social environment, and inwardly, towards oneself" (27). In other words, "We find ourselves faced with a text that is a kind of pharmakon, a remedy with poisonous characteristics, a poison with the capacity to cure" (31).

However, if AIDS diaries "do not want the pieties of memorialization as an act of closure that makes forgetting possible" (32), I would suggest that in *memoirs* we see the lurking presence of narrative patterns and images that would encourage us to read for other sorts of plots: the persistence of desire, in other words, for "discursive ordering" (6). The temptations of the discourse of "self-restoration" are a concern especially in memoirs that are already mediated: written, that is, by a secondary witness, written "to the memory of" the dead (a situation that makes them provisionally different than the "diary" or "chronicle"). Likewise, if in the context of diaries, as Chambers suggests, "the critic as writer is in a position to furnish the relay function on which the continuation of witnessing projects ... depends" (132), then the critic's dilemma is also multiplied in the context of memorializing texts. Considering the ways in which memoirs are already mediated and (tentatively) ordered, I contend that the most pressing question for the critic may become how *not* to mourn — that is, how not to become caught up in mourning as compensatory, as an aggressive action of normalizing closure, even while there may be no evading the law that commands us to mourn (and to mourn "well").

As one of Freud's most perceptive contemporary readers, Butler explores melancholia in a way that helps to disengage the term from its pathological associations and that, further, may allow us to consider how it both complements and resists the

normalizing push of “the work of mourning” in the context of AIDS memoirs. Arguing that in *The Ego and the Id* Freud draws attention to the possibility that “the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego,” that “it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface,” Butler highlights Freud’s emergent sense that “the way in which we gain new knowledge of our organs during painful illnesses is perhaps a model of the way by which in general we arrive at the idea of our body” (*Bodies That Matter* 65). With this change in emphasis, a new set of possibilities is raised for reading mourning and melancholia. Butler is particularly curious about the following questions. “What is excluded from the body for the body’s boundary to form? And how does that exclusion haunt that boundary as an internal ghost of sorts, the incorporation of loss as melancholia? To what extent is the body surface the dissimulated effect of that loss?” (65).²⁴ Emphasis on the supposed closure of mourning, which is generally presented in terms of psychological depth — that is, hypostatized by way of a language of healing and integration — masks the existence of a much more unstable, and fundamental, set of relations: melancholic, reiterative, incomplete ones.

By extension, we are enabled to reread Freud’s essay on “Mourning and Melancholia,” particularly the statement that “the complex of melancholia behaves like a

²⁴To repeat, then, Butler’s cautious invitation to appropriate Freud for the purposes of queer and feminist theory, “Clearly the point is to read Freud not for the moments in which illness and sexuality are conflated, but, rather, for the moments in which that conflation fails to sustain itself, and where he fails to read himself in precisely the ways he teaches us to read” (*Bodies That Matter* 65).

open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies ... from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished” (253). The moment of the unstaunched “emptying” of the ego affords us a glimpse of the role of the ego as the boundary of the body, as opposed to foundational concept; consequently, the founding exclusions of identity-formation are made available to interrogation (*Bodies That Matter* 113). As we shall see, melancholy keeps the formation of these exclusions a lively question by refusing to

* // relinquish love for what has been declared off limits. For the moment, though, I want to foreground the context that increasingly motivates Butler’s rereading of Freud on melancholia: the homophobia of contemporary American society and the status of HIV/AIDS losses as an exemplary instance — and an urgent, pressing articulation of — the imbrication of subjectivity in the dynamic of melancholia. Butler insists that the love of gay men as gay men — not only love for one another but anyone’s love — is allowed to occur “only under the official sign of its prohibition and disavowal” (and, we might add, pathologization) (*Psychic Life* 139). When “certain kinds of losses are compelled by a set of culturally prevalent prohibitions,” the consequence is, according to Butler, “a culturally prevalent form of melancholia, one which signals the internalization of the ungrieved and ungrievable homosexual loss” (139). And what is lost goes beyond the loss of an “object” or “some set of objects”; what is lost, rather, is “love’s own possibility” (24). Still, as Freud’s exposition implies, “by taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction” (257). The fundamental ambivalence of mourning and melancholia allows for the preservation of

love in the midst of denial and prohibition, although this love is almost unrecognizably distorted, expressed as “hate,” disparagement, and repudiation.

In that it involves a grief that we can neither own nor bring to completion, “melancholia rifts the subject, marking a limit to what it can accommodate” (*Psychic Life* 23). Indeed, as my introductory epigraph from Butler highlights, she raises the possibility of grieving loss in ways *other* than those sanctioned by the law, in ways that would “resist” “its lure of identity” (130). We cannot *not* grieve, she says, but can we grieve “elsewhere” or “otherwise”? (130). In her chapter in *Psychic Life* on “Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification,” Butler further explores the possibility that melancholia, or impossible mourning, always a matter of the internalization of prohibitions and identification with the law — and hence, disavowal of love — as Butler (probably inadvertently) implies through her insistent repetition of these terms (134)? May the “limits” of our “accommodations” be thought as open to shifting, rather than as static? Evident throughout Butler’s writing, I want to suggest, is the sense that there are two possible paths for melancholia (although, as we shall see in the course of this study, they are much less easily extricable from one another than the following summary may seem to suggest). One, a version she characterizes as distinctively heterosexual in that it would defend identity (while corroding everything else); its motivation is to maintain the self’s sense of coherence and legitimacy through the reiteration of “the ideal of social rectitude defined over and against homosexuality” (141). The other, a queer version, one that persists in loving (and in acknowledging the love of) the “categorically” unloveable. In

both cases, “the foreclosure of certain forms of love suggests that the melancholia that grounds the subject (and hence always threatens to unsettle and disrupt that ground) signals an incomplete and irresolvable grief” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 23). However, the critical differences between the two are several. What is at issue is not “sexuality” perhaps so much as it is the way desire for coherence (for a legible identity) plays against the persistence of diffuse “passionate attachments” (6). Put another way, the assumption (and fear) of “bodily deficiency” in mourning (Freud’s “emptying out of the ego”) may be reconsidered if grief might be acknowledged as replete with libidinal energies, with what Moon calls “bodily abundance and supplementarity” (“Memorial Rags” 239). Grief may be rethought, so the implication runs, as a “scene of agency,” albeit one without a subject at its centre, perhaps because only a “decentered subject” is “available to desire” and to the effects of desire (Bersani cited in Butler 149). Moreover, if, as Butler writes, “agency is the assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically,” then unresolved grief, when it “operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible,” may become an “ambivalent scene of agency,” though it is “constrained by no teleological necessity” (emphasis added, *Psychic Life* 15).

Perhaps in what Butler calls the “risking” of “the *incoherence* of identity” we can find a possible point of leverage for thinking melancholia as a “scene of agency,” if a necessarily ambivalent one (emphasis in original 149, 15). The implications of a reconceptualization of melancholia in connection with first-person memoirs are further

illuminated, I want to suggest, by Derrida's writings on mourning and memorialization. As Marcus muses in her study of autobiography, deconstruction's preoccupation with the connections between death and autobiographical discourse may seem strange now "in a cultural context in which death has been largely rendered invisible and in which the relationship between auto/biography and memorial would seem to have been severed" (209). This is no longer so, I would reply, in the context of HIV/AIDS, which has returned to us death — and survival — as central cultural problematics; moreover, as Derrida's writings on the topic help to clarify and complicate, the pandemic has returned these questions to us as inextricable from questions of social justice and responsibility.²⁵ In particular, the evocatively self-scrutinizing *Memoires for Paul de Man* asks us to consider both the dispersal of the self/other relationship *and* the way in which we are drawn back, ever, into figurality. Elaborating on the implications of de Man's own writing on autobiography, Derrida worries about the ethical consequences of the discourse of "self-restoration." He asks whether "the most distressing, or even the most deadly infidelity" might be that "of a *possible mourning*" — a mourning that, sanctioned and cathartic, seems unequivocally to belong to us and to restore us to our "selves" (emphasis in original 6). Such a mourning would build itself around the drive to "interiorize the

²⁵Marcus raises a common objection to what she terms "the death-dealing discourses of deconstruction": that they have seemed to "deny a voice to any subject before women have found their own" (210). What becomes particularly interesting in the context of HIV/AIDS is the question of what "agency" might mean in the context of a melancholic subjectivity that we cannot (except at great cost) wish away.

image, idol or ideal of the other”; this is a move that would install a relation of possession, so that this “other who is dead” could “live only in us” and thus only for our own purposes (6). Conversely, he asks, “Or is it that of the impossible mourning, which, leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove, either refuses to take or is incapable of taking the other within oneself, as in the tomb or the vault of some narcissism?” (6). This “refusal” to “take the other within oneself” may parallel Butler’s notion of the “failure” of identificatory phantasms as a moment in which the law requiring interiorization is suspended (*Bodies That Matter* 105). However, Derrida’s phrasing implies that there exists, rather, a *responsibility* to reject the bad faith of interiorization for the witness or reader in such a scenario; but, as in Butler’s modelling of agency, the refusal Derrida points to is one without a stable foundation or “teleological necessity” (Butler, *Psychic Life* 15) in that it is somehow both agented (“I refuse”) and “non-subjectivizable” (“it refuses” or is “incapable”). Certainly what most distresses Derrida, as he weighs these possibilities against one another, is that because the “normal” “work of mourning” is described in terms of “memory and interiorization,” because it normalizes such “obsessive triumph,” it seems inevitably to “entail a movement in which an interiorizing idealization takes in itself or upon itself the body and voice of the other, the other’s visage and person, ideally and quasi-literally devouring them” (34, 38).

Derrida’s interview on “The Rhetoric of Drugs” claims the exemplarity of AIDS for today’s “socio-ethico-political problems,” and suggests further connections between memorializing texts and the distorting and devouring representations of otherness on

which they seem inescapably to depend. Derrida insists that it is “AIDS” even more than “drugs” that raises “the question of consciousness, reason and work, truth, the good memory, and the anamnesis of allegedly primary or natural processes” (246). The words “memory” and “anamnesis” carry the burden of the analysis that is embedded in this sentence. We represent these concepts — “consciousness, reason and work, truth” — to ourselves as “allegedly primary and natural”; accordingly, we seem only to “recall” them rather than reiteratively to invent them. Belief in “the good memory,” like belief in “possible mourning,” may be the most egregious instance of bad faith, of “deadly infidelity,” in the context of a reality infinitely more ridden with conflicting desires than the myth of “the good memory’s” sufficiency would suggest.

Indeed, though the two “problems” (“AIDS” and “drugs”) that concern him in this conversation are certainly linked in their shared association with “delinquency,” AIDS, Derrida insists, instigates an “absolutely original and indelible” rupture in our systems of meaning and value (250). This rupture goes to the heart of subjectivity because “the various forms of this social contagion, its spatial and temporal dimensions, deprive us henceforth of everything that a relation to the other, and first of all desire, could invent to protect the integrity and thus the inalienable identity of anything like a subject” (250). The use of the phrase “social contagion,” far from referring in any simple way to “AIDS,” which, after all, is not an “infectious disease” as Eric Michaels wryly notes,²⁶ should

²⁶Michaels clarifies the basic absurdity (as well as the danger to him) of being placed in the infectious diseases ward of the Royal Hospital in Brisbane, informing us that “AIDS is not

remind us rather of what Paula Treichler calls “the epidemic of signification” that has arisen in response to HIV/AIDS, out of a panicked set of relations between the disease, homophobia, and biomedical discourse (31). The “chaotic assemblage” of “understandings of AIDS” intensively recycle and thus give new visibility to the “prior social constructions” that shape “understandings” of difference and “delinquency” (31, 35). What is at stake according to Derrida, as for Butler, is the “symbolic organization” of “the subject in its separation and in its absolute secret” (“The Rhetoric of Drugs” 250-251). For although “this is how it’s always been,” “now, exactly as if it were a painting or a giant movie screen, AIDS provides an available, daily, massive *readability* to that which the canonical discourses we mentioned above had to deny, which in truth they are destined to deny, founded as they are by this very denial” (251). Derrida’s comments thus pinpoint the pressure that the AIDS emergency brings to bear on the fictions by which we reiteratively seek to secure our integrity as subjects, and, by implication, the exclusionary moves by which we articulate and reinforce these ideals; these are conditions of subjectivity that predate the pandemic to be sure, but which the pandemic continues to intensify, to particularize in unique ways, and to render problematic. Corroborating Butler, Derrida’s comments raise, too, what she identifies as the “political question of the cost of articulating a coherent identity position by producing, excluding, and repudiating a

an infectious disease. darling, if I had to tell you what I went through to get this, your hair would curl pink! But we are terribly susceptible to disease” (*Unbecoming* 18).

domain of abjected specters that threaten the arbitrarily closed domain of subject positions" (*Psychic Life* 149).

With his further forays into social and political theory in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida becomes increasingly concerned with what exorcisms seem to justify the self-satisfied assumptions of power. In this context, he is concerned with the mania and jubilation with which the fall of Marxism continues to be played out in "the ideological supermarkets of a worried West" (68) and registers alarm, but also skepticism, about the self-sustaining power of Western democracy's denials, founded as they are on the supposed "triumph of liberal capitalism" (68). "This triumph," he argues, is celebrated by the privileged "only in order to hide, and first of all from themselves, the fact that [liberal capitalism] has never been so critical, so fragile, threatened, and in certain regards catastrophic, and in sum bereaved?" (68). What we "hide" from "ourselves" — in undertaking the work of a "possible mourning" — becomes slightly more specific than his references to "the *spirit* of the Marxist critique" might at first glance suggest (68). Is what we hide from ourselves not the cruel correspondence between definitions of "delinquency" and the economic and cultural "margins of society"? And is it not these "margins" that call out most pressingly for justice, against the work of mourning, of forgetting, of selective (and motivated) remembrance?

By forcing a "destructuring and depoliticizing poly-perversion" within "the social bond" and within the subject, AIDS may compel us in the direction of the second path for

grief being suggested in *Memoires*, even as the pendulum seems to swing in precisely the opposite direction, in the direction of mourning as a possible exorcism. It may compel us, in other words, towards the practice of memory Derrida associates (via Hegel) with *Gedachtnis* (thinking memory) as opposed to *Erinnerung* (interiorizing memory) (*Memoires* 38). “Manic, jubilatory, and incantatory,” the impulse of “triumphant mourning work” is to exorcize troublesome ghosts (*Specters of Marx* 52). But HIV/AIDS — because it so profoundly fractures the “canonical discourses,” and because it reminds us incessantly of what those discourses seek to “deny” — asks us to think about something we can tentatively call “impossible” mourning. This would be a mourning that would not spin itself dizzy and euphoric in the futile needlework of suturing an “open wound.” According to Derrida’s reading of de Man,

True ‘mourning’ seems to dictate only a tendency: the tendency to accept incomprehension, to leave a place for it, and to enumerate coldly, almost like death itself, those modes of language which, in short, deny the whole rhetoricity of the true (the non-anthropomorphic, the non-elegiac, the non-poetic, etc.). (*Memoires* 31)

In a certain sense, then, “the failure succeeds,” for “an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us” (35).²⁷ Intimate relations of alterity, when they are not devoured for the purposes of self-

²⁷Towards the conclusion of “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” however, Derrida expresses his wariness of “the political violence” that may ensue from the “restructuring and supposedly repoliticizing impulse,” possibly from the interiorization of “the image, idol or ideal of the

restoration, persist to give evidence of passionate attachments (for this rejection is born of “tenderness”) to the very objects that would ordinarily constitute the subject’s “outside.” If HIV/AIDS as universal or exemplary of anything then, it stands as a specific and irrecusable cultural experience of “traumatism” (to employ Derrida’s word [“Rhetoric of Drugs” 251]), one that forces us variously to avow and to disavow the “domain of abjected specters” that the “canonical discourses” would have us obsessively, triumphantly deny.

III: Reading Abjection: Eric Michaels’ *Unbecoming*

Before turning to my chapter-length studies of Hoffman, Kincaid, and Jarman, I need to introduce two theoretical strands emerging from this discussion of AIDS memoirs’ melancholic relation to “a domain of abjected specters.” What do we mean exactly by abjection, that is, how does it manifest itself textually? And, how can we begin to articulate the role of the critic who reads abjection, making a career, uneasily, melancholically, out of turning the spectral into meaning, even searching for “wisdom,” for a “world-shaking” revelation? Another way of asking these questions: what kind of visibility is afforded to the seropositive body and to the ill body under the rubric of “impossible mourning”? In Eric Michaels’ journal *Unbecoming* (1990), the appearance of

other” within the self, the compulsive return to the “mimetic interiorization” that is “the origin of fiction, of apocryphal figuration” (34).

Kaposi's sarcoma lesions promises, at first, a kind of narrative inevitability, as they dispassionately "announce" themselves:

I watched these spots on my legs announce themselves over a period of weeks, taking them as some sort of morphemes, arising out of the strange uncertainties of the past few years to declare, finally, a scenario. As if these quite harmless-looking cancers might, when strung together, form sentences which would give a narrative trajectory, a plot outline, at last to a disease and a scenario that had been all too vague. (3)

The possibility of a narrative trajectory, while its certainties are attractive, does not, however, win out in any clear way. Though Michaels begins to articulate a distinction between past (uncertainty and vagueness) and present (clarity), "the strange uncertainties of the past few years" remain, ultimately, the same "strange uncertainties" of the present. The passage continues by adding the sobering comment that "this relief proves always a false and premature dispensation. Perhaps the oddest thing about AIDS is that it takes so very long; one is required to live through all its stages, at each point confronted with insane, probably pathological choices. This week, it's who to tell, and how" (3). While, on the one hand, "cultural anxiety and dread" seem to entail, as Yingling argues, that the "literality" of AIDS "must also be continually addressed in strenuous, referential narratives of victimization, punishment, resistance, and healing," Michaels' account stages a different relation to this "literality" ("AIDS in America" 293). Michaels' diary, which covers the years 1987-1988, ending abruptly with his death, documents his personal experience of the consequences of the public discourse of AIDS, and in particular as that discourse is inflected by Australia's colonial legacy of polite reticence combined with a determination

to normalize difference; and Michaels persistently turns his critical, theoretical acumen as an anthropologist to this analytical endeavour, which we might describe as a kind of “self-ethnography.” Refusing to “abject” “the collapse of identity and difference” from “systems of self-knowledge,” *Unbecoming* exploits uncertainty and anxiety for its project of survival (Yingling 292). As Chambers’ subtle reading has established, Michaels’ diary mobilizes a “tactics of untidiness as a mode of resistance to those forces that would like to tidy AIDS patients” (10).²⁸

Before illustrating how these “tactics of untidiness” operate in Michaels’ diary, I want to suggest that *Unbecoming* raises a question that necessitates the consideration of another theoretical axis regarding melancholia. Throughout *Unbecoming*, as well as in the passage cited above, extremes of passion seem to animate what Derrida describes as “cold enumeration.” Paradoxically, it seems that a representation of the other that is uncontained by a distorting investment in its own outcome issues from a charged space of intimacy — in Michaels’ case this occurs in the form self-regard. The condition of such

²⁸I have opted to include Michaels as an introductory example rather than embarking on a chapter length discussion for several reasons. Ross Chambers has produced an exhaustive and persuasive reading of this diary in *Facing It*. Moreover, its “tactics of untidiness” push limits about which the memoirs in my study are perhaps relatively ambivalent; but *Unbecoming* does contain a sophisticated reflection on the dilemma of abjection that corroborates the thesis I shall explore vis-à-vis Hoffman, Kincaid, and Jarman, making it well worth exploring briefly here.

depersonalized representation is in the first place an intense desire for love, and a yearning for sustenance, in the face of the symbolic bodily boundaries that “abjection” would reiteratively police. However, Derrida’s writings on mourning and AIDS, like Butler’s, seem inadvertently to privilege the discursive as opposed to the bodily dimensions of the question, and so to downplay the passions that most concern them. The problem, as William Haver stresses in *The Body of This Death*, is that while the “erotic body in its historicity and sociality” may be an “unimaginable figure,” it remains a crucial consideration precisely because it constitutes “a thought ... of the limit” (xi). What strains against the “plot outline” in the opening paragraph of *Unbecoming* — the narrative certainty that Michaels almost begins to desire here — is the very “body” that produces the cancers that seem to provide the last and final symptom of an unavoidable narrative trajectory: towards disintegration and death.

The conflict between the inclination to search for narrative “dispensation” and a persistent (and sometimes unwilling) return to “embodiment” in personal writings about HIV and AIDS is an especially important consideration, as Haver insists, because “AIDS discourse has by and large sustained a fatal nostalgia for the clean and proper body, which is also a no less fatal nostalgia for the clean and proper body politic” (*The Body of this Death* 8). In a sense, “AIDS has come to function,” as Karen Zivi observes, referring to the work of Julia Kristeva, “as our abject,” “as that which is to be jettisoned, cast off,

excluded from society” (“Constituting the ‘Clean and Proper’ Body” 39).²⁹ Using the location of “impurity” in leprosy in Chapters 13 and 14 of Leviticus as a chief example, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva argues that the broken skin (in its intact state the “the essential if not initial boundary of biological and psychic individuation”) “becomes inscribed within the logical conception of impurity” as “intermixing, erasing of differences, threat to identity” (*Powers of Horror* 101). In Western culture, “the body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic”; anything that shows the insecurity of boundaries is by definition (and for definition’s sake) rejected, abjected. Given this cultural context, the tendency to render HIV/AIDS as abject is certainly far from arbitrary. HIV makes the body prone to a host of opportunistic infections, as well as to the ravages of medications and the press of institutional power — all conditions that contradict the fictions of bodily integrity. Skin bears the burden of defining symbolic boundaries, and so with HIV/AIDS, as with leprosy, “it is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one’s ‘own and clean self’ but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents” (53). Neither, however, can the virus or its various effects be considered exclusively to embody the abject, but rather need to be thought as a particularly intense expression and confrontation of a wider cultural problematic. Aligned

²⁹Zivi’s analysis addresses not cultural representations by people infected and affected by HIV but rather how laws, state police power, and media images attempt to entrench “public order and public safety” by invoking AIDS as “abject” (39-40).

materially with “waste, blood, decay, bodily fluids and infection” and socially with what threatens to “pollute” bodily boundaries the integrity of “individual and social order,” HIV/AIDS throws boundaries into chaos, provoking their panicked reiteration (Zivi 39-40).

The model of “impossible mourning” that I have been elucidating by way of Butler and Derrida’s theorizations of unresolved grief finds an informative supplement, I want to argue, in Kristeva’s writings, which are preoccupied with the melancholic’s strange ways of preserving attachment to (and ambivalent love for) bodies coded as exceeding the boundaries of the “clean and proper.” Abjection is, in this context, shown to be highly unstable, and, to the degree that it challenges the self-sufficiency of narrative and figurative language, to exert a transformative pressure on conceptions of the individual and the social (and the relations between the two). In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, we learn in particular of melancholia defined as “the institutional symptomatology of inhibition and asymbolia that becomes established now and then or chronically in a person” (9). For Kristeva, as for Derrida, melancholia does not involve the interiorization of an ideal, then, on the contrary, “The depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing” (13). Confirming Derrida’s attribution of this “uncontrollable necessity” (of “impossible mourning”) to “a non-subjectivizable law of thought beyond interiorization” (*Memoires* 37), Kristeva “posits” the “Thing as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion,” emphasizing that it “is inscribed within us *without memory*” (emphasis added 14). Melancholia is thus a

condition that contains a critique of the sign, because it is characterized by an excess of affect, a link to the semiotic, the “primal Thing” (42). Kristeva stresses that “signs are arbitrary because language starts with a *negation* (*Verneinung*) of loss” (43). In melancholia, then, there occurs a modification or interruption of the signifying bonds or sequence because “depressed persons” reject this arbitrariness: they “*disavow the negation*” that makes symbolic language possible: “they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose” (43). Kristeva, like Derrida, then, refers to a mourning under erasure, an “impossible mourning,” and, through her negotiation between the *inability* to mourn (conceived of as a pathological deficiency, an illness or disease of the subject) and the *unwillingness* to mourn (conceived of as dissent or resistance), emphasizes the ambivalent agency that resides in melancholic attachment. What her work contributes is a way of describing the resultant poetics:

The *denial* (*Verleugnung*) of the *negation* would thus be the exercise of an impossible mourning, the setting up of a fundamental sadness and an artificial, unbelievable language, cut out of the painful background that is not accessible to any signifier and that intonation alone, intermittently, succeeds in inflecting. (43)

The result is a language that bears the imprint of the abject, “a language” that “now manifests itself whose *complaint* repudiates the common code, then builds itself into an *idiolect*, and finally resolves itself through the sudden irruption of *affect*” (*Powers of Horror* 53). The “fundamental sadness” and “artificial unbelievable language” set up by

the melancholic's unrelinquished attachment to the "Thing" does not, however, imply that what we encounter is the complete collapse of the ego. Indeed, Kristeva emphasizes that "the superego's protection has in fact stabilized" the "narcissistic trauma" that manifests itself in the denial of negation (53). (We can connect the role of the superego, when it shifts into frantic compensation, with Butler's "heterosexual melancholy.") Neither is this the "work of mourning," which would move toward a reintegration into symbolicity, for, as Kristeva contends, "the work of art as fetish emerges when the activating sorrow is repudiated" (*Black Sun* 9).

By contrast, then, with the "belief in conveyability" that characterizes the Western subject, there is a lucidity and a movement against complacency in this "potential melancholy being" (68), if also a cruel undoing of what Michaels refers to as the "dispensation" afforded by narrative. Suggesting some of the implications, perhaps, of Derrida's complaint in *Memoires* about being "denied" the "gift" of "narration," of not "knowing" "how to tell a story" (3), Kristeva describes "melancholy people" as "Messengers of Thanatos," not in the sense of being driven towards death, but suggesting rather that they "are witnesses / accomplices of the signifier's flimsiness, the living being's precariousness" (*Black Sun* 20). It may be "precisely because" we "keep the memory" (or, in Kristeva's vocabulary, "the Thing") "that [we] lose the narrative" (*Memoires* 3).³⁰

³⁰In Kristeva's writings, we encounter a rereading of melancholia in terms of what Tilottama Rajan describes as "semiotic materialism," which "is concerned with how this *real*, even though it is unsignifiable *in* language, can nevertheless be seen transversally *through* language" ("Trans-positions of Difference" 221). Resistance to the symbolic

In *Unbecoming*, for example, melancholy “resists” or “counteracts” the “process of labelling, a struggle with institutional forms, a possible Foucauldian horror show” (4-5). “Barbaric” definitions of disease and contamination are “inflicted” bodily, through the proliferation of prophylaxes: the multiplication of “rubber gloves, face masks, goggles, and an inventory of tropes,” suggest that “medical practice” does not “deal,” from Michaels’ point of view, “so much with the disease (which, after all, is imaginable in some sense as well), but more evidently, no less, with sin and retribution” (5). But what *Unbecoming* mobilizes in response is the “denial of negation” rather than “another set of definitions” or another story. While from one side of the hospital the patients are faced with a view of the institution’s power generator, the other affords a view of “the entry drive to an oddly pleasant colonial house and a niche of tropical plantings” (5). These opposites Michaels interprets as representing the gruesome machinery that peeks out occasionally from behind the hospital’s cheerful public façade, in a move that suggests the proclivity of a certain cultural geography to hide the workings of power. The cultural significance of particular

order (of the ego and, in a related way, of the social) comes from the semiotic (conceived of in a “de-idealized sense” [Rajan], that is, as an hypothesis of excess rather than as essence). Kristeva has been criticized for a strain of biological essentialism in her work. See, for example, Butler’s critique of Kristeva’s feminism in “The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva.” However, Rajan’s phenomenological reading of Kristeva seems finally to put this criticism into perspective: “Her work in semiotics, culminating in her theory of the genotext, is an attempt not just to see the unconscious as structured like a language, but also to read language as a body. This is in no sense a return to a myth of presence, since the body is conceived in terms of differential pulsions that preclude its being the site of any prereflective immediacy” (Rajan 216).

landscapes — and the critical-analytical bearing they may take on in connection with the representation of HIV/AIDS — is a topic to which I shall return in this study, specifically in my discussion of Jamaica Kincaid's conversations with her brother in Antigua's national botanical gardens and in my comments on Derek Jarman's creation of Prospect Cottage, at Dungeness on the Kentish coast. Meanwhile, though, I want to emphasize what is crucially important for Michaels, namely his sense that "between these two sides" — the generator and the façade — there exists a netherworld, where even these suspicion-laden comparisons no longer obtain. Michaels describes "a long, crooked corridor — littered with wheeled stainless-steel objects, holding or conveying a bewildering assortment of wrapped things, wrapped to protect their sterility, or used, tainted things, wrapped to prevent contamination" (14). These objects lose specificity from the melancholic's perspective; their ability to signify is shattered. What is revealed, rather, by Michaels' account is the way objects are rendered as either "contaminated" or potentially contaminated in the bizarre logic of "wrapping," the imposition of artificial "skins," as it were, which would delineate boundaries on the paranoid basis of a possible "tainting."

In first-person accounts of HIV/AIDS, desire for coherence, and more fundamentally, exclusion, frequently ceases to sustain the fictions of coherent subjectivity or of narrative conveyability. Even more, the texts often actively dedicate themselves to unworking those fictions. As *Unbecoming* exemplifies, these texts emphasize how the subject exists in "perpetual danger" (perpetual exposure to the "abject"); they also have an interest in resisting the "establish[ment]" of a defensive position (*Powers of Horror* 6-9).

We are immersed in a literature of “abjection” as opposed to one delusionally secure about a stable relation to “otherness,” a literature where “the abject” is exposed as “the *violence* of mourning for an ‘object’ that has always already been lost” (emphasis added, *Powers of Horror* 15). Michaels furnishes, furthermore, a cogent critique of the violence of a mourning that would complete itself through the logic of “routinization and normalization” (Haver 2). The violence of a “possible mourning” is implicit in the logic of “hospitalization.” Because “the hospital is the place one goes – or is sent – when something is wrong with one’s body,” “the threat of hospitalization is the threat of not being all right and not being all right in a way that is all too socially visible” (Singer 100).

Michaels interrogates that scenario, informing us that:

A person lying in my bed merely looking around the room and out the window can see great distances, to parliamentary debates on condoms and morals, to histories of Australian asylums, etiquettes, hierarchies, and colonialism. But what most has me flat on my back here is a discourse of “Tidiness ” (14-15)

Observed from the vantage point of a hospital bed, the “endless rounds of cleaning, cleaning, cleaning” become apparent to Michaels, the anthropologist, as “probably ... more ritual than rational — that the cleaners were instilling tidiness, not fighting disease” (17). According to his analysis, “Tidiness is a process which, while avowedly in the service of cleanliness and health, in fact is only interested in obscuring all traces of history, of process, of past users, of the conditions of manufacture (the high high gloss).” Due to its “association with health and cleanliness,” tidiness “is considered an appropriate discourse

to inflict on the diseased, the aging, the putrefying (17). So, “the real dramatic effort is spent on polishing” (17). Never mind that “if you’re actually the one sick and on your back,” “you barely see” the floors and that “what you do see is the ceiling, paint cracked, peeling and falling into the water jar, ceiling fan blades edged in dirt and encrusted with insects”; the point is that these polished floors are impressive and reassuring from the point of view of the “well” (17). Michaels analysis thus bears out Kristeva’s observation that “Filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin” (69). What his analysis brings new attention to, however, are the painful consequences of this “logic” for those who find themselves “jettisoned,” cast beyond the borders of an imagined social body. Already vulnerable to suffering — in the sense that “right now, neither of my immune systems is worth shit” — Michaels finds himself having to “share facilities, bathroom, and unsealed rooms with some of the most exotic illnesses in the tropical world” (18). “The floors may glow, but often as not, the communal toilet is filthy,” and so he is doubly, perhaps triply confined and doomed; ironically, he is “terrified to go out of my room into this tidy world” (18). (And, in Michaels’ case, exclusion takes on a literal, legal dimension — in addition to his illness, his sexuality, and his intellectual and political leftist tendencies — in that, as an American expatriate, he is vulnerable to the Australian government’s calculation of the costs of his remaining in the country, to being defined as “an American, a foreigner, an Other, and subject to whatever anybody thinks about that” [110-116]). Indeed, as Chambers argues, *Unbecoming*’s “mission” is one “of

harassment” in “its ambition to function as the permanent thorn in the side of Tidy Town and the continuing ‘Foucauldian horror show,’” with the photographic self-portrait of Michaels, shirtless, tongue extended, and marked by Kaposi’s sarcoma, standing as “a critical counterimage that refuses to be tidied away or otherwise to disappear” (108).³¹ Seemingly “quoting” the visual discourse of the medical pathology textbook and counting on and working with the expected (voyeuristic, horrified, tantalized) and unexpected (mindful, resistant) ways in which the layperson might confront such images, this photograph’s placement as the frontispiece to such a confrontational memoir foregrounds how the text forces a critical encounter with the representation of the abject body of HIV/AIDS upon even the most “casual” or “recreational” of readers. Indeed, this photograph — its readerly expectations, its effects, and its motivations — stands metonymically for an analogous textual effect that is the central concern of this thesis: the photograph literalizes the analogous “picturings” of HIV/AIDS, with all of their complex

³¹Kristeva argues in *Black Sun* that in general post-Second-World-War Western literature has been characterized by “an aesthetics of *awkwardness*,” making it a “*noncathartic literature*,” “the discourse of dulled pain” (225-226). What my rearticulation of Kristeva’s categories in the context of AIDS memoirs may suggest is that HIV/AIDS makes suffering and consciousness of death even more evident than do the high modernist texts Kristeva discusses. In a sense as Kristeva argues in relation to Celine in *Powers of Horror*, the AIDS memoir becomes a “cache for suffering”: in the first instance a narrative is an attempt “to situate a speaking being between his desires and their prohibitions,” but we “realize that the narrative web is a thin film constantly threatened with bursting” (140). Characteristically, then, “the narrative yields to a *crying-out theme* of suffering-horror,” and one finds “neither narrative nor theme but a recasting of syntax and vocabulary, the violence of poetry, and silence” (140).

attendent motivations and effects, constituted by the memoirs that I shall investigate in depth (each of which comprise, in their particular, weird, resistant ways, family albums)

IV: Testing Boundaries: Editing Gary Fisher

If *Unbecoming* confronts us with what the “canonical discourses” would have us maintain as “abject,” and, ultimately, exorcize — that is, if it elaborates for its readers how “melancholia rifts the subject, marking a limit to what it can accommodate” — its project may perhaps be characterized by an unusual lucidity (Butler, *Psychic Life* 23). Given that, even in the case of Michaels’s “resisting text” there remains a “danger” “that it survive its author’s demise only to be read complacently” (Chambers 112), then it is more than likely that other, more ambivalent texts may be even more vulnerable to complacent, resistant, or normalizing readings. Like *Unbecoming*, *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher* (1996) can be categorized “a resisting text” in that the journals and stories collected here consider how HIV intertwines with and intensifies the social exclusions to which Fisher is already subject as a black gay man, exclusions that are complexly caught up, too, with his desires. In this regard, we might compare Fisher’s initial response to the appearance of KS lesions with that of Michaels. He suspects that “these spots” might seem to “keep my ambitions under wraps,” “more than any other single piece to this nightmare” (250). He further connects this “nightmare” to other, preceding manifestations of shame, observing that “I’ve always been ashamed of my body (hateful, spiteful) never

loving and nourishing even when it begged for it. All those chances to get buff-n- beautiful, to fulfill the gayboy dream (even in black) would not have been wasted if I'd understood the nature and purpose of immediate beauty" (250). However, this is not a lesson he is able to absorb: although "others told me" of "beauty," and "I felt it," "I felt ugly too, a lot and a long time ugly" (250). Fisher asks ultimately whether "the spots fit a pattern of self-loathing, self-oppression, etc., et al.?" (250). And, while he finally cannot give credence to this punitive narrative (indeed, the trailing off into a series of *et ceteras* expresses a certain boredom or familiarity with this narrative as a narrative, as the citation of a publically sanctioned rendering of his psyche's workings) and resists internalizing the prohibition on self-love, "not even to save my life," he also asks whether, despite the fact that "I didn't create this drama, this tragedy," "perhaps I'm playing the part a bit too well." (250). His sense that he "plays" a "part" reminds us, further, that by "lived experience" we cannot simply mean one life living a singular present, and that in any given moment or context there exist varying ways of staging (self-)possession, stylization, or dramatization.

So much could and should be said about this important text, but for now let me focus specifically on the question of the chain of relations that bring Fisher's writings to us in published form and that, indeed, literally contextualize it in the form of an editorial framework. Fisher's searing writings, not unambiguously designated by their author for publication, also foreground the question of reception, in particular the editor's and reader's roles in perpetuating the text's stylizations of self-possession and dispossession, its

varying modes of what Foucault suggestively called “the care of the self,” and in interpreting the moments where Fisher investigates how he has “internalized abjection” (Yingling, “AIDS in America” 292). Don Belton’s introduction identifies the aporia here, noting that “Gary’s sense of urgency during the last year of his life to see his work collected in a book was tempered by his mistrust of public recognition” (vii). By what rights, though, are we able to draw the conclusion that the fact that “Gary did not write for publication ... makes the requirement for his publication at this moment all the more urgent” (vii)? Furthermore, by describing the “pleasures” and “truths” of Fisher’s writings as “naked” and “unpolished,” Belton projects on to Fisher’s writings qualities of unhidden, unmediated eroticism that, while they are certainly part of Fisher’s project, as figures or strategies of self-legitimation and self-possession, do not match up to the experience of reading the notebooks and journals, which are often wrenching, opaque, and, indeed, mediated (“clothed,” “under wraps,” and in some senses “polished”) in their reflections on sexuality. As the previous example intimates, Fisher agonizes, often analytically, but often less analytically than he would like to see himself capable of, about the way the erotic is for him imbricated in relations of power that inspire and tip over into self-hatred.³² Perhaps, then, Belton’s adjectives reflect his own need to see the text

³²Mark Thompson’s introduction to *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice* registers an ethical problematization of S/M similar to the one I am suggesting is raised by Fisher’s writings. As Thompson writes,

Radical sexual play, in any form that is not loving and self-aware, can devolve into serious abuse — what some would call evil behavior. Taking responsibility for the inner journey also means to act in a responsible manner, especially when it comes

published and to create for it a certain reading framework that would retrieve for it a secure and lasting value as a celebratory sexual manifesto. Reminding us of how Gary's posthumous text appears in the midst of "an interminable harvest of the deaths of young black men," Belton is preoccupied with "what a chilling reflection it was on the current statistical value of a black, male life in America that I would personally know so many freshly dead young black men" and, accordingly, with redeeming Gary as a black gay man whose desires were uncomplicated by the power inequities that (in another manifestation) contributed to his death (vii-viii).

Belton seems confident, moreover, that Gary's work "would not be available to standard forms of white patronization, because of the work's obsession with critiquing myths of white nationality and white masculinity" (x). But what remains unspoken (more or less) in Belton's forward is the sense in which the very appearance of Fisher's work is due to a special kind of "patronization" in the person of Eve Sedgwick, who edited the journals and notebooks and who provides a biographical afterword. In the framing of Fisher's text between Belton's foreword and Sedgwick's afterword, we might well become curious about what kind of triangulation is being mapped onto Gary's textual self-representations, particularly his representation of desire, sexuality, and violence, and about what kind of aggressive normalizations might be at work as the editors grieve the loss of

to sophisticated sexual games. The leather community has come a long way in separating the murkiness of shame-bound feelings from unacceptable actions towards others. (xviii)

their friend. The position of the editors of *Gary in Your Pocket* involves, I want to suggest, a revealing double bind. Their collaborative work on/with Gary's textual remains constitutes an attempt to model the "reweaving of sustaining relations" (Butler *Psychic Life* 145), a crucial project when, in the context of the spectacle of AIDS, and perhaps especially "when subjected to hospitalization," "one occupies the paradoxical position of losing one's usual site of validation in a system of gazes and regards" (Singer 104). (But maybe this "system of gazes and regards" did not exist for Fisher in the first place, and maybe that's the problem: his writing is obsessed with this original loss, and no amount of critical working through by Belton and Sedgwick can fully repair this gap.) Certainly Sedgwick's afterword registers considerable anxiety, however, about her role in collecting, publishing, and promoting Gary's writings. There is a troubling "indignity" or "promiscuity" in "book publication" (286). The choice of title for the anthology foregrounds, ironically, the very process of appropriation she is concerned with: the sense in which the book seems to proffer "an individual spirit held often mute in a closed box that anyone can buy and put in their pocket" (286). Does not this packaging, this act of incorporation and of folding-in, "answer eerily to the indignity of death; but also to the survivors' yearning for a potent, condensed, sometimes cryptic form of access to the person who would otherwise be lost"? (286).

There is a sense in which the anxiety of Sedgwick's afterword – contrasted with the confidence of Belton's foreword – seems to suggest that Sedgwick is the "wrong" reader and hence the "wrong" editor for Fisher's writings (*A Dialogue on Love* 179), as

though only a clear alignment of identity positions (one black gay man reading and mourning another) could remedy what is awry in this colloquy.³³ As the slogan goes, according to Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied*, "Black men loving black men" may be "the revolutionary act" in a patriarchal and racist society. But as Fisher's friend, teacher, and designated literary executor, Sedgwick has an obligation to respond to his work, an obligation from which she cannot abscond. (And, moreover, his writings may not be open to full remediation by anyone). *A Dialogue on Love*, Sedgwick's personal memoir regarding her own experience of illness and therapy, provides further insight into the energies that circulate in her relationship with Gary, offering the reflection that the editorial work brings her into connection with the abject in a profoundly discomfoting manner: "Editing Gary, she feels somehow that her present way of moving between the living and the dead is obscene, dirty (dirt as matter out of place)" (198). The matter is even more complicated than this analysis of purity, danger, and mortality suggests. Sedgwick worries, too, about the various oppositions that would seem to categorize her as the wrong reader, one who, given the "license" afforded by Gary's death, would seem inevitably to misapprehend him. This incessant worry points to the ironies and the risks (and not just the potentialities) encapsulated in the title of her 1987 Berkeley graduate course, the course in which she first encountered Gary: "Across Genders, Across

³³These doubts are not only the product of Sedgwick's own worries. As she observes in a recent interview, "At conferences where I've presented Gary's writing, there's been some very predictable stuff about 'you're a white woman,' for instance" (Barber and Clark, "Interview with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick" 8).

Sexualities” (Afterword, 275). This work “is about and by a black man and she is white, he is gay and she is not; the material has considerable angry racial material as well as being about sex and about master-slave sexual relationships; finally there is a long ‘colonial’ history of white women patronizing black writers” (*Dialogue* 179). Considering how in the context of HIV/AIDS the “logic which identifies the male position with the force of death also produces an opposing position for women, who will come to be associated with the counterforce of life” (Singer 84), I would suggest that the differences of gender, race, and sexuality that circulate and intersect in this friendship / literary executorship would seem to predetermine a relation of neutralizing obituary redemption, where the editor constructs the writer (and, through him, “history”) as an “image, idol, or ideal” that prepares for a mournful triumph over delinquency and marginality (Derrida, *Memoires* 6). Sedgwick registers her awareness of this potential for recuperation during the process of preparing the texts for publication, reflecting that “although in some ways [it was] lovely to be taking responsibility for somebody’s writing that I loved so much,” it was also “a hard thing, though: when Gary wrote something that I didn’t get, or I wouldn’t have done it that way, or it just felt un-matured, I had a responsibility to put it forward just as it was” (Barber and Clark, “Interview with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick”9).

Indeed, as Melvin Dixon reminds his readers, in anticipation of his own death, the living have a responsibility to address and to heed the dead: “I’ll be somewhere listening for my name” (188). In the context of Dixon’s essay (for which this statement also forms the title) the personal mode of address is linked to a wider cultural problematic. While

Dixon challenges his audience (the essay is a printed version of a talk first delivered at *Out Write*) with the statement that “we alone are responsible for the preservation and future of our literature,” his address potentially extends responsibility for the preservation of writing by black gay men beyond the bounds of an identifiable community. Reaching out more widely by virtue of its appearance in print and in the multicultural, multisexual, multigenerational environment of Howe and Klein’s anthology, Dixon’s essay takes on another textual life that effectively widens its field of address, without generalizing it (as though there were some general public whose empathy must be solicited [Crimp qtd in Caruth and Keenan 547]). Dixon’s questions — “What kind of witness will you bear? What truth-telling are you brave enough to utter and endure the consequences of your unpopular message?” — resonate confrontationally (187, 185). If the role of the critic may be most importantly to suspend the logic of containment and separation, then, it also needs to be thought, in the first instance, as fragile, as decentered, as melancholic. As Maurice Blanchot argues so evocatively in *The Writing of the Disaster*,

The I that is responsible for others, the I bereft of selfhood, is sheer fragility, through and through on trial. This I without any identity is responsible for him to whom he can give no response; this I must answer in an interrogation where no question is put; he is a question directed to others from who no answer can be expected either. The Other does not answer. (119)

As in Butler’s queer version of melancholia and Derrida’s “thinking memory,” for Blanchot responsibility is a fractured and fracturing experience. There is no wisdom, only “waiting,” or keeping watch, for “Through the passivity of patience, the self has nothing to

undergo, for it has completely lost all the capacity of a privileged self, without ceasing to be responsible” (120).

If, as I have been suggesting, a sort of melancholic exposure to the other is conceived of as constitutive of subjectivity, then not only may we finally dispense of the definition of melancholia as pathological, but it also becomes possible to see how we are always “entangled,” “always caught up in answering, from the start” and how textual manifestations of melancholic attachment may be read not as “incomplete” but as a part of this “answering” (21). Responding to the writings of Blanchot and Levinas, Thomas Keenan clarifies this dynamic, arguing that “others do not befall me, like a terrible accident that disfigures an integral self. And I do not respond or find myself obligated because some self precedes mine and addresses me, but because I am always already involved and entangled with others, always caught up in answering, from the start: we begin by responding” (*Fables of Responsibility* 21). Keenan makes the connection between Levinasian ethics and reading explicit: when “reading” is considered as “our exposure to the singularity of a text,” responsibility in reading may be thought of not as “a moment of cognitive certainty” but rather as “what happens when we cannot apply the rules” (1). The link Keenan makes between responsibility and the instability of reading corresponds to the “refusal of compensation” that Kristeva’s theory of melancholia models, for example. Encountering a text that refuses compensation for loss entails a process of reading that would respect – and perpetuate – this same “tender rejection” of the other, precisely when

it seems most attractive, and most inevitable, to embrace an interiorized ideal image.³⁴

Reading AIDS memoirs asks us to consider “a primordially impertinent existence, infected before all contagion” (Düttmann 41); it does not release us into an easy integration with an “other” but rather leaves us prone to “the radical instability of flux” (Haver 12). But neither can this oppositional reading secure its stance: we remain split, as Sedgwick is, between a new lucidity and vigilance about the violent relations of abjection and mourning by which we constitute the self as individual and the ever-present danger that love to / manifest itself as guilt and self-beratement.

Returning to consider (briefly, but I hope suggestively) the implications of Sedgwick’s role in editing and promoting Gary Fisher’s work, I want to argue that what readers witness in Sedgwick’s relation to Fisher involves what Blanchot calls “the return to an *other* meaning in the laborious work of ‘designification’” (139). Fisher’s illness is

³⁴Eva Ziarek has linked the “possibility of ethics in Kristeva’s account of mourning” to the philosophy of Levinas (70), specifically the way in which it “delineate[s] a signification of the other without, or beyond, the mediation of a third term” (63), beyond the logic of compensation for loss by a signifying system. As Ziarek notes in relation to Kristeva’s description of melancholia, “The inability to trade the loss of the other for the ‘symbolic triumph’ does not strike [one] necessarily as a disorder of the subject but as a powerful critique of the desire to master alterity through the order of representation” (73). The indirectness of Ziarek’s statement suggests some of the difficulty of recruiting Kristeva’s theory for a Levinasian ethics. Indeed, as Rajan suggests, Kristeva has not made clear what kind of reader would be able to embrace this “critique of the desire to master alterity”. Kristeva’s “genotext, [defined as ‘a zone that is not linguistic but can be seen in language’] requires a reader, in ways that Kristeva has not theorized: it calls for a hermeneutic, which could not occur if there were not something posited, albeit not in a thetic way” (“Trans-positions of Difference” 230).

staged as an interruption to the “normal” routine of Sedgwick’s life (“getting back from somebody’s dinner party,” for instance, she receives word that he has been hospitalized), and it is an interruption from which she does not recover (127). He is inscrutable and that opacity renders forever impossible the happy, interpenetrating symmetry that Sedgwick elsewhere evokes; she “can’t tell what he thinks is happening” nor determine exactly how he envisions the future of his writing (127). While, at a certain point, engaging in her own “writing” about Fisher seems attractive “as a defense against reading” the complexities of Fisher’s life and writings (128), Sedgwick’s afterword suggests that she has “grown” so “steeped in his death” that such defenses come into question: “Almost every night of it I have dreamed, not *of* Gary, but *as* him – have moved through one and another world clothed in the restless, elastic skin of his beautiful idiom. 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). Contrasting with Belton’s readerly embrace, which emphasizes their shared identities, Sedgwick offers only one certitude, an insight the consequences of which are themselves profoundly unsettling; in all this, there is only “one thing I couldn’t doubt: for all its imposing reserve and however truncated, Gary’s is an idiom that longs to traverse and be held in the minds of many people who never knew him in another form” (291).

While, in the context of therapy, Sedgwick outlines and admits her desire to hold on to a conspicuously ideal relation, to the pleasing correspondences of the belief that “there’s some circuit of reciprocity between these holding relations’ your ability to hold

me inside you, and mine to hold you inside me" (*Dialogue* 165), she also acknowledges and celebrates the knowledge that Gary's writings remain recalcitrant, noting in her afterword to *Gary in Your Pocket* that "it is also publication that allows the dead to continue to resist, differ, and turn away from the living" (286). The consolations of spatializing the radically temporal nature of relations of love and loss are, as Sedgwick's struggle demonstrates, irresistible; but this colloquy also shows that a radicalized mourning does help us to work with (although not to resolve or triumph over) these spatializations, to complicate these notions of inside and outside, and in particular, the consolations of conceiving the subject as possessed of an unmediated "inside." In her selection and arrangement of texts, we are brought to witness this "turning away." By placing the essay "Waiting" at the beginning of the collection, Sedgwick foregrounds Fisher's critique of what Belton summarizes as "the national discourse of white male power" (xi). Criticizing white men's adoption of liberal politics as "fashion" (and pointing out, too, that "it wasn't that at all, when it was actually stronger than any young militant black man's of some education who thought he could frighten power with words or with borrowed money and still have white friends"), Fisher extends his analysis to gender, problematizing white women's "sensitivity" to "oppression" and its "as yet nameless sources" (5). The power grab latent in this "sensitivity" comes into question, in that it is "a revitalization of the myths that made her so knowledgeable and sensitive to begin with, like a fast child in a slow class" (5). Fisher's turning away from the agendas of the living involves precisely the ways in which his journals and stories steel themselves against

empathy. While Fisher's insights into the dynamics of appropriation (his argument that "as part of a people I know that I am being fucked, abused" [198]), he also worries about his masochism in a way that makes it difficult to read his staging of sexuality as purely analytic and liberatory. A diary entry from Christmas Eve, 1985, declares that

I UNDERSTAND! this self-slaughter, but it scares me. I'm trying to decreate. Trying to go back; not to an easier time, but a more honest one. Shit, slave, nigger, cocksucker; like the wind and darkness, the Auroras of Autumn. I'm doing it with sex and society, bludgeoning myself with misconceptuous facts, or the fictive facts that were "in fact" bludgeons *then*. No, I'm doing it with words. (emphasis in original 188)

His writing thus blurs the boundary between analysis of oppression and its internalization even as he seems to begin to make such distinctions, leaving his readers traumatized and bereft of a liberated, individual at the core of his writings, making us wonder, too, however, about what direction this writing may have taken had Fisher continued to work. Editing and reading Gary becomes for Sedgwick, not a process of working through grief, but rather an infinite series of "heightened acts of possession, habitation, uncertain agency" to which there can be no "correct," prescribed response (*Dialogue* 161).

In *At Odds with AIDS*, Düttmann redefines testimony in relation to the AIDS epidemic "as the mark of originary Being-not-one, which can be identified neither as the historical nor as the non-historical" (75). In this light, we can begin to see — against the grain of the association of melancholia with a certain passivity, as in Crimp's articulation of proper mourning — the appropriateness of melancholia (understood as Derridian "thinking memory" or as a Kristevan refusal of compensation) as a model for

understanding the “active function” (80) of AIDS memoirs in all of their “impertinence” and multiplicity. In connection with HIV/AIDS, Düttmann stresses that “Giving testimony comes about because Being-not-one must be marked and thus time and again distinguished from knowledge and ‘belief in,’ which usurp it” (75). Indeed, if “the possibility of such a usurpation is the origin of the duty and responsibility to testify, in a way that is not responsible for something determined and not obligated to a determinable instance” (75), then “all words of consolation, of appeasement, and of explanation cannot and must not be endured” (26). Readers, already exposed to the indeterminacy of meaning that accompanies AIDS, have a responsibility to make themselves newly attentive to the challenge to the bounds of self and other that such a risk-ridden literature doubtless will stir, however unpredictable its consequences for the ego and the social bond as we presume we know them, or maybe precisely *because* of the interruptive force of this unpredictability. This unpredictability, born out of melancholic attachments, is not something to be celebrated for its own sake. Rather, it may compel us in the direction of what Linda Singer describes as the project of “reinventing our collective erotic imaginaries and rhetoric” (82). Ironically and unfortunately, it may be precisely these crises of affect, representation, and reading that will — because of their resistance to consolation and appeasement — provoke “the possibility of producing forms of pleasure” that may “empower us” (82).

V: Affect, Representation, Reading: Three Readings

This study will now pursue extended readings of three specific memoirs: Amy Hoffman's *Hospital Time*, Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother*, and Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature*. The considerations that have contributed to my choice of texts and organizational strategy include the following. First, I have chosen to write about memoirs that explore intimate relations of alterity outside of the context of romantic partnership or marriage. Hoffman's, Kincaid's, and Jarman's are texts in which questions of responsibility abound but where the trajectories for addressing "the other" are far from self-evident. In particular, the relation of bearing witness at second hand is rife with recuperative pressures, especially where gender, race, ethnicity, and economic differences cross over, reinforce, and illuminate one another. Second, I have elected to discuss these texts in individual, in-depth chapters in order to allow for a full play of relevant contexts and intertexts that allow me to reflect on culturally specific inflections of mourning while connecting these inflections to the rhetoric of AIDS. Comparative chapters would, I think, run counter to my aim of questioning normalizing or universalizing critical strategies. If my method is more "imminent" than diagnostic or conclusive, I hope that may be the measure of a commitment to thinking about grief in a way that might oppose the pathologization/diagnosis that would make criticism into autobiography, narrative, or obituary.

More specifically, I propose to explore in the chapters to come that the following four areas where the “canonical discourses” that would underwrite the work of “possible mourning” are at once shown to be intensified and to falter:

1) *Kinship*

Keeping in mind of the dominant maps Singer outlines in *Erotic Welfare* — particularly the panicked “repackaging” of the family “as a prophylactic social device” that would seem to protect and restore the integrity of the self and the family group from contamination by viral infection or by grief — the memoirs in this study trouble the ways in which mourning replays the idea of the nuclear family as privileged ethical site (and women’s role in presiding over the restoration of the “clean and proper” male body to an imagined national ‘family’ interest). They enact the ways in which impossible mourning blasts away (though not entirely destructively) at the privilege we give to blood kinship and marriage and may prompt the articulation of possibilities, to employ Sedgwick’s phrase, of “queer tutelage.”

2) *Crisis and Survival*

But there exist other modes of recuperation as well. I suggest that memoirs insist on the status of HIV/AIDS as a continuing crisis, though, at the same time, no longer an inevitably deathly one. Indeed, as Haver argues, the “onto-epistemological panic” set into motion by AIDS (in its originary multiplicity, its radical unthinkability) is met consistently by a move towards “the normalization, routinization, and, indeed, commodification of

AIDS” (2). The memoirs in my study contest such “routinization” of the pandemic, this push towards the “forgetting of the Real of AIDS,” which, as Haver emphasizes, is exemplified by the push in the later 1990s to define AIDS as a “chronic” condition rather than as a “crisis” (of responsibility, and, indeed, memory).

3) Narrativity and Fragmentation

Narrativity, though it is not dispensed with entirely to be sure, strains under the burden of “the originary multiplicity of the AIDS object” (Haver 1) — almost to the point of bursting. While Lee Edelman highlights the ‘unmanageability’ of AIDS as a subject for writing, suggesting that this unmanageability is fundamentally at odds with the linearity of narrative, I suggest that textually what we find ourselves immersed in is an array of warring impulses, not a clear taking of sides on the question: readers desire narrative, surely, but we also desire another kind of faithfulness (93-94). The hypothesis that I hope to test here is that any narrative we might be tempted to construct about AIDS that would illustrate an admonishing (and properly Oedipal) movement away from “erotic abandon” to the authoritative positions of [the good] “death,” “monogamy” or “activism” (105), or any reading that would impose, retrospectively, a narrative dynamic, is potentially exposed as untenable because of a strong countervailing impulse to heed this “originary multiplicity.”

4) *The Care of the Self*

AIDS memoirs may model (though not unambivalently) the reconception of political opposition in terms of ethicized subjectivity in the midst of grief — as opposed to the promotion of a few stable identity positions. As Düttmann reminds us, drawing on Derrida's comments, it is possible to be “not one” with AIDS, to be at odds with it; what is required is clearly not a stable position of opposition but, on the contrary, “a thinking that does not sublate its impertinence” (101). The specificity of AIDS as a “caesura in time” (101), an interruption or fundamental break with categories of progress, hope, affirmation, calls for the production of “testimony” as opposed to “knowledge” (75). While complicated — in that it involves “the paradox of a thought that does not recollect or assemble itself in the identity of the identical and the non-identical” (101) — this project unfolds under the pressure of an ethical imperative to question the punitive and shame-perpetuating boundaries of current social imaginings of sexual differences.

My analysis begins with Amy Hoffman's *Hospital Time*. This memoir is a difficult book to read — in the sense that it records the most unlikeable moments and characteristics of both Hoffman and the friend, Mike Riegle, for whom she grieves. In Chapter 1, “Queering the Kaddish: The Practice of Critical Memory in Amy Hoffman's *Hospital Time*,” I provide a framework for reading this pathological-seeming memoir that aims to bring out the political dimension of what I demonstrate is Hoffman's distinctively

melancholic subjectivity. The components of this framework are several. After establishing the affective inflection of the memoir as melancholic by pointing to the ways in which Hoffman's narration is stalled in regret, doubt, and beratement, I investigate the possibility that this "stance" has political reverberations for readers. In one sense, it may seem that Hoffman risks inscribing a rather tired script of female self-immolation for the purpose of redeeming a male body for the body politic, sacrificing herself in a blaze of glory in order to recuperate him. But this reading, I argue, does not sustain itself, and self-sacrifice and redemption are displaced by the relation of queer friendship that exists, however ambivalently, between Amy and Mike. And, indeed, the position of unresolved grief is one into which she is to some extent forced by the cultural interdiction (so well-described by Butler) against the possibility of loving, losing, or grieving a gay man. Hoffman struggles to play a role for which there is no precedent, that she must invent. By elaborating the "impossible" position that has been forced upon her, Hoffman succeeds in affirming love for Mike, if not consolation.

I also consider *Hospital Time* in light of a selection of relevant intertexts that illuminate questions of queer subjectivity, illness, and grief — specifically, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Mark Doty's memoir *Heaven's Coast*, Rebecca Brown's *The Gifts of the Body* (a series of linked stories about being a caregiver for people with AIDS), Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, and Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum's *Cancer in Two Voices* (in which a lesbian couple reflect on reinventing Judaism in the context of illness and the loss of a partner). Here I argue that Hoffman's inconsolability correlates to a commitment to

“critical memory” that wears away at the privilege and authenticity we invest in organic metaphors and narrative patterns that would enact the “working through” of grief. Still, this is a practice of memory that, while it is emphatic about distancing itself from conventional frameworks for mourning that would neutralize the specificities of Mike and Amy and their connection one to the other, does not ultimately flout tradition so much as reappropriate it for the purposes of a lesbian grieving for her gay friend. (And Mike certainly represents only one of the many friends she has lost; in the sense that he is the most difficult and demanding, it seems, he becomes for her exemplary of her struggle with these multiple losses.) Hoffman purports, for example, to reject the Kaddish, but accomplishes something much more complicated than rejection by citing it in her writing about Mike. Under the pressure of Hoffman’s melancholic attachment to Mike, the Kaddish seems newly capacious, to have new room for this member of her queer family.

Hoffman’s conflictedness about the risks of a too hasty closure (as weighed against an equally urgent desire to locate the meaning of Mike’s life and death) are matched — perhaps exceeded by — Jamaica Kincaid’s ambivalence in her memoir *My Brother*. Though their purported aim is to memorialize, these two memoirs are in many respects more centrally concerned with exploring the subjectivity of the mourner. And it is in turning back to examine the witness’s compromised sense of self that they are most compelling. Reading these texts, we learn about the *huis clos* of the “sibling” bond, the hatefulness of being so tied, and the love that fleetingly, surprisingly may emerge in the midst of horror and resentment.

I argue in Chapter 2, “Angels in Antigua: The Power of Melancholy in Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother*,” that, like Hoffman, Kincaid is haunted by her brother. There is for her no easy capturing of the significance of his life and death, no one story she can tell about him. Kincaid’s memoir mediates but does not resolve her warring desires: namely, the impulse to redeem the prodigal and the imperative to record scrupulously those places (and they are abundant) where the stories she tells about him cannot remain consistent. In focusing on Kincaid’s melancholic ambivalence, I elucidate the contributing social, racial, and economic complexities of her positioning, bringing the discussion of bearing literary witness to HIV/AIDS into a cultural context strikingly different from Amy Hoffman’s relatively more affluent, American point of view. The disaster of which Kincaid writes is one compounded by social inequalities, and she finds herself torn between her identification with Devon, as he lies dying in a dingy hospital room in Antigua, where the wisdom of the day says that health care resources would be wasted on him, and the often more persuasive pull of the values around which she has constituted her own middle-class, writerly life in rural Vermont. Kincaid’s guilt about her own “privilege and power” relative to Devon’s circumstances becomes a corrosive force that is registered in her constant stalling, backtracking, and negating of the assertions (and condemnations) she is tempted to make. The result is stringently analytical, and often uncomfortably so.

Motivated by her unresolved grief for Devon, Kincaid continues and complicates the criticisms of Antiguan society that she developed earlier, in her essay *A Small Place* (1988), especially her argument about the lack of an adequate infrastructure for dealing

with basic health care needs for the people who live there. The problem becomes more urgent in the personally charged context of HIV/AIDS, and Kincaid's accusations are self-implicating as well as bracing for others. In particular, she engages the ways in which unwillingness to acknowledge men's sexual contacts with men, the sex trade, or drug use perpetuate the doom of HIV-positive people. This insight redounds, in turn, on the dilemma of representing Devon. Two motifs, the garden and the corpse, constitute the focal points for these investigations. Tempted by pastoral themes, Kincaid cannot, however, avoid the many senses in which Antigua is a poisoned paradise. Her organic metaphors consistently and devastatingly fail, in a manner that matches Devon's irredeemability. Whatever the natural world offers, it is far from an uncomplicated hope, as Kincaid's painful descriptions of Devon's body insist. There is, however, a possibility for love, if not for hope, opened up by Kincaid's embrace of the abject.

In Chapter 3, "'Flowers, Boys, and Childhood Memories': The Pursuit of Pedagogy in Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature*," I consider the British filmmaker, painter, diarist and gardener's AIDS journal. Unlike Hoffman and Kincaid, who write about their relations with other people living with HIV/AIDS, the subject of *Modern Nature* is Jarman's own experience of living with HIV and, increasingly, living with a host of opportunistic infections (as well as a complement of powerful drugs and medical procedures that have their own effects on his body). But Jarman's memoir shares with *Hospital Time* and *My Brother* a self-consciousness about the demands and responsibilities of grief. Certainly Jarman is concerned not only with the question of self-

representation (and the future of how he will be read and interpreted) but also with the fate of a generation of gay men, his friends, many working in the arts. He desires to give shape and style to both.

Beginning with a discussion of Jarman's awareness of the risks (of misinterpretation and sentimentalization) involved in writing "candid" autobiography for public consumption, I note how his contrary, competing calculation — that he is obliged to do so — wins out. Now the question becomes, as it does in his work in other genres, one of how to intervene in the reader's processes of interpretation on the limitless horizon of future possible reading encounters. At this point, I bring my own reading practice into the foreground, asking how, impelled by my own grief, regret, and desire for consolation, I may write about Jarman in a way that resists preemptively tidying his legacies, purging them of their messiness and irresolution. In so doing, I stage a predicament that bears certain similarities to those articulated by Hoffman and Kincaid, and explored in the essays of Eve Sedgwick and Sue Golding — the possibility of grieving across gender, desire, sexualities, and here cultures and generations, too, without easy resort to the "versions of pastoral," to borrow David Halperin's phrase, that would govern such relations, and in so governing, subtly but aggressively to normalize them (145). By re-reading the phenomenon of the AIDS quilt here, a form of memorialization that I suggest is arrestingly similar to Jarman's own art practice (in that both seek to stylize the fragmentary and the ephemeral), I attempt to disengage this work of memory from the civic constraints that

would make it always (and nothing more than) recuperative, as well as potentially annihilating for the female critic, reader, mourner of a man with HIV/AIDS.

Subsequently, I offer readings of *Modern Nature*'s representations of two specific scenes, so as to perform an act of interpretation that could corroborate Jarman's self-stylization, while attempting to maintain a distinct critical distance. I focus first on the scenes of illness and hospitalization, and second on the childhood scenes of pedagogy that obsess Jarman as precedents for the discipline to which he now finds himself subjected by medicine and by the media. Affirming desire and appetite in the most desperate and urgent of circumstances — that is, in the midst of a ravaging illness that so many cultural imperatives would have him interpret as a symptom of a "diseased sexuality" — Jarman glances back to childhood from this vantage point in a manner that affords a provocative reimagining of sex in education and of "sex education." I argue that Jarman's memoir asks us to think differently about sex and education in the time of AIDS by drawing on Deborah Britzman's theory of queer pedagogy and, in turn, to one of her chief sources, the second volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, *The Use of Pleasure*. In this light, we may better see how Jarman's writing (insists that readers engage the text's own optic) — rather than to impose one; and the optic he offers is one that seeks to perpetuate a queer ethics of love and desire.

CHAPTER ONE

Queering the Kaddish: Amy Hoffman's *Hospital Time* and the Practice of Critical Memory

A white woman wearing white: the ruly ordinariness of this sight makes invisible the corrosive aggression that white also is: as the blaze of mourning, the opacity of loss, the opacity loss installs within ourselves and our vision, the unreconciled and unreconcilably incendiary energies streaming through that subtractive gap, that ragged scar of meaning, regard, address.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "White Glasses" (255)

I: Melancholia as Critical Memory

Amy Hoffman divides her memoir *Hospital Time* into four sections that appear to move readers through a linear pattern, from *Living with AIDS*, through decline in *Memphis Stories*, and through death in *Mike Dies and is Laid to Rest*, to *The Afterlife*.¹ But although its narrative architecture corresponds to the "working through" of grief, *Hospital Time* seems thoughtfully confused about what it means to write "to the memory of" her friend and colleague, Mike Riegle, in the wake of his death, about what the

¹Within these four sections are arranged anecdotes, stories, and reflections, each with its own subtitle. (I have chosen to italicize the section titles to distinguish them from the subtitles of the anecdotes and essays.) The memoir also includes an introductory essay on the subject of the disorientation of living in "hospital time."

complexities of that “strange dative” entail (Derrida, *Memoires* 33). This confusion is connected to Hoffman’s uncertainty about whether she was a dutiful and loving friend, a skepticism which is, in turn, linked to her feeling overwhelmed by the extremity of the devastation of AIDS and the lack of a public register for her grief. Commenting on another friend’s certainty about having fulfilled her obligation to Mike, Hoffman registers her own anxiety: “She and others have no doubt that their presence at his bedside made a difference to him, a great difference — whereas I sat with him too, every day, but I don’t know” (124). *Hospital Time*’s characteristic affective register is one of bewilderment, which often veers into self-excoriation by the autobiographical narrator, born out of her feeling that faithful grief would be characterized by clarity.

The affective inflection of Hoffman’s text constitutes as much an argumentative *response* to the “socially-produced” trauma of the AIDS epidemic as a *reflection* of it (Crimp qtd in Caruth and Keenan 541).² *Hospital Time*’s melancholic orientation enriches and complicates the politicization of AIDS by insisting that the representation of Mike Riegle, and of those who surrounded him in his life and in his death, remain unresolved and “critical,” and that our strategies for reading him live up to this rigorous standard of irresolution. Modified from its earlier usages in psychoanalysis, the concept of

²As Keenan explains in the same conversation, in the context of AIDS, because “the testimony is an address,” that “means that it’s a provocation to a response” (qtd in Caruth and Keenan 542).

melancholia can, as I suggested in the introduction, provide a precise and critically powerful way of describing this condition of response and of adumbrating the text's somewhat oblique approach to ethics, politics, and representation. Distinguishing "melancholia" from the "work of mourning," the work that produces closure and reintegrates the individual into the "reality principle" governing daily life, Freud, in his essay on "Mourning and Melancholia," characterized "the complex of melancholia" as "behav[ing] like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies ... from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished" (253). Certainly this description resonates with the way Hoffman describes her own position as a caregiver:

I was overwhelmed, it was all too much for me, how could it not have been? I wanted to run away, I wanted it to be over. I'm sorry. I wish, I wish, I wish *every single day* that I had been more genuinely kind, more open and loving and freely generous. Although if it happened again, someone I know having AIDS — and it has, it will — I'd do it again and feel the same, because that's what AIDS does, the fucker. (emphasis in original 22)

Repetition, apology, and a sense of entrapment characterize this passage: Hoffman seems to feel at once victimized and unworthy. This affective register is not exclusive to Hoffman's text, as we shall see as this study unfolds. Indeed, as Thomas Yingling argues, "Because it provides only negative structures of identification, AIDS is most notable for its capacity to produce non-identity or internalized abjection" ("AIDS in America" 293).

Do the sadness, despair, and confusion of Hoffman's text imply a capitulation to the emotional drainage produced by the lack of an audience for her testimony? And why indulge in a personal memoir, focusing on a particular private experience, especially when

language is so demonstrably impoverished, as Hoffman's despairing epithet ("AIDS — the fucker") implies?³ If the perspective is one committed to politicizing AIDS, in other words, why not write an account in the manner of an "epidemiological" narrative, if not in the form of a critical essay.⁴ A conversation Hoffman records in *The Afterlife* indicates the emotions as well as the sense of obligation that have motivated her choice to write a memoir about her experience as Mike's friend and caregiver, alerting readers, I want to suggest, to the activist context of Hoffman's writing, a context that, significantly, includes her work (and Mike Riegle's) for the Boston paper, *Gay Community News*. In response to her friend Kevin's objection that grief is irrelevant, even a waste of energy, that "every AIDS funeral should be a massive protest march," Hoffman queries: "Protest march against whom?" I said. 'To where? It's a virus'" (105). The debate, prompted by their friend Bob's funeral, took place, Hoffman admits, prior to "the real heyday of ACT-UP,

³Douglas Crimp has, for example, argued against the elegiac, insisting that from the early days of the pandemic "there was a critical, theoretical alternative to the personal expressions that appeared to dominated the art-world response to AIDS" (Introduction, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* 15).

⁴Steven F. Kruger distinguishes "epidemiological or population" AIDS narratives from personal narratives, pointing out that in the domain of popular culture and media "Both narratives present the picture of a 'battle' already lost: the individuals and populations affected by HIV and AIDS are irretrievable" (80). John Greyson's critique in the film *Zero Patience* of Randy Shilts' "epidemiological narrative," *And the Band Played On*, pinpoints the potential such narratives have to distort. Shilts' invention of "Patient Zero," in the person of Gaetan Dugas, a promiscuous Québécois airline attendant who, it is suggested, was responsible for bringing HIV to North America, plays on exactly the kind of cultural fantasy Sedgwick, Singer, and Epstein are identifying. Greyson's film explores the genealogy of this fantasy.

before people began chaining themselves to the FDA and blockading the Brooklyn Bridge during rush hour and fantasizing about secret squads of PWA suicide saboteurs — before that guy dumped his coffin on the White House lawn” (105), and by listing these strategies, she does display a certain respect for them. But Hoffman still objects to the proposition that personal grief must at some point be set aside so that it does not compromise political aims. Instead, she insists on the value of individual experience: “For a minute, Kevin, can’t it just be us? Not hundreds of thousands of AIDS cases worldwide, but just this one person, here in this bed, quietly dying?” (106). These statements, far from being an endorsement of “quietly dying,” ask for an expansion of the possible range of what it means to be “at odds with AIDS,” to cite Düttmann’s phrase, at odds with a virus and with the at once pervasive and elusive, indeed virulent, homophobia of the culture at large.

Hospital Time thus interpolates — and interrogates — the mourning versus activism debate articulated by Douglas Crimp, and, furthermore, suggests how blurred are the boundaries that supposedly make activism “critical” and art “pathetic” or “pathological.” Indeed, the refusal of recognition for individual death may mean that these deaths will never be allowed material specificity but remain, rather, statistics, part of the narrative calculus that characterizes public health discourse and media renditions of the AIDS epidemic, part of “the overarching, hygienic Western fantasy of a world without any more homosexuals in it,” to employ Sedgwick’s startling phrase (*Epistemology of the Closet* 42). As Lee Edelman argues in *Homographesis*, if majority culture reiterates AIDS

in terms of “a linear narrative progressing ineluctably from a determinate beginning to a predetermined end,” then activism may risk corroborating the panic logic of majority culture when it “defines itself against the ‘narcissism’ and ‘passivity’ that figure the place of gay male sexuality in the Western cultural imaginary” (89, 117).⁵ In this context, Hoffman’s pleading acknowledgment of “just this one person, here in this bed” identifies her resistance to making peace with the AIDS deaths she has witnessed. “Resistance” to making peace is articulated in terms of a determination — indeed a duty — to set herself to the impossible task of doing justice to the particularity of this man, her friend, at the moment of his illness and dying. Like Sedgwick, though, as she looks at the AIDS quilt and thinks about her relation to Michael Lynch in “White Glasses,” a vertiginous mixture of feelings and thoughts ripple through Hoffman’s mind as she reflects on the project of memorialization: the rush of wanting this justice and knowing that each attempt homogenizes and erases to the precise extent it remembers. Duty and obligation are inextricably bound up with the needs, emotions, doubts of the mourner, creating a double bind for the project of memorializing: the task is at once as unstable as it is imperative. Hoffman’s memoir — concerned as much her with own emotions as it is with Mike Riegle or with the larger questions of AIDS and its representations — adumbrates what

⁵Edelman interrogates, for example, the way in which the slogan “Silence=Death” “enacts a metaphorical redefinition of ‘silence’ as ‘death,’” and thus “configures the activity of life with the (re)production of discourse (however oppositional) and thus plays out the logic that privileges procreative intercourse over homosexual sex by aligning the former with active production and the latter with ‘murder of the race’” (89-89).

Sedgwick calls, writing of another friend, Craig Owens, “this strange, utterly discontinuous space of desire euphemistically named friendship” (“Memorial for Craig Owens” 105).

In light of the way that *Hospital Time* foregrounds activism as its perhaps its chief context, and considering how it highlights the entanglement of the duty to mourn faithfully, with outrage, disbelief, and a desire for it all to be over, it would surely be a serious misreading to see Hoffman as merely caught in a temporary “pathological” state. As I discussed in the introduction, recent rereadings of Freud on mourning and melancholia in light of *The Ego and the Id* have taken “melancholia” firmly out of the realm of the pathological to indicate both its status as a founding dynamic of subjectivity and its potential as a kind of critical memory. Hoffman’s memoir foregrounds the melancholic incorporation of the other in the self, but, I want to argue, it does this in a way that is often quite opposed to the consumption or “devouring” (Derrida 34) of the other in the mourning process. Building on Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s definitions of introjection and incorporation in *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, Judith Butler has, for instance, explained that “incorporation ... belongs more properly to melancholy, the state of disavowed or suspended grief in which the object is magically sustained ‘in the body’ in some way” (*Gender Trouble* 67-68). “Since the moment he died,” reflects Hoffman, “I’ve taken him with me everywhere” (78). The image is surely less one of “devouring” than it is a matter of an unrelinquishable bond, or even of stewardship. In a sense, she takes the role of a custodian, lifting or carrying a child. But if Mike is a burden

she struggles to lift, he is a strangely weightless, impossible one, and one she does not elect or choose to carry: he is impossible to refuse lifting, but impossible to lift. Hoffman cannot seem to detach herself from Mike, and she is not speaking of “his memory” *per se* but of his unending, reiterative haunting of her. As Derrida elaborates in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, another’s death produces a sort of aporetically illegal licence for representation and for mourning, where the project is at once mandatory, forbidden, and impossible. If mourning, as the working through and normalization of loss, entails the interiorization of an idealized image of the other, and hence a smoothing out and a forgetting, melancholia or “impossible mourning” designates the impossibility of such closure, insisting instead, as Derrida summarizes, on a “tendency to accept incomprehension” and to adopt “those modes of language” that would “deny the whole rhetoricity of the true” (31). In his preface to Abraham and Torok, Derrida insists that the “breakdown” or suspension produced by melancholia is connected to the unlocatable substance of the loss that is being grieved:

The referent is constructed in such a way as never to present itself “in person,” not even as the object of a theoretical discourse within the traditional norms. The Thing is encrypted. Not *within* the crypt (the Self’s safe) but *by* the crypt and *in* the Unconscious. The “narrated” event, reconstituted by a novelistic, mytho-dramatico-poetic genesis, never appears. (“Fors” xxvi)

Although “everything” appears to “remain” “‘in me’ or ‘in us’, ‘between us’,” that sense of possession is, according to Derrida, illusory (though not dispensable) (*Memoires* 33). If the crypt disguises or hides a body (or as Hoffman’s phrasing involves “taking” or

“carrying” a body), thus preserving it, the crypt is (paradoxically) not a location: it is “undecipherable,” “unreadable” (Donato 206). Ultimately, as Eugenio Donato explains of Derrida’s allusion to the crypt, “The knowledge of the dead which we, perhaps, carry in us will have to remain every bit as occult as the corpses that lie hidden in the texts we read” (205). Because it is structured in the first place by loss, abjection and their entwined disavowals, this knowledge is not available to reading, or exorcism. (As Butler states, “incorporation is not only a failure to name or avow the loss, but erodes the conditions of metaphorical signification itself” [Butler, *Gender Trouble* 68].) Hoffman’s bald statement that she takes Mike with her everywhere camps out on the border of figurative language and cold enumeration, a literalized or encrypted not-quite-metaphor that is at once fanciful and truthful, an index of “incomprehension.” In the final section of *Hospital Time*, which is entitled *The Afterlife*, and should, according to the model of mourning as working through, provide resolution, the puzzlement over the way memory encrypts the dead is only augmented. All she can profess to “believe in” is “memory,” the belief that “you carry the person within you, and thus he lives, as part of you and yours” (104). Yet she meditates, too, on her frustrations with the unreliability and opacity of memory, with its “cold substance,” its “pits, faults, abysses, volcanoes,” its mechanical, impersonal workings, its inability to make the dead “present” and fully readable, all of which make this sense of “holding” the dead so that they “live” problematic: if Mike lives, then where is he? and why does he not speak? (91, 104).

In this connection, it seems that we may move productively through psychoanalysis towards an ethical, political, and rhetorical examination of the intonation of Hoffman's AIDS memoir. By what force is the process of interiorization held in suspension? According to Kristeva's reading of melancholia, "Depressed persons ... *disavow the negation* [that is, the negation of loss that founds signification], they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose" (*Black Sun* 43). Melancholic attachment to the grieved object prompts the rejection of the compensatory options offered by the symbolic; in the refusal of compensation, the loss itself is perhaps refused, in a kind of reverse disavowal. The repeated refusal of catharsis is a telling index of the way in which mourning confronts its own impossibility in *Hospital Time*; these refusals are at once a response to the impossibility of ontology and the ethical imperatives of the "real" of AIDS. Hoffman's memories, for instance, of the reality of Mike's pain, dementia, and humiliation prevent her from achieving any catharsis, or from releasing herself from the suspicion that she did not really help him. Recalling the task of doing Mike's laundry on one of the occasions when he is afflicted with diarrhea, Hoffman notes how "I berated myself alternately for being too fastidious and for not protecting myself with latex gloves" (54). As Urvashi Vaid emphasizes in her foreword to *Hospital Time*, the "shit-stained" (xiv), painful reality of his body's decline is never put peaceably aside, but is carried around, oddly lovingly, by the witness – a "strange burden" indeed (Keenan 151). Kristeva's reading of melancholy directs our attention, too, however, to questions of rhetoric and

narrative form: because it is an instance of the “real” being “inscribed within us *without memory*” (*Black Sun*, my emphasis 14), melancholia, or “impossible mourning” (43), produces a distinctively “*noncathartic literature*” (*Powers of Horror* 225). Refusing to relinquish its burden, and taking on all of its heaviness, leakiness, even opacity, *Hospital Time* mobilizes what Haver calls “the primordially *erotic* historico-socio-politicality of the body” against “the (entirely fantasmatic) clean and proper body politic” (emphasis in original 7). While the lack of clarity in this relation may seem to contradict activism’s imperative to action, it may also be that consideration of how these passionate attachments are lived by survivors may be one of the conditions of a more fundamental kind of opposition to AIDS. Let me put the question another way: since, as Haver argues, the fantasy of the “clean and proper body politic” “is maintained only in the processes of the exclusion of an expendable social surplus comprised of people and peoples of color, sex workers, IV drug users, and queers” (7), it may be precisely this excluded “social surplus” that calls for preservation. If memory encrypts, it also preserves the object and preserves, perhaps, too, libidinal investment in the “lost” object. The preservation of this attachment may be (to borrow Edelman’s vocabulary) more of a “necessity” than a “luxury” (117). In other words, its condition may be a certain excess or illegibility.

What I wish to emphasize in the discussion that follows is that by speaking to a particularized situation — Amy Hoffman’s relationship with Mike Riegle — *Hospital Time* attests to the overwhelming force of grief and to the ethical and political considerations it compels when it remains unresolved and unresolvable. These

considerations have, in turn, a bearing on the mode of storytelling in which the memoir engages. Initially known to one another socially and as colleagues, Amy and Mike were not close friends until the time of his illness, when, to her surprise, she made a commitment to participate in his care. In the intensity of Hoffman's immediate witnessing of Mike's illness there emerges an unsolicited, uncontrollable intimacy. Questions of responsibility now abound: Hoffman is reluctant to usurp Mike's prerogative to author his own story, and yet in his absence she is compelled, at the same time, to create some kind of public record. This task of representation is especially urgent, and especially problematic, in the context of the "socially-produced" trauma of AIDS (Crimp qtd in Caruth and Keenan 541), for, in a sense, it is, as Thomas Keenan explains, "a double trauma": "On the one hand there's a cataclysmic event, which produces symptoms and calls for testimony, and then it happens again, when the value of the witness in the testimony is denied, and there's no one to hear the account, no one to attend or respond — not simply to the event, but to its witness as well" (Keenan qtd in Caruth and Keenan 541). To illustrate the transformative but never clear-cut processes of melancholic memory in *Hospital Time*, I will first consider how its peculiar playing of rhetoric against structure embodies a melancholic politics of recontextualization, and then explore in turn the ethical and political dimensions of the memoir's status as a *gendered* text of grief as well as its interrogation of specific literary and religious intertexts.

II: Re/collecting Mike

As a memoir preoccupied with recording the experience of witnessing another's death as well as with memorializing the dead, *Hospital Time* responds to several conflicting but equally strong imperatives: the imperative to allow Mike's life and death scope for meaning and recognition, and the imperative not to foreclose meaning, or to play into discourses that would "homogenize," even when the survivor's desire for such closure is most pressing and finally irresistible. Addressing these paradoxical demands, Hoffman invents a narrative pattern that insists, through its melancholic obsessiveness about the status of her love for Mike, through its willingness to engage what Hoffman refers to as the "messy" details of Mike's life, death, and afterlife (91), on what I shall call, referring to Derrida, a mode of critical or "thinking" memory that puts pressure on the idealizing memory ("remembrance as interiorization") of auto/biographical or obituary representation (*Memoires* 35-36). Through its hesitancy about such retrospective reconstruction, *Hospital Time* well illustrates Derrida's insight that so-called "faithful interiorization," which would make the "other a *part* of us, between us," somehow changes the other, so that "the other no longer quite seems to be the other" but an extension or product of the self (35). The practice of Hoffman's text balances between the tendency to assume that Mike — or at least his memory — has become her possession and the tendency to "abort" or "renounce" such "interiorizations," with the necessity for what Derrida calls "tender rejection" of the other moving to the foreground, even as she recognizes the way in which Mike maintains *his* hold on *her* (35). In *Hospital Time*, potential responses to Mike's death unfold along multiple trajectories: we are confronted

with Amy's memories of Mike, Mike's hypothesized posthumous responses to Amy, and the readings of both of them by other friends in their circle. At the same time, we are also regularly reminded of the larger context of the memoir as a public text to be read by strangers. Readers are thus drawn into a vertiginous dynamic of social and self-questioning. So situated, anger, guilt, and self-beratement fuel the practice of critical memory and yield criticism of the pattern of containment that has characterized mainstream American culture's response to AIDS.

Fragmented and repetitious, the structure of *Hospital Time* enacts the melancholic subjectivity that is the fabric of Hoffman's testimony. Throughout the memoir, and especially towards the end, Hoffman speaks against the impulse to beautify, and thereby to sanctify Mike's death, to distill from the relation a too easy wisdom. As I suggested earlier, the fourth and final section of the memoir, *The Afterlife*, far from putting Mike to rest, and far from assuming that Hoffman's memoir can fully account for his life and death as it moves towards a conclusion, registers his "presence" (if we can call it that) as disruptive and elusive. The opening meditation on the subject of "hospital time" prepares for the irresolution of the final sections. Waiting for Mike to die, Hoffman finds that time suddenly fails, is suspended: "Nothing's happening – or maybe it's that everything is happening, or is about to" (3). With this recognition, her perspective changes, as she entertains the possibility that this experience of "Eternity" is "the real thing," and "Your vigor, your life outside," is by contrast "an affront" (5); more than that, it comes to seem "utterly frivolous, the world and its stupid time" (5). Such repetitions of disbelief

constitute, as Haver argues, a form of “ontological stammering” characteristic of the literature of witness to HIV/AIDS, whereby taken-for-granted priorities are exposed, unravelled under the pressure of “the Real of AIDS” (290). Writing, moreover, in the second person in this section, addressing the reader as “you,” Hoffman interpellates readers of *Hospital Time* into this dislocated point of view.

More generally, the conspicuously conventional linear structure is foregrounded through the use of subtitles only to be flagrantly disrespected. This structural contradiction advertizes the memoirist’s inconsolability, while at the same time demonstrating the pressure that exists to achieve proper mourning. The first two sections of the book focus largely on giving voice to these disjunctions. Mike desires agency, and this desire manifests itself in his attempts to escape his local environment, to be on the move and so, perhaps, to escape his illness. But travel does not provide him with respite — in fact, it only exacerbates his and Amy’s suffering. On holiday in Provincetown, plans for a relaxing day at the beach fall apart because “we had forgotten that he was sick” (37), and later, in Memphis, when Mike collapses changing planes enroute to visit a friend in Austin, we see the illusion of normalcy finally crack open: Mike and Amy are both “*hospital/ized*” (as his companion she is given a place to stay in the hospital), and they now “wait” for death “like the damned” (45, 50 emphasis in original). (“Forgetting” Mike’s illness has not really happened, of course, only the pretense of forgetting; this repression itself is a strange, destabilizing disavowal in a text that so complicates the distinction between recollection and forgetting.)

Their hospitalization makes visible the ways in which they are subjected to and by institutional discourses of disease and illness, a situation that makes it difficult to maintain a stance of ironical resistance. If a prison imprisons, a hospital “hospitalizes,” producing not only medical “treatments” but a certain inflection of subjectivity — a more palpably subjected subject, one less capable of articulating an ironizing resistance to the hospital’s denuding narrative of its own beneficent helpfulness. Hoffman observes that “The bed is narrow, the patient bristling with needles, electrodes, and other ICU accoutrements that must not be displaced” (4), making this body perhaps not unlike a butterfly collector’s specimen pinned awkwardly and subjected to the possessive gazing of an enquiring expert. This vulnerable, prone body is ripe for misreadings. Doctors in suburban Memphis, perceived by its inhabitants to be far away from the major urban epicentres of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, mistakenly diagnose Mike with pneumonia. Though Memphis will certainly have had its share of cases, public panic produces such profound denial that the doctors here offer “the only diagnosis they know that goes with AIDS: PCP [pneumonia], that’s the ticket. Never mind that the bronchoscopy came up clean” (49).

If the hospital effects a kind of capture, reproducing the subject under a rubric of containment, *Hospital Time* refuses to “collect” Mike even as it is committed to recording his life and death, resists setting up an idealized image of him. But this refusal always involves a complicated linking of avowal and disavowal. While Hoffman has (perhaps despite her intentions) “become known as a Mike specialist, a Mike collector” amongst her friends” (145), labels that suggest her “ownership” of Mike’s memory, as well as the

almost entire absorption of her existence in this project, her attitude towards the enterprise of remembering Mike by writing about him remains ambivalent. She claims, on the one hand, to love Mike more faithfully and accurately than anyone else and asserts, on the other, that both she and Mike are unworthy of love, even “despicable” (Freud 245-46)

This ambivalence corrodes the memoir’s putative linear structure, returning us consistently and emphatically to the sense that Mike “lives” a most unsettled, incomplete, almost mechanical “life” within Hoffman’s memory. Throughout the memoir, the progress towards completed grief that is suggested by the linear structure is interrupted by a series of ironic episodes, organized under titles that create briefly the expectation that the about-to-be narrated event will affirm the work of mourning, but which ultimately return us to a corporeal reality that estranges “ordinary” life along with any consolatory gestures. Take for example, the section, in Part Three, entitled “Mike Dies Peacefully” (77) Hoffman parodies in this title the comforting assertion offered by Mike’s friend Rob: “Mike died peacefully, Amy, I want you to know that” (77). Hoffman strenuously rejects this reconstruction of his death: “Peacefully. If you want to believe that, go ahead” (77). Previously, anticipating the event, Hoffman presents us with another perspective on Mike’s death, a more horrific one, one that Rob’s placating comment attempts to erase Hoffman emphasizes the way in which death was “manifestly before our eyes” already, observing how Mike’s body looks no different after his death than it did during the four days before he died, “His skin yellow, his face a skull, his eyes rolled back into his head” (69). And when Hoffman’s partner, Roberta, asks the nurse how Michael can still have

diarrhea, they learn that his body is consuming “the lining of his stomach” (69). Hoffman groups the doctors’ attempts to placate her together with Rob’s : “No hope. Nothing to be done. We can make him comfortable” (79). And, similarly, she objects to “Their irrepressible confidence, the optimism of their power. (Would they, too, describe Mike’s death as ‘peaceful’? Maybe ‘comfortable’),” remarking upon the posture she herself occupies in these conversations: she somehow herself adopts the position of “invalid” as she sits passively listening to the doctors (78-9). Amy’s contestation of Rob’s reconstruction and the doctors’ interpretation directs us back to a less thoroughly edited account. The memoir thus pursues a persistent pattern of denying comfort, so that what Hoffman’s repeated refusals of appeasement accomplish is the establishment of what Kristeva describes — “the setting up of a fundamental sadness and an artificial, unbelievable language” (*Black Sun* 43) — though from the perspective of the grieving this language is no more artificial or unbelievable than the language with which we would collect Mike Riegle and display him to advantage. To say that “in the end, Mike left me twisting in the wind” takes on a wide-reaching resonance: it is not only that his lack of direction made it difficult for Amy to make legal decisions, but that her very involvement with him has taken over her sense of self, seeming to divest her of “ordinary” involvement in the world, leaving her without peace and even “dead,” which is the implication of the grim trope she uses to describe herself (16). Absorbed in her grief, the witness becomes an object: a passive, weighty, vulnerable body. This project of memorializing AIDS thus draws attention with particular force and urgency to the “latent threat” that, as Paul de

Man argues, the apostrophic mode of address in “autobiographical” writing poses to its author : the address that would preserve the dead redounds upon the one who addresses, so that “the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” (“Autobiography as De-Facement” 78).

This condition of obligation also complicates Hoffman’s attitude toward the memorial service, when Mike’s friends meet to scatter his ashes in the Fenway, an urban park where he often cruised for men. There is embarrassed confusion among the group about how to approach the task. Hoffman, who has brought the ashes with her, “invited the others to follow me, but there was a moment of hesitation. The *goyim* didn’t want to get near the box” (87). The word *goyim* is used disparagingly here to mark the friends’ distance from religious ritual, their confidence (which is also Hoffman’s confidence or hope in some senses) that they can make up a personalized ritual that will do justice to Mike. Secularism masks reluctance to come into proximity with Mike’s corpse: the friends are generally primed with consolatory fictions that articulate and limit their proximity to the reality of the corpse. (The friends may also be considered as stagey aspects of Hoffman’s own consolatory fantasies, but safely distanced by being identified with others — and thereby, in a sense, abjected and mastered, so that Hoffman may better “possess” her friend by dispossessing others, rendering them as unworthy of the right to mourn him.) Witness Rob’s comment, mentioned earlier, or Jacoby’s confidence that the teddy bear she placed in Mike’s room “eased his pain” (125), though everyone knows that he “famously despised possessions” (140). Hoffman responds to the friends’ reluctance to

approach the ashes by referring to Jewish tradition for an alternative precedent, noting how “The mourners have to dig until the grave is filled, and it’s a dirty job” and how it is customary to “wash our hands before reentering a home after a funeral anyway” (87). I will return to the significance of Hoffman’s reference to religious tradition in the final section of this chapter, where I deal with her references to the Hebrew prayer for the dead, but for now I would like to underline the contrast between the recognition that they have just been forced to make and the eagerness of the mourners to seize upon a symbol that promises to compensate for this recognition. Indeed, upon the completion of the ritual scattering of the ashes, one of the friends, Loie, alerts the attention of the others to the appearance of a great blue heron “making his way among the reeds and the ashes” (87), crying out that the bird “is Mike’s spirit! It is his totem!” (87). For Hoffman, however, this conclusion is not quite possible. Although she tests out points of comparison (like Mike, the bird is “lean, long-legged, deep-voiced”), she rejects Loie’s interpretation, acknowledging that “I wish more than anything I believed that. The Great Blue Heron” (87). We are made to “fall back on the real object (the Thing) of [our] loss” (*Black Sun* 43): the ashes that cling to the hands, “the heavy, heavy ashes” that remind Hoffman, with a cruel incongruity, of “Michael’s emaciated body” (86).

In this, *Hospital Time* resists, with a remarkably precise negation, the vision of the natural world that Mark Doty articulates in his memoir, *Heaven’s Coast*.⁶ More loosely

⁶Doty’s text has been quite widely heralded as the major memoir to emerge from the “later phase” of the pandemic. Perhaps it has been read as such in part because of the

organized, on the surface, than Hoffman's text, *Heaven's Coast* works eventually towards an affirming conclusion, in which the spirit of Doty's lover, Wally, is implied to linger, benevolently, in a rich spiritual place. Doty remarks apropos of burying Wally that "I understand, differently, the longing of Antigone to bury her brother properly. Something shifts, with the body where it belongs" (283). (But, as I will explore in Section III, this is not quite the full purport of the claim that Antigone makes in relation to the body of Polyneices). In Hoffman's text, by contrast with Doty's, the ashes are cast to the wind and water, and "The Thing" remains "encrypted." As Derrida argues in "Fors," in relation to impossible mourning, encryption is located "Not *within* the crypt (the Self's safe)" — and this is how I am reading Doty's definition of nature as fundamentally symbolic, as an enclosure, "the Self's safe" (xxvi). Rather, encryption is performed "by the crypt and *in* the Unconscious" (emphasis in original xxvi). Textually, we are embroiled in an opaque, misery-laden language, a mode of storytelling that can only barely be labelled narration. Just as Hoffman charts her own abandonment of the clamshell she had thought to use as a scoop for the ashes (ventriloquizing his wish for "something natural, from the Sea, as he would have wanted" [86]) for the necessity of having to use her bare hands, so too her account of the memorial service puts into crisis the possibility of symbolic resolution

consolation it offers. Painfully aware of the kind of melancholy out of which Hoffman writes, Doty refers to it from a certain remove, it enters the text in a less shapely or directed way perhaps through the personal letters that Doty intersperses amongst his reflections.

Turning to the fourth and final section, *The Afterlife*, I want to suggest that the “after” (the “future” for which mourning ostensibly clears the way) in which *Hospital Time* is interested is something quite different than what we might have expected – Mike is a cryptic, disruptive presence in the unconscious of the witness rather than a messenger from beyond the grave. In this text generated out of the force of impossible mourning, “The ‘narrated’ event, reconstituted by a novelistic, mytho-dramatico-poetic genesis, never appears” (Derrida, “Fors” xxvi). But Mike does “return” to Amy in puzzling glimpses: he is present as a ghost, a disjunctive force, disjunctive, that is, of present, future and past, and of inside / outside boundaries. When, for example, “the snapshot of Mike that I’ve propped up on the bookcase,” impresses her with its lifelike quality, making it “hard to believe the picture is not of a person who resides in this world,” the image returns to her in the context of a dream:

He visits me later in my dream, wearing the same shorts and tee shirt he’s wearing in the picture.

“Touch me,” he says, sitting down next to me, knowing I think he is a ghost.

I reach out to his thigh, and his thigh is real – I feel the hair, the flesh, and the bone – and my hand does not pass through it as through a mist. He is not dead. He has proven it to me. (134)

While this apparition may be read as a conventionally elegiac disavowal of death, the ultimate effect of Mike’s return is to restore us to “hospital time,” to that disorienting netherworld: he is neither alive nor dead. It is as though he continues to speak “the AIDS language” (28), while Hoffman, whose life “after” occurs in the world, becomes estranged from this language. This is a matter of fidelity: the two of them were once united against

uncomprehending strangers, and now she fears she has betrayed him by allowing herself to be drawn back into her “life outside” and feels guilty that she feels relieved. But their estrangement is far from complete, as the dream suggests. Mike continues to claim her attention and commitment, to the extent that he seems to live an independent existence within Hoffman’s unconscious, confronting her with the “evidence” of his solidity, his physicality, which she has struggled hard to recognize has become ash and been dispersed by her own hands. To be haunted by the sensation of Mike’s physical presence is to be reminded of his otherness, his resistance to her desires, even now that he is, in a sense, her possession or invention, for he exists as *her* memory of him. His un-deniable death unsettles what Hoffman thinks about life and death, bringing her to the sorrowful recognition that perhaps it is not she who possesses or dreams him, but rather the dream of Mike that, more accurately, possesses her.

The most powerful instance of the political effect of this refusal of compensation for grief occurs in the second last chapter of *The Afterlife*, the chapter devoted to “Mike’s Dick,” the part of his anatomy that remains to this point all but occluded for his lesbian friends. At a subsequent memorial gathering, Hoffman learns from a former lover of Mike’s that Mike “had a bent dick,” a detail, Larry notes, that is only possible to recollect for those who had seen him aroused (145). Just as Mike demands, in the context of her dream, for Amy to touch him and to recognize him as real, this story offers a fragmentary glimpse of Mike’s erotic body that demands a place in her account, despite the fact that it is conveyed to her at second hand, or that she allows into the text only as displaced.

Hoffman's focus on this detail, and her placement of the story towards the end of her narrative, in a tantalizing substitution for a summary of the significance of Mike's life, constitutes an embrace, across gender and desire, of that which might violate the boundaries of the "clean and proper body" of mourning, the body implied in Hoffman's rendering of Rob's comment about Mike's "peaceful" death. Indeed, as Douglas Crimp explains, there is a need to make gay sexuality differently visible — on something like its own terms — in the context of the epidemic. Reflecting on the narrativization of AIDS in the media, Crimp observes that he has not

seen a story in the mainstream media during the entire ten years of this epidemic that deals with the anxieties of gay men generally, regarding for example what this epidemic has done to our experience of our sexuality. This is how one of the worst aspects of homophobia shows itself, in the suggestion that homosexuality is a simple choice, because it's assumed that we could all now make the choice not to be homosexual.

(qtd in Caruth and Keenan 546)

Especially in "Mike's Dick," with the section's extreme self-consciousness about Hoffman's role as the potential censor of Mike's life, *Hospital Time* is very aware of its responsibility to avoid the widespread "fatal nostalgia" for the clean, properly, and heterosexually bounded body, a nostalgia that would erase same-sex desire in the first instance (Haver 8). Hoffman attests to the difficulty she encounters in writing about Mike's body, given the incomplete status of her experience and memories of it; but she also affirms its erotism, even in the midst of its "decomposition": "As I write I create him, and he's mine all mine, all his deeds and effects I think of his body. I flash on it

decomposing horribly in its coffin, the busy dick, however it was made, bent or straight, long gone” (145).

Yet the “real” of Mike’s existence remains a disruptive presence, because it has by its own peculiar force incorporated itself into Hoffman’s psychic and narrative space: “He is ashes but his body persists in memory: weary, wicked, wandering. Bent and delicious. I don’t give him any peace, dragging him around like this” (146). The tone is one of self-beratement, as though Hoffman is irritated with her inability to relinquish Mike and wonders if this continuing attachment on her part might be an unwelcome interference. These are certainly two possible ways of reading the phrase “dragging him around like this.” But given her earlier criticism of the tendency to impose “peace,” the statement would be more accurately read as an affirmation of her melancholic incorporation of Mike. Her melancholic attachment to Mike preserves him, but without masking the relation, and without purporting to understand it either: it allows for the decomposing body, the bent and delicious body, but not the peaceful body.⁷ Working across identifications, then, Hoffman’s memoir gestures towards her investment of libidinal energy in Mike’s person. And indeed, can we not describe her bond to him as having all the intensity of a love affair,

⁷Zeiger argues of AIDS elegies that “Such poems inscribe a double vision: they summon ghosts while insisting upon the finality of death. The living poets do not want the dead to be buried *in* AIDS elegies, nor, endangered as they are themselves, can they see the dead as wholly other. The poems are filled with ghosts and revenants, while the relations of the living with these revenants are intimate, unforclosed” (131). Moreover, “AIDS elegy’s insistence on the particularity of individual loss makes the poem a pleasurable physical ‘index,’ not a consoling artifact-substitute” (133).

with its jealousies, resentments, fascinations, infatuations? *Hospital Time* thus participates in what Michael Moon describes, in the context of HIV and AIDS, as “the project of restoring the ‘scandal’ of sexuality, specifically gay male sexuality, to the mourning process” (235). Considering grief as continuous with libidinal energy (rather than a “cutting off” of the erotic), we might consider memorialization working as “a remembering that has repositioned itself among the remnants, the remainders, and reminders that do not go away” (239).

Mike’s unpleasantness is preserved, too, for, while Mike’s body is eroticized on the one hand, on the other Hoffman’s text is given over to remembering his disregard for his own body, most specifically in the third to last section in *The Afterlife*, the section on “Mike’s Eating.” She recalls that “He had the mental attitude of a bulimic, if not the behavior, despising food, yet craving it, needing it of course, yet despising his body’s pleasure” (141), moreover, “He was a moocher” who “didn’t believe food was worth paying for” (141). Though Hoffman asserts the accuracy of her memory, claiming that “from the very beginning I saw him, Michael, in all his Michaelness, and I never lost sight of that no matter what, and I think that is love” (143), her text demonstrates a much more complex sense of what it means to preserve Michael’s “essence” or unique specificity. Derrida explains the way in which loss does and does not produce a void “With the nothing of this irrevocable absence, the other appears *as* other, and as other for us, upon his death or at least in the anticipated possibility of a death, since death constitutes and makes manifest the limits of a *me* or an *us* who are obliged to harbor something that is

greater and other than them; something *outside of them within them*" (*Memoires* 34).

Indeed, if it is to succeed in (or at least not to foreclose on) perpetuating the "loci of maximum potential" for "creativity and struggle" that persist in "each person, like each institution," despite the sense in which subjects lack easily summarizable "core" identities (Sedgwick, "Gender Criticism" 297), recollecting Mike involves a diffuse, contradictory release of energies and significations.

Countering the implicit pressure to remain quietly anonymous, then, Hoffman's memoir, representing Mike with obsessively detailed particularity, shows him to be gloriously varied, even inconsistent, impossible to summarize, but also that he remains present in traces, in glimpses: gay community activist, prison rights activist, linguist, friend, lover, a witty, bitchy, sloppy, opinionated, brilliant, hypocritical, demanding, radical "fairy" man. Significantly, the focus on "just this one person" does not simply replace the many, but creates room for specificity while also constituting a gesture in the direction of the even greater multiplicity of the collective. If Hoffman is in a sense the keeper of a collective set of memories about Mike, her narrative also necessarily, under a traumatic compulsion, extends its embrace beyond his person. In "Influences from Beyond the Grave," we are acquainted with Bobby, whose illness (ironically) was the occasion for Amy's meeting Roberta, her current partner. Like the fragmentary memory of "Mike's dick," Bobby's visitation overwhelms with its wicked supplementarity: "and suddenly, Bobby, big as life, is beaming down at the two of us from a fluffy pink cloud in Paradise Little wings flutter at his shoulders, and he's wearing only a celestial jockstrap that

glistens whiter than white” (99). This “vision” provides a glimpse of Bobby’s body as he might well have fantasized it, a vision of vigor that prefaces and so competes what we then read about his illness, when his neuropathy “annihilat[ed] even the simplest comforts – a blanket, a cup of tea” (102). Possibly, Hoffman fantasizes, “They’ve restored his health. Not only has he gotten a tan up there, but his muscles are seriously pumped, his hair as brown and glossy as it was in his Florida youth, his eyes as clear and blue as the heavens” (99). Similarly, in “Walta’s Birthday,” we learn the story of Michael Bronski and his partner Walta, of Walta’s inability as his illness progressed to read the poems he had once composed, and of Bronski’s feelings of bewilderment upon Walta’s death: “He’s no longer living the life he loves, although he used to. He’s so lonely. There’s no cure” (136-138). Though there may be hope for a pharmaceutical cure, there is no cure for the grief that AIDS has already caused: what do we mean then when we talk of a cure for the disease? Does that hopeful grasping inadvertently erase the memory of those who have already died and the trauma to those who love them?

Hoffman’s introduction to *The Afterlife*, “Calling the Names,” reinforces that the scope of her grief extends beyond Mike, that the text refers as much to the collective as to the individual. Here Hoffman comments, in a kind of voice-over, on what it means for a witness to ritualize loss by uttering the names of the dead. Speaking the names of the dead reveals the impact on those who remain alive. “*The accretion of names reveals an image: a glimpsed freeze-frame of our lives hollowed out by loss*” (emphasis in original 91). Locating AIDS as a traumatic experience, an interruption that produces “lives

hollowed out by loss,” Hoffman wonders: “why did I do that [repeat the names]? What can it mean to these strangers around me to hear these syllables? They’ll never know the whole story” (91). There is an accumulation, however, of a social presence: “But as the calling of the names continues, it becomes a kind of theater or living work of art — a tableau vivant, perhaps” (91). Though she can imagine others asking “Must we not make peace, must we not move on?,” there continues to be a sense that she is obliged on a visceral level to the “ghosts” of the men she has lost: “But my teeth are chattering, my body humming, I can’t stop feeling the reverberations....” (91). Through a process of “designification,” operating structurally and rhetorically, *Hospital Time* wrests itself away from a definition of mourning as “working through” and resolving grief, furnishing a new context for interpreting Hoffman’s fantasies and dreams: they are the melancholic remainder that ensures, and even celebrates, the otherness of the object of grief (Blanchot 138-139).

Melancholy is recirculated, reread, as revealing the intense love of an unchosen intimacy, and the libidinal energy that motivates the resistance to “working through” and relinquishing loss: perhaps libidinal energy even elaborates loss. But the possibility that her account will submerge Mike beneath her own desire for a certain image of him (which is one way of reading how much of Hoffman we get in this memoir), effectively burying his story, is an outcome of which Hoffman is evidently wary, for, as she notes towards the end of the book, Mike might well object to her “dragging him around like this” (146). And yet, on another level, Hoffman has no choice but to write about Mike; she does not

choose to “drag him around like this.” (The phrasing suggests the collapse of symbolic language: Like this? Like what?) Indeed, there is another way to interpret the statement, for the full context reads: “I don’t give him any peace, dragging him around like this” (146). Throughout the memoir “peace” is regarded as the placating gloss of memorial reconstruction, and “dragging” him with her as she charts her own affective responses to his illness and death means that our interpretations neither of Mike nor Amy ever settle into a comfortable, coherent whole. Only this amorphous, restless activity can approximate the incommensurability of the traumatic experience, or the complexity of their experiences, erotic and emotional. Restlessness and incomprehension may be read as indexes of a tendency towards “true mourning,” towards the refusal to disavow loss. As Mike’s variable motto suggests, there is (ironically, painfully, but fittingly) “No rest for the weary” and “No rest for the wicked” (146).

III: A Contemporary Antigone? Theorizing Sororal Obligation

*I would not urge you now; nor if you wanted
to act would I be glad to have you with me.
Be as you choose to be; but for myself
I myself will bury him. It will be good
to die, so doing. I shall lie by his side,
loving him as he loved me; I shall be
A criminal — but a religious one.*

*The time in which we must please those that are dead
is longer than I must please those of this world.*

Sophocles, *Antigone* (ll. 79-87)

When Antigone rejects Ismene's too belated, regretful offer to join her in publicly commemorating the death of their brother Polyneices, she pinpoints the cost of holding on to the dead, in the context of grieving a death deemed ungrievable by the state powers one risks being deemed a "criminal." At the same time, though, Antigone's speech expresses absolute conviction that this is the correct path for a loyal sister: "The time in which we must please those that are dead/ is longer than I must please those of this world" (ll. 86-87). We may read Hoffman, I want to suggest, as one of a long line of women in literature who have been given, left, or who take on the task of burying the dead, beginning with Antigone. But where Antigone (and this is perhaps the source of Mark Doty's identification with her in *Heaven's Coast*) is unequivocal about the supremacy of "God's ordinances, unwritten and secure" (l. 499) that compels her loyalty to her dead brother over the law of the state, Amy Hoffman, although committed to mourning Mike Riegle, appears relatively undecided, and decidedly unheroic.

What are the ethical implications of Hoffman's obsession with grieving Mike Riegle's death, given the acknowledged gender polarities of the scenario?⁸ By taking Sophocles' Antigone as a figure for the question of the social significance of women's grief, I shall investigate the emergent implications of the unsteady mix of rebellion, duty,

⁸And yet these polarities are shown to be highly unstable. Hoffman recounts the story of Mike having received an anonymous note "addressed to Mike Riegle: Male Lesbian," at the same time that she questions his reliance on her "feminine intuition," his trust that "he wouldn't have to explain himself" but rather "simply be" (and be free to be difficult), "and we [his support network of lesbian friends] would simply understand" (72).

and equivocation that permeates Hoffman's memoir. Though *Antigone* can be read as proto-feminist for its focus on the young woman's defiance of Creon's tyranny and misogyny, it has also been read as confirming the patriarchal gendering of mourning, even as it models a kind of rebellion against authority.⁹ If we follow Hegel's influential references to the play in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the sister's duty to grieve her brother's death forms the very substance and purpose of familial relations. The "*Family*" constitutes the "*natural* ethical community," and its "(unconscious) role is to preserve," through its various practices and rituals, the "elemental individuality" of the male individual from "the desires of unconscious organic agencies and by abstract elements" (468, 472). Luce Irigaray has criticized this position, pointing out how women are themselves negated by the duty assigned to them in Hegel's ethical vision, for if women's "inherent duty is to ensure *burial for the dead*, thus changing a natural phenomenon into a spiritual act," then "we see that it is the task of womankind, guardian of the blood tie, to gather man into his final figuration, beyond the turmoil of his contingent life and the scattered moments of his Being there" (cited in Jacobs 898; *Speculum* 266-267). Sisterly devotion to the male dead is, according to this reading, a form of false consciousness that naturalizes female self-immolation in the service of patriarchal norms, and for the purpose of maintaining the boundaries that contain the abject, symbolically insulating the

⁹There are numerous examples of this dynamic in traditional elegies, as Celeste Schenck suggests in her study of women elegists ("Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy")

patriarchal body politic from forces that threaten disintegration. When mourning men is framed as women's duty, we find not only the consumption — and disfiguring — of the other, but the female self also consumes itself in the work of mourning in order to refigure the other in a way that underwrites patriarchal interests.¹⁰

But as a figure uniting questions of ethics, the feminine, and mourning, Antigone may be reconceived, I want to suggest, in the context of *Hospital Time*. Read together, these two texts provide another way of thinking about women and grief: unresolved grief can suggest the existence of an obligation that exceeds the bounds of a “feminine” duty, of a gender identity that would affirm conventional roles. Like Amy Hoffman, Antigone faces everywhere evidence of a male body's disintegrative corporeality. And it may not be so clear, as Carol Jacobs has argued of the play, that Antigone's words and actions do function to “guard” the “blood tie” by preserving her brother's body from contingency. “she who would bury Polynieces and give him meaning and form also produces or rather

¹⁰ There is a similar pattern at work in the context of women's contributions to activism and caregiving in the AIDS emergency. See Jeannine DeLombard (“Who Cares? Lesbians as Caregivers”) and Halina Maslanka (“Women Volunteers at GMHC”) for analyses of the gendered aspects of caregiving in the context of AIDS. DeLombard reports that while “many lesbians see their AIDS caregiving as a form of gay activism,” many also express “mixed feelings” about the expectation for women to become involved in gendered and might not necessarily work two ways, were the circumstances reversed (350-352). In this context, Patton's critique of the narrow definitions of women's roles in the AIDS crisis is also relevant. According to Patton, women who choose to be active as volunteers enact a conventional gendered (and class specific pattern) of providing support, nurturance, and even redemption (exemplifying “the compassionate member of the general public”), while HIV-positive women are generally visible (not as sexual agents of any kind) but as either innocent or delinquent (“ “With Champagne and Roses” ” 170).

has already produced the dispersal of that form-giving, as mother of the dust, as carrion feeding bird, as prefiguration of intelligibility gone awry” (910). The extravagance of Antigone’s commitment to her dead brother presents an unresolved relation of obligation to the other that is subtly at odds with any “final figuration” of him. Despite the surface conventionality of the scenario, there percolates beneath that level of meaning a certain inadvertent, or ironic pressure (of identification replacing difference) that counters “the manhood of the community” (Hegel 496), something that Thomas Yingling has referred to in the context of AIDS as the “national body,” the imaginary relation to the body that “reject[s] not only disease but the very notion of embodiment it recalls” (*AIDS and the National Body* 24-25).¹¹ In an “unrevealing rite of unintelligible frenzy” such as Antigone’s (Jacobs 910) — in a text of grief produced under the auspices of obligation to the other’s *experience* (rather than what he is supposed to represent as a national masculine symbolic body) — neither the male other nor the female self is consumed (and, indeed, perhaps it is revealed that neither one existed as such in the way this description presumes.) The foregrounding of the sister-brother bond, for example, indirectly levels

¹¹Revising Hegel, particularly his aside labelling “womankind — the everlasting irony in the life of the community” (496), Jacobs contends that “what Antigone performs is no supplement to a natural process, no addition of the movement of consciousness ... no ‘positive *ethical* action,’ rather an eternally possible irony” (911). Hegel’s implication that woman’s valuing of the individual constitutes “the contradiction and the germ of destruction, which lie hid within that very peace and beauty belonging to the gracious harmony and peaceful equilibrium of the ethical spirit” may be read as a precise, if unintended, analysis of the disruptive force of “feminine” melancholic attachment (498).

gender hierarchies, because in him the woman finds “a man on a level with herself” (Hegel 497).

Hoffman’s own “unrevealing rite of unintelligible frenzy” — *Hospital Time* — likewise disarticulates the very process of mourning that it invokes; in a sense, it is at once “criminal” and “religious.” But her melancholic attachment to the particular, the material, and the bodily is less obliquely present than is Antigone’s, and its effect is a political one to radically restructure social identities and relationships. Motivated to record her grief for a man to whom she is — by conventional definitions — neither sister, mother, lover, wife, doctor, or nurse (23), Hoffman’s text presents, first of all, a created or chosen (but certainly in no sense “pretended”) sense of community — an ethical community to be sure, but a departure from (or a complication of) the “natural” ethical community that Hegel models on the nuclear family. The implications of *Hospital Time*’s rendering of community, friendship, and family are at least twofold: as she negates the privileging of the nuclear heterosexual family, Hoffman claims status and recognition for her bond with Mike. In this sense, *Hospital Time* is written against the grain of what Thomas Couser identifies as the genre of “relational AIDS memoirs” (114). Frequently without acknowledging their own privilege, and without considering their own potential vulnerability to the AIDS epidemic, “as ‘family narratives’ these books quite literally represent the family’s ‘terms’: they tend to encode or enact family values that are sometimes at odds with those of the member being reassimilated” (115). Through sisterly narratives in particular, as in the closing scene of Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia*, and as

Jamaica Kincaid struggles to avoid in writing about her brother, “the nuclear family quite literally reclaims and relocates the body of its errant member” (121). Considering how it displaces the potential reclaiming of a gay body by a heterosexually normative nuclear family, the family of “origin,” Hoffman’s text is more akin to AIDS elegies by gay men than it is to “sororal narratives,” for AIDS elegies, as Melissa F. Zeiger notes, “rarely participat[e] in traditional elegy’s consumption and silencing of women” (113)¹² And women “appear” in a much different light “when released from their roles as cautionary markers of sexual difference or threat”: they come into view as “partners in activism” and as caregivers, but in a context where “this is not a degraded women’s job but work embraced by men in a way that recasts the gendered division of nursing labor” (116). What Hoffman’s text stages, however, is not the nexus of elegy and epithalamium that Zeiger emphasizes is characteristic of AIDS elegies by men, but something rather more nebulous, and more troublesome for the heterosexual categories that furnish our normative definitions of intimacy: this is a text not of marriage or sexual union, but of friendship, of queer alliances.¹³

¹²Zeiger argues that because they are “[n]ot required to integrate female figures sacrificially into their cultural dynamic, AIDS poems are free to include them in roles previously foreign to elegies by men. The poems are marked by expressions of love, intersubjectivity, and identification with women absent from almost all earlier depictions” and with “an ironic awareness of its [femininity’s] traditional representations” (113).

¹³Like Sedgwick, who in her essay “Tales of the Avunculate,” wonders about “how to *stop* redeeming the family,” I find myself confronted here by a lack in vocabulary. To call Hoffman’s relation Mike “sororal” is perhaps to diminish it, preemptorily to circumscribe it within the kind of “natural” or “Oedipal” circuit that Irigaray and Jacobs are attempting to crack open in their analysis of Antigone. As Sedgwick argues, “the worst danger about

What can we make, given this context, of the repeated, equivocal disavowals of love for the other that characterize *Hospital Time*? I suggest that they encapsulate — with a queerly negative energy — a struggle with a key ethical and political problematic in the representation of AIDS losses: namely, as Judith Butler puts it, “the uncertainty with which homosexual love and loss is regarded,” the uncertainty that deprives us, in the context of AIDS, of “finding a public occasion and language in which to grieve this seemingly endless number of deaths” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 138). While, according to Freud, it is in melancholia that “by taking flight into the ego, love escapes extinction” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 257), such love, as Butler argues, is judged for failing to “measure” up to “the ideal of social rectitude defined over and against homosexuality” (141), and the result is “self-beratement” (140). Butler’s description may make the situation sound inescapable, but the overall effect of Hoffman’s melancholic testimony, I would argue, is to open up, through its very *repetitions* of self-beratement, a textual space in which it becomes newly possible to conceptualize “homosexual love and loss” as “a

‘family’” is “how much the word, the name the *signifier* family is already installed so unbudgeably at the center of a cultural value system — so much so that a rearrangement or reassignment of its *signifieds* need have no effect whatever on its rhetorical or ideological effects” (72). The entrenched opposition of the terms “family” and “friendship” makes what we call friendship seem less important, or registers it — as Sedgwick indicates — only in the most hopelessly euphemistic terms. Paralleling Sedgwick’s identification “as a gay man,” Hoffman’s citation of the anonymous note Mike received calling him a “male lesbian” gives us a snippet of a name for what Mike is to her by indicating the queer slant of this relation across the sex-gender system. By calling Amy and Mike’s relation a “queer alliance,” though this is perhaps too vague, I am attempting to signal the need for a third term, while not assuming that I’ve found one that is sufficient.

‘true’ love, a ‘true’ loss, a love and loss worthy and capable of being grieved and thus worthy and capable of having been lived” (138). Recalling how she hated feeding Mike the food he vainly hoped would cure him, the “food of his delusion” (97), Hoffman reaches a moment of crisis and finally cries over Mike: “I cry because I miss him, because I loved him, because I feel so mean, because his death was so terrible, hard, and early, because I didn’t treat him tenderly” (97). The repetition of self-beratement, rather than remaining a matter of self-judgement, becomes a refusal of compensation for forced loss, and for the socially-produced trauma that compounds her multiple losses to AIDS, a refusal that in turn foregrounds the strength of Amy Hoffman’s bond to Mike Riegle.¹⁴ In fact, Hoffman rereads her own harsh questions about whether she loved Mike and whether she fulfilled her obligation to him — rereads, that is, her own melancholy — as an indication of their deep, mutual implication in one another’s lives. As she explains when her mother questions why Hoffman has become so involved (and expresses her concern

¹⁴Kristeva’s evaluation of *women* and melancholia is far from straightforward. Drucilla Cornell has argued that especially in her later writings (and most especially in *Black Sun*) Kristeva implies that women must buy into a compromise with the symbolic order, the Law of the Father, if they are to avoid madness (*Beyond Accommodation*). Another look at *Black Sun* by way of *Powers of Horror*, suggests, though, that Kristeva’s categories do not line up entirely well along gendered lines. Furthermore, her terminology remains helpful for describing the process by which the “Thing” puts semiotic pressure on conventional discourse, even more so when one reads the “genotextual” or semiotic dimension of a text, as Tilottama Rajan has done, for example, as a submerged articulation of political concerns.

that Amy is giving to an outsider energy that should be reserved for “real” family): “I did it for him because he was my family” (109).

By naming her relation to Mike “family,” Hoffman is, moreover, implying that the intimate bonds we label family or friendship might mean more, or differently, than the dominant cultural codes assume. Relations based on acknowledged identification replace instrumental relations that hold identification at bay, on the constitutive outside of the self. This shift is highlighted in Hoffman’s comments on the too late but none the less “majest[ic]” and “righteous” entrance on the scene of Mike’s straight brother, Chuck, at the time of the funeral: “The healthy brother, he turns up with his man-of-the-family authority draped about him like a red scarf and we kowtow to him like deformed trolls living under a bridge to one who walks in the light” (112). Hoffman’s treatment of Chuck’s appearance exemplifies her suspicion of the sympathy those outside her circle of friends attempt to express. The red scarf, replaced, in the context of a dream, around Chuck’s neck, perhaps as a kind of AIDS-awareness red ribbon writ large, points up the hypocrisy of his statement that he had decided to come to the memorial service because “he wanted to understand his brother’s life and why he had become so alienated from the rest of the family” (111). Chuck’s presumption that Mike was an outsider, a prodigal who can now easily (and should now easily) be redeemed by his “family” is reversed in Hoffman’s recitation of this scene, which follows quickly upon Hoffman’s claiming of Mike as a member of *her* family. The memoir thus registers the wasting, depleting disavowal of love that Mike’s family of origin has perpetuated during his life and seeks to

solidify now that he is dead (precisely so that they won't have to understand, so that they can seal themselves off preemptorily once again from the rich reality of his life.)

Likewise, the hospital director in Memphis who offers to take home Mike's laundry is viewed with the same resentment for her conformity to the "normal" appearances of adulthood. In her prim business suit, "She looked so much more like an adult than I ever would" (54), and Hoffman is irritated by the woman's attempt to appropriate out of sympathy the role of caregiver, a role that she would possess exclusively even as she worries about the possibility that her involvement in Mike's life and death also constitutes itself a sanctimonious, self-interested interference. With these interspersed statements targeting the socially recognized posture of adulthood as just that, a posture or performance, Hoffman implies a critique of the crude Freudian interpretation of lesbians as improperly adjusted women, who have not moved beyond the childhood clitoral stage of sexual development. (And it is this division of maturity and immaturity that plays a crucial role in the designation of lesbians and gays as somehow deficient in their achievement of responsible adulthood, a habit of thought so pervasive, Hoffman is implying, that it forces her to regard her own community as "deformed" and "troll-like.") The reality that undergirds Hoffman's parodic commentary on Mike's "real" family is her experience that "With AIDS, nine times out of ten it's the fake family who cleans up the shit" (112). The attachment that is expressed to such memories of physical intimacy — to the visceral memory, for example, of being the one "who cleans up the shit" — fuels a claim to occupying the relation of greatest proximity, of an imaginative and practical

kinship, as opposed to the fakery, in this instance, of the birth family's delayed, and highly circumspect, embrace. Strikingly, it is the very "immature" melancholic emotions generating the narrative voice of *Hospital Time* that make it possible to prise open this asymmetrical organization of sexuality and maturation as well as to interrogate the ways in which grief is subject to the editorial interference of prior cultural assumptions.¹⁵

Hoffman's text contrasts on this point with Rebecca Brown's fictionalized memoir, *The Gifts of the Body* (1994), which is also written from the perspective of a lesbian caring for people living with AIDS, primarily men. Brown's final chapter in this series of interlinked, fictionalized (but autobiographically based) stories, "The Gift of Mourning," compels us to step back with the caregiver from a dying woman to leave her children to mourn over her body; indeed this is the conclusion of the entire book: "We left them with the body and they mourned" (9). *The Gifts of the Body* emphasizes the physical details of labour, death, and grief in a way that counters the corrosive "moral etiology" of the body

¹⁵ In another section that considers Mike's clothing, "Mike's Coat," Hoffman alludes to the documentary *Brother's Keeper*, making an analogy between the four brothers in that film, poor farmers in upstate New York, one of whom is accused of murdering another, and Mike's increasingly dilapidated appearance. *Brother's Keeper* turns on the question of whether the alleged confession of Delbert Ward was coerced, whether, under pressure, he signed documents that he was unable to read; and it focuses on the way in which the brothers come under the voyeuristic gaze of the media and even a local community that construct them as exotic in their primitiveness, and in their supposed "queer" relation, one to the other. The allusion thus identifies the traps in approaching stories of marginalization from the assumption that there could be anything like objectivity, or a method that would have no impact on the subject of the story. Hoffman also emphasizes the recalcitrance of her subject: Mike Riegle quickly tires of the new coat that his friends coerce him into buying and returns to wearing his dirty, worn-out jacket, the one that he chose.

that has so consistently attached itself to HIV and AIDS (Watney, "The Spectacle of AIDS" 73), evoking through its rhetoric of restraint a strong sense that an ill, dying, or dead body should by no means be viewed as just so much raw material for anyone else's representation. Far from artless, what one reviewer has called Brown's "casually vernacular language" is a vital component of her project (Steinberg 85), for it calls attention to details that might otherwise seem mundane; for example, in "The Gift of Sweat" Rick's sweat when he attempts to surprise the narrator by preparing breakfast for her (just as he used to do for his lover) signals to her "how long it took to get down the street, how early he had to go to get the best [cinnamon rolls]" (9). This bodily fluid, sweat, becomes a sign of the passionate connection that Rick and the narrator express for one another through labor, a relation of bodily "flow" that works across gendered oppositions and casts labor in the context of caregiving as passionate, mutual, ethical (Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 198). However, Brown's conclusion makes a potentially confusing detour from these purposes. Her ending risks reinstalling the nuclear family at the centre, and the end, of the story, as though this were its narrative destination in the first place. While the narrative voice is still with the caregiver whom we follow out of the room, there is a sense of difficulty and loss that comes with the pressure to adopt a professional reticence when the family takes possession of a body to which the narrator has also become attached, has come to love; giving the gift of mourning to others seems to require that she school herself to quietude.

Hoffman's approach, her wild, self-focussed, corrosive and unresolved grief, aligns more closely with the perspective implied in the work of certain women essayists working in the context of queer theory than it does with Brown's fictionalized account.

Sedgwick's essay "White Glasses," for instance, the evocative text I cited as my introductory epigraph, gives scope to intense and contradictory feelings of loss, and, in so doing, identifies the difficulty of bringing this "impossible mourning" into critical focus.¹⁶ Sedgwick reflects on her attachment to her friend Michael Lynch, meditating on the way she has adopted certain elements of his style, particularly his "cool" white plastic glasses and observing that the symbolic resonances of "a white woman wearing white" (purity, sentiment, grief) can make it seem like the position could never be anything more than a capitulation, an instance of "ruly ordinariness" (255). But although we might read the wearing of white as a banal citation of femininity, just as we might read Antigone's frenzy

¹⁶Resonating with "White Glasses," Sue Golding's essays on AIDS and grief, by unleashing an unrelenting affective tumult, displaces our systems for representing and reading identity, and for reading loss. See, for example, Golding's "Revenge," which explores sadness, revenge, responsibility and justice, all the while querying the ways in which "revenge, as a kind of leisured memory, writ tiny in the ironic mutiny of it all," may seem ineffectual (200). In "Queer Research," an essay written for Golding's anthology *The Eight Technologies of Otherness*, William Haver suggests a definition of "queer research" as "active intuition," a refusal "to forget that perversity, that chaos of pleasures and affects, that anonymic existential exigency which has been the occasion of its [queer research's] emergence" (278). It is "a departure without destination, an unworking of the cultural" (284). I am suggesting that Hoffman's memoir, like Sedgwick and Golding's essays, performs "queer research" in the manner of a refusal to forget that "unworks" culture in opposition to the potential closure performed by the "work of mourning."

as a routinized gesture that supports masculine rule rather than contesting it, still there remains “the corrosive aggression that white also is” (255). The lingering incorporation of an object associated with the lost, or about to be lost, other forms a “ragged scar” — as Sedgwick says — a bodily marking that tells the genealogy of intimate friendship, with its legacy of “unreconciled and unreconcilably incendiary energies.” In the face of anticipated loss, the memory of such fusion is painful but replete with an investment of passionate energy, which responds to the unquenchable demand to sustain relations of “meaning, regard, address” (255). The relation between the two bodies in this queer friendship is not regulated by sexual difference, and with the suspension of this framing, may be bound to transform itself to something powerful but unrecognizable. Looking towards a future of accumulated deconstructing of gender, sexualities, perversities, and the disciplinary discourses that currently shape the experience of illness, Sedgwick refuses to predict what it will look like, but points out that at the very least the future will not follow the script laid out for the extinction of collective, first-hand memory of the epidemic: “I relish knowing that enough of us will be here to demonstrate that the answer can hardly be what anyone will have expected” (266).

“That ragged scar of relation, meaning, address” — the “Obituary” section of *Hospital Time* foregrounds the temptation to hurry towards the comforts of narrative closure. “Obituary” presents, as we might expect, a narrative of significant life events, furnishing, for example, the information that “Mike was an avid linguist,” that “over the years, Mike carried on correspondence with hundreds of prisoners, many of whom came

to regard him as a close friend,” or that “Mike brought to everything he did — whether it was sex, gardening, singing choral music, reading, or star-gazing — a sophisticated and original mind, a curious imagination, and a deeply rooted integrity” (81-82). In obituary discourse, the other’s life seems to speak — to produce, effortlessly, the summary of an identity, and to match up a life to grander patterns and communally agreed-upon virtues. But when we read Hoffman’s newspaper obituary for Mike in the context of her more fragmented reflections on his life, the recognition of the way this discourse measures out his life in the past tense, making almost exclusive use of intransitive constructions, is unavoidable — we have been accustomed to seeing him in her memoir as much less consistent, much less pleasant, much less socially productive, on the whole much less tidy. In fact, then, the effect of “tidiness” is achieved, as Chambers points out, “at the price of burying that person [the dead] with past-tense verbs and in the form of narrative closure” (130-131), and we can detect, moreover, a certain “substitut[ion] for ‘their’ message the concerns ... of the survivors” (132). Sedgwick similarly emphasizes that the effect of “the obituary imperative,” because it is so “implacably inclusive,” is to produce a vocabulary and a syntax that is “ravenously denuding, homogenizing, relentlessly anthropomorphizing and yet relentlessly disorienting” (“White Glasses” 265). Certainly there is a palpable gulf between the measured, objective tones of Hoffman’s interpellated obituary for Mike and the headiness of “dragging him around,” though each mode of memorialization is in its own way disorienting. As Hoffman summarizes midway through the memoir, imagining his disapproval of her representation, just as he tended to voice his disapproval of any

choice that privileged the personal over the political, the act of writing about Mike — the act of memorializing him — extends the paradox that is their relationship: “he put his life in my hands, and yet he mistrusted even a straightforward statement of fact” (78). She is fairly certain that “he wouldn’t like this writing I am doing about him” (78). The purpose of the passage, then, is metafictional: rather than furnishing an overarching interpretation, “Obituary” draws our attention to the kinds of “denuding” discourses that are available to the memoirist, or, rather, to the way in which discourses of “maturity,” “cleanliness,” and “health” threaten to engulf the narrative willy-nilly, quite apart from any authorial intentions. Interpellating the “obituary imperative” in order to point to its powers and its dangers, Amy Hoffman’s text is “responsible” both to her own experience and Mike Riegle’s, granting each experience its own limited, partial authority in the text. Indeed, though she professes that “I wanted nothing to do with a memorial service. My philosophy was that when Mike died my responsibility ended” (85), the wound remains open, the burden prescribed, for Hoffman is tied to Mike in a non-negotiable, physical sense, symbolized by the legal relationship he entrusts her with during his illness and her guardianship, subsequently, of his memory: “But in ashes begin more responsibilities” (85). Contingent, but unavoidable, Hoffman’s responsibility to Mike Riegle both robs her of her narrative and provides her with an impulse for writing. Still, despite this mixedness of emotional register, *Hospital Time* brings into existence a sense of community. The condition of this community is however, to borrow Keenan’s phrasing, that “the ‘we’ here can be a community only in the strangest sense, a community without any ground in

common ‘like’-ness and without a universal law, without the present in which any subject might articulate itself, but only a terrifying proximity” (*Fables of Responsibility* 36).

Indeed, *Hospital Time*’s affective intensity is, if not quite intelligible, then not quite unintelligible either, for if it is not readily legible, its reality is none the less undeniable and forceful. The effect of the text’s terrifying “proximity” to the other — specifically, the rending of the narrative from within in a manner that foregrounds writerly and readerly responsibility — produce a rhetoric of melancholic incorporation that resists obituary discourse, though it may not finally keep it at bay.

IV: Queering the Kaddish

Taking my cue from Sedgwick’s emphasis in “White Glasses” on “the powerfully performative rhetorical force of obituaries and memorials” (264), I shall conclude this chapter by considering the dialogue Hoffman’s memoir performs with two sets of seemingly opposed intertexts: *Hospital Time* responds consistently and directly both to the representation of AIDS in literature and to her inheritance, as a Jewish lesbian, of a certain set of traditional texts and practices that address her central concerns, namely conceptions of family and of grief. Like the text’s explicit disruption of the obituary framework that would generate a “work of mourning,” these gestures, I want to argue, only appear to function as markers of clarity (by way of the taking of sides) in a realm of murky emotions: frustration, self-doubt, anger. Rather, the signatures the intertexts supply fail to furnish a consistent conceptual framework, since they everywhere testify to the ways in

which AIDS disrupts conceptual categories, despite the power of the stable framework proffered by the media that adds up homosexuality, AIDS, contagion, and doom in a seemingly inexorable equation (Edelman 86). These religious and literary references constitute successful “failures” in Derrida’s sense, however, for *Hospital Time* mediates these systems of meaning in a manner that unleashes plural possibilities of interpretation and identification.

By referring to the literature of the AIDS epidemic, and by foregrounding the range of responses to it, Hoffman seeks recognition for the specificity and the magnitude of her losses, drawing a line between those who have been affected by HIV and AIDS and those who come to the cultural representations of the epidemic as outsiders, as consumers of an image of a disease to which they have not borne personal witness. In this connection, she relates that “Roberta and I went to see a play in New York with her sister and brother-in-law” (114). Narrating in her own words the scene of Prior Walter’s hospitalization in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, Hoffman performs in the space of a few sentences the approach she herself takes to representing Mike’s death, namely the “cold enumeration” (Derrida, *Memoires* 31) of details together with the registering of her own emotions, here a sense of familiarity combined with terror and bafflement:

A man is dying of AIDS They roll an IV pole and a hospital bed onto the stage. He strips, and his body is emaciated. His legs have that AIDS look — no calf muscles, no buttocks. I wonder, Can they do that with makeup? Has the actor starved himself in a Stanislavskian frenzy? Is he really dying? He stretches his hand around to his behind and pulls it away covered with blood. He screams, and I do too. (114-115)

The terror inspired by this scene prompts, in turn, a highly personalized interpretation: “I’ve sat by the beds of Bob, of Tim, of Mike, of Walta, as they’ve chattered and writhed, and I’ve wondered. Flaming angels” (114). Given this context, the response of Roberta’s brother-in-law, who casually dismisses the play with the words “God, was that corny,” irritates Hoffman, prompting her to clarify once again her impatience with outsiders: “I don’t want these people to talk to me anymore. I’m too damn busy” (115).

But *Hospital Time*’s references to *Angels in America* also situate Hoffman’s grief, terror, and sense of alienation in the context of religious tradition, specifically the structures for grieving offered by her Jewish inheritance. Consider Hoffman’s concluding piece, which is entitled “Kaddish,” but in which she refuses to recite the prayer to which she alludes, the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, a prayer, as Hoffman notes, “of reconciliation ... of acceptance” (149): “But I won’t. I won’t. Accept this suffering, this order that encompasses it, this karma, this harmony of the spheres” (149).¹⁷ By linking the kaddish to “karma” and “the harmony of the spheres” in the process of rejecting it, she insinuates that all of these references to religious are no more true or helpful or relevant to Mike’s early and difficult death than are the concepts proffered by the cultural raiding that passes for religious faith in the “New Age” marketing of spirituality. Certainly, in its insistent refusal of untruthful consolation, Hoffman’s melancholic rejection of ritual stalls

¹⁷Indeed, the opening lines offer praise, and seemingly no hint of rage: “May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified in the world that He created as He willed” (“The Mourner’s Kaddish” 177).

us when we are on the verge of embracing traditional scripts for mourning, and the kaddish does indeed model the “working through” of grief, especially through its marking of time (as the ritual declines from a weekly to a monthly to an annual observance)¹⁸ In particular, her rejection of the kaddish at the end of *Hospital Time* marks her distance from Tony Kushner’s emphasis on reconciliation in *Angels in America*. In *Part 2: Perestroika*, Belize, the play’s representative outsider, attempts to convince the sceptical Louis that Roy Cohn, powerful, mean, hypocritical, and homophobic, ought to be forgiven for his offenses: “He was a terrible person. He died a hard death. So maybe.... A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn’t easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it’s the hardest thing” (2:3:122). Belize argues that “Forgiveness ... is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at least. Isn’t that what the Kaddish asks for?,” and the scene concludes with the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg leading Louis through the prayer, so as to perform the reintegration of a secular Jew, by the ministrations of those more oppressed, more persecuted than he, into the restorative language of ritual (122). If Ethel Rosenberg can forgive the man who was responsible for her death, then Louis certainly ought to take the role of son, reconciling with the diabolical father-figure

¹⁸Sarah Schulman emphasizes the threat this move poses to the status of the gay family in her novel *People in Trouble*. Recalling how “stiff” and “out-of-place” the “contingent of relatives” looks at the memorial service for a friend who died of AIDS, Molly describes their relieved response to the traditional funerary script: “Then the family moved to the front and brought in a rabbi who got to stand up at the end and say, ‘Yiskadol veh yiskadosh shemay rabah,’ which seemed to be the only part of the whole event they could understand. That was when they cried” (94).

by ritualizing his death. *Hospital Time*, on the contrary, emphatically rejects any such resolution through reference to a higher order of justice: “You won’t catch me saying a kaddish over anyone’s remains. It’s not for me to join in praise of the Named One, Who in His Wisdom named for us AIDS” (149).¹⁹

This negation of the kaddish may also be emphasizing, however, how necessary it is to reinvent these inherited ways of making meaning of death, as opposed to implying a mere rejection of the tradition’s relevance. In other words, perhaps Hoffman’s “kaddish” suggests, through the text’s implication in the very prayer that it denies, that mourning rituals, such as the one that is familiar to her from the Hebrew tradition, might be (or might become) more an index of inconsolability — and of a reworking of “family” (of what are considered legitimate losses and loves) — than of reconciliation in the context of

¹⁹Hoffman’s reference to the kaddish competes with Allen Ginsberg’s poetic version, which also attempts a queer reinvention of the prayer for the dead. His “Kaddish,” written for his mother, addresses an overwhelming, unresolved, and materially specific grief for a deteriorated life: “Towards education marriage nervous breakdown, operation, teaching school, and learning how to be mad, in a dream — what is this life?” (8). His recollection of her final advice to him (“Get married Allen don’t take drugs — the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window” (31), like the irony of “Hymmn,” which heaps up a demented discourse of exaltation (36), registers his anger and sense of discord. Still, there is a romantic elevation of self and body implied in this rewriting of kaddish. As Ginsberg’s note on the back cover suggests, these are meant to be “hymns laments of longing and litanies of triumphancy of Self over the mind-illusion mechano-universe of un-feeling Time.” There is an intention to elevate, somehow, “the beatific human fact.” For Ginsberg, writing, unlike Hoffman, before HIV and AIDS, there is a truth residing in the self and the body; the Hebrew tradition celebrates this vitality, and thus can be revised to accomodate gay desire.

AIDS. In “Six things I have Inherited,” Hoffman enumerates the bequests she has received during her life, including “Bob’s grandfather’s novel and Mike’s father’s (pathetic) life insurance,” noting the ironic twists this process has taken, specifically “how, as one’s gay family supersedes one’s birth family, the gay family, that is, me, becomes the keeper of the birth family’s legacy” (131). Hoffman raises the question here of what it means to be next of kin, a critique that complements her appropriation of the kaddish for grieving Mike; indeed, since the kaddish is traditionally said by a child for a parent, reciting it implies the relation of next of kin and is an enactment of the continuity of generations. So, while she is dismayed, on the one hand, by the recognition that the “two redneck old men” from whom she inherited “would have been outraged to know that their male progeny had made me,” “a middle-class, second generation Jewish lesbian from New Jersey,” “their heir,” she also relishes, on the other, this reversal of expectations (131).

Locating the places in cultural rituals where they might be subject to a non-compliant reiteration, one that differs from the “original context or intention by which [the] utterance is animated” in the slightest but most ground-shifting of ways, Hoffman calls attention to, and claims as central to her definition of love, her role as Mike’s next of kin (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 14). Even to propose that it would be fitting for her to say the kaddish for a friend, a member of her “gay family” is for her to further disrupt the normative chain of relations, to “produce” “effects” that “exceed those by which it was intended” (14).

Meditating on these questions of kinship, sexual orientation, and grief in the context of breast cancer, Sandra Butler notes how, at her lover Barbara Rosenblum’s

funeral, “As the rabbi completed the service by leading the mourners in the *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead,” the prayer instigates the cries of Barbara’s mother, “the sound of a shriek, sustained for a heartbeat and becoming a wail,” a outburst which almost overrides the measured tones of the prayer: “The sound was a barrier, a shield to stop the inexorable process of this prayer, this ending” (*Cancer in Two Voices* 171). In Sandra Butler’s words, Barbara’s mother “remembers how to mourn, how to make the sound we have all forgotten and needed to hear. She is a woman who is not muted and well-behaved in her grief as we have learned to be” (172). Illuminating the competing impulses that motivate *Hospital Time*’s denial of the kaddish, Butler and Rosenblum’s *Cancer in Two Voices* suggests that this prayer, the kaddish, may be considered less as a script than as an occasion for the enactment of a sorrow, a text that reminds us of “the necessity to leave space for the sound of the one who unexpectedly survives again” (172). Moreover, what appears as the balancing of claims -- between Barbara’s role as “her first-born, my love” -- is also an assertion of equity, that Sandra’s grief for her partner may be compared in its intensity to a mother’s grief for the loss of a daughter (172). And Sandra Butler concludes her commentary on the memorial service, as Amy Hoffman does, not with an affirmation of peace, but with an insistence on the way in which such a loss that demands “gnashing of teeth. Crashes of thunder. Bolts of lightning” and a celebration of the refusal to be “muted and well-behaved” in grief (172).²⁰ This tradition has something to teach us or

²⁰ Towards the end of *Cancer in Two Voices* Sandra Butler records the loss of two male friends to AIDS, suggesting the importance of communal “recognition” for loss and grief

model for us about grief in the context of epidemic: with these ambivalent recyclings of the kaddish, a sense of cultural continuity, if it is not restored, perhaps becomes more thinkable.

Hoffman accomplishes more, then, through her disavowal of the kaddish than the rejection of sacred ritual: somewhat circuitously, she queers this inherited text (just as in a less specific way she revises the tradition of *Antigone*), opening it up to multiple possibilities for unleashing “the unreconciled and unreconcilably incendiary energies streaming through that subtractive gap” of unresolved grief (Sedgwick 255). While a focus on what Zeiger calls “an embrace of the domestic and the improvisatory” is surely a component of Hoffman’s practice, then, her melancholic attachment to Mike prompts her to interrogate, and stubbornly to reverse, received cultural texts (124). Replacing the kaddish, and at the same time drawing its energy from this text, *Hospital Time* transforms our sense of the collective cultural form grief may take. Positioning itself against, for example, Amy’s mother, who asks where Mike’s real family is as though she is worried that Amy will use up her energy for caregiving and for mourning on a stranger (109-111), the text insists, out of its melancholy, on achieving recognition for her bond to Mike. At the same time, and despite the imposition of a framework that would move us through

in contexts where dominant cultural definitions for significant relationships predetermine invisibility. After Barbara’s death they clean up her garden, performing “An act of recognition for a neighbor, a friend, a comrade in a time of plague”; Sandra in turn helps to care for them as they become ill (173).

grief in an orderly progression, *Hospital Time* bears witness not just to Mike's illness and death, but to a situation that is exceptionally complex: to the ways in which Mike continues to claim her quite beyond her own choice and intentions, to the ways in which he haunts her efforts to make sense (and to be freed from) the heavy burden of their unlikely intimacy. Blanchot remarks on the role of rites in the context of the writing of disaster, suggesting that "Rites are religious, but they do not transform the everyday into religious affectivity; they seek, rather, to lighten the time that has no history by knitting it together through practices, services" (144). Rites accomplish this "lightening," he argues, "by forming a meticulous network of consents in the glad daylight of historical memories and anticipations" (144). *Hospital Time*'s practice of critical memory unfurls a grief that cannot be predicted or controlled or finally worked through, emphasizing the way in which this unscriptedness installs relations of responsibility, "a meticulous network of consents," or perhaps of differences, that "lightens" (though it cannot finally mend) "hospital time," "the time that has no history" (144).

CHAPTER TWO

Angels in Antigua: The Power of Melancholy in Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother*

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy
of History," VIII

I: The AIDS Memoir Meets Postcolonial Botany: Situating Jamaica Kincaid

Jamaica Kincaid's fiction has often been characterized as essentially about the loss of a hypothetical pre-Oedipal or childhood paradise. In this light, *My Brother* (1997), her memoir of the life and the AIDS-related death of her half-brother, Devon Drew, despite being written in response to a specific event, is remarkably consistent with the thematics of Kincaid's oeuvre. In fact, Kincaid's first published writings, the collection of stories entitled *At the Bottom of the River* (1978) and her first novel, *Annie John* (1984), contain a number of striking parallels with *My Brother*.¹ We can justifiedly view *My Brother*,

¹From the focus on the mother-daughter relationship as analogy for colonialism, to Annie's preoccupation with death, her illness and melancholy, and her role as "autobiographer" (Gilmore 104-105), there exist significant parallels between *Annie John* and *My Brother*. Similarities of "fact" but, more importantly, of "intonation" also abound between *My Brother* and the stories of *At the Bottom of the River*.

then, as the latest installment² in Kincaid's ongoing project of writing through her Antiguan childhood and adolescence and her move as a young woman to the United States. However, if Kincaid's fiction might be said to be "about loss" (Simmons 1), then it is at least equally preoccupied, to use Kincaid's own words, with "the distinction between privilege and power and no privilege and no power" (Wachtel interview 326, cf. 330). *My Brother*, in its approach to combining these two questions, strikes out in a new direction for Kincaid: faced with the AIDS pandemic, with the ways in which it locates and, hence, particularizes Devon's lack of "privilege and power," Kincaid undertakes to confront in an extended way the problem of her own position as a now privileged North American commentator on Antigua.³ The importance of working out the meaning of her own changed relation to Antigua and her family there is especially urgent for Kincaid given that she writes about a man, her brother, Devon Drew, whom she can barely claim to know, although they are blood relations. (Kincaid left Antigua for America when Devon was three years old and she was sixteen [*My Brother* 20].) Because of the emergency of

²In *My Brother*, Kincaid refers to her eldest brother's story as "another big chapter," thus implying that she has conceived her autobiographical fictions as a kind of on-going family biography (81).

³In her discussion of Kincaid's critique of the displacement of the colonial relation into the neocolonial economics of tourism in her essay *A Small Place* (1988), Moira Ferguson observes that "Jamaica Kincaid's own departure from Antigua and her role as external observer who is simultaneously an insider are never problematized" (99). This raises the question as to "how much of her anger is compensation for the privilege she gains from living in the United States and being part of that very North America whose colonial practices have played havoc with Antiguan people..." (99).

AIDS, which demands that she respond to Devon, Kincaid must address her brother and the particularities of his world in the context of the “power” and “privilege” she has to create literary worlds.

Tellingly, in *My Brother* Kincaid drops the last remnants of what had become an increasingly thin guise of fiction in her previous works, writing more directly now as a combination of essayist, historian, and autobiographer, and foregrounding the craft and the polemic of her “incantatory” prose (Simmons 43). Adopting a discourse of extreme frankness, Kincaid foregrounds her conflicted feelings about death, loss, privilege and power in *My Brother*, as she confronts the question of how to represent the dispossessed other from the de facto American vantage point of economic security and literary renown. Forced to break away from the mother/daughter mirroring (and accompanying colonizer/oppressed analogy) that had become the chief paradigm for the relation of self and other in her work, Kincaid, in deciding to write about her brother’s AIDS-related death, finds herself taking on a new level of ethical and political challenge, because the situation demands that she reflect on her own relation to the representation of post-independence Antigua, for which Devon, in his agony, becomes a metonym.

Everywhere in *My Brother* there is evidence of melancholic exasperation with Devon on Kincaid’s part, as well as other affective responses associated with melancholia, namely self-directed anger, guilt, and beratement: “My talk was full of pain, it was full of anger, there was no peace to it, there was much sorrow, but there was no peace to it. How did I feel? I did not know how I felt. I was a combustion of feelings” (50-51).

These expressions of pain, bewilderment, and even anxiety about the feelings themselves (which are not within her control) are not gratuitous but are knitted (albeit inconsistently) into a political context. Indeed, from the beginning of the memoir, we are faced with the “state of emergency” in which the relation between sister and brother exists, and it is implied that Kincaid’s uneasiness is connected to the cultural and economic gulf that has emerged between them. Recalling an attempt years earlier to encourage Devon to practice safe sex, Kincaid reflects in a self-critical way on the inefficacy of her advice:

But I might have seemed like a ridiculous person to him. I had lived away from my home for so long that I no longer understood readily the kind of English he spoke and always had to have him repeat himself to me; and I no longer spoke the kind of English he spoke, and when I said anything to him, he would look at me and sometimes just laugh at me outright. You talk funny, he said. (8)

From the way in which she imagines Devon’s evaluation of her, we can gather that Kincaid’s long absence has engendered a gap in communication. Kincaid admits only in retrospect that “I don’t know my brothers very well, but I am pretty sure that a condom would not be something he would have troubled himself to use” (8), and that this is because he is poor, uneducated, and a victim of his own macho attitude, which that makes him unable to perceive himself as being at risk, or as a potential risk to others: “I told him to protect himself from the HIV virus and he laughed at me and said that he would never

get such a stupid thing ('Me no get dat chupidness, man')" (8).⁴ From Kincaid's awareness of such gaps in experience and language, there emerge questions about the propriety of telling Devon's life story after he has died. Can she tell his story ethically or accurately, given that he would likely see her perspective on his life as "ridiculous"?

To what extent, then, has Kincaid come to occupy a position analogous to the blithely carnivorous tourist in her earlier essay, *A Small Place* (1988)? In that essay, the imagined gaze of the residents of Antigua questions the strangeness, and the offensiveness, of those who visit this place to mine it for exotic experiences:

An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that, and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness. (17)

Similar in tone and rhetoric to the passage I just cited from *My Brother*, where Kincaid imagines Devon's resentment of her, this indictment of tourist arrogance highlights the destructive implications of the North American and European "consumption" of Antigua for the people who reside there. This asymmetrical relation is exemplified, I want to suggest, by the epidemiology of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean. According to the Joint United Nations / World Health Organization Program on HIV/AIDS, the spread of HIV is occurring in the Caribbean at a rate three times that of North America, making the rate of

⁴A 1993 report on cultural attitudes towards the AIDS epidemic in Caribbean communities suggests that "condoms are not being used regularly by men women or young people" due to the lack of "perception of risk" and the privilege granted to male pleasure (Baxter et. al., "Report for the English-speaking Caribbean Communities" 19).

HIV infection in the region second only to that of sub-Saharan Africa. This elevated rate of infection can be connected directly to neocolonial economic and social factors: poverty, intravenous drug use, the stigmatization of homosexuality, and economic reliance on tourism.⁵ Not only can tourism be connected to the AIDS epidemic through its link to prostitution, but tourism by North Americans and Europeans also looms as one of the reasons for the lack of a willingness (and hence the lack of an infrastructure) to deal with the epidemic. Citing “labour migration” and “tourist travel” as major factors in “the migration of HIV infection” in the Caribbean, George C. Bond argues that “the development of tourist industries” has been a particularly egregious example of how “U.S. capital as a replacement for the decline of profits from older colonially established sources such as sugar cane ... has traced the routes for HIV to follow” (“The Anthropology of AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean” 6). Moreover, it has also been documented that “at

⁵At the end of 1998 the Joint UN / WHO Program on HIV/AIDS estimated that there were approximately 330,000 people in the Caribbean region living with HIV/AIDS out of a total population of 36 million people. Thus, the rate of incidence among adults is almost 2 percent, or approximately 3 times that of the North American rate of 0.6 percent. Even more alarming is the fact that the annual number of AIDS cases in the region is on the increase, whereas numbers have been dropping steadily in North America. A report on AIDS in the Caribbean delivered at the 1996 Vancouver conference attributed this increase to the combination of “socioeconomic disadvantage and lack of information” (qtd in Kovalski). See “AIDS in Latin America and the Caribbean,” ICAD, December 1998, and Kovalski, “Poverty, Drug Abuse Fuel Caribbean AIDS Outbreak.”

the beginning of the epidemic, some countries [in the region] did not want to recognize an AIDS problem out of fear that tourism would be adversely affected” (Kovaleski).⁶

The point, of course, is that the question of what it means for Kincaid to speak on Devon’s behalf, and as someone who lives a much more materially and intellectually privileged life, *does occur* to her, and from the beginning of the memoir works to roughen any assumption that she possesses an easy claim on the story of Devon Drew. Her “feet are (so to speak) in two worlds” (“Flowers of Evil” 159). However, her position is not in strict opposition to that of the tourist, not one of pure *altrusim*, an opposition to which she gestures in *A Small Place* with the reference to “an Antiguan black returning to Antigua from Europe or North America with cardboard boxes of much needed cheap clothes and food for relatives” (4). I would suggest, on the contrary, that Devon emerges in *My Brother* as Jamaica Kincaid’s political unconscious, or, as Homi K. Bhabha argues, “the ‘missing person’ that haunts the identity of the postcolonial bourgeoisie” (“Interrogating Identity” 43). If Kincaid’s brothers are the “underwritten” story of *Annie John*, appearing only as the shadowy threat to the protagonist’s childhood paradise (their births push the family into economic disarray [*My Brother* 141]), then here, with the arrival of “the deathly social destiny of AIDS,” which profoundly alters established “modes of cultural identification and political affect” (Bhabha, “Locations of Culture” 6), they can no longer

⁶I will return to the specificities of HIV and AIDS in the Caribbean throughout this chapter, but I will address this issue in a more concerted way in Section III; there I focus on the treatment Devon receives from his family and from the health-care system in Antigua.

rest beneath the surface of Kincaid's prose. In a kind of perverse reflection (but not a surprising one) of North American homophobic panic about AIDS, it seems that doom and rejection are the unavoidable fate of those who contract HIV in Antigua. Devon's presence and voice haunt Kincaid's text, compelling her to evaluate her own complicity, from a distance, in his suffering at the same time that she criticizes his ignorance and the social and economic conditions that have produced it.

There is a precedent in Kincaid's non-fiction essays for reflection on her current position of relative privilege that illuminates the features and the consequences of her "self-positioning" in *My Brother*. In a series of articles on gardening first written for *The New Yorker* in the early 1990s, Kincaid follows up on the scathing tone of her previous essays exposing the on-going effects of colonial history in an independent Antigua (namely *A Small Place* and "On Seeing England for the First Time").⁷ Breaking with the middle-class decorum of her gardening column, that is, the dispensing of descriptions and advice, she asks, in an essay titled "Flowers of Evil," "And what is the relationship of gardening to conquest?" (159). To summarize, for the ruling class, gardening, especially the aesthetic

⁷In 1999 Kincaid republished these essays in book as *My Garden (Book)*. The two essays to which I shall refer, "Flowers of Evil" and "Alien Soil," appear here with minor variations but under different titles (respectively, "To Name is to Possess" and "What Joseph Banks Wrought"). The changed titles highlight more clearly perhaps Kincaid's interest in investigating her own implication as an expatriate in relations of conquest and control. It is worth noting, furthermore, that although Kincaid began writing these essays on gardening for magazines with the intention of publishing a book, she only returned to their completion *after* addressing her brother's story; the intertwined publishing histories of these texts thus supports my reading of Devon's story as an undesired interruption of an identity she might prefer to construct.

cultivation of non-food plants, provides a fantasy of a paradoxically natural *and* controlled luxury, one that now allows for the retrospective minimization of the ecological devastation and agricultural exploitation that characterized the European conquest of the Caribbean. Moreover, through the aesthetics of gardening, exploitation and corruption mask their own operations.⁸ What is *most* striking in “Flowers of Evil,” though, is that, referring to her own elaborate Vermont garden, Kincaid implicates herself in the very dynamic of conquest she is criticizing: “And I thought how I had crossed a line; but at whose expense? I cannot begin to look, because what if it is someone I know? I have joined the conquering class: who else could afford this garden — a garden in which I grow things that it would be much cheaper to buy at the store” (159).⁹ In *My Brother*, Kincaid

⁸Jamaican-Canadian poet Olive Senior’s collection *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) corroborates this critique. In a poem entitled “Brief Lives,” Senior emphasizes the archeology of destruction that lurks behind the land’s cultivation, even in the most innocent-seeming personal garden:

Gardening in the Tropics, you never know
what you’ll turn up. Quite often, bones.
In some places they say when volcanoes
erupt, they spew out dense and monumental
as stones the skulls of *desaparecidos*
— the disappeared ones. Mine is only
a kitchen garden so I unearth just
occasional skeletons. (83)

⁹Erika J. Waters and Carrol B. Fleming point to the complexities of “de-colonizing poetry dealing with the Caribbean landscape,” noting that “early Caribbean poetry, written by Europeans, emphasized exotica, the natural surroundings in contrast to the European landscape” (“Replacing the Language of the Center: Botanical Symbols and Metaphors in Caribbean Literature” 390). They suggest, by way of contrast, that “metaphors in [contemporary] poetry and fiction which utilize native fruits and vegetables” work to

begins to look at the question of “at whose expense” she has “joined the conquering class”: Devon is the “someone” she “knows” whom she has in effect conquered by leaving behind.

The connections I am drawing amongst power relations, the AIDS pandemic, and the motif of gardening in *My Brother* are far from arbitrary. As Alfred W. Crosby argues in *Ecological Imperialism*, just as the persistence of European plants ensured agricultural and economic conquest of the Americas, “It was their germs, not these imperialists themselves, for all their brutality and callousness, that were chiefly responsible for sweeping aside the indigenes and opening the Neo-Europes to demographic takeover” (196). And Crosby points specifically to the role of “Old World pathogens” such as smallpox in killing so many Amerindians, especially Arawaks, during the early years of Caribbean colonial contact with Spain (198-199). In “Flowers of Evil” Kincaid identifies naming as part of the process of conquest in which she has begun to implicate herself, opening up the possibility that she may exercise domination through narration, by telling a self-interested version of Devon’s story. Commenting on the Europeans’ renaming of local flora in a way that reflects their conquest of the area, Kincaid calls the “naming of things ... crucial to possession — a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably

“replace ... the language of the center in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place,” for these metaphors emphasize local knowledge — especially a “survival linked closeness with the earth” — in place of the “malevolent connection” forged by European domination of the landscape (390-393). Kincaid is, I would suggest, alarmed by her increasing distance from this “survival linked closeness to the earth,” and this concern leads her to speculate that she may have aligned herself with the oppressors.

away — that it is a murder, an erasing” (159).¹⁰ For these reasons, “it is not surprising that when people have felt themselves prey to it (conquest) among their first acts of liberation is to change their names” (“Flowers of Evil” 159). This argument corresponds, in general, to the importance of naming and renaming in Kincaid’s life and in her texts.¹¹

But what does seeing and naming *Devon* mean for Kincaid? Does her account take advantage of — indeed perpetuate — the silence that HIV/AIDS seems to impose upon him, making her complicit in the history of epidemics as the vanguard of imperialist takeover? On the one hand, by writing about Devon, Kincaid risks the “conquest” of his story, that is, she risks participating in the scopic and narrative regime of “possession,” “murder,” “erasing” (159). And by “cultivating” his story, so to speak, she may obfuscate this act of “conquest,” masking it as her endowing of Devon’s story with “proper” values and a “proper” teleology. But might there be another way of writing about Devon? As Bhabha argues,

To see a missing person, to look at Invisibleness, is to emphasize the subject’s transitive demand for a direct object of self-reflection, a point of

¹⁰Crosby notes the “sunny view” taken of “imported diseases” by white colonial administrators: “John Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony and a lawyer by training, noted on 22 May 1634, ‘For the natives, they are neere all dead of small Poxe, so as the Lord hath cleared our title to what we possess.’” (208)

¹¹Kincaid’s own name change, from Elaine Potter Richardson to Jamaica Kincaid, has been the subject of much critical commentary, most of it emphasizing the reinvention of a subaltern self through the power of fictionalized life-writing. For example, Diane Simmons celebrates the conclusion of *At the Bottom of the River*, where subjectivity is claimed through a process of renaming: “I claim these things then — mine— and now feel myself grow solid and complete, my name filling up my mouth” (82).

presence that would maintain its privileged enunciatory position *qua* *subject*. To see a *missing person* is to *transgress* that demand; the 'I' in the position of mastery is, at *that same time*, the place of its absence, its *re*-presentation. ("Interrogating Identity," 47 emphasis in original)

Bhabha's shift in emphasis from the first sentence to the second in this passage indicates the possibility of displacing the imperative that the dispossessed other occupy the role of passive, self-reflecting object of the privileged subject's gaze. If the radical alterity of the other is recognized, however, this calculus no longer obtains, and the subject itself, the "I" of the representation, loses the security of its authority. Kincaid for her part struggles to acknowledge the gap between brother and sister, allowing into her account some sense of her own emotional irrelevance from Devon's perspective: "That night as he lay dying and calling the names of his brothers and his mother, he did not call my name" (174). She must admit that "I had never been a part of the tapestry, so to speak, of Patches, Styles, and Muds" (175). She explains the family nicknames (for Devon, Joe, and their mother), but does not or cannot use them. This moment of the suspension of naming, of recognizing her own exclusion from the circuit of communication that has arisen in her absence, bears out Bhabha's argument that, when identity comes under scrutiny within a postcolonial context, "What is interrogated is not simply the image of the person, but the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed" (49). (Momentarily drawn into Devon's point of view, we start to understand that perhaps it is Kincaid, ironically enough, who is the Drew family's "missing person.") Moreover, the image that is projected by Devon's nickname, Patches, indicates

just how wide the discrepancy is between Kincaid's projections and his reality and how fragmented and phantasmatic his self-identity is. Devon's nickname, given to him by his brother, Dalma, originated in the fact that Devon "liked to place patches of different-colored cloth all over his clothes regardless of their needing such a thing as a patch" (172). I want to suggest a parallel between Devon's inconsistent "identity," which is, it seems, impossible for Kincaid to summarize, and the "patchwork" that is the economic, medical, and cultural situation of postcolonial Antigua. (Indeed, Kincaid has expressed her conviction that "after colonialism ended, the rulers in the West Indies ruled people somewhat worse than the colonizers did," pointing to "cruelty" as the "legacy" of colonialism and to the collapse of "infrastructure" under "self-rule" [Wachtel interview 324].)

What the context of the AIDS pandemic does, then, is to compel Kincaid to grapple with the question of representing the other, with "otherness" here encompassing differences of gender, sexual orientation, *and* economics. Unlike smallpox, which, according to Crosby, in the early decades of conquest drew hard lines between the conquerors (who were immune) and the indigenes (who were not), the HIV virus extends "immune" status to no one. In a parallel way, AIDS compels Kincaid to testify to Antigua's post-independence social inequities, without falsely "economizing" the object of representation from within the bounds and imperatives of her own position of privilege, without containing it within the bounds of her own ego, the bounds of "my now privileged North American way (my voice full of pity at the thought of any destruction, as long as my

great desires do no go unmet in any way)" (*My Brother* 125). Though he is its ostensible subject, Devon haunts the text as a "missing person," the "genotext," to use Kristeva's term, or the "unformulated" political unconscious, of his sister's story about him.¹² The unasked for and yet unavoidable task of chronicling Devon's affliction compels Kincaid's text in the direction of an "impossible mourning," a politicized melancholy, that contrasts with the relatively more resolved dynamics of her previous autobiographical texts. The memoir is, I want to argue, written out of the interruption of Kincaid's autobiographical "I," for, as she seems to discover each time she attempts to assert an explanatory metaphor, it is only through "self-annihilation" that she can write responsibly about the "disaster" or "emergency" that is Devon's life and death.¹³ As is evident from her early

¹²In another context, Tilottama Rajan has borrowed the terms "phenotext" and "genotext" from Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) to refer to the binary relation of "text" and "life," renovating these terms to show how they allow for a psychosocial reading of autobiographical narrative (164-165). Defining the genotext as "the unformulated part of the text, evident for instance in rhythm as that which exceeds statement ... something which is not linguistic but is seen in language," Rajan argues (via Fredric Jameson's notion of the "Real," or the political unconscious, as "the absent cause of the narrative process" [161]) that textually and politically it corresponds to the "desire" that is "produced *within the symbolic order* as a transgression of this order." In this way, the genotext can be understood as a political "negativity" that marks out the lost possibilities "negated" by the reigning ideology.

¹³There is a significant contrast to be noted between Kincaid's method and what Joanne Braxton summarizes as the characteristics of black women's autobiographies (she emphasizes "the autobiographer's self-awareness" and "the formation of her black and female identity, as well as her public voice" [205]), and even with what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, namely that "the deformation/reformation of identity" are dialectically linked processes: "Deploying autobiographical practices that go against the grain, [the marginalized woman] may constitute an 'I' that becomes a place of creative and, by implication, political intervention" (xix). What Kincaid is doing in *My Brother* may thus

story “Blackness” from *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid has been for a long time preoccupied with the melancholic suspension of selfhood:

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... (46-47)

”Blackness” is melancholy “formless[ness]” and a suspension of symbolic language, as Kristeva’s elaboration of Freud similarly implies, but it also has a historical, familial, and racial resonance in the context of *My Brother*. One of the sources of this melancholy is Devon’s increasing “blackness,” an observation that works both literally and metaphorically, leading Kincaid to invoke the following strategy of containment: “he was descended from Africans mostly” (*My Brother* 150). (But does Kincaid not share a familial history with her brother, however fractured? On what grounds but that of the distance implied by quasi-objective labelling of the source of Devon’s blackness in this

be closer to John Beverley’s theory of “testimonio,” which, in “putting” the “problems of poverty and oppression” “on the agenda,” “produces if not the real then certainly a sensation of experiencing the real that has determinate effects on the reader that are different from those produced by even the most realist or ‘documentary’ fiction” (102); and yet Kincaid’s politicization of the personal is not free from the distortions of “liberal guilt” as Beverley insists is characteristic of testimonio (98-99). This general point has been made about Kincaid’s fiction by Giovanna Covi, who argues that Kincaid’s “narrative, in fact, is a continuous attempt to turn away from any definitive statement and to utter radical statements” and that “Jamaica Kincaid, a black woman writer, is *radically* postmodern precisely because she is also postmodern, but not only so” (345-346). What I am arguing, in a sense, is that *My Brother* extends Kincaid’s radical postmodernity.

sentence does she disavow their shared ancestry?) In any case, *At the Bottom of the River* seems to end on a note of self-assertion, with the statement that “I was not made up of flesh and blood and muscles and bones and tissue and cells and vital organs but was made up of my will” (79), a rejection of the body that seems to imply an attempt at “banishing of randomness” (the “randomness” of this history of racial oppression) “from my existence” (47).

In *My Brother*, however, the vulnerability of the self cannot be thoroughly displaced: in the process of memorializing her brother, Kincaid finds that her disavowals of love and connection come under pressure, become revealed *as* disavowals (if not undone as such). Despite her own (ironic) yearning to conceive of her relationship with Devon as somehow assuaged by their shared identification as gardeners, Kincaid has to admit that “The plantsman in my brother will never be, and all the other things that he might have been in his life have died; but inside his body a death lives, flowering upon flowering, with a voraciousness that nothing seems to be able to satisfy and stop” (19-20). Thus, in *My Brother* Kincaid follows out a trajectory of melancholia from which she had previously recoiled, becoming, with this weird trope of death’s bloom, the gardener of a strange and fecund death. The evidence of Devon’s afflicted body makes Kincaid’s self-recuperation impossible. It sets forth instead its own agenda through the “voracious” “flowering” of its slow death. And the death of Devon’s body demands to be recorded, even though it does not respect the normative economies of narrative discourse, the recuperative “plot” of (auto)biography. To use Bhabha’s words, “something” (here, Devon’s affliction)

constantly “exceeds the frame of the image,” and by “eluding” the eye, that is, the scopic drive that generates the “natural,” “clean,” and “proper” images of the body in which Kincaid desires to take refuge, it “evacuates the self as a site of identity and autonomy” and “leaves a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance” (“Interrogating Identity” 49).

Written out of an unbidden identification with Devon, out of what Blanchot calls “the wounded space, the hurt of the dying” (*The Writing of the Disaster* 30) and the melancholic “impoverishment” of the ego of the witness, *My Brother* makes it possible for us to glimpse the hitherto hidden political subtext of the autobiographical self that Kincaid has constructed, the political unconscious embodied as Devon’s “resistant trace” as the “missing person” of her narrative — as an extreme example of the vulnerability of those who remain in the place that Kincaid has left, a vulnerability that remains profound even when it is masked by a performance of masculine bravado and indifference (Bhabha, “Interrogating Identity” 49). In this sense, Kincaid’s impossible mourning for Devon entails a kind of critical memory that, I want to argue, enhances the prismatic potential of her already melancholic relation to her “native” place, Antigua. By the phrase “the power of melancholy,” then, I mean two things: the way in which Kincaid as a witness is held (unpredictably) in the “thrall” of the “impossible real” (Blanchot 38) of the other’s affliction, and at the same time the way in which the subject of the writing possesses, somehow, the power of articulation. In *My Brother*, the power of melancholy is clearly *not* something that Kincaid *wields*, but a force, rather, in which she is caught. Profoundly

destabilizing, her melancholia challenges positions and boundaries that on a more conscious level she wishes to maintain. It also raises questions of responsibility, not responsibility as the “bourgeois” attributes of “maturity, lucidity, conscientiousness” (indeed, these things likely number among the those Devon would find “ridiculous” about his sister), but as “a change of time and language” in writing that will “summon us to turn toward the disaster without either understanding it or bearing it” (Blanchot 25-27).

The rest of this chapter will discuss the workings of this “change of time and language” in *My Brother*. First, I will examine the extent of the implications of this unresolved bond and unresolved grief for the rhetoric and structure of the memoir, through the production of caesuras in time and the suspension of naming and figurative language. Then, I will illustrate how Kincaid’s melancholic commitment to Devon as the “missing person” of her life story extends and complicates the politicized “family romance” of Kincaid’s previous autobiographical works, discussing also how the memoir generates out of its situation of “impossible mourning” a critique of the political and economic situation that contributes to Devon’s suffering, a critique from which Kincaid does not exempt herself. Throughout, I will be concerned with the ways in which the text struggles against the ever-present desire to “banish randomness” once and for all. For Kincaid’s internalized homophobia, along with her resentment of her past and contentment with her present, never collapses entirely, though all of these desires are brought into crisis by her melancholic commitment to Devon.

II: Bearing Witness to Devon Drew

Kincaid's starting point for telling Devon's story is, by her admission, one of "quick judgement" (8). It did not surprise her to learn that Devon was HIV positive, for "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 knew only of women)" (8). What is telling is that Kincaid does not investigate at this point what her parenthetical comment that "I knew only of women" begins to imply about Devon's sexual orientation. (Clearly, though, her knowledge that she "knew only of women" is not all the knowledge she has, and so the text's negations prepare us for their undoing.) She imagines Devon as (potentially at least) a "vibrant" (190), brilliant, productive man, hardworking and heterosexual.¹⁴ However, the memoir's melancholic disposition undermines this fantasy, exposing it as a longing, and making room for the "real" of AIDS,

¹⁴Kincaid's panicky disavowals of Devon's sexuality parallels the cultural logic according which, as Simon Watney summarizes, the West constructs "African AIDS": "Because the West remains strongly influenced by the notion of a singular linear model of human cultural evolution and an equally oversimplified picture of normative psycho-sexual 'development,'" "the construction of 'African AIDS' tells us little or nothing of AIDS in Africa but a very great deal about the changing organization of sexual and racial boundaries in the West, where AIDS has been widely harnessed to the interests of a new hygienic politics of intense moral purity" ("Missionary Positions: AIDS, Africa, and Race" 95-97). As I emphasized in the introduction, this panic may distort public health initiatives: the focus on promiscuity in Western studies of HIV transmission in Third World countries, born out of Western projections on "Africa," "tend to stigmatize and blame certain groups while failing to explain patterns of transmission"; indeed, "multiple partners alone are neither a necessary nor sufficient cause for the transmission of HIV" (George C. Bond et al., "The Anthropology of AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean" 6).

the “real Thing” of her loss: the loss of the possibility of loving him. Note the ironic reversal of Kincaid’s use of parentheses here. On many occasions, Kincaid uses them to record Devon’s speech, as though she cannot process literarily or emotionally his utterances or his use of dialect.¹⁵ By putting fragments of her own thoughts in parentheses as she tries to puzzle out the background to Devon’s illness Kincaid registers her “onto-epistemological panic,” that is, her sense that her usual categories for explaining her experiences are no longer persuasive, or even possible, in the age of AIDS (Haver 2). In fact, the aspects of Devon’s existence that Kincaid excludes from her consciousness come to “haunt” the “boundaries” she constructs for their relationship “as an internal ghost of sorts” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 65). The memoir’s stated purpose is to “understand” his illness and thus avoid “d[ying] with him” (196). But there is a tension between Kincaid’s desire to reinvent the relationship and the ways in which Devon eludes her narrative grasp. His dead body is described as “unreal”: “his eyes closed, shut, sealed, like an envelope, not a vault; his body was delicate, fragile-seeming, all bones” (190). The

¹⁵In her discussion of the (non)role of “Caribbean language” in *Annie John*, Merle Hodge notes that “for dialogue, Kincaid does not attempt to reconstruct Creole speech. All discourse is translated into Standard English, with a very few notable exceptions. ... These flashes of dialogue in Creole seem to come as part and parcel of certain *intimate and unprocessed memories*, preserved in such detail that the actual language used is indelibly recorded, resisting translation” (50–51, my emphasis). While in *Annie John* we could see the “low incidence of direct speech” as “an avoidance strategy,” or as befitting a fictional work about “individual experience,” where “only the central character is drawn in depth,” *My Brother*, by contrast, is committed (albeit ambivalently) to the kind of “code-shifting” that “dialogue in Creole” entails, a “code-shifting” that “invites attention to issues such as class and cultural difference” (53).

imbedded textual metaphors suggest that Devon's corpse has become a kind of hieroglyph, compelling but inscrutable: "his farawayness" is "so complete, so final," and yet he continues (paradoxically) to speak to her, though not in the "everyday way that I speak of speech" (190). Near the end of the memoir, Devon's spectral presence prompts a change in Kincaid's judgement of his life: "the source of the sadness was a 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).

She struggles to acknowledge love for a man deemed "unlovable" by a homophobic society and a troubled family, although due to her own biases and cultural situation, Kincaid must travel a longer distance to reach her recognition of Devon's homosexuality than Amy Hoffman does to embrace Mike Riegle as her kin in *Hospital Time*. It is only when a stranger, another woman, a friend of Devon's who was part of the lesbian/gay community in Antigua informs Kincaid when they meet at a book-signing in Chicago that Devon was "a participant in homosexual life" that this gap is filled in (164-167). Until this point (when the knowledge becomes unavoidable if it is still deflected by her oddly distancing phrase), Kincaid is confused by Devon, wanting to convince herself of his vibrancy and intelligence and unable to understand his struggle with his sexuality in the context of a homophobic culture:

He was not meant to be silent. He was a brilliant boy, he was a brilliant man. Locked up inside him was someone who would have spoken to the world in an important way. I believe this. Locked up inside him was someone who would have found satisfaction speaking to the world in an important way, and that someone would not have needed to greet every

passerby, that someone would not have time for every passerby, that someone would have felt there isn't enough silence in the world. (59)

These seem to be more Kincaid's own feelings; she is someone who finds "satisfaction in speaking to the world in an important way." She remembers how Devon assented to her projection of another life for him, for a lack of any other response to give:

It is I who told him this and he agreed with me at the moment I told him this, and he said yes, and I saw that he wished what I said were really true, would just become true, wished he could, wished he knew how to make the effort and to make it true. He could not. In his daydreams he became a famous singer, and women removed their clothes when they heard him sing. (59-60)

Both from her own sense that her projections are ludicrously inaccurate and from the information about Devon's "homosexual life" that she eventually receives, Kincaid is compelled to adopt a characteristic pattern of undercutting her own projections, thus establishing a kind of critical memory that worries at the boundaries of her idealized images of Devon, including this secondary definition of Devon as homosexual, the other of herself as heterosexual. She is pushed towards the recognition that "I could not think about him in any purposeful way" (91).

By tracing the motif of gardening in *My Brother*, we can establish the full extent of the destabilizing power of Kincaid's melancholic relation to Devon and, in turn, to Antigua. Within the first few pages of the memoir, Kincaid offers the detail that the news of Devon's illness interrupted her own reading of a book on gardening, *The Education of a Gardener*, by Russell Page, a book she at first did not like for its posture of servitude (10). Yet afterwards, when she has returned to Antigua to see Devon, she views it

nostalgically, for its apparently simple pleasures, and, in a moment of outrageously ambivalent irony, attempts to read her current experience through it: “And when I picked up that book again, *The Education of A Gardener*, I looked at my brother, for he was a gardener also, and I wondered, if his life had taken a different turn, might he have written a book with such a title?” (11). The irony is leveled lightly, however, and blends with what is a self-consciously judgmental comment regarding her own shame that Devon did not have a “productive” life. Lamenting that her mother has cut down a tree that Devon planted, Kincaid notes that “That lemon tree would have been one of the things left of his life. Nothing came from him; not work, not children, not love for someone else” (13).¹⁶ “Nothing ... not ... not ... not”: here Devon’s life is represented as empty of significance, and yet these negations, partly because they are so emphatic, suggest that his life is not (quite) nothing — indeed, somehow it possesses enough significance to prompt the creation of this elaborate, self-excoriating, memorializing text. A pattern emerges, as Kincaid vacillates between the imposition of the identity of “gardener” on Devon and the recognition that it does not correspond to the known and implied facts of his life, nor to the summons or call to obligation that Devon’s alterity constitutes. Speaking of Devon, she speaks more of herself, projecting on him a hypothetical version of herself, and seeing

¹⁶There are significant parallels between Devon’s non-conformity and some of Kincaid’s earlier female characters, namely the “Red Girl” in *Annie John* and Lucy, notable for her “anti-social” tendencies, in *Lucy*. The irony is that Kincaid now indicts in her brother what she once affirmed for her female protagonists. He is an anti-social figure, a figure of “excess,” but not of the kind of aesthetically and intellectually driven excess that she has come to value.

in him a wasted potential for heterosexual and economic “productivity.” The news of Devon’s illness thus produces a caesura in Kincaid’s consciousness, something Keenan describes, via Foucault, as an “anti-rhythmical (rhetorical) interruption, ‘the straight line of the future that again and again cuts the smallest thickness of the present that indefinitely recuts it starting from itself’” (169). As we shall see, this caesura has a profoundly destabilizing effect on Kincaid’s position as “author”: “Interrupting the symmetrical exchanges that organize the subject and its ‘minutely present unity’ — the likenesses of cognition — the caesura opens in it the encounter with the difficult and always particular (singular) text of the political” (Keenan 169). And, as Düttmann reminds us, AIDS produces a specific kind of “caesura in time” (101), that is, a fundamental break with categories of progress, hope, and affirmation, something I would call, too, a suspension of the “working through” that is assumed to characterize “successful” mourning.

Certainly, Kincaid attempts in the first of the memoir’s two sections to do precisely the opposite, that is, to reframe Devon’s “delinquency”¹⁷ within the terms of an imagined shared identification as “gardeners” which extends into a fully fledged fantasy of an alternative, indigenous paradise. “Nature” is set up as a positive term, one that (ironically)

¹⁷As I mentioned in the introduction, In “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” Derrida links AIDS to the concept of “delinquency,” which provides yet another way of defining “the margins of society”. “If we consider the fact that the phenomenon of AIDS could not be confined, as some had thought or hoped, to the margins of society (delinquency, homosexuality, drug addiction), we have here, within the social bond, something that people might still want to consider as a destructuring and depoliticizing poly-perversion: a historic (historial!) knot or denouement which is no doubt original” (252).

brings their relation into the visual field of self and nation as an organic whole, as a relation (like the one, as I suggested in my introduction, that Eve Sedgwick desires for her relation with Gary Fisher) of pleasing symmetry and mutuality.¹⁸ With Devon's illness in remission as a result of the drugs that Kincaid has brought with her from the United States, drugs to which he would have no access without her intervention, the two of them take a walk in the recently restored botanical gardens near their mother's home:

We walked around the perimeter, and using a book on tropical botany that I carried and also relying on our own knowledge, we identified many plants. But then we came to a tree that we could not identify, not on our own, not from the book. It was a tree, only a tree, and it was either just emerging from a complete dormancy or it was half-dead, half-alive. My brother and I became obsessed with this tree, its bark, its leaves, its shape; we wondered where it was really from, what sort of tree it was. (79-80)

Kincaid wants to see Devon as "coming out of a dormancy," whether "a natural sleep" or "a temporary death" (81). Kincaid does not seem to be able to relinquish the "possession" of "things" through "naming," that "murder" and "erasing" that she elsewhere rejects ("Flowers of Evil" 159). Because of the strength of her desire, the lack of affirmation on his part is framed as irrelevant. She speaks on behalf of both of them, just as the memoir's title teasingly does, saying "we" and "my brother and I". But she also admits that this identity may not have been acceptable to him: "If it crossed his mind that this tree, coming out of a dormancy, a natural sleep, a temporary death, or just half-dead, bore any

¹⁸This gesture towards organic community uncomfortably echoes the "regressive fantasy of America" as a utopian, pluralistic nation for which David Savran has criticized Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* ("Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation" 25).

resemblance to him right then and there, he did not say, he did not let me know in any way” (80). Still, there is a tenacious idealism in this section of *My Brother*, one that is paralleled momentarily in the gardening essays when Kincaid sets aside her critique for a moment to imagine what “the botanical life of Antigua consist[ed] of” before the arrival of Europeans (“Alien Soil” 48). Lament is pushed aside by rational “deduction”: “What herb of beauty grew in this place then? What tree? And did the people who lived there grow anything beautiful for its own sake? I do not know; I can only make a straightforward deduction: the frangipani, the mahogany tree and the cedar tree are all native to the West Indies, so these trees are probably indigenous” (“Alien Soil” 49).

Toward the end of the first half of *My Brother*, Kincaid associates Devon with a mahogany tree, one of the plants she can name as indigenous; this metaphor seems to offer a way of consoling herself by revalorizing his life. She makes the fruit of the mahogany tree into a metaphor for their shared appreciation of plants, and almost succeeds in sanctifying their relationship by positing an emphatically idealized image of Devon:

It was there he found the fruit of a mahogany tree, something we had both seen before, the fruit of a mahogany tree, but it was a marvel to us then, so perfectly shaped like a pear, the Northern Hemisphere fruit, not the avocado pear, but hard like the wood of the tree from which it comes. I brought it back to the Vermont climate with me and placed it on a windowsill, and one day when I looked, it had opened quietly, perfectly, into sections, revealing an inside that was a pink like a shell that had been buried in clean sand, and layers upon layers of seeds in pods that had wings, like the seeds of the maple. I did not know until then that the seeds of the mahogany tree were like that. (80-81)

Observe, however, the comparisons in which Kincaid indulges: “shaped like a pear, the Northern Hemisphere fruit,” “like the seeds of a maple.” This is a language of awkward distinctions, distinctions that call so much attention to themselves that they seem to be intentionally alarming, especially given that the comparative references are all to “first world” plants. That is, the distinctions seem to foreground how much projection is occurring on Kincaid’s part in recounting this anecdote of brother and sister as united in their passion for gardening and in their reconstruction of an indigenous paradise; the possibility that mahogany fruit might suggest male genitalia is (in this context) almost thoroughly repressed. Still, she wants to insist on the appropriateness of her organic metaphor even as she prepares us for its undoing:

But the feeling that his life with its metaphor of a flower firmly set, blooming, and then the blossom fading, the flower setting a seed which bore inside another set of buds, leading to flowers, and so on and so on into eternity — this feeling that his life actually should have provided such a metaphor, so ordinary an image, so common and so welcoming had it been just so, could not leave me; and I was haunted by everything that had happened since he died and everything that had happened before he died and everything that was happening... (168)

If anything, this trope is more appropriate to Kincaid’s own process of storytelling and of memory than it is to Devon’s sense of his own life: “And in the *unfolding* were many things, all *contained in memory* (but without memory what would be left? Nothing? I do not know)” (emphasis added 163).

The last detail in the episode is similarly jarring, and makes inescapably apparent the discrepancy between Kincaid’s imagining of Devon and the realities of Devon’s world,

although these remain hypothetical until the final forty pages of the memoir, when, in that oddly distorted and delayed way, Kincaid registers her already existing awareness that Devon was “a participant in homosexual life” (161). Kincaid remembers how, as they “walked past the Recreational Grounds, the public grounds where major public events are held,” Devon “pointed to a pavilion and told me that when he was a student at his school, he and a friend used to take girls under there and have sex” (81). Devon’s actual phrasing is recorded in parentheses, again as though she cannot process his statement: “(‘Mahn, me used to bang up some girls under there’)” (81). This incident constitutes more than a counter-gaze, for what it does is to direct Kincaid’s and the reader’s gaze away from pastoral possibilities and towards an aggressively sexualized male body, one that exultantly defies “public” or national civility, perhaps defined as the realm of proper (colonially assimilated) sexual conduct and conformity to “Standard English.”¹⁹ The irony is redoubled once Kincaid starts to interpret Devon as “closeted”: his bravado masks a deeper non-conformity, “his secret of not really wanting to seduce them, really wanting to seduce someone who was not at all like them, a man” (164). In any case, the parentheses mark out the potential for this recounting to censor Devon on the basis of his non-

¹⁹Commenting on the importance of speaking English to Xuela in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid has noted that “English, and proper English, is the language of legitimacy and the language of reality — all the things that are not described in the proper European language are not considered real and not to be taken seriously. And she [Xuela] recognizes instantly that the tongue that one speaks in is a weapon” (Wachtel interview 336-337).

conformity, a censorship she clearly has the potential to accomplish because of the “disparity of power” between them (Wachtel interview 326).

On a later occasion in *My Brother*, when Kincaid quotes Devon as using “conventional English,” she identifies dialect as “the English that instantly reveals the humiliation of history, the humiliations of the past not remade into art” (108), suggesting that she somehow attributes this dimension of unfathomable “humiliation” to the “real,” uncensored Devon, the one whom she has so much difficulty in recording. In connection with Kincaid’s mahogany-fruit metaphor (speaking of Devon, she speaks more of herself, projecting on him a hypothetical version of herself), I suggest that she rewrites this nostalgic image in a way that acknowledges how “the humiliations of the past” and, indeed, of the present, as embodied in Devon’s plight, his illness, poverty, ignorance, closetedness, resist being “remade into art” (108). Echoing the image of the layers of the mahogany fruit when it opens on her Vermont windowsill to reveal its seeds, Kincaid recalls her first meeting with Devon upon her return to Antigua: “When I first saw him in the hospital, lying there almost dead, his lips were scarlet red, as if layers and layers of skin had been removed and only one last layer remained, holding in place the dangerous fluid that was his blood” (83). The metaphor and the narrative, like Devon’s skin, are thus revealed simultaneously to be no more than a “thin film constantly threatened with bursting” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 140). The threat of contamination by Devon’s vulnerability pushes its way into the foreground; Kincaid’s fears *will* surface and so bring into question the fiction of the stability of her bodily ego, despite her attempts to frame the

relationship as a matter of conscious symbolic reconciliation. And, in the process of being transformed into a more literal reference to Devon's HIV infection and his illness, the metaphor ceases to bear the fruit of consolation; and it is almost immediately interrupted, within the space of three pages, so that the progress of time is stalled, or so that perhaps time even regresses. The shadowy return of the mahogany-fruit metaphor, then, is an instance of what Blanchot calls "nonreligious repetition, neither mournful nor nostalgic, a return not desired" (5). Indeed, if Devon's life can be called emblematic of anything, finally, it is his unending suffering, not beauty, for the description continues: "His face was sharp like a carving, like an image embossed on an emblem, a face full of deep suffering, beyond regrets or pleading for a second chance. It was the face of someone who had lived in extremes, sometimes a saint sometimes a sinner" (83). As Blanchot argues, such agonistic repetitions characterize the writing of the disaster: "Wouldn't the disaster be, then, the repetition — the affirmation — of the singularity of the extreme? The disaster of the unverifiable, the improper?" (5-6). Kincaid's language of hyperbole emphasizes the contrast between Devon's mouth and the increasing blackness of his skin: "His mouth so white, abloom with thrush; his lips so red, glowing shiny from fever; his skin blackened as if his normal quotient of pigment (normal in a way unique to him, he was descended from Africans mostly) had increased from some frightening source: his face was like a mask, and this was while he was still alive, or still amounted to something called being alive" (150). Still recognizably, in some trace sense, a human body, Devon has, it seems, ossified, taking on the darkness, perhaps, of mahogany wood. He has become an artifact,

the subject of human work and interpretation, not simply a blossom, fruit, or leaf, though the image of the mouth “abloom” tantalizes us with the hint of an organic reality — but one that has gone awry, so that “blackness” returns, disturbingly, as a symptom of disease (Mahogany, a deciduous hardwood, is precious and irreplaceable, but the economic imperative to consume pays this irreplaceability no credence; likewise, Devon, potentially “brilliant,” “vibrant,” and “important” becomes a victim of neocolonial economics.)

In a wider structural sense, *My Brother* plays its rhetoric of emergency against its self-consciously simple structure in a manner that resists the teleology of a “good” and “peaceable” death. The memoir’s structure is bipartite, marked by Devon’s illness on the one hand, and his death on the other, though it is all written from a retrospective position. Moreover, the image Kincaid has chosen to divide the two sections is a close-up of the leaf of a tropical tree. Possibly, then, this is a hint that the botanical image starts to function not as a statement of resolution but as a kind of “interruption” of statement, of narration. Certainly, if the first section tends to construct Kincaid herself as a heroic figure arriving in Antigua with AZT and other drugs unavailable there, and to posit some genuine moments of communication between sister and brother, the second section proceeds to undo any sense of victory. Devon’s remission is here revealed to be just what it is, a brief reprieve. There is no release from the eventuality of his death; moreover, the effects of Devon’s decline, death, and ghostly afterlife are unpredictable, unscripted, and distinctly discomfiting. This implies a resistance to what Lee Edelman describes as “the purposes of those intent on writing ‘AIDS’ as a linear narrative progressing ineluctably

from a determinate beginning to a predetermined end” [94], that is, the purposes of doom and blame. Kincaid observes how, from the time of Devon’s relapse, “the house had a funny smell, as if my mother no longer had time to be the immaculate housekeeper she had always been and so some terrible dirty thing had gone unnoticed and was rotting away quietly” (90). The passages implies criticism of the mother’s abjection of Devon and his illness, but for now I wish to emphasize Kincaid’s response. She is at a loss when it comes to describing this smell, and reflects on her inability to metaphorize her experience: “I cannot find a simile for this smell, it was not a smell like any I am familiar with” (90). Paralleling Amy Hoffman’s references to Mike Riegle’s dick, Kincaid dwells specifically on Devon’s genitals as one of the loci of the unsolicited intimacy that she now shares with him, across gender, and across sexual desire. When Devon finally realizes that his sister has entered the room, he makes a gesture that pushes her even further into “asymbolia” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 9): “And then he grabbed his penis in his hand and held it up, and his penis looked like a bruised flower that had been cut short on the stem; it was covered with sores and on the sores was a white substance, almost creamy, almost floury, a fungus” (91). Note the contrast with the license she takes earlier, in Part 1, not only with the mahogany fruit metaphor (which, of course, she unravels) but with her first detailed descriptions of the bodies portrayed in the slides accompanying one of Dr. Ramsay’s public talks about HIV/AIDS:

The pictures were amazing. There were penises that looked like ladyfingers left in the oven too long and with a bit taken out of them that revealed a jam-filled center. There were labias covered with thick blue

crusts, or black crusts, or crusts that were iridescent. There were breasts with large parts missing, eaten away, not from a large bite taken at once but nibbled, as if by an animal in a state of high enjoyment, each morsel savored for maximum pleasure. There were pictures of people emaciated by disease, who looked very different from people emaciated from starvation; they did not have that parched look of flesh and blood evaporated, leaving a wreck of skin and bones; they looked like the remains of a black hole, something that had once burned brightly and then collapses in on itself. These images of suffering and death were the result of sexual activity, and by the end of Dr. Ramsay's talk, I felt I would never have sex again, not even with myself. (37-38)

However, in the episode that begins Part 2, the language of "impossible mourning" resists the impulse to conflate illness with the notion of a forbidden or poisoned sexuality, with appetite run amok (a possibility the decadent references to food open up), for the earlier denials of metaphor-making give the phrase "like a flower" a strange ring: the sores are anything but botanical, and so the comparison breaks down. Indeed, for Kincaid, "Everything about this one gesture was disorienting," for it forces her to recognize the extent of Devon's physical and mental decline. It is not only upsetting that he suffers so much, but he has lost any sense of propriety: he is "no longer able to understand that perhaps he shouldn't just show me – his sister – his penis, without preparing me" (91). The boundaries of self and other are threatened by collapse, and the "real" of AIDS, here the previously aggressively sexualized male body rendered vulnerable and fragile, can no longer be "cleanly" disavowed. No "fatal nostalgia" (Haver) for the "clean and proper body" is possible. Kincaid is forced to deal with her own feeling of being hostage to the situation, since she can no longer resort to "natural" images of the body: "And when I actually saw my brother for the last time, alive, in that way he was being alive (dead really,

but still breathing, his chest moving up and down, his heart beating like something, beating like something, but what, but what, *there was no metaphor*, his heart was beating like his own heart, only it was beating barely)” (my italics 108).

What the hesitancy of Kincaid’s “incantatory” prose does, then, in this context is to “stall” us in the paradox of Devon’s living death. The memoir registers again and again Kincaid’s exhaustion and exasperation: “I was so tired of him being in his state, not alive, not dead, but constantly with his demands, in want, constantly with his necessities, weighing on my sympathy, at times preying on my sympathy, whichever way it fell, I was sick of him and wanted him to go away, and I didn’t care if he got better and I didn’t care if he died” (108). Readers are thus made to hover, as we are in *Hospital Time*, around the sense of being “preyed” upon by the ill, by the suffering, by the dead; at the same time, we are forced into the recognition that all metaphors are swallowed up by death, that there is no release from this imposition (20). Devon’s body has become a formless vapor, it seems, something she cannot contain: “I felt I was falling into a deep hole, but I did not try to stop myself from falling. I felt myself being swallowed up in a vapor of sadness, but I did not try to escape it. I became obsessed with the fear that he would die before I saw him again” (20). Kincaid anticipates this sense of the inescapable imposition of the other in the story “Blackness” which I cited earlier, suggesting another way of interpreting it. Out of a deepest melancholy, she writes of a loving identification with the impossible, silent real: “I shrug off my mantle of hatred. In love I move toward the silent voice. I shrug off my mantle of despair. In love again, I move ever toward the silent voice. I

stand inside the silent voice. The silent voice enfolds me. The silent voice enfolds me so completely that even in memory the blackness is erased. I live in silence. The silence is without boundaries" (52). This concept of "the silent voice" suggests that representing Devon's AIDS-related death is more a matter of listening and of address than of "naming" or establishing identity. Enfolded by Devon's "silent voice," Kincaid testifies to his experience in a way that is "without boundaries" but always aware of them. As Blanchot puts the question: "How can one enter a relation with the passive past, a relation which would itself be incapable of presenting itself in the light of a consciousness (or of absenting itself in the obscurity of any unconsciousness)?" (29). Indeed, the AIDS pandemic calls, as Düttmann argues, for the production of "testimony" as opposed to "knowledge," and this call is especially urgent in the context of cultural differences such as those with which Kincaid is faced (75). In this sense, we could say that *My Brother* engages in a kind of storytelling that is willing to risk "the paradox of a thought that does not recollect or assemble itself in the identity of the identical and the non-identical" (101). When the real is held "parenthetically" in the aesthetic image, the aesthetic image becomes repoliticized: "The image — or the metaphoric, 'fictional' activity of discourse — makes visible 'an interruption of time by a movement going on the hither side of time, in its interstices'" (Bhabha 15).²⁰

²⁰The interpolated quotation in Bhabha's sentence is from Emmanuel Levinas's essay "Reality and Its Shadow" (*The Levinas Reader* 131). Levinas's point, of course, is that this repoliticization of the aesthetic is the responsibility of criticism; if we only contemplate and do not respond, the parenthetical containment of the "real" in art will be at best

III: *My Brother's Critique of the AIDS "Closet"*

If the disintegration of Devon's body challenges the boundaries of Kincaid's bodily and authorial ego, exposing it as transformatively melancholic, then given the neocolonial social and economic situation in which the memoir unfolds, this disintegrating body also has a set of wider, political analogies and effects, which I would now like to explore more fully. The "real" that is held parenthetically in Kincaid's self-conscious, interrupted rhetoric is composed of two aspects in addition to the questioning of her own position as an expatriate visitor. Namely, the memoir testifies to the failure of Antiguan society and its infrastructure to address the AIDS epidemic and to the ways in which family relationships in this place reinforce and mirror governmental and social refusal to face AIDS directly. Take, for instance, the secrecy in which Devon's illness is initially cloaked. At first he "did not tell our mother the truth, he told her he had lung cancer, he told someone else he had bronchial asthma" (23). Only through institutional prejudice, ironically, does the truth become known: "but he knew and my mother knew and anyone else who was interested would know that only people who tested positive for the AIDS virus were placed in that room in isolation" (23). (Antigua is, in a sense, America writ small, since the social response to HIV and AIDS in both places fits this searing description of irresponsibility.) Through its melancholic rhetoric, I want to suggest, *My Brother* maintains a critical attitude towards both of these manifestly exclusionary and

"ambiguous" and at worst "in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion" (141).

forgetful institutions, the national health care system and the family, showing, moreover, how they constitute mutually reinforcing scripts. In the context of a political situation and a family that would rather have her play along with a logic of “panic” and denial (Singer, *Erotic Welfare* 28-29), Kincaid refuses to relinquish her bond to Devon. Working against the dynamic of the Drew family (with the mother, Mrs. Drew, representing the forces of oppression and forgetfulness), *My Brother* testifies, though ambivalently, to “the state of emergency” in which Devon lives and dies.²¹

The placement in Antigua of people with AIDS “in rooms by themselves” (21-22) exemplifies the logic of panic, denial, and doom that characterizes the response to the pandemic and the marginalized population it largely affects. *My Brother* shows this logic to be rampant in Antigua because of the lack of medical resources for the underprivileged classes and because of a deeply ingrained homophobia. Thus, the Antiguan situation reflects the inequities of North American society, where the links between AIDS, race, and poverty are increasing and are only beginning to be acknowledged.²² When Devon

²¹In *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir*, Paul Monette refers to “the double closet of the war,” referring to the overlapping of social exclusion based on the dual stigma of homosexuality and AIDS, especially in the context of family structures (41). My section title echoes this double meaning, while aiming at an additional resonance: the “closeting” of the entire issue of AIDS due to the neocolonial economics and social structure of Antigua. The use of the word “closet” here is also meant to signal the argument I will be making about the analogy between the familial and social placement of AIDS in Antigua. As Bhabha has suggested, “The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions” (“Introduction: Locations of Culture” 9).

²²In the preface to *Strong Shadows: Scenes from an Inner City AIDS Clinic* (1995), Abigail Zuger stresses how AIDS exposes social inequities in the United States: “No

becomes ill he is placed alone in a small room, and we quickly become aware (as we do with Eric Michaels' critique of the discourse of "tidiness") that rather than connoting the privilege of privacy, Devon's placement in isolation is more a manifestation of neglect: the room lacks the amenities we might expect by North American middle class standards, for there is no table lamp, the television is broken, the floors and walls are dirty (22).

Considering that Devon has "trouble breathing," the fact that "pieces of dust would become dislodged" from "the blades of the ceiling fan" seems a preposterous risk (27).

However, Devon's room is neither more nor less than an apt expression of the predominant attitude that since AIDS is a death sentence, health care resources should not be "wasted" on prolonging doomed lives. Kincaid mimics a dispassionate bureaucratic voice to enforce this point as well as to criticize it: "It is felt in general, so I am told, that since there is no cure for AIDS it is useless to spend money on a medicine that will only slow the progress of the disease; the afflicted will die no matter what; there are limited resources to be spent on health care and these should be spent where they will do some good, not where it is known that the outcome is death" (31).

According to *My Brother*, a logic of panicky self-interest and denial infiltrates the whole culture, creating a circular situation that practically ensures the doom and suffering of those affected by HIV/AIDS. In the late 1980s, when Kincaid asked the tourist/reader

disease shows up the crazy quilt of American medical care for the shabby thing it is among the sick-to-death poor better than AIDS. In the infectious disease clinics of large urban hospitals like mine, the much-touted amenities of our health-care system are not in evidence" (xii).

of *A Small Place* to imagine the consequences for her or his own health of Antigua's dilapidated health care system, she identified the hospital as a problem, and as an indicator of the economic and cultural precariousness of the lives of ordinary Antiguan in that country after independence:

Will you be comforted to know that the hospital is staffed with doctors that no actual Antiguan trusts; that Antiguan always say about the doctors, "I don't want them near me"; that Antiguan refer to them not as doctors but as "the three men" (there are three of them); that when the Minister of Health himself doesn't feel well he takes the first plane to New York to see a real doctor; that if any one of the ministers in government needs medical care he flies to New York to get it? (8)

Those without the means to travel to the United States, or who require emergency care, are left to the mercies of a decrepit system, and those in power are not motivated to improve the situation because for them the best of American health-care services are only a quick plane ride away. Besides, the public image projected to tourists is a greater priority than public health. An additional cause for frustration is the unavailability of drugs that might produce some improvements for patients, for "even if a doctor had wanted to write a prescription for AZT for a patient," as Devon's doctor, the kind Dr. Ramsey, clearly would want to do, "that prescription could not be filled at a chemist's; there was no AZT on the island, it was too expensive to be stocked, most people suffering from the disease could not afford to buy this medicine" (31-32).²³ We might also, finally, connect

²³As my introduction emphasized, the optimism inspired in the mainstream media in the late 1990s by the potential for new antiretroviral drug "cocktails" for the management of HIV and AIDS as a chronic disease comes into doubt when one considers that these drugs are not readily available to people in the Caribbean, Africa and Latin America, the parts of

the logic of panicky self-interest and denial to Devon's own refusal to regard himself as "source" of infection for others. The social worker discovers that during his remission Devon "had been having unprotected sex with [a] woman and he had not told her that he was infected with the HIV virus" (66). The one warning that registers with him is the (false) statement "that HIV infection was dose-related, that is, the more of the virus you have received, the quicker it kills you" (67). He is seemingly impervious to appeals to altruism: only the thought that he might need "to protect himself from other people" has any impact on him. Despite the fact that he is very ill, Devon conceives of himself as "a powerfully sexual man," invincible, who "could not go two weeks without having sex" (67), making it unlikely that he will follow through on practising "safe sex."

The place that the Drew family assigns to Devon and his illness within the domestic structure corroborates the sequestration performed by the hospital, supplying an analogy between the repressions of the family structure and those of Antiguan society at large. Like the dingy hospital room in the way that it seals him off from the larger community with a certain "aloofness, at-arm's-lengthness" (46), Devon's room at his mother's house exemplifies his doom. It is described, ultimately, as "coffinlike" (172), as though he does not really live in it but has already been declared dead. Mrs Drew's

the world in which rates of infection are on the increase. The barriers are economic as well as bureaucratic and informational. As Rafael Mazin and Fernando Zacarias report, for instance, in "Antiretrovirals: reality or illusion?", "the monthly cost of antiretroviral therapy is two to five times the monthly income of most families in Latin America and the Caribbean" (28).

welcoming back of the prodigal into her home, and even, for lack of other options, into her very own bed (54), creates an illusion of intimacy, but the implication is that the arrangement is both temporary and mutually parasitic. She plans “to build another little room, right next to her bedroom, for him to live in” (79); though it is supposed to replace the coffin she had thought she would have to build for him before his remission, “the room to be built would be small, the size of an ordinary tomb” (79). Moreover, the current arrangement is an intensification of the closeness of the mother-son relation that has contributed to Devon’s refusal to grow up; allowances are made for Devon and his brothers that were never granted to their sister, and so they are kept in a position of dependence on their mother (“He would lie on his bed in a drug-induced daze. His mother would not have allowed him to do this if he were female; I know this” [44]). This is only an intensification of the dependency that has characterized Devon’s life thus far, previously, Devon had lived in a shack adjoined to his mother’s house: “The structure that my sick brother had lived in *resembled* an actual house; it had three windows and the windows had working shutters, it had a door that could be bolted” (my emphasis 55). In all of these ways, Devon’s room in his mother’s house represents, metonymically, all of the ways in which maleness, same-sex desire, and infantilization are intertwined in this context: namely, Devon’s prolonged adolescence; his lack of an independent identity; and the mutual workings of homophobia and impoverishment that shape the conditions of his life.

The analogy between Devon's infantilization within his family of birth and the treatment of people with AIDS in Antiguan society becomes quite explicit: "most people suffering from the disease are poor or young, not too far away from being children; in a society like the one I am from, being a child is one of the definitions of vulnerability and powerlessness" (32).²⁴ In part, the memoir is testifying to the demographics of the disease in Caribbean countries, for "with one exception, he [Dr. Ramsey] had not seen anyone over the age of thirty-two suffering from AIDS" (35). However, Kincaid is more interested in the wider political point to which this statistic alerts us: AIDS intensifies the "vulnerability and powerlessness" that already afflict young people, the colonized, and perhaps especially a man such as her brother, who is further encumbered with the sorry illusion of his masculine virility. Mrs. Drew, in her willful ignorance about the implications of her choices, and in her refusal of memory, represents the colonizing agent. Her refrain, the phrase "what to do" (150-151), for example, suggests her bewilderment and panic, and her ministrations and sacrifices, it is implied, mask a desire for control of the other-in-need. Devon's Rastafarian friends share, according to Kincaid, who has very little imaginative access to their specifically Caribbean group identity, his mother's attitude, and so the analogy to Antiguan society widens; they are unable to offer support, and can only consume him visually: "But when he lay in the hospital none of his friends came into his room to visit him. They came to see him. They would stand in the doorway

²⁴As Ferguson argues of Kincaid's writing, "From the start, the family to which Jamaica Kincaid constantly refers is also the macrocolonized family, the island population" (34).

of his room and they would say something to him” (42). Of course, we are reminded, “Had he been in their shoes he might have done the same thing” (42). Indeed, even when one man, a man named Freeston, is courageous enough to be “the only person to publicly admit he was afflicted with the HIV virus” (146), and even when that man’s mother offers him real care and refuge, all this counter-example means to Devon is that he finds it necessary to distance himself from someone he considers, derogatorily, an “auntie-man”(146-148).

Equipped with relatively more knowledge and financial resources than those who have remained in Antigua, and feeling bound melancholically to Devon even in advance of his death, Kincaid attempts to ameliorate Devon’s situation with practical help. Significantly, unlike the care her mother provides, Kincaid’s intervention is situated rhetorically as political, that is, as a showing up of the inadequacies of the medical and familial economies that determine Devon’s abject fate; at the same time, the memoir questions the imposition of American values in the process of dispensing aid. By bringing Devon AZT and other medications unavailable in Antigua (for example, a more powerful anti-fungal medication), she performs together with her ally, Dr. Ramsey, an ironic, even “delinquent,” reversal of the American “war on drugs,” thus showing up the ludicrousness of the economic situation that keeps potentially effective anti-HIV drugs out of the hands of the “vulnerable” and the “powerless.” As Derrida argues in “The Rhetoric of Drugs,” “AIDS is in the very process of redrawing the political front lines and the face of politics, the structures of civil society and the State,” and it is doing this in the face of American

anti-drug rhetoric, which would still construe American public policy and law as directed “against an identifiable enemy, the international counter-state of the drug-lord” (252). By questioning the hierarchy of knowledge and power systems, by showing how they “oscillate” and so “lose the character of a hard-and-fast contradiction, of an inexorable either-or,” Kincaid is positing “a subaltern agency as the power to reinscribe and relocate given symbols of authority and victimage” (Bhabha, “Are You a Man or a Mouse?” 64).²⁵ Elsewhere in her writing, Kincaid gestures provocatively, too, towards the possibility that the indigenous knowledge of plants might hold some real medicinal possibilities, thus highlighting, through a hypothetical imaginative process, what might be occluded by the exclusive dependency on multinational drug companies. For example, in “Alien Soil” Kincaid describes a local remedy for thrush that her mother has mentioned: “She called it the cancanberry bush, and said that in the old days, when people could not afford to see doctors, if a child had thrush they would make a paste of this fruit and rub it inside the child’s mouth, and this would make the thrush go away. But, she said, people rarely bother with this remedy anymore” (50). Absent from *My Brother*, however, is the sense local remedies can have any long-lasting curative effect, even if they might promise to ease Devon’s suffering a little in the present, for there is no concerted effort on the part of local people to take charge of dealing with the epidemic: “public concern, obsession with the

²⁵Bhabha uses these particular terms to describe the instability of masculinity and nation, but I think that they are equally applicable to the way *My Brother* opens up the contradictions inherent in the slipshod application of Western medicine to Antiguan AIDS.

treatment and care of the AIDS-suffering community by groups in the larger non-AIDS suffering community does not exist” (31). Even the indigenous “pharmakon” is denied by the implacability of AIDS, by its tendency to reinforce social divisions and hence conquest, as with the troubled “mahogany fruit” metaphor I explored earlier, Kincaid refuses to permit us to associate any idealism with indigenous knowledge.

Moreover, despite the ways in which her quest for alternatives is well-intentioned, Kincaid finds that she must none the less bring her own motivations into question, especially in light of the unavoidable recognition that “inside his body a death lives,” and that she cannot protect either Devon or her own person from the consequences of death’s voracious, inexorable conquest of the body’s illusory integrity (19-20). To investigate Kincaid’s ambivalence — that is, her veering between enforcement and surrender of the boundaries of the authorial, sisterly ego — we can return, once more, to the vocabulary of the family romance, to the triangular configuration of mother, sister, and brother and the relations of power, love, repudiation, and identification between them. The following passage, part of which I quoted previously, exemplifies the kind of melancholic equivocation that characterizes *My Brother*, indicating how it stems from the Drew family’s past, the past of “the people I am from” (50):

But I did not think I loved him; then, when I was no longer in his presence, I did not think I loved him. Whatever made me talk about him, whatever made me think of him, was not love, just something else, but not love; love being the thing I felt for my family, the one I have now, but not for him, or the people I am from, not love, but a powerful feeling all the same, only not love. My talk was full of pain, it was full of anger, there was no peace to

it, there was much sorrow, but there was no peace to it. How did I feel? I did not know how I felt. I was a combustion of feelings. (50-51)

Why are we told so insistently that this “powerful feeling” is “not love”? The effect of this negation is to foreground the “pain,” “anger,” and “sorrow” that characterize Kincaid’s bond to her birth family (and to Antigua), the emotions that, in their intensity, almost eclipse the opposite dynamic — that of identification — on which they hinge.

Corresponding to this disavowal of love, the memoir shows how Kincaid attempts to establish certain boundaries between her own position of strength and Devon’s vulnerability. For instance, on her return, Kincaid refuses to stay at her mother’s house and refuses to eat her mother’s cooking, preferring to pay for a hotel; Devon, on the other hand, does not have the power to choose to stay elsewhere. Furthermore, Kincaid clearly thinks of herself as having rescued her own life from a family situation which could not recognize ambition or independence in a woman, whereas Devon has remained within the fold of the family only to experience the ultimately disempowering effects of the illusion of power bestowed on him as a male. Writing his story is attractive because it promises control, and maybe a means of self-restoration: “I became a writer out of desperation, so when I first heard my brother was dying I was familiar with the act of saving myself: I would write about him. I would write about his dying” (195-196). Devon’s affliction, however, brings the naturalness and security of these distinctions into question, including the containment of the risk of obligation that is implied by the disavowal of love. Indeed, the parallel between Kincaid’s life and Devon’s is one of the most important ways in which

his life haunts hers: "I shall never forget him because his life is the one I did not have, the life that, for reasons I hope shall never be too clear to me, I avoided or escaped. Not his fate, for I too, shall die, only his life, with its shadows dominating the brightness, its shadows eventually overtaking its brightness, so that in the end anyone wanting to know him would have to rely on that, shadows" (176).

What lies in the "shadows" of the shared past of sister and brother? And how are the representations of Devon's AIDS-related death and the family mutually transformed when these layers of time and memory are represented simultaneously? Previously in Kincaid's fiction the arrival of other children is alluded to but noticeably underplayed, given how threatening it is; her three brothers are fathered by a man who is not Kincaid's own father, and, as I mentioned previously, their births, especially Devon's, threaten the family's economic well-being and push to the limits the mother's ability to cope (71). Moreover, Devon, who has read Kincaid's books, asks her if he is the "throw-way pickney" (174). While she admits to resisting his interpretation that she has written him into (or out of) her novel as an unwanted child, whose mother in fact desires his destruction, Kincaid goes on to explore the correspondences of AIDS and her family's history through the lens of the events of Devon's infancy. Because Mrs. Drew, in her exhaustion and despair after his birth, did not "give his chemise the customary elaborate attention involving embroidery stitching and special washings of the cotton fabric," Devon is vulnerable to "evil spirits" (5). Later, he is attacked by "an army of red ants" while he is sleeping in his mother's arms (5), an incident Kincaid, out of her melancholy, now sees as

possessing an overdetermined significance: “I was only wondering whether it had any meaning that some small red things had almost killed him from the outside shortly after he was born and that now some small things were killing him from the inside” (6). *My Brother* explores the unsettling implications of these gaps in information, implications which are redoubled in the postcolonial context and in the context of AIDS; specifically, it appears that, with these memories of neglect now resurfacing, questions of what kind of responsibility mother and sister owe to Devon now that he is dead can no longer be ignored.

There is an overwhelming pressure to retain these memories in the realm of the repressed, in the “closet” of memory, just as Devon is placed in physical and emotional isolation, but Kincaid’s memoir refuses to comply: “This was an incident no one ever told my brother, an incident that everyone else in my family has forgotten, except me” (6). As the keeper of these terrible memories, Kincaid must confront the role she played in Devon’s victimization as the youngest child in the family, the one who was unwanted, uncared for. Indeed, behind Kincaid’s resentment of her brothers lurks a sense of guilt, for, while the red ants incident may be attributable to Mrs. Drew, Kincaid’s own neglect of Devon, her wish “that he had never been born,” also haunts the text (141). Left in charge of her infant brother as a young girl, she gets so caught up in her reading that she forgets to change his diaper; enraged, Kincaid’s mother burns her books (128-131). The scene encapsulates the family’s destitution:

And in it, this picture of my brother's hardened stool, a memory, a moment of my own life is frozen; for his diaper sagged with a weight that was not gold but its opposite, a weight whose value would not bring us good fortune, a weight that only emphasized our family's despair: our fortunes, our prospects were not more than the contents of my brother's diaper and the contents were only shit. (131)

What is being hinted at is the process of exclusion by which Kincaid has precipitated herself out a debilitating family situation, catapulting herself into a position of material and intellectual success in America. Devon, in his helpless infancy, becomes the indication of everything she has escaped: "vulnerability" and "powerlessness." Indeed, as Kristeva argues, "Refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (*Powers of Horror*, her emphasis 3); Kincaid's rejection of Devon, in all of his bodily excess, shows the extent to which the interests of the sister are pitted against those of the brother in this colonial family romance. But now, with Devon's affliction with diarrhea, with his body disintegrating, liquefying, not solidifying into a coherent visual image, Kincaid can no longer "abject" him: "My brother was in great pain. A stream of yellow pus flowed out of his anus constantly; the inside of his mouth and all around his lips were covered with a white glistening substance, thrush" (138). According to Kristeva, confrontation with a corpse challenges our ordinary psychological mechanisms of exclusion: "If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (3). In the context of AIDS, "corporeal waste" reveals the "objective frailty of the symbolic order" (70). By contrast, for example, with Hoffman's

celebration of bodily supplementarity in her writing of Mike's erotic body, in the case of Kincaid the "frailty" of symbolic language gives way to an extraordinary "abjection of self" (70, 5).²⁶ Admitting on one level that she is excluding Devon in order to constitute her "self," Kincaid also admits the identification that goes along with this, namely the frightening possibility that his fate was one that she escaped by means of being "so cold and ruthless in regard to my own family, acting only in favor of myself when I was a young woman" (69). The closet of idealizing and exclusive memory can no longer contain what is increasingly apparently a mode of unpredictable, and hence critical memory, emerging from the impossibility of mourning, or what Derrida refers to, corroborating Kristeva, as "a *nonsubjectivizable* law of thought beyond interiorization" (*Memoires for Paul de Man* 37).

Kincaid's apprehension that she might, in a sense, "become" her mother — by denying the unpredictable, painful forces of memory, and by abjecting Devon — is palpable. By citing Mrs. Drew's reaction to Devon's death Kincaid distances herself from the role of exemplary mourner, observing that "she mourns beautifully, she is admirable in

²⁶Kristeva qualifies her definition of abjection to suggest that it is not a matter of essence, but rather that it is a process that involves a questioning of authority, but not from a stable subject position (The "Thing"... "is inscribed within us *without memory*" [my emphasis *Black Sun* 14]: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers of Horror* 4). If we are to use the term abjection to characterize Kincaid's response to Devon's illness, then this point is crucial to bear in mind, for it establishes the abject as a disruptive political force, and not a pathologizing definition of Devon's body as "unclean."

mourning; if I were ever to be in mourning, this is the model, the example, I would imitate" (132). Through this oblique strategy of overstatement, *My Brother* criticizes (just as it is itself occasionally complicit in) Mrs. Drew's inability to love her son Devon except by infantilizing him, or by setting herself up as a paragon of mourning. Like Mike Riegle's straight brother, Chuck, in Amy Hoffman's *Hospital Time*, Mrs. Drew is willing to participate in an "emergency" when it might endow her with an air of magnanimity, and when it will furnish her with the privilege of making meaning from the position of "after,"²⁷ but she is unable to acknowledge Devon's bisexuality, or his having the specific illness called "AIDS." This is only symptomatic, of course, of a wider cultural attitude; as Kincaid's friend Bud observes upon hearing her talk of Antigua, it seems ludicrous "that when a person is ill no one mentions it, no one pays a visit; but if the person should die, there is a big outpouring of people at the funeral, there are bouquets, people sing hymns for the dead with much feeling" (146). (Again, this is perhaps more similar to, or even a magnification, of the inability of contemporary North American society to address illness and death, rather than being unique to Antigua.) What brings the characterizations of Chuck and Mrs Drew together is the rhetorical and political purpose they share: the suggestion that to mourn in a way that accords with social expectations about "proper

²⁷"Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And the enemy has not ceased to be victorious" (Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" 254). In the context of Kincaid's memoir it seems that the dead are especially vulnerable to the revisions of "the work of mourning."

mourning” — in a way that glibly “economizes” loss — is to play into the pattern of denial that has characterized the treatment and the representation of people with AIDS.

My Brother shows how guilt and anxiety may produce, through the ambivalent processes of melancholia, a sense of responsibility, a sense of being bound in obligation to the other and a compulsion to resist shutting out complexity and risk. As I suggested earlier, Kincaid’s aborted visual metaphors at once connect and distance her point of view from the “scopic regime” (Bhabha, “Interrogating Identity” 59) from which, through its panic about defending the boundaries of the bodily ego, the logic of compartmentalization and visual consumption proceeds. In connection with the second half of the narrative, where Kincaid faces her childhood memories and Devon’s corpse simultaneously, I suggest that we consider the contrast between Kincaid’s first viewing of Devon’s dead body and her viewing of him in his coffin, after his body has been remade by the undertaker. Once “the people still in life arranged him,” Devon “looked like an advertisement for the dead, not like the dead at all” (181): “his hair was nicely combed and dyed black,” “his lips were clamped tightly together,” and “eyes had been sewn shut” (180-181). Kincaid repeats the words “sewn shut” — “I have to say it again, sewn shut” — as if out of disbelief that the orifices of his body could or should be closed in this way (181). As abject, then, as “the jettisoned object,” or what “is radically excluded,” Devon’s corpse refuses to be sutured into a system of meaning, and so “draws” the text “toward the place where meaning collapses” (*Powers of Horror* 2). With the visual impact of the corpse prior to its makeover, when Kincaid faces it unadorned, enclosed in its “plastic

bag” (180), we face an instance of what Kristeva calls “true theater, without makeup or masks” (3). And here a complex dynamic of recognition and estrangement is at work.

Devon does not look like himself, but neither does he look “arranged” as an “advertisement for the dead”:

He did not look like my brother, he did not look like the body of my brother, but that was what he was all the same, my brother who had died, and all that remained of him was lying in a plastic bag of good quality. His hair was uncombed, his face was unshaven, his eyes were wide-open, and his mouth was wide-open, too, and the open eyes and the open mouth made it seem as if he was looking at something in the far distance, something horrifying coming toward him, and that he was screaming, the sound of the scream silent now (but it had never been heard, I would have been told so, it had never been heard, this scream), and this scream seemed to have to break in it, no pause for an intake of breath; this scream only came out in one exhalation, trailing off into eternity, or just trailing off to somewhere I do not know, or just trailing off into nothing.

(178-179)

Caught in the caesura in time produced by her initial viewing of the corpse, Kincaid attempts to hold onto this non-image of Devon in the face of social and familial pressure to keep his mouth, and the rest of his speaking body, “sewn shut.” The language of negation (“uncombed,” “unshaven,” “I do not know,” “trailing off into nothing”) and of paradox (“silent”/ “sound” / “scream”) suspends the work of mourning. A gesture in the direction of the significance of Devon’s life emerges, although any such “statement” can only be vague and indeterminate. We find that the narrative voice is enfolded in the silent voice of Devon’s pain, overwhelmed by the boundary that consumes all, the unstable boundary of his “living death,” the unstable boundary that shows that neither the unpredictable, fluid forces of memory nor those of the body can be comfortably sealed off.

While this wordless “exhalation” can only be registered as a blank, a caesura, within the terms of symbolic language, on a semiotic or genotextual level it brings us into contact with everything we might rather suppress, as Kincaid surely desires to suppress: a close-up, extreme view of the moment of death, of the body becoming “corporeal waste” and lapsing into passivity.

The result of this confrontation with Devon’s corpse is to open up an interpretative space that allows for the recognition of Devon’s otherness, one that allows for a response to it that does not merely repeat the worn path of exclusionary practices. In the midst of the “terrible accident” that is the overlapping of illness and homosexuality (Sedgwick, “Gender Criticism”), and, in this case, economic and cultural marginalization, there emerges an awareness of masculinity as performative, as “a prosthetic reality — a ‘prefixing’ of the rules of gender and sexuality; an appendix or addition, that willy-nilly, supplements and suspends a ‘lack-in-being’” (Bhabha, “Are You a Man or a Mouse?” 57). The supposed sovereignty of masculinity — the hierarchy of privilege against which the young Kincaid rebelled by choosing her books over the role of proxy caregiver — is shown to be interrupted by Devon’s feminization, infantilization, and invisibility, or, in other words, his fragility and exposure as an “embodied subject,”²⁸ both in the past, when

²⁸I borrow this term from Sidonie Smith, who distinguishes the “embodied subject” from the “universal subject” in theorizing the place of the body in women’s contemporary autobiographical practices (*Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* 5). In its focus on Devon as an “embodied subject” and Kincaid as struggling “universal subject,” *My Brother* upsets Smith’s gendering of these oppositions. Though Smith does acknowledge that “woman” is one component among many in the category of the “nonuniversal, the colorful,” that is,

he was an infant, and in the present, due to his illness and to his sexual orientation. In this transformed context, Kincaid begins to grasp that there may be more than one meaning behind the “anxiety” that underlies Devon’s bravado. She begins to grasp the extent to which his “anxiety” was a reaction of “despai[r] ... that the walls separating the parts of his life had broken down”(164). Devon’s thin, broken skin, with its ever-open orifices, gestures not just towards physical pain, then, and not just towards the horrified reaction of others, but towards Devon’s own grief in response to the disintegration of the life he had constructed, however ramshackle. Recognizing this for the first time, Kincaid wonders if because she “knew nothing about his internal reality,” she may have misread “anxiety when it appeared on his face ... as another kind of suffering, a suffering I might be able to relieve with medicine I had brought from the prosperous North” (164). The power of the melancholy that Devon inspires moves the memoir beyond satisfaction with postures of sympathy and “help,” forcing her to accept both how much distance there is between brother and sister *and* how their lives are mutually constituted and implicated. Like the “unhomely moment” described by Bhabha, the power of melancholy “relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (“Locations of Culture” 11). As Kincaid acknowledges, her “personal psychic history” and its “traumatic ambivalences” produce simultaneously a sense of connection (their

those who are excluded by the “discourses of the universal subject,” she does not explore how the masculine subject might be differently composed when he is poor and black (and ill) (11).

struggles against oppression have similarities) and disjunction (through ruthlessness, Kincaid has escaped the vulnerability and powerlessness that remain Devon's lot). For while Devon's "homosexuality is one thing, and my becoming a writer is another altogether, [...] this truth is not lost to me: I could not have become myself while living among the people I knew best, I could not have become myself while living among the people I knew best" (162).

None the less, the "reality principle" quickly reasserts itself as the memoir halts toward its conclusion. In a striking about-face Kincaid reasserts the privilege of textual comprehension: "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" (195-196). Even more striking is the homage she pays in the final pages of the memoir to William Shawn, the *New Yorker* editor, her mentor and her father-in-law. If Kincaid cannot close the "open wound" that is Devon's body in her text, then does she attempt to murder him by adopting another dead man, William Shawn, as a replacement addressee (a white American intellectual father figure) (198)? What does it mean for Kincaid to address William Shawn as the "perfect reader" in a text that supposedly apostrophizes Devon Drew? It is disturbing that the white father-in-law is presented as the ideal reader, for he is (at least symbolically) everything that Devon is not: at the centre of the world, on top, sophisticated, all-knowing, and supportive (indeed one of the crucial agents) of Kincaid's career as a writer. Despite its

inconsistency in this regard,²⁹ Kincaid's memoir does maintain, I would argue, a critical distance from her mother's "economy" of loss, that is, her forgetfulness. It maintains this distance because its attachment to the material reality of Devon's experience remains unresolved; this is an attachment that her yearning for "understanding," her references to William Shawn, and her defensive statements about protecting the sanctity of her own American family cannot vanquish, for the supplement, introduced so belatedly, is unconvincing. *My Brother* continually circles back over the unanswerable question "which Devon was he?," a question that summarizes perfectly Kincaid's sense that she is responsible for recognizing who he was, and her doubled sense of loss at the realization that this will never be possible, that she has missed her opportunity to "know" him (191). Though "it is the end," "yet so many things linger" (156). By contrast with the exemplary mourners whom she criticizes, and despite the odd attempt at the end of the memoir to close off uncertainty by invoking a perfect circuit of communication with another, more privileged male "other," Kincaid holds on, melancholically, to Devon in all of his complexity, and in all of the complexity of her feelings about him and about the family and the place of their shared origins. In so doing, she affirms her bond to Devon, but also,

²⁹This inconsistency is the price of *My Brother*'s melancholic engagement with Devon, as it veers headily between repudiation and identification. As Butler stresses, "That identifications shift does not necessarily mean that one identification is repudiated for another; that shifting may well be one sign of hope for the possibility of avowing a more expansive set of connections" (*Bodies That Matter* 118). One might be tempted to criticize Kincaid for certain "close-minded" statements, but I would argue that these moments remain tied to a process of identification to which the memoir is highly committed.

because “the dead never die” (121), and so continue to haunt those who attempt to record their lives and deaths, what Devon’s life, illness, and death might mean remains open-ended. The ephemeral is held parenthetically in the textual, suggesting that there may not be a “life” to reconstruct as we would ordinarily conceive of within the conventions of Western auto/biography: “And 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; in his life there had been no flowering, his life was the opposite of that, a flowering, his life was like the bud that sets but, instead of opening into a flower, turns brown and falls off at your feet” (162-163). Without “progress,” only demonstrating decay, Devon’s existence compels Kincaid to take up a position of authorial passivity, the role of a disoriented, grief-stricken, self-berating observer. She is at once overwhelmed by and bereft of significant facts, desperately attempting to balance between bearing witness to Devon’s life and making meaning out of it. This unresolved dynamic means that *My Brother* remains open to multiple outcomes, for, as Blanchot argues, “In the work of mourning, it is not grief that works: grief keeps watch” (51). Kincaid’s *My Brother*, through its shifting melancholic identifications, keeps watch, and suddenly, surprisingly, in the same moment that so much anguish is being registered, it shows that there coexists with all of the disavowals of love the possibility, however tenuous, of a radical and loving identification with this “missing person”: “I said to him that nothing good could ever

come of his being so ill, but all the same I wanted to thank him for making me realize that I loved him” (21).

IV: “Angels in Antigua,” or Walter Benjamin in the Tropics

Although the stated purpose of the memoir is redemptive and therapeutic (Kincaid aims “to understand his dying, and not to die with him”), the moments of insight are notably hard-won. For the most part, indeed, it seems that the memoir is describing the wreckage of the situation from above, to recall Benjamin’s image of the “angel of history,” that is, of materialist historiography (257).³⁰ Looking “toward the past” the angel contemplates rather than reconstructs it: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (257). The power of *My Brother*’s melancholy makes it a document of “emergency”; Kincaid is

³⁰Tony Kushner has, of course, made extensive use of Benjamin’s suggestive image of the “angel of history” in *Angels in America*, and the influence of Benjamin on Kushner has been widely acknowledged by critics. See in particular David Savran’s “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation.” However, as Savran notes, the politics of Kushner’s play are, to say the least, “ambivalent” (15), perhaps owing more to Mormonism than to Benjamin (24-25), and this is especially so when he attempts to deal with the intersection of AIDS and racial politics in America. As Savran argues, “*Angels* unabashedly champions rationalism and progress” (21), demonstrating “the dogged persistence of a *consensus politic that masquerades as dissensus*” (21); thus, Belize, the black ex-drag queen, not only becomes the play’s exemplary caregiver, but also its conscience and “guarantor of diversity” (30). Kincaid’s memoir, while it is equally self-contradictory, is, I would argue, more ambivalently ambivalent than *Angels in America* in that it takes the economic and cultural privilege of its author to task (31). As a result, *My Brother* more accurately registers what “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us.”

not interested in saving her own skin, as it were, not interested, that is, in reconstituting herself as a whole subject, a whole author. Rejecting the practice of writing a “journal,” “a daily account of what occurs during a certain time,” the memoir is deeply committed to reliving the “time” of Devon’s illness, that “short time” between when “he became sick and the time he died,” the time that “became a world” (91-92). The world is a world of “wreckage,” a strange sort of “eternal” existence, a “refuge of the lost, the refuge for all things that will never be or things that have been but have lost their course and hope to recede with some grace” (92). While Kincaid is reluctant to embrace Devon, complaining that “I can’t do what you are suggesting — take this strange, careless person into the hard-earned order of my life” (49), she does despite these feelings incorporate him into her text, and, in so doing, she incorporates the specter of “corporeal waste.” As she summarizes, the project is profoundly unsettling, revealing the interimplication of life and death, power and powerlessness:

to be so intimately acquainted with the organism that is the HIV virus is to be acquainted with death; each moment, each gesture, holds in it a set of events that can easily slide into realities that are unknown, unexpected, to the point of shock; we do not really expect these moments; they arrive and are resisted, denied, and then finally, inexorably, accepted; to have the HIV virus is to have crossed the line between life and death. On one side, there is life, and the thin shadow of death hovers over it; and on the other, there is death with a small patch of life attached to it. This latter is the life of AIDS; this was how I saw my brother as he lay in his bed dying. (95-96)

My Brother thus comprises a history that makes it possible for us to glimpse something of the unrepresentable “real” that is Antigua in the time of AIDS. That “the exchange of values, meanings and priorities ... may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even

incommensurable” does not compromise the disturbing impact of this vision (Bhabha, “Locations of Culture” 2). On the contrary, *My Brother* produces its record of catastrophe from the very fabric of the conflicting interpretations of Devon’s life. Though Devon, who “was obsessed with the great thieves who had inhabited his part of the world,” might want to align his life’s history with the heroic exploits of “the great hero-thieves of English maritime history: Horatio Nelson, John Hawkins, Francis Drake” (94-95), a representation of his life could only be forced to accommodate itself to this model at great cost. The terrible irony of Devon’s fascination with the history of the colonizers impresses Kincaid, for, as she observes, although “he liked the people who won, even though he was among the things that had been won,” “his life was not real, not yet a part of history; his reality was that he was dead but still alive; his reality was that he had a disease called AIDS” (95). Kincaid’s disorderly, bifurcated, halting text makes Devon’s reality “real,” “a part of history” (95), though not “understandable,” precisely because it transforms history: through its unresolved grief, the memoir counteracts Devon’s internalized oppression, the social exclusion of people with AIDS in Antigua, and the normalizing pressures of Kincaid’s adopted country. Indeed, she explicitly rejects the orderly way in which American pastoral fantasies mask social exploitation and exclusion by refusing memory: “But there is no order in my garden. I live in America now. Americans are impatient with memory, which is one of the things their order thrives on” (51). The melancholic dynamic of *My Brother*, its self-implication in “abjection,” in “impossible mourning,” thus poses a distinct contestation of the logic of panic and

compartmentalization, and also of the impulse towards a retrospective idealization of the dead, towards the “official” history of “events.” In this sense, *My Brother* counters the logic that confines AIDS patients (narratively and socially speaking) to “rooms by themselves” (Kincaid 21-22), those medical, social, and familial closets *par excellence*. Kincaid’s account is so disturbingly intransigent because of the very fact that we cannot locate this challenge in a stable position of authority on her part. Instead, through the enunciative situation of melancholic anxiety and uncertainty, *My Brother* brings its critique of the technologies of AIDS, sexuality, family, coloniality, and nation forward for our uneasy inspection.

CHAPTER THREE

“Flowers, Boys, and Childhood Memories”: Derek Jarman’s Pedagogy

Fragments of memory eddy past and are lost in the dark. In the yellowing light half-forgotten papers whirl old headlines up and over dingy suburban houses, past leaders and obituaries, the debris of inaction, into the void. Thought illuminated briefly by lightning.

(Jarman, *Modern Nature* 20)

... the profound moral imperatives and ethical calculations that ultimately do drive the great gay queens through this century...

(Eric Michaels, *Unbecoming* 25)

I: “Politics in the First Person”: Writing HIV+

Just as Jamaica Kincaid, in reconstructing the life of her brother Devon, is tempted to invoke a series of organic metaphors that would make Devon speak reassuringly from beyond the grave, and just as Amy Hoffman’s friends wish to read the natural world as symbolizing the peacefulness of death, Derek Jarman turns, too, towards his garden as a source of solace. The evolution of his garden — a massively mediated combination of the indigenous and the exotic, of the natural and the refuse of human technology — at Prospect Cottage, planted defiantly on Dungeness’s shingle beach, exposed to incessant winds and sunlight, and in full view of a decrepit, looming nuclear power development, is chronicled over the course of several published autobiographical

texts.¹ *Modern Nature*, Jarman's chronicle of the years 1989-1991, which saw both the beginnings of the garden and his body's shift from non-symptomatic to symptomatic HIV, explores most fully the complexities of his intertwined testimonial and horticultural projects. In particular, *Modern Nature* is preoccupied with the potentially deforming pressures of writing for public consumption.² In the first place, Jarman is cautious about the consequences of exposing his feelings of loss, and notes his tendency to freeze "emotions" "for fear of filling the world with tears" (*MN* 54). He seems to fear that he may "drown" others as well as himself in his grief, and, in so doing, risk not only the exposure but the sentimentalization of his concerns, a kind of "over-watering." He worries, too, that by editing the journals for publication he has imposed a more cohesive pattern than really existed, and frequently disclaims whatever orderliness or narrative logic

¹ Derek Jarman's autobiographical productions demand to be acknowledged for their full multiplicity in a dizzying array of genres: memoirs, diaries (published and unpublished), film, painting, and gardening. So, while I focus on *Modern Nature* and make some extended reference to *At Your Own Risk* and Jarman's garden at Prospect Cottage (a visual / material counterpart to *Modern Nature*), it is worth noting the sheer volume of Jarman's self-productions: it suggests his compulsion to make the text of his life grow, shift, and shimmer, all, one suspects, in the hope of eluding easy critical exegesis of his "personality." For my citations from these key texts, I will use the abbreviations *MN* and *AYOR*.

²In his recent authorized biography of Jarman, Tony Peake notes that "in early 1990," Jarman's diary "had been accepted for publication by Mark Booth at Century"; it was "between September, when he made a final entry, and the end of the year, [that] Jarman shaped the raw material into the book it would become" (463-464). Although he did not exactly write the book under commission, then, we may be certain that Jarman had thought of it from the outset as a public rather than a strictly private record.

the journal might be interpreted as projecting in favour of an emphasis on its dreamlike qualities: “This diary gives the wrong impression, it’s much too focused. I’m emerging from a strange dream” (275). Referring to his garden, for example, Jarman is at pains to point out the traumatic difference between the cyclically enduring life of the natural world and the implacably temporal life of the human being, highlighting that “behind the façade my life is at sixes and sevens. I water the roses and wonder whether I will see them bloom. I plant my herbal garden as a panacea, read up on all the aches and pains that plants will cure – and know they are not going to help. The garden as pharmacopoeia has failed” (179). Loosely echoing Richard Burton, whose *Anatomy of Melancholy* Jarman sought out and read during this period (170), Jarman conveys his pervasive sense of loss, his feeling that the whole world must be “mad,” “that it is melancholy, dotes” (Burton 39). The self-identity and permanence of the natural world, founded in “the intrinsic ontological primacy of the natural object,” has been disrupted and cannot straightforwardly offer Jarman the solace of communication with “a transcendental essence” (de Man, “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image” 5-7). Indeed, *Modern Nature*’s documentation of the quotidian is unsettled by the pressure of Jarman’s sadness, to the extent that the world becomes viewed as a montage of desolation: “Everything I perceive makes a song, everything I see saddens the eye. Behind these everyday jottings – the sweetness of a boy’s smile. Into my mind comes the picture of a blood red camellia displaced in the February twilight” (MN 207).

Prospect Cottage is invested with all of his longings for paradise, and for escape from the burden of his knowledge of his having tested positive for HIV. As Keith Collins summarizes in his preface to the photographic record, *Derek Jarman's Garden*, although “the garden started accidentally” when pieces of driftwood and flint were used improvisationally to stake and protect the plants, “slowly the garden acquired new meaning — the plants struggling against biting winds and Death Valley sun merged with Derek’s struggle with illness” (Preface). In Jarman’s account, Prospect Cottage is home too, however, to many “ill omens,” to a proliferation of signs that seem to corroborate Jarman’s fundamental, all-encompassing sadness and that complicate how we may interpret the landscape’s allegorical role.³ Opening a car door, for example, Jarman finds himself confronted with the image of “a large grass snake writhing at my feet – it opened its mouth in agony” (157). The world is out of sorts, all potential for wisdom and consolation undermined by the casual cruelties of the modern world’s machinery, as exemplified in the snake’s death: “We hadn’t seen it – the snake of wisdom who brought the knowledge of good and evil, man’s best friend, serpent of memory, great figure of eight, lying with its back broken and its mouth open, crying in silence” (157). Earlier in *Modern Nature*, however, Jarman visualizes the HIV virus as a snake in order to emphasize its predatory behaviour, and the debilitating consequences for those it seems to

³On the allegorical aspects of Prospect Cottage, see Deborah Esch, “‘The only news was when’ (*The journals of Derek Jarman*)” and Daniel O’Quinn, “Gardening, History, and the Escape from Time: Derek Jarman’s *Modern Nature*.”

target: “Could I face the dawn cheerfully, paralysed by the virus that circles like a deadly cobra? So many friends dead or dying — since autumn: Terry, Robert, David, Ken, Paul, Howard” (56). The image of the serpent plaguing an Edenic space — he subsequently refers to “VD” as “the old serpent” — suggests that any paradise Jarman might attempt to construct is always tainted by the specter of HIV (63). Whether he identifies with or against the serpent, it symbolizes a life and a generation traumatically interrupted. This feeling that “all the brightest and best [have been] trampled to death” is an insight that Jarman solidifies by way of an ironic comparison to the losses of the First World War, a comparison suggested by his just-completed film *War Requiem* (1989): “surely even the Great War brought no more loss into one life in just twelve months, and all this as we made love not war” (56). Jarman’s periodic reiteration of the names of friends who have died — a move he repeats in *Blue*, *At Your Own Risk*, and the text that accompanies the photographic record of his garden — echoes the paradoxically silent cry of the serpent of wisdom. Attempting to embrace those he has lost, he finds that although he may repeat their names, their persons are somehow not tractable to representation; what characterizes these “dead friends,” as Jarman’s subsequent poem suggests, is the silence of their deaths.

I walk in this garden
 Holding the hands of dead friends
 Old age came quickly for my frosted generation
 Cold, cold, cold they died so silently
 Did the forgotten generations scream?
 Or go full of resignation
 Quietly protesting innocence
 Cold, cold, cold, they died so silently.

(69)

Speaking the names of his friends again later in *Modern Nature* as his losses continue to increase, and as he starts to experience serious illness connected with HIV, Jarman feels himself to be “wandering aimlessly in this labyrinth of memories,” trapped by the virus’s ravenous denuding of the garden’s most vital sweets: the vibrant men whom he loved and loves still (169).

To what extent did Jarman turn to autobiography – to the process of writing, elaborately drawn out of the course of several interlocking memoirs, but also to self-narration in painting, film, and garden – as an antidote to the tortuous venom of melancholy? In seeking to answer this question, this chapter will pursue several interconnected threads: first person politics in autobiographical writing; the problem of reception and contextualization (exemplified in the cultural phenomenon of the AIDS quilt); the challenges and the implications of writing from a perspective that attempts fully to inhabit an HIV positive body; and the way in which Jarman’s project redounds on questions of pedagogy and responsibility, in personal, national, and international contexts

I will begin by examining the conditions of Jarman’s “first person” politics as worked out in his memoirs. In his recent biography of Jarman, Tony Peake marks the turn in Jarman’s career upon the news that he had tested positive for HIV with the observation that “Starting with *The Last of England*, he would use the time he had left to produce a quantity of films, paintings and books commensurate with the very longest of lives” (385). As Peake further explains, “The key to his entire campaign was work. He had always

worked hard; now he would work even harder, frenetically almost, using work as a means of riding his despair and combating loss” (385). The role of Jarman’s copious writings in countering “despair” and “loss” is not without its complications, though, given that work’s fraught relationship to the heteronormative conventions of auto/biographical writing and reading, conventions that would smooth the edges of what he most valued, or even erase it entirely. And indeed, his writings are much more than straightforwardly autobiographical, but rather may be read as theoretical reflections on subjectivity, activism, artistic work, and the overlapping representational contracts of testimony, obituary, and elegy — inflected by his perspective as queer and HIV+.

Jarman had been evolving for years his strategies for surviving as queer in a straight world, a project that was to him altogether necessary and yet frightening, given the void into which he felt he spoke. His first foray into autobiographical writing came in 1982, when his “friend Nicholas told [him] to write it ‘out’” and Jarman was prompted to write his first memoir, *Dancing Ledge* (AYOR 27).⁴ His films *Caravaggio* and *Edward II* are concerned to rework history and biography in order to “out” what normative history seeks to conceal — the “great gay queens” of centuries past, to paraphrase my introductory epigraph from Eric Michaels. And, similarly, Jarman’s writings about his

⁴*Dancing Ledge* (1984) is addressed (on a prefatory page) “To the British Cinema” and stands primarily as a defense of his film *Caravaggio*, an imaginative queering of the life of the Renaissance painter. Jarman is adamant that “the film will dig and excavate and make no attempt to hold the mirror up to reality” (25), and acknowledges the film’s autobiographical bent: “The problem is I’ve written a self-portrait filtered through the Caravaggio story” (28).

own life seek to redress “the terrible dearth of information, the fictionalisation of our experience” by demonstrating that “the best of it [our experience] is in our lives” (*MN* 56).⁵ Deploing the lack of “gay autobiography,” especially the fact that almost “no-one had written an autobiography in which they described a sex act,” Jarman determined upon the following remedy:

That seemed to be a good reason to fill in the blank and to start putting in the “I” rather than the “they”; and having made the decision about the “I” to show how things related to me so that I wasn’t talking of others – *they* were doing this and *they* were doing that.

It was very important to me to find the “I”: *I* feel this, this happened to *me*, *I* did this. I wanted to read that. My obsession with biography is to find these ‘I’s. The subtext of my films have been the books, putting myself back into the picture. (*AYOR* 27)

When Jarman states that “it was very important to me to find the ‘I’” he is speaking retrospectively, casting his readers back to the context of his own sexual liberation in the late sixties. Likewise, for the Jarman of *At Your Own Risk*, “The problem of so much of the writing about *this epidemic* is the absence of the author” (my emphasis 5). This statement suggests a certain continuity in Jarman’s thinking: somewhat indirectly, he

⁵ In films such as *Jubilee*, *The Tempest*, *Caravaggio*, *Edward II*, and *Wittgenstein*, Jarman engages the distortions and elisions of the historical record, countering, as Jim Ellis insists in his discussion of Jarman’s queering of the Renaissance, “the nostalgic, Thatcherite construction of England’s glorious past in the cinema of the 1980s,” and “resist[ing] homophobic constructions of the past and present” (290-291). Ellis argues that typically “Jarman’s refusal to provide the visual pleasures of period, whether through an aggressively antirealist mise-en-scène, or the pointed use of anachronistic props and language, both circumvents and implicitly critiques the trap that is almost constitutive of the genre” (290).

insists here on the increased importance of celebrating sexual liberation in the face of the panic — renewed by the pandemic — about the threat posed by “deviant sexualities” to a putative general public. In *Dancing Ledge*, however, AIDS enters the book only in its final chapter, prompting a late foregrounding of the way in which “sexuality colours my politics,” and a citation of “homosexuals” “struggle ... to define themselves against the order of things,” while enduring “suffering” “at the hands of the ideologically ‘sound’” (241).⁶ But, writing from his perspective as HIV+ in *Modern Nature* and *At Your Own Risk*, Jarman is fully enmeshed in this complicated scenario for the authorship of testimony, and finds that it necessitates a reinvention of what he came to call “politics in the first person” (*AYOR* 106).

The turn we may mark in Jarman’s autobiographical methods correlates with the way in which the label HIV+ subjects individuals as well as “risk groups” to a certain “narrative discipline,” a mania for diagnosis of so-called pathological or delinquent subpopulations (Nunokawa 313). The contradictory genres to which Jarman feels he has

⁶The shift in terminology we can note in Jarman’s writings — from “homosexual” in *Dancing Ledge* and “gay,” but increasingly often, “queer,” in *Modern Nature* and *At Your Own Risk* — is a telling indicator (as it is for many other activists and writers over the same period) of his increasing politicization in the context of HIV/AIDS, as well as a complication of his sense of subjectivity. As he implies in *Blue* — describing himself at one point as “a cock-sucking / Straight acting / Lesbian man / with ball crushing bad manners” — the instability of gender identity and of what counts as “ideologically sound” politics are crucial aspects of the way queer performativity may test the boundaries of empathy and “charity” in the context of HIV/AIDS.

been consigned by his HIV+ status (and their potentially paralyzing effects) are evoked by the items he purchases at the stationer's on his way home after receiving the news that he had tested positive. What he buys subsequent to this much-delayed and resisted appointment are "a daybook for 1987 and a scarlet form to write out a will" (*AYOR* 7). The gesture of purchasing a daybook emphasizes the urgency of accounting for his life (Crusoe-like, in the manner of a spiritual autobiography), while the purchase of the "scarlet form" involves a projection into the future, to the stopping place of death. Possibly, too, these official forms for accounting for one's life anticipate the "endless questionnaires" to which Jarman finds himself subject while in hospital, suggesting continuity amongst these various kinds of surveillance and self-surveillance (*MN* 253). At the same time, these genres — daybook and will — model the preparation of his legacy along certain predetermined lines, as they emphasize the disposal of time, of property, and of his person. Even in the more elevated genres of life-writing, such as biography (and here Jarman is referring to Genet and Cocteau), "it is still quite common to read that the uncovering of a Queer life has diminished it"; and the lesson Jarman spells out for us is to "Beware the executors of the estate" (*AYOR* 72).

Situated amidst these imperatives and traps, Jarman's life and death can only stand as "political" or "educational" one by engaging with these conditions; to ignore them would have been to court anonymity. The conditions of Jarman's writing consist of a certain *subjection* to a narrative of inheritance as well as to the popular media, a dual *dependency* that makes Jarman's story constitutively vulnerable to the possibility that his

life may be taken as already written — as a death-driven narrative.⁷ In particular, Jarman's risky encounter with hostile public discourses⁸ courts the possibility that his book (and the public persona they assist in creating) might be all-too-readily "diagnosable" as yielding "symptom[s] of a diseased lifestyle" (Reinke 17).⁹ In other words, to submit one's own experience to the public discourses of HIV/AIDS risks confirming that "pervasive homophobia" based on "a deep cultural idea about the lethal character of male homosexuality" (Nunokawa 311). Jarman distills his predicament as follows:

What is certain is that strangers in the street all look on me as 'dead'. I have to underline the fact that I'm OK; but doing this doesn't convince them.

On the other hand it makes me twice as determined to survive, to find a gap in the prison wall that society has created and jump through it.
(MN 232)

As Sedgwick observes regarding AIDS and the risks of personal testimony, "It has been characteristic of the discourse around AIDS to be ... tied to a truth imperative whose angle is killingly partial" ("Gender Criticism" 287). By the phrase "killingly partial,"

I borrow these terms from Butler's introduction to *The Psychic Life of Power*, where, in musing on "the psychic form that power takes," she emphasizes that there exist "discursive conditions for the articulation of any 'we'" (2). "Subjection," she argues, "consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency" (2).

⁸Jarman's reference to Plato's *Symposium* and Shakespeare's *sonnets* as a "cultural condom" protecting the community against hate points similarly to the irony my phrasing captures here (163).

⁹As Michaels argues, contra Marshall McLuhan, "Conceptual and process art did not conquer the world," and "what persisted [instead] was narrative, character, nationalism" (38).

Sedgwick suggests that the call for personal writings that might reveal the truth is a motivated one. The “truth imperative” seeks to confirm for the majority culture the fated — and yet somehow transcendent and socially cleansing — quality of HIV-related deaths amongst “risk groups.” According to this logic, testimony then provides evidence of what the majority culture always thought it “knew” anyway: that “degeneracy” courts a punishing death, and a sort of social catharsis for “everyone else.” This view is corroborated by Düttmann who, in his analysis of Hervé Guibert’s *To The Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, wonders about the sense in which “a confession is necessarily an affirmation, no matter how else one behaves towards the thing confessed” (14).¹⁰

Worried as Jarman was about compromise, he was also concerned that his work reach a wide audience, and so his relation to the autobiographical contract is a fraught one.¹¹

This conflicted attitude is captured in a series of questions he raises at the beginning of *Modern Nature*, as he reflects on the conditions familiar to him from his long career as film-maker and painter that are attendant on going public, on “confessing,”

¹⁰Düttmann elaborates by suggesting that “by confessing AIDS, one promotes AIDS” (14). Figuratively speaking, “One feeds the virus to oneself and weakens the immune system for a second time” (14).

¹¹Deborah Esch comments on the representation of Jarman in the media and on his response to those representations in her chapter on *Modern Nature* in *In the Event: Reading Journalism, Reading Theory*; she draws particular attention to Jarman’s confrontation with a member of this “yellow press,” noting his assertion that journalistic reports will fade into obscurity, while his memoir will persist, and even accrue greater authority, beyond the present moment (120-127). He asserts the power of “authorship” over the anonymous reportage that feeds a “vulture culture” (120).

As the sun rose, thoughts jostling each other like demons, invaded my garden of earthly delight. What purpose had my book? Was I a fugitive from my past? Had I condemned myself to prison here? How could I celebrate my sexuality filled with so much sadness, and frustration for what has been lost? How had my films been damaged? Look at the cash sloshing around my contemporaries. (*MN* 56)

Similar to Hoffman's searing self-questioning about whether she had fulfilled her obligation to Mike Riegle, Jarman's record of these "jostling," disruptive thoughts highlights the complexity of what "survival" would mean for him. Determined to "survive" by weathering illness and continuing with his work, how may he do so without submitting fully to the forces that damaged his films, the financial imperatives of patronage (whether originating with British government funded programs or with Hollywood) that might influence his work? Will sadness and frustration lead him to turn back on his sexual radicalism, by leading him to believe in his own "delinquency"?¹²

Unlike the heterosexual melancholy dissected by Butler and exemplified in certain instances by Kincaid, a melancholy that only *masks* the guilt inspired by a loss deemed socially ungrievable (*Psychic Life* 146), this very queer melancholy *rewrites* self-beratement, pushing the surfeit of emotion associated with unresolved grief into the realm of what Sedgwick calls the "reparative" ("Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" 8

¹²Peake suggests that this is one possible interpretation of *The Garden* (1990), the film Jarman made at Dungeness concurrently with his writing of *Modern Nature*. Specifically, Peake notes that the serpent in his leather harness is an overtly sexual — and nightmarish — figure: "You wonder whether Jarman is asking himself if his own sexual appetite was not perhaps to blame for his illness. If sexual spontaneity is not as dangerous a force as repression" (459).

ff).¹³ Sedgwick postulates the “depressive position” as “the position from which it is possible in turn to use one’s own resources to assemble or “repair” the murderous part-objects into something like a whole — though not, and may I emphasize this, *not like any preexisting whole*” (“Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” 8). These “positions” are furthermore not to be taken as mutually exclusive: on the contrary, Sedgwick argues, “powerful reparative practices ... infuse self-avowedly paranoid critical projects” and “paranoid exigencies” “are often necessary for non-paranoid knowing and utterance” (8). In this context, what I want to suggest is that rather than constituting an external force that he must conquer, or neutralize, Jarman’s inconsolability *produces* the very “gap in the prison wall” through which he may “jump.” Jarman’s self-identification as an HIV+ “survivor” of the epidemic opens up the future to unpredictability; his writings blur any easy divide we might be tempted to make between negatives and positives, between survival and doom, certain life and certain death. So, if there is something like “hope” here, it exists as provisional, the result of an insistence on re-“assembling” the physical environment, one’s own body, and the bodies of others so that they may provide “nourishment” and “comfort” (8). As Sedgwick declares, “Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned

¹³ Sedgwick bases her claims on Melanie Klein’s theory of object relations, noting the “paranoid position” as one of “terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one” (8).

reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates” (24).

Jarman’s desire “to become a work of art and to retain some value in death” turns out to yield an outcome more surprising, I am suggesting, than notoriety, condemnation, or disapproval, or even their apparent opposites, fame and adulation (*AYOR* 103).

Paralleling Foucault’s interpretation of the implications of Greek and Greco-Roman morality, which emphasizes the voluntary adoption of “style” over and against universal interdictions, Jarman’s memoir models (as Sedgwick’s essay does using a psychoanalytic vocabulary) how the “arts of existence” enact “the care of the self”: it draws attention to “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves,” “to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* 30, 10-11)

Modern Nature’s productive uncertainties — and the potential of its deployment of the “arts of existence” — is exemplified in the pattern of antithesis that we find repeated throughout *Modern Nature* regarding the garden’s success or failure as “pharmacopoeia.” Despair at the garden’s inability to guarantee a “cure” alternates with an emphasis on its capacity for functioning, none the less, as a balm, as a soothing restorative agency, one that speaks to the senses, as Jarman vacillates between “paranoid” and “reparative” relations to the space he has shaped for himself. His observation, for example, that the garden has failed to serve as a “pharmacopoeia” is followed with the contradictory statement “Yet there is a thrill in watching the plants spring up that gives me

hope" (*MN* 179). But the possibility of "hope" is quickly displaced by shadows of another, human sort: "Even so, I find myself unable to record the disaster that has befallen some of my friends, particularly dear Howard, who I miss more than imagination. He wanders into my mind – as he wandered out a stormy night eighteen months ago" [sic] (179). We are directed back to an earlier (temporarily forgotten?) conversation, a final conversation in which Howard Brookner's lack of words — the "long silences and the slow wounded moaning," which invokes, again, the specter of the snake — means that Jarman cannot "know whether he understood a word," a one-sided conversation that "left me confused, tearful, and fearfully sad" (54). In an effort to still these memories, Jarman occasionally invokes a vocabulary of recalcitrance that would underplay his affective response to being ill: "I refuse to believe in my own mortality, or the statistics which hedge the modern world about like the briar that walled in the sleeping princess. I have conducted my whole life without fitting in, so why should I panic now and fit into statistics?" (151). With the planting of "twelve wild roses" around the cottage, Jarman renders the image of the "sleeping princess" walled about by briars literal, suggesting that escape may shade into an updated form of imprisonment when the struggle for agency is given up for the peace of the narcoleptic. The garden at Prospect Cottage embodies a conflicted relation to time and to the process of crafting history, or "making" a "pharmakon."¹⁴ Resisting "belief" in his "own mortality" as preordained by the

¹⁴Daniel O'Quinn argues that Jarman's garden precipitates him out of history and time, and into an alternative archeology of "sacred somitical space" (115).

narrativization of AIDS, Jarman seeks less to dull the senses than he does to heighten them, and thereby to distill some nurturance from the world. Still, the “sticks and stones” and rusted metal out of which he builds his Eden persist from season to season, despite the sense in which “all this disappears in the burgeoning spring,” standing as continuing reminders of the world Jarman finds inimical (37; 109). Likewise, some practice of freedom more tenuous than escape — some more perilous, and yet less fantastic “gap” in the prison wall — constitutes the project of Jarman’s autobiographical writings.¹⁵ I wish to seek after its possibilities, and after its conditions.¹⁶

In *At Your Own Risk*, the more overtly theoretical / polemical of his two extended written memoirs on HIV/AIDS, Jarman’s proleptic intervention in the mourning of his death occurs by means of a carefully calibrated play with the first-person pronoun, echoing

¹⁵I use the word “freedom” in the sense Foucault derives from his reading of the “moral problematization of pleasures” in Greek and Greco-Roman culture. “more than a nonenslavement, more than an emancipation that would make the individual independent of any exterior or interior constraint; in its full, positive form, it [freedom] was a power that one brought to bear on oneself in the power one exercised over others” (*The Use of Pleasure* 80).

¹⁶Jarman’s “sadness” consistently contradicts the introduction of myths that would organize his grief more “economically.” We may mark the extent of Jarman’s memoir’s dissent from Anne Hunsaker Hawkins’s category of “pathography” in *Reconstructing Illness*. Emphasizing the abiding power of “mythic thinking” (and citing myths of battle, journey, dying, and healthy-mindedness), Hawkins characterizes the ““pathographical act”” as “one that constructs meaning by subjecting raw experience to the powerful impulse to make sense of it all, to bind together the events, feelings, thoughts, and sensations that occur during an illness into an integrated whole” (18).

his early strategy of “putting in the ‘I’ rather than the ‘they’” (27).¹⁷ In practice, though, the “I” is not consistently singular or self-present. Jarman aligns himself, rather, with his lost friends, positioning himself as a specter in the context of his writing about his own life:

Shall I begin on the day that I was overwhelmed by guilt? — I had survived. So many of my friends caved in under the hate; I have known men to die for love but more to die for hate. As the years passed, I saw in the questioner’s eyes the frustrations of coming to terms with life; are you still here? Some were brutally frank: ‘When are you going to die?’

Didn’t you know I died years ago with David and Terry, Howard, the two Pauls. This is my ghostly presence, my ghostly eye. ‘I had AIDS last year,’ I said with a smile and they looked at me as if I was treating their tragedy flippantly. ‘Oh yes I had AIDS last year. Have you had it?’

‘What are you doing next Mr. Jarman?’ What comes after, after, after, that’s the problem when you survive. (*AYOR* 9)

As Deborah Esch has observed of this passage, Jarman’s play with temporality “eludes recuperation by a realism that would dictate (in advance and among other things) that ‘death is only a matter of when’” (134). But if the emphasis is on eluding the apparent inevitability of a certain cultural narrative, and on survival by means of a “singular impropriety” (134), then what precisely are Jarman’s legacies to us, as we read him now, and in the future? Jarman’s insistence on the “ghostliness” of his presence in a passage so emphatically cast in the present tense foregrounds his allegiance with the dead, setting this

¹⁷The polemical register of *At Your Own Risk* is clearly signaled by the title, which, as Peake notes, echoes the “designation given in gay guides to the more dangerous places to cruise or search for casual sex” (488).

loyalty against those interlocutors who would possess (and consume) this “tragedy” in the space created by what they desire: tidily finished deaths. Jarman identifies and plays on what he sees in “the questioner’s eyes,” “the frustrations of coming to terms with life,” with Jarman’s persistence in living “as the years passed.” He offers himself, in response to this inhospitable gaze, not as author, but as *specter*, as an untimely, “ghostly eye” to whose disjointed perspective readers are demanded, in turn, to submit themselves. Jarman writes, in other words, as representative of a collective, a generation, *and, furthermore*, subjects himself to the collaborative goodwill of others if his point of view is to be perpetuated, not abruptly attenuated. Such a linking across “generations,” as it were, of authors and readers, acknowledges his privilege as “survivor” and witness of others’ lives. In the same moment, Jarman risks the very exposure that he worries about and criticizes: exposure to the potential for misreading, a possibility borne out of the impulse to triumph somehow over the dead by appropriating their voices. This necessary exposure to the possibility of misinterpretation exemplifies the situation of dependency pinpointed by Judith Butler in her introduction to *The Psychic Life of Power*, and it goes to the heart of Jarman’s “reparative” project, suggesting the difficulty — even the unlikeliness — of survival on anything like his own terms, terms corresponding to “love” rather than to “hate”: since, “as the condition of becoming a subject, subordination implies being in a mandatory submission,” the very “desire” for “survival” may make one more prone to the exigencies of power, and, therefore, the compromises it would exact (7). The “ghostliness” of Jarman’s “presence” — the mutability of the prosopopoeias by which he

engages our attention — asks readers to think again about how “the one who holds out the promise of continued existence plays to the desire to survive” (7), about how social “legibility” imposes certain conditions on that survival, too often a path that would seem to ensure that the dead will not return.

II: Rereading the Quilt: Recuperation or Reparation?

Registering so scrupulously in his writings about his own life and illness “the workings of social power” on that life and the project of representing it, Jarman, like Gary Fisher and Eric Michaels, writes from a paradoxical position: as one of a “field” of “objects marked for death” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 27). In the course of her discussion, Butler connects the predicament of subjection to the particular possibilities for erasure that are risked by the subject who writes or speaks publicly as HIV+. She worries particularly about “the melancholic aggression and the desire to vanquish, that characterizes the public response to the death of many of those considered ‘socially dead,’ who die from AIDS Gay people, prostitutes, drug users, among others” (27). Returning us to the dynamic of social abjection that underpins subject formation, where “social existence” depends on “social differentiation,” Butler argues that the narrative sentence or plot seems always to be written in the following manner: “If they are dying or already dead, let us vanquish them again” (27). So if subjectivity is generated by “dependency on a discourse we never chose” (2), any utterances would seem always conditioned by this imperative and its contexts, and thus always prey to interpretation that reconfirms that

subordinate relation. And, in a compensatory twist, by way of an “inversion of that [melancholic] aggression,” the other is “cast” “as the (unlikely) persecutor of the socially normal and normalized” (27). But Jarman’s writings do not rest with this recognition, nor do they consistently attempt to assuage woundedness with fantasies of escape; rather, they force us to grapple with Butler’s central query: “What would it mean for the subject to desire something other than its continued ‘social existence’?” (28). Extending Foucault’s emphasis on the purpose of “philosophical activity” in a contemporary context as “the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known” (*The Use of Pleasure* 9), Butler asks whether “existence” can “nevertheless be risked, death courted or pursued, in order *to expose* and *open to transformation* the hold of social power on the conditions of life’s persistence?” (my emphasis 28). In Jarman’s writings, the “moral imperatives and ethical calculations” of the queer subject, and the HIV+ subject, bring the civic/pedagogical subject into a more porous, less rigorously defended relation to the “abject” of the ill body, pleasure, and mortality (*Unbecoming* 25). In other words, if by foregrounding the call to write gay autobiography, Jarman to some degree wants to claim, or even to preserve “the subject as continuous, visible, and located,” offering his own account as an alternative to majority culture’s distortions of queer lives, this project cannot be so much a matter of simple substitution, a strategy that, Butler’s argument implies, would be destined to be absorbed and neutralized by the majority culture (*Psychic Life* 29). But, in the sense that his published journals are “haunted by an inassimilable remainder” in the form of his

continuing attachment to his lost generation, giving rise to “a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivation,” they perform the tasks of cultural exposure and transformation, channelling that excess of affect into a project dedicated to sustenance (29). In turn, a “remainder” — in the form of a ghostly “eye” or “I” — haunts those who read him (29). And, as I have been intimating, this “remainder” is turned, subtly, to a project of reparation.

It is at this point of ambivalence and risk in Jarman’s text that my own position as a reader is thrown into sharpest relief and that questions of guilt and the psychic desire or need for triumph wrested their way, inevitably, into the foreground of my discussion. I first read Jarman shortly after my uncle died of HIV related illnesses, and I was initially (and still am) attracted by the book’s potential as *pharmakon*. Still, I find myself asking, in what sense was I always preparing myself for Peter’s death, always setting up ways to mourn? This is possibly why memories of the weakness of his rage, the little cruelties of his behavior, his jealousy when I went to visit him and departed too soon are so upsetting — I had been anticipating something much more spiritually significant, and thereby some consolation. What does it mean to be disappointed by the manner of someone else’s death? What may I do with this grief and regret, or how may I frame it? Will it lead inevitably to other recuperative gestures, borne out of a long-established pattern, fueled by the panicked media narrative which has conditioned my frame of vision?

My own position as reader of Jarman’s text aligns to a significant extent, then, with the position of “family member,” the position with which I have been so preoccupied,

and so critical of, in this study; it is analogous, to some degree, with Amy Hoffman's and Jamaica Kincaid's position as witnesses of others' stories, the stories of their "siblings."

What I want to pursue here, more specifically, is the way in which Jarman's text has become for me much more extraordinarily educational than I had expected upon picking up the book, how it has demanded a reading strategy that would force a disarticulation of my own most pressing reading agendas, those "ongoing" schemes of "neutralization" that, in Derrida's phrase, "would attempt to conjure away a danger" (*Specters of Marx* 32).¹⁸

What does this education consist of? How might I write about it without writing him another tidying obituary? Corroborating and expanding on the consequences of what Derrida describes as "the manic, jubilatory, and incantatory form that Freud assigned to the so-called triumphant phase of mourning work," Butler elucidates how *guilt* characteristically produces an intensified "desire for triumph," thus necessitating the jubilant and desperate certitude mourning may generate ("Introduction" 26-27). But she also asks, "without a repetition that risks life – in its current organization – how might we begin to imagine the contingency of that organization, and performatively reconfigure the contours of the conditions of life?" (29). The question of "this respect for justice

¹⁸The context for this comment pertains to the fate of the "*Marxist reference*" in current theoretical discourse which would read Marx in a scholarly fashion, as philosophy, rather than as a theory of political and economic revolution; the reference is neutralized "by putting on a tolerant face, to neutralize a potential force, first of all by enervating a *corpus*, by silencing in it the revolt [the *return* is acceptable provided that the *revolt*, which initially inspired uprising, indignation, insurrection, revolutionary momentum, does not come back]" (31).

concerning those who *are not there*” is central to “the politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” that I am using to frame my discussion of Jarman (Derrida xix).

In many ways, the cultural practices that have accumulated around the public memorialization of HIV/ AIDS in North American consumer society ensure that our remembering involves a repression. As Sturken argues in *Tangled Memories*, this potential for systemic “forgetting” is nowhere more evident than in the practices of memory inscribed in the AIDS quilt, in its various national and more local permutations. If, on the level of an individual panel, naming the dead becomes a synecdoche for “coming out,” as Sturken suggests, then the process of “destigmatization” may be arrested in and by that speech act, by the bounds imposed by a certain domesticating context (186-187).¹⁹ Add to that the sense in which “through the simple act of testifying or confessing to feelings of regret, the speaker achieves a kind of cleansing of guilt,” and perhaps is able to “assign meaning” by way of “redemptive transformation” (190), through an Antigone-like staging of a family romance that would restore the threatened male body. (Gestures of destigmatization work, moreover, with an alarming regularity to mask privilege, “reiterating” in their hesitancy the “significant divisions in American society,” namely the

¹⁹ As Butler emphasizes in *Excitable Speech*, “The possibility for a speech act to resignify a prior context depends, in part, upon the gap between the originating context or intention by which an utterance is animated and the effects it produces” (14). The context provided by the quilt, I am suggesting, might be altogether too close to the recuperative project of the family romance.

inequalities that are brought into relief by the epidemic [209].)²⁰ Jarman, the fabricator of a whole chorus of his own self-memorializations — indeed his art practice shares with the quilt a commitment to the “found,” the domestic, and the improvisational — did not hesitate to voice his criticism of the quilt, and his objections reverberate with those raised by Sturken:

When the AIDS quilt came to Edinburgh during the film festival, I attended just out of duty. I could see it was an emotional work, it got the heartstrings. But when the panels were unveiled a truly awful ceremony took place, in which a group of what looked like refrigerated karate experts, all dressed in white, turned and chanted some mumbo jumbo – horrible, quasi-religious, false. I shall haunt anyone who ever makes a panel for me. (*Derek Jarman's Garden* 91)

The quilt's privileging of emotion creates an opening for two kinds of responses that bother Jarman. The relation of the viewer to art becomes one of mere “duty,” and this dutiful reaction unfolds in the space of a “quasi-religious” public ritual, suggesting, furthermore, the mandatory and limited quality of the emotional response that is being elicited; whatever political potential the quilt might possess is eviscerated by this “truly

²⁰ Contrasting the disruptions posed to American collective memory by the AIDS epidemic with those of the Vietnam War, Sturken argues that the “AIDS epidemic will not be historicized and rescripted as the Vietnam War has been, to smooth over its rupture” (179). Though she admits the danger of the “translation of a disruptive narrative into familiar clichés,” this does not stop her from praising the “radical steps” taken by films such as *Philadelphia* and *And the Band Played On* (177). Against Sturken's attempt to be even-handed, I would insist that “simple narratives” continue to take hold, especially in mainstream narrative film and television, even as memory is acknowledged in some critical contexts to be “complicated” and “tangled” (182).

awful ceremony.” Extending his suspicions about the commodification of mourning, in the same passage Jarman insists that Keith Haring’s graffiti art, while it served to “raise consciousness,” ultimately “failed to turn tragedy beyond the domestic” (91). And elsewhere his skepticism extends to the intertwining of the art and fund-raising worlds — to the sense in which “dues” are “paid” by affluent artists “in cash not spirit,” and to the suspicion that guilt means that “We are all kind to friends who are dying” (*MN* 91).²¹ Likewise, speculating on the “relations of mourning” in “White Glasses” in the context of her friendship with Michael Lynch, Sedgwick points to the quilt’s implication in the “ravenously denuding” mode of memory that is obituary discourse (265). Although there is a sense in which the quilt may evoke many “possible tones,” it can also be read as possessing “a nostalgic ideology” that flattens the personal experiences it seeks to represent, and, relatedly, as occupying a “sometimes obstructive niche in the ecology of gay organizing and self-formation” (265).²² But the most unequivocally “paranoid”

²¹Jarman here performs a strange projection of what he perhaps fears are the implications of his own work onto other cultural projects. His criticism of Keith Haring’s art as “domestic,” and perhaps feminine, for example, echoes quite closely the dismissive reviews of Jarman’s own work, as documented in *Modern Nature*. The critical response to *The Garden* was mixed, and the particular criticisms expressed by Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* are tinged (according to Jarman’s recitation of the them) with a homophobic, and gender-inflected bias: “*Derek Jarman has made a movie of epic irrelevance that, when it rises to the occasion, is merely redundant Mr. Jarman, whose films include Sebastiane and Caravaggio, has a weakness for the kind of baroque imagery that is utterly beside the point. The last line: Mr. Jarman decorates a film as much as he directs it*” (234).

²²“White Glasses” predates Sedgwick’s working out of the distinction between “paranoid” and “reparative” reading in her introduction to *Novel Gazing*, of course, but we can well

reading of the quilt belongs to Jeff Nunokawa. Citing “homophobic reticence” as the source of “the Names Project in the first place,” Nunokawa argues that the “canonization” of the quilt “in the dominant media” confirms, even exploits the retrograde promise of its originating impulse. In other words, “if the majority culture is not inclined to recognize the death of the male homosexual, it is also not inclined to recognize anything else about him; if the majority culture grants no notice to his death, it also inters him from the start” (319). These criticisms are persuasive; they ring with a certain paranoid truth. Indeed, as Derrida argues of the aims and methods of “effective exorcism,” as they have been brought to bear on Marx and his legacies “in the ideological supermarkets of a worried West” (68), exorcism “pretends to declare death only in order to put to death” (48); and while it may seem passive to the extent that it is presented as inevitable, exorcism is an *active* form of forgetting, a motivated (because guilt-ridden) kind of erasure, and one that distorts even when it does not “put to death.” Certainly Derek Jarman, who so much values being “able to explore our problems and celebrate our achievements without being contextualised by Heterosoc” (*AYOR* 79), vehemently (albeit flippantly and somewhat inconsistently) resists the pattern of containment via exorcism that the quilt would seem, according to these analyses, to reinstate.²³

label this particular line of questioning “paranoid” for the worry and rage it evokes.

²³ My choice of the verb “reinstate” is not arbitrary, but, rather, suggests how the quilt, in its frequently national settings, enacts a certain incorporation of subcultures into a homogenous, straight, masculine ideal of the nation. As Sturken summarizes, “The implied patriotism and connotations of family heritage implicit in the quilt form threaten to

We may ask, though, whether melancholy is always contained within the framework of regret and recuperation — through their proffering of release from mourning, through their potential, in Sturken's terms, to "mollify" "incommunicability" (199) — or whether it may also, when its context is shifted ever-so-slightly, engender a reparative agenda. "Exorcism," according to Derrida, may not always be jubilatory, triumphant, manic. With the introduction of another context for reading, one distinct or disjointed from the imperatives of the patriotic ego, it might be possible, as Derrida suggests,

To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other *arrivants* to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome — without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of a concern for *justice*. (175)

Under what circumstances may *revenants* — such as Jarman's "ghostly presence" — return to be "welcomed" rather than "chased away" by either denial or domestication? Let us take an example from early activist work vis-à-vis the quilt. In his personal introduction to *In the Shadow of the Epidemic*, Walt Odets describes the experience of viewing quilt panels during the time he spent as a volunteer in 1987 for the Committee for the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, an organization which shared space with the Names Project quilt (2). The circumstance of sharing a storefront with the

rescript those memorialized in the AIDS quilt into a narrative of Americana in a country that has systematically marked them as outsiders" (215).

Names Project meant that, as he sat at his desk, Odets found himself confronted with a constant, close up view of the work of the quilt project; this viewing of the quilt took place out of sync with the ordinary timing by which the “general public” is habituated to viewing public monuments. And Odets’ description of this happenstance suggests that the affective impact of the panels exceeds what may be inferred as their originating purpose, when viewed collectively, prior to their installation in a public space. Glimpsed in the process of its making, the quilt is far from being completely explained in terms of a nostalgic ideology. As Odets explains, “Although the panels are intended to memorialize and celebrate the lives of those who have died, the stacks of unopened boxes, awaiting attention from overworked staff, began to make me think less and less of celebration, and more and more of newly arrived corpses” (3). Significantly, then, Odets views the panels from an estranged view – not in their proposed *national* American context (that is, the Mall in Washington, a state-sanctioned venue for public memorials [Sturken 215]). The panels maintain, somehow, their metonymic relation to the bodies they memorialize; as Odets testifies, “Each panel, however simple, seemed the story of a full human life, but each had also ended in the awful stranglehold of AIDS” (3). In this unplanned, unforeseen context, the memorializing impulse that motivates the production of panels for the quilt seems to turn against itself, offering life stories and showing how they have been thwarted by a terrible epidemic on a massive scale. If the quilt inevitably flattens the fragments it incorporates, then it does not erase them entirely and leaves open the possibility that the

unruly bodies the quilt represents might, through their disruption of place and time, resist their being woven into a national diorama of grief and guilt.

We may tentatively make an analogy between the quilt as handiwork and the work of the memoirist or diarist, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of the reader or critic of that work. In the course of his reflections on the quilt's status as "*labor*," Thomas Yingling argues that, whatever the myths in which it is implicated,

the quilt is in some profound way disturbing (handicraft in an era of consumer goods, and motivated neither by profit nor beauty; handicraft where the trace of labor and its social referent remains visible, where that is indeed what defines its value – an unreifiable practice; labor seeking to intervene in an appalling alienation and both out of love and anguish encoded on the surface of the object). ("AIDS in America" 307)

Yingling argues, then, that motivated, or at least contextualized, as it may be by the triumphalist impulses of mourning, "as an *artifact* the quilt continues to challenge our understanding, and any cognitive accommodation that is forthcoming remains marked as radically by difference as by identity" (307). The piecing together of fabric along with other found fragments to represent a life far from definitively inters the subjects of its representations. Quilt-making's most distinctive characteristics may be, rather, its function as a form of contextualization for the various metonymies suggested by "found objects"; its production of a surface; and its tactile quality. Quilts are also provisional, subject to disintegration over time, since fabric will fade, rip, untidy itself; so too, fabric invites the prospect of mending or alteration. What we bear witness to in viewing the quilt is, possible, a strange archive, one in which melancholic incorporation (and its attendant

disrespect for boundaries) intermingles with more nostalgic tendencies, and with an idealized connection across gender, sexuality, and desire, as well as across familial and national structures. The traces the quilt bears of an “unreifiable practice” are illuminating for my consideration of Derek Jarman in particular because of the radically “found” qualities of Jarman’s own art practice (307).²⁴ Quilt-making, as a local, improvisatory, and (most often) *amateur* practice of storytelling, may be interpreted as a practice of survival that “constructs a communal reference system of knowledge and value in which

²⁴Though he is perhaps best known as a filmmaker and writer, Jarman began and ended his career as a painter (having also worked as a set designer during the 1970s). From a technical point of view, Jarman’s use of “collage and object trouvés” in painting is paralleled by “superimposition and complex editing in film” along with his incorporation of his own and his parents’ Super-8 footage (Roger Wollen, “Introduction: Facets of Derek Jarman” 15). As Jonathan Hacker and David Price point out, “Jarman’s aesthetic impulse centres on the value of art, not for the viewer but for the creator,” and accordingly he emphasizes “process” rather than “product” and embraces the “collaborative nature of film-making” (“Essay on Derek Jarman” 232). Peake points to Jarman’s incorporation of the results of his beachcombing into his art during his years living in London’s docklands, tracing this back, in turn, to his childhood habits: “The boy who had stared so fixedly at flowers had become a man who could stare with equal intensity at the detritus in his path and isolate its beauty. ... Now, by giving new life to the discarded and the decaying, he was questioning what should be valued, what rejected” (150). Overall, Peter Wollen summarizes, “there is a lasting tension in his work between a delirious neoromantic Englishness and a pop modernism, always in touch with ‘street culture’” (“The Last New Wave: Modernism in the British Films of the Thatcher Era” 248). In the late paintings, “the visual field becomes a complex densely worked site of simultaneous overlay and excavation,” where the mark of the artist’s hand is visible in the finger-painted text super-imposed on canvases that might be considered “pastiche” of Abstract Expressionism (Stuart Morgan, “Borrowed Time” 114-115). Titles amongst this group of paintings (most of which were completed in 1992) include *Toxo*, *Sick*, *Letter to the Minister*, and *Queer*.

experience becomes recognizable through collective frameworks and becomes therefore communicable *as experience* rather than abbreviated or atrophied” (307). This is a practice that may counteract, as Yingling suggests, drawing on Benjamin’s “The Storyteller,” the “world of information and industrial alienation” in which AIDS is constructed as a spectacle (307). Indeed, Jarman’s favored techniques as painter, filmmaker, writer, and gardener — collage and collaboration — have an affinity with quilt-making that is obfuscated in the rage he projects on to the nationally celebrated, contextualized AIDS quilt he views in Edinburgh. In describing his autobiographical practices, he notes, for example, his sense of having “had *to piece together a life* under a great dark cloud of censure and ignorance” (my emphasis *AYOR* 5). Jarman turned to his art not as a forum for resolving his grudge against “Heterosoc,” but rather as a medium for the production of contexts that would resist his stories’ being absorbed into by the narrative workings of the majority culture’s guilt complex, that would resist the fetishization that occurs, as Kristeva emphasizes, “when the activating sorrow” of a work of art “is repudiated” (*Black Sun* 9). Corroborating that self-preservation, that insistence on maintaining a context in which the encoding of “love and anguish” serves reparation, not guilt, Jarman referred to painting, for example, as his “lifeline,” even when his continuing to work as a painter required that he depend on the hands — the labour — of others “to help stretch and prepare the canvases, as well as mix the paint” (Peake 493-494).

At another remove, this conception of the quilt as “artifact” or handiwork, together with Jarman’s practices of “found art,” allows for a critical rephrasing of the ethical questions that each of these cultural productions poses to its interpreters. How might we define the contours of a reading practice that could resist the compensatory aggressions of mourning? What kind of reading practices might avoid hurrying interpretation toward the performance of another, more definitive death, but rather to promote the continuation of a conversation with a ghost that persists in the traces of a certain labour? With the recycling and recontextualizing of Jarman’s obituaries that occurred in the months after they first appeared indicates, there emerge, I want to argue, the seeds of a critical practice that is — like the “arts of existence” he himself models — “at odds with AIDS.” It holds out the possibility of a critical practice able to attend to the “originary im-pertinence” of Jarman’s writings as he gathers together the fragments of his life (Düttmann 3-4). Specifically, the reciting of Colin MacCabe’s “official” obituary for Jarman in the context of a special issue of *Critical Quarterly* subtitled “Critically Queer” displaces the initial reading context with another, more hospitable one; MacCabe’s phrasing becomes more personal, as though to reappropriate Jarman back into a queer context — “it is unbearable,” he writes, “that *we* have lost Derek” (my emphasis viii).

More provocatively yet, the context provided by Sue Golding’s essay “Pariah Bodies” in this issue of *Critical Quarterly* replaces, and criticizes, precisely what Jarman most feared: “contextualisation” by “Heterosoc,” the claiming of “our sexuality” by “those who seek to sanitise its expression and weave it into the fabric of bourgeoisie [sic] British

morality” (*AYOR* 21,79). Concerned with documenting how majority straight culture’s habits of interpretation threaten to make even her essay, written in rage and despair, into a bloodless “museum artifact,” Golding warns the tauntingly labelled “kind and gentle” / “gentle and thoughtful reader” that “this record of our existence is *not* for posterity! (emphasis in original 28). The dynamics of bourgeois recuperation would “neatly arrange” grief “for selective viewing, well behind protective glass,” as though it could be a neat, unequivocal inheritance (28). Golding’s words shatter the primacy, the integrity of this point of view, insisting that “grief” is not a consumer good to be experienced at the safe distance museums and zoos afford to the exotic for the paying customer. It is, rather, an experience of intimacy, a confrontation with what Western culture ordinarily categorizes as abject, namely, the tactile and the olfactory, a confrontation of which the quilt is sometimes capable of producing, too: “If what you want is to ‘ooohh’ and ‘aaahh’ from the other side, with your upturned noses pressed against the supposed boundary between us, then: go away! For this is about skin” (28). In this account, the boundary between PWA and caregiver is porous, and, with defenses removed in this way, their proximity allows pain and frustration to reach extremes of melancholy: “Robby’s dementia is giving substance to my own: as he rushes to and fro, whilst moving not at all, utterly obsessed with painting canvasses he can no longer touch or smell or see, I want to rip the hair from my head; I want to tear my clothes; I want to walk shoeless” (30). Like Jarman, Robby is a painter; his obsession “with painting canvasses he can no longer touch or smell or see”

has the effect of bringing Golding closer to her own body, instigating grief's most physical reactions.

Might Jarman's writing inspire a similar response in his readers? Rescued from the status of "museum artifact," at least provisionally, by way of their own emphasis on skin and sadness, to what future readings are Jarman's texts liberated? Meditating on skin (a permeable and mostly opaque boundary) in opposition to glass (impermeable and transparent), Golding's statements demand that we attend to the sensual world, specifically to the intimacy of the tactile, as opposed to the specular relations attendant on the visual (when it coincides with other impulses to contain what is defined as "abject"). And indeed, to suggest that Jarman's texts be read as activating a ghostly "presence." His specter is an emphatically sensuous one that resists neat correlation with abstractions, whether they are contemptuous or the product of the more subtly exorcizing labels of therapy or "prophecy." Fragmented, and often conflicted in the meanings they attaches to the memories that are resurfacing, Jarman's writings, especially *Modern Nature*, asks us to do what Deborah Britzman, in her theory of queer pedagogy, describes as "think[ing] through the structures of textuality," in order to reflect on what desires and conceptual limits we bring to the text, as well as the places where the text demands us to reshape these (93). What I want to attend to in what follows is the rupturing and tentative reorganization of memories, places, times, and bodies that Jarman's memoirs theorize and perform. The force of melancholy, of the memory of skin, is what makes his autobiography (and, as we shall see, his "pedagogy") resistant to being "arranged" for

“selective viewing,” keeping in view the objects which he accrues in the project of caring for a self, and a generation, over which he agonizes and which he persists in loving (28).

III: “Through Sick Eyes”: Inhabiting a Body with AIDS

Modern Nature, generically best described as a “revised” diary, balances the quotidian with a pattern of sequential development, as it traces Jarman’s transition from defining himself as HIV+ to inhabiting a body now increasingly prey to multiple opportunistic infections, a body with AIDS (240). Though the emotions are deeply felt and highly personal, Jarman observes that he had always been “conscious ... of the limitations and loyalties” of the diary “as I have always been aware that it would be published” (298). Given these inbuilt pressures, the resounding question is “how much can it [the diary] tell of our dilemma?” (298). At certain moments, he is highly protective about the “depressed” condition that attends his increasing illness. Fighting flu, for example, in January of 1990, Jarman observes that he is “the most depressed I can remember,” noting that “the only consolation is I’ve given it to no-one, just spluttered it into this diary” (218). Far from being held back from public view, Jarman’s melancholy becomes the substance of his chronicle of illness; and, indeed, it is the accidental-seeming, “spluttering” quality of Jarman’s journal that makes it succeed in “telling of our dilemma,” even though in another sense it “fails” finally to resolve the crisis. Much as Jarman’s garden, in incorporating the results of his beachcombing activities in the “random” section at the back of the garden, while seeking a more formal, controlled, “symbolic” effect in the

front, *Modern Nature* collects and arranges the “shadowy secrets” that “congregate like moths” around the generative source of a strange, menacing, and yet illuminating force: his body’s vulnerability to illness. (Indeed, at the time of his purchase of Prospect Cottage, Jarman assumed that the property afforded no opportunity to create a garden; it was with much surprise on his part, then, that the garden came into being in such an unlikely place, the “plants plonked in and left to take their chances in the winds of Dungeness” [*Derek Jarman’s Garden* 14].) If the “nuclear industry” represents “the rot at the core of democracy,” the AIDS pandemic — especially the panic that exposes the prejudices that lurk behind the democratic principles of civil societies — also appears to loom beyond the scale of individual or community agency. Jarman’s questions about organizing the community at Dungeness are equally applicable, then, to the AIDS pandemic: “What can any of us do? And what information do we have?” (240).

In *Modern Nature* Jarman takes back the refuse of the social systems that would alternately survey and penalize him, subjecting him, that is, to a certain narrative discipline that would predetermine what it means to inhabit a body with AIDS. Avoiding passivity *and* heroism, Jarman testifies about his illness in a manner that shifts the terms of his own subjection, making room in this account for the circulation of grief, desire, and love. In a situation where, as Julien Smith argues in her discussion of AIDS and ethics, “the most ordinary capacities of the body, such as the body’s ability to retain food, fail,” and where the queer body has accordingly been read as sabotaging its own health, and thus confessing to “sickness,” Jarman’s testimony insists on sustenance (*The Constructed Body*

77). Inviting a comparison, perhaps, with the sea kale of Dungeness, which “survive in this terrain because they have roots at least twenty feet long,” Jarman’s record of his illness identifies, and nurtures, in other words, the sources of his own tenacity in a hostile environment (*Derek Jarman’s Garden* 18). “Survival” is cultivated on a vertical dimension rather than a horizontal, future-oriented one, as *Modern Nature* perpetuates the “instant” (perhaps of affective or libidinal investment in the natural world) that, in Derrida’s phrase, is “not docile to time,” to a narrative, that is, of an exorcism that would repeatedly declare social death in the act of anticipating a literal one (*Specters of Marx* xx). More specifically, Jarman’s own identification of three crucial recurring topoi — “flowers, boys and childhood memories” — suggest that these are the sources in which he “can find strength” (*MN* 91). But the journal is far from hinging all its hopes on the retrospective construction of a lost sexual ideal of gay communality. Rather than preoccupying himself with the loss of his body’s imagined natural coherence, or the imagined coherent egalitarianism of his generation, Jarman now invests his bodily experiences — excessively — with a wild, wandering, and often inconsistent surge of affect, so that his web of references to “flowers, boys, and childhood memories” may affirm desire and love in the face of prejudice and doom.²⁵ And what takes on great importance here is the way in which Jarman’s play with shifting levels of immediacy and

²⁵ Ellis, Esch, and O’Quinn all comment at some length on Jarman’s technique of massive, often unmarked quotations from his wide readings in art history and Renaissance writings in particular.

estrangement transfers his anxiety to his readers; the constantly mutating quality of our relation to his detailing of his illness implicates us in the project of ensuring the continued visibility of his “sources of strength” in excess of the usual frames for constructing the body with AIDS.

Jarman is wary of “the idea of the hospital and the socialisation of my death,” and, in particular, to the “institutionalisation of cures,” a phenomenon of which the AIDS quilt might be a prime example, and the expectations we have of pharmaceutical “cure” another (*AYOR* 99). This circumspection is substantiated through the playing out of Jarman’s first-person perspective on the effects of the opportunistic infections to which his body is vulnerable. As Smith emphasizes, “illness throws us back upon our bodies, which we can no longer assume will be there for us. The body, so familiar, feels unusual in illness, not quite itself” (77). The chaos that was there all of the time suddenly shows itself, undermining the assumed grounds of a coherent subjectivity. Indeed, as Elizabeth Grosz’s summary of the implications of Freud’s comments on “Mourning and Melancholia” suggests, since “mourning is a reclamation of libido from unreciprocated investments which have emptied the ego,” illness tends to the disclosure of the shakiness of this process of reclamation (29). Accordingly, “when the subject is ill, the ego is unable to sufficiently invest external objects to give them attention” (29). In this state of perpetual irresolution of loss, “libido is directed towards the subject’s own body, appearing to replace an external love object with its own body, or, at least, its pain” (29). In *Modern Nature* Jarman pursues such investment in his own body, though the returns from this

project seem to diminish as the body itself does; however, if AIDS may be labelled, as Eric Michaels offers so caustically, “a kind of cosmic personal reducing plan, where one by one certain functions disappear,” then investment in what remains of the body’s functions occurs with unprecedented ferocity. Jarman’s testimony thus contradicts the media-made narratives that in his view would hasten the deaths of people deemed socially expendable or undesirable; these tendencies are exemplified in what Jarman refers to as the “starvation diet” for people with HIV who are dependent on the state for financial aid (54); they are also evident in the distressed state into which Jarman finds he is forced, so that he goes “back and forth in the garden, like the boy with anorexia who weighed himself every five minutes” (77).

Small details of daily life capture Jarman’s indignation, I want to suggest, then, and they often rest without an explicit interpretive frame, leaving them surging with an at first unchannelled intensity of affect. Daily encounters with the mirror, as he prepares his face for others to view, force the marking of time. The dramatic changes in Jarman’s appearance take him by surprise: “The razor bumps across the bones of my face. Even the bones themselves have shrunk. My hands seem half their normal size. My raw stomach aches and aches” (251). The “amazed” observation that he has “shrunk” prompts a negation — “I haven’t turned into a little old man” — followed by an admission that “as I have a bath my bones grind against the enamel, creak ominously” (257). Here his body loses its familiarity, emerging as mechanical / skeletal rather than sensual / fleshly, as though it were taking on a textural similarity to the rough shingle beach of Dungeness.

We see the body's transformation not as a wasting away, as a liquefying of the body, as we did in Kincaid's account of Devon's illness or Amy Hoffman's of Mike Riegle, but almost as a hardening, a paring down to its more essential elements, a process which is described with such understatement that we cannot be sure whether to be horrified or not.²⁶ Still, the components of the "ritual" of shaving are, accordingly, rendered "topsy turvy," as Jarman finds that the routine marking of time is unmoored (257). While he notes that he "still splosh[es] handfuls of hot water at my face to soften the hairs," counting "to 68," the significance of the ritual has changed, almost without his noticing, in a way that reflects Jarman's changed sense of the relation of his life to narrative time. Now, he finds that he must alter the words that accompany his actions: "I used to say to myself each splosh for a year of life" (257). Crucially, though, Jarman insists that this defamiliarization of the body "acquaints" him with it, as though "for the first time in my life" by the sense in which he is now compelled to "explore" it (260). And he correlates his physical "weakness" with the "heighten[ing]" of "every perception," noting that the "snail's pace" at which he is forced to write makes him attend to the bodily effort that goes into the recording of his experience (261). By offering these details of his own body's pushing against the boundaries of the abject, and, specifically, by presenting them

²⁶This contrast sheds light on the status of "abjection" as an intersubjective relation. Viewed at second hand, the failure of "the most ordinary capacities of the body" are (almost inevitably) viewed with horror. Accounted for by a subject experiencing the process of a body's failure to sustain itself, the shift is just as dramatic, but, here at least, it is not imbued with repulsion.

in their “minimal visibility, in [their] extreme manifestations constituted by pain and melancholia” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 122), but without installing the “signifying brand” of “repugnance, disgust, abjection” (*Powers of Horror* 11), the diary maintains a sense of Jarman’s own body as an active force, if not an agented one, a newly spectral (and spectrally sensuous) entity that demands recognition of, even love for, its shifting contours.

Switching, momentarily, to the point of view of the well, mimicking, possibly, the vantage point of those who might see themselves as safely distanced from the risk groups for HIV/AIDS, Jarman observes that “There is a natural impulse to wish those who reproach our good health with illness quite dead: a great building burnt to ashes, a painting slashed, a tree fallen, the past cleared away for the future. Little deaths. All of us feel satisfaction in a dark corner” (231). In his commentary on others’ illnesses and death, he contests the inevitability of this “impulse” to abject them, as well as the connected assumption that futurity depends on embracing the healthy to the social exclusion of the ill. In doing so, he corroborates Düttmann’s problematizing of the “aporetic” relation “between sickness and health,” the notion that “sickness as the condition of health at the same time endangers health and can be its destruction” (47-48). Jarman’s account does not attempt to choose one side of this aporia, but cultivates an oppositional relation to the virus out of the constitutive non-coherence of subjectivity that is exposed in “contemporary experiences of being sick” (47). Emphasizing his own paradoxical position as a “living” specter, he brings into play “the strangely shapeless shape of this Being-not-

one, this fundamental undecidability, that always already affects its possible meaning” (47-48). Indeed, Jarman follows up his philosophical rumination about the relation between sickness and health, past and future with the bare declarative that “My friend Alan died today” (231). Only two weeks after he records Alan’s death, Jarman notes (and this is just one example of how losses tumble quickly one after the other in the journal) that “Sandy rang at four. Paul died in his sleep last night” (238). Placed in this particular sequence — his summary of the law governing the relation between the “healthy” and the “sick” followed without pause by the registering of Alan’s death, then the marking of Paul’s passing — the relation between the two men, a relation of friendship, is demonstrated as superseding the “rules” that might otherwise be brought into play to distinguish the living from the dead. The ill, dying, or dead body’s resistance to being “cleared away,” placed, in Golding’s phrase, “behind protective glass” is further intimated by the continuation of the poem I cited earlier:

Linked hands at four AM
 Deep under the city you slept on
 Never heard the sweet flesh song
 Cold, cold, cold they died so silently

I have no words
 My shaking hand
 Cannot express my fury
 Sadness is all I have
 Cold, cold, cold they died so silently

Matthew fucked Mark fucked Luke fucked John
 Who lay in the bed that I lie on
 Touch fingers again as you sing this song
 Cold, cold, cold they died so silently. (69-70)

Even as he experiences fear and ambivalence about “inhabiting” a body that is increasingly (and somewhat unpredictably) vulnerable to a host of opportunistic illnesses, Jarman’s chronicling of his friends’ deaths during the course of his illness stresses sexual and tactile connectedness with other men, in the past and in the present, not the opposition of his relative “health.” The shift in address here — from the “you” who “never heard the sweet flesh song” to the “you” who is instructed to “touch fingers again as you sing this song” — muddies the referent, so that it is unclear as to whether Jarman is assuming a hostile or a receptive audience; he speaks both within and outside of his “community,” annulling for all (regardless of sexual orientation or serostatus) the strategy of “clearing away” the “past” “for the future.” At the same time, his “sadness” means that others’ deaths are, remarkably, “neither dodged nor embellished” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 122). And this happens despite the fact that the multiple losses he is experiencing — the fact that “hardly a day passes without illness invading” — heightens the feeling of being overwhelmed by the disorientation of his experience of the same virus in his own body; the illusion of a “normal,” “healthy” life is jarred repeatedly by news of friends’ deaths. But the pace of these losses is not mitigated by symbolic interpretation; Jarman records the illnesses and deaths of his friends in simple, even abrupt language that calls us to attend to these events, but not necessarily to explain or interpret them. Jarman’s representational strategies imply that ethical projection into some kind of future that does not merely repeat the “cold” and “silent” (because “untouched”) quality of these deaths involves a sustained, melancholic engagement with the past rather than an attempted exorcism. We are exhorted, in fact, to

“touch fingers” with the past precisely when panic seems most inescapable, when bad news arrives in the middle of the night.

The professional distancing of the hospital staff during Jarman’s first hospitalization contrasts sharply with Jarman’s perceptions of his body, only enhancing his feeling of claustrophobic silencing, as is suggested by his image of being pursued by “the shadowy black bats of breathlessness” (290). The retorts he offers in response to their pleasantries about the weather, for instance, enforce the estrangement produced by his perspective, exposing the bias of the healthy, namely that time will unfold (or appear to unfold) in its customary way. When “The doctor worries that the sun will disappear before the weekend. I say not to worry: before his time’s up he might wish he could switch it off” (291). How strange this desire seems when it is placed side by side with the threatening interruptions of breath mirrored in Jarman’s earlier, highly alliterative prose. This same sadness — diffuse, corrosive, and profoundly estranging of the patterns (of breath, of movement) of which we assume a “normal” life consists — generates simultaneously a critique of the political and economic inertia that undermines the best intentions and efforts of the staff, whom Jarman in fact frequently praises. If, as Michaels quips, hospitals constitute a “sort of Foucauldian holy ground on which multiple lines of discourse converge,” then *Modern Nature* responds to the “institutionalisation” of illness (and its possible “cure”) by insisting on the contradictions inherent in that experience, the overlapping of medical intervention, punishment, and pathologization that the healthy are

either incapable of seeing or that they unthinkingly normalize. Released from the hospital, finally, Jarman explodes with rage at a dinner party:

My pills and the euphoria of escaping from the confines of hospital have caused me to create a scene. Michael asks me how I am.

‘Fine,’ I say, but then launch into the state of the NHS. Where, as my weight drops below 9 stone and I sweat it out, a scan takes three weeks; and Virginia Bottomley, junior health minister, sits sweetly at the foot of the bed saying everything is improving – quite impervious to the serious advice she is being given by everyone who works here. How can such charm have such deaf ears.

I shout this across the restaurant – the diners freeze, counting on their medical insurance: Have they put enough aside for the London Clinic?

As I weaved my way home very unsteadily I felt glad that I had made this scene. The pills loosen you up – no-one raised a voice against me. (282)

Jarman’s new, hyper-aware relation to his own body, along with the discipline initiated by the medical regimen, has irrevocably changed his perspective. In particular, his account of the delays in tests and treatment points to the maddening disjunction between the perfection of theory and the delays of the practice — would that hospitals were half as efficient and organized as their Foucauldian representation suggests. To be released from the institution is, moreover, not to be absolved from the perspective his confinement has generated. The passage registers a certain lack of control, an outburst of built-up emotion: Jarman describes himself as “euphoric,” describes himself as “shout[ing]” and then “weav[ing] his way home very unsteadily.” In a sense he is the ghost at this dinner party, a raging force returned from, if not death, then from a liminal experience of near-death. Revisiting Thatcher’s junior health minister’s attempt to placate him (and the citizenry in “general”) by her mere presence, Jarman juxtaposes her reassurances with the

details of his treatment under the auspices of the National Health Service; the comparison is highly unflattering and makes Virginia Bottomley's words sound hollow as they likely were. A physical presence means very little, next to nothing, when it is fashioned to suit the purposes of producing a made-for-the-media domestic / national tableau and when "charm" is a subterfuge masking "deafness" to the words of those on the frontlines. (One recalls here, too, inevitably, the widely disseminated photographs of Princess Diana shown holding the hands of PWAs.) In other words, the image produced by this visit conforms to Golding's category of "museum artifact," though to take the visit on its own terms, something Jarman refuses to do, would be to see it as a gesture of good will. It is the quietude, the normalcy, even, of the violence wreaked by the state on the bodies of the ill, especially bodies with HIV/AIDS, that makes the encounter so disturbing. Jarman's response is an excessive performance that could be dismissed as merely cranky were its acrimony not so precise.

Virginia Bottomley's symbolic efforts at reassuring all that the system is working are presented, furthermore, as paralleling the infuriatingly passive forms of censorship to which Jarman feels he has been subjected during his film-making career. Repeatedly, other people's "parties" or photo opportunities — held under the dispensation of forgetfulness that prevails in the world of the well — are disrupted by Jarman's sadness, which worries the seams of the linked social violences of censorship, prejudice, and inaction. For instance, during this period of his initial illness, Jarman's attempts to realize the film project *The Garden* (ironically, a story of persecution that retells the passion of

Christ, only with a gay couple as his substitutes) ran into serious difficulties: “Another phone call confirmed that *The Garden* had been pushed aside for the fund-raising cocktail party” (312). Jarman’s melancholy perspective extends the analysis, giving it a wider scope: “I’ve been the subject of this insidious censorship all my life. What gets funded, what doesn’t, what is shown, when and how – it all seems quite ludicrous. Laugh it off, but feel a little sad” (312). As with Bottomley’s pretending away governmental inaction, the prejudice Jarman senses he must work against is subtle in the extreme; he is certain of its existence, and yet it cannot “be proved” (312). These biases are, however, embodied in Section 28, a law instructing local authorities about how to contain the representation of openly gay cultural production. The legislation reads as follows:

- 1) *A local authority shall not:*
 - a) *Intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality.*
 - b) *Promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.*
- 2) *Nothing in subsection 1 shall be taken to prohibit the doing of anything for the purpose of treating or preventing the spread of disease.*
- 3) *In any proceedings in connection with the application of this section a court shall draw such inferences as to the intention of the local authority as may reasonably be drawn from the evidence before it.*

(Section 28, Local Government Act 1988; qtd in *AYOR* 113)

The implications for culture, and for safe-sex pedagogy, are, as Jarman suggests, enormous. These governmental actions exemplify, perhaps, the “rot” at the core of democracy, “the deepening criminality of those who rule over us” (54); in fact, Jarman

reports his arguing in a television profile that “Section 28 was an attack on the family,” reversing the supposition that his most important relationships are “pretended” (75).²⁷

Given the psychic consequences wrought by these entrenched — and now, in the context of HIV/AIDS, panicked — social, medical, legislative, and economic structures, we might well start to feel befuddled as to how a record of such “sadness” comes to model reparation. Jarman’s altered perspective estranges his view of the local environment, and, in so doing, it evokes as much despair as it does rage: “Looking at the Ness through sick eyes I notice the burnt-out broom, the foxgloves that have disappeared, the stunted poppies in the bright dry sunlight” (288). Poppies, flower of remembrance, are stationed as central to Jarman’s “personal mythology” at the beginning of *Modern Nature*: “A flower of cornfield and wasteland,” of unintended beauty, the poppy simultaneously represents “the staff of life” (bread) and remembrance of the dead, and is “bringer of dreams and sweet forgetfulness” (9). But here poppies are seen as “stunted”: though they survive, their growth is arrested (8; 23). As Jarman looks ahead, the future sometimes seems just as bleak in its predetermination, with only the *number* of attacks on his body in question: “How many assaults will my body stand? At what point will life cease to be

²⁷In *At Your Own Risk*, Jarman documents the passage of these pieces of legislation, and explains what he sees as their installation of a kind of second tier of citizenship for gays and lesbians. As Peake and Esch both discuss, in 1993-1994 proposed changes to the age of consent for gays and lesbians were to disappoint him further, as they promised to mitigate inequality but ultimately reinforced it by perpetuating a double standard in the adoption of the age of 18 as a compromise position.

bearable?" (304). Glancing back at this crisis in *At Your Own Risk*, Jarman reflects that at first "Faced with the prospect of writing about it [AIDS], I faltered; there were too many stories I wanted to record ... All life became a problem, and I solved this by shutting my physical self off like a clam. For a while I could have been a model for the Conservative Family Association" (83). Most unbearable is the fear of debilitation, especially the looming specter of blindness, something Jarman at first dismisses (self-consciously) as not frightening, "just aggravating – so silly to lose your eyes. I can write clearly and in straight lines across the gloomy page" (307). The decision to take AZT is set forth, like the decision to be tested for HIV in the first place, in its full difficulty and uncertainty. Emphasizing how persistent are the imperatives of narrativization, and how anaesthetizing its repetitions, Jarman lists the "prescriptions" he takes "to the pharmacy: AZT, Ritafer, Pyroxidine, Methamine, Folinic Acid, Triludan, Suylphadiazine, Carbamezepine" (313). The regimen of drugs chimes in with the repetition of another kind of list, the (similarly expanding) list of the names of friends who have died, and neither of these ritual recitations is capable of guaranteeing a cure or even some kind of reparation. That such inventories are deeply unsatisfying is corroborated by Jarman's reflection upon reading a biography of Ginsberg, which he describes disparagingly as "A laundry list of drugs and boyfriends," a move that both recalls the antecedent of gay liberation and prompts Jarman to mark his difference from that time, and from his own implication in it (237).

Despite the sense in which many of his identifications seem, to follow Kristeva's analysis of borderline states, "'empty,' 'null,' 'devitalized,' 'puppet-like,'" making his ego

like “an empty castle, haunted by unappealing ghosts — ‘powerless’ outside, ‘impossible’ inside,” Jarman’s writing about his body while he is hospitalized none the less highlights the continuity of his experiences of pain and of desire (*Powers of Horror* 49). In this sense, he continues to “assemble” and “confer pleasure” on his own body so that it becomes an “object” that may replenish his psyche, however “inchoate” and “powerless” it appears to be (Sedgwick “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” 28). Estrangement from his own body is foregrounded; it is as though he has been “snatched” by illness “into its demon Disney World, where chairs and tables dance and fight and the room swirls about. Excruciating pain. Surely someone else is ill in bed with catheters and drips” (314). But his view “through sick eyes,” eyes that are variously described as “itching” and “drunken,” does not merely empty out the world and the self (307; 310). That his perspective on illness implicitly contests this distancing from his own body, seeking, in fact, to claim it, in all its debilitation, as capable of pleasure, work, and love, becomes evident in Jarman’s account of his surgery for an infected appendix:

My appendix was chopped out on Saturday, when they were sure it could not be cured or calmed by antibiotics. I struggled out of the twilight with a metal zip from top to bottom of my stomach. My traumatised guts, spilled out on the operating table – so much offal – were now back in a stomach taut as a balloon. I could not move, but lay for several days staring ahead like a tin soldier, knocked for six. (314)

With the failure of drugs to effect a remedy, the punitive, “demonic” underside of the medical narrative in which he finds himself comes into clearer view. The surgical approach to dealing with illness, while it is not rejected out-of-hand, he experiences as

immobilizing, objectifying, traumatizing. As the subtle boundary of the skin is violated by the surgeon's instruments, Jarman sees his own body as abject, his "guts" as "so much offal," a description that connotes both refuse and pollution. Subsequently, however, Jarman makes a point of reassuming the first-person pronoun: "Ten days later I pick up a pen, my appetite lost for recording and writing. It's six months since I became ill. I've lost a stone and a half and the razor bumps across my face again" (314). Three gestures are presented as interdependent in these, the final words of the memoir: looking into the mirror, shaving, and "picking up a pen." The possibility of assuming once more the work of a cultural producer is connected to a recollection of his body, and in particular, to facing loss of "appetite" for any of this, and yet determining to enter the fray *again*. Reintroducing the marking of time, and at the same time stalling it in another dimension, Jarman risks the renarrativization of his life, hazards again his vulnerability to the powerful currents inherent in the dependency of subjectivation. The elliptical quality of Jarman's narration is far from being suggestive, then, of reticence, but asks us to read in a manner that disengages normative categories, to acknowledge the remainder that will not be dissolved: the legacy of his loving self-regard in the midst of ravaging illness.

Because it is so insidious, though, censorship is a persistent threat: the literally and metaphorically "sick" body is ever-vulnerable to acts of exclusion. This vulnerability is especially evident in the recommendation by Jarman's editor that he remove the passages describing cruising on Hampstead Heath from the manuscript that would become *Modern*

Nature, on the grounds that they might be read as promoting “irresponsible” behaviour.²⁸

Since for Jarman, as for Eric Michaels, “Gayness remained emergent in social action, so that each night we seek to rediscover that identity by performing those rites of hyperexchange,” a certain “psychic violence,” as Michaels points out, is inherent in “the sad fact that I expect never again to engage in those caresses of the body which sustained and defined me for most of my adult life” (*Unbecoming* 58). In *Modern Nature*, the claiming of space — imaginative and “real” — complements the claiming of an “I” in the text in a manner that casts back to Jarman’s autobiographical impulses prior to the context of AIDS. It is here that the extended passages describing Jarman’s cruising on London’s Hampstead Heath take on a crucial significance. What they substantiate is the continuing performance of the paradise that is suggested allegorically by Jarman’s other gardens in the midst of the present, urban, social world.²⁹ Arguing that “the alfresco fuck is the original fuck,” and that “sex on the heath is an idyll pre-fall,” Jarman reports that

All the Cains and Abels you could wish for are out on a hot night, the May blossom scents the night air and the bushes glimmer like a phosphorescent counterpane in the indigo sky. Under the great beeches some boys with gypsy faces have lit a fire, which they stoke sending sparks flying, smiling

²⁸ See also Peake, who notes Jarman’s argument with Shaun Allen “about whether or not to delete or tone down the passages describing Jarman’s nocturnal visits to Hampstead Heath” (463).

²⁹ The garden at Prospect Cottage is in some senses a reconstruction of the gardens he associates with the happy times of his itinerant RAF childhood, for example, the garden at Villa Zuassa at Lake Maggiore in Italy and the one at Curry Mallet Manor, a Tudor house in Yorkshire (Peake 16-17, 31-32).

faces flushes with the heat. In the dark for a brief moment age, class, wealth, all the barriers are down. An illusion you say, I know but what a sweet one. (83-84)

The passage is distinctly celebratory. These potential “Cains and Abels” are restored to a pre-lapsarian moment, before the original sin (and fear of sexuality) associated with their heterosexual parents; specifically, they are liberated from the association of fratricide (which is linked in this context to the transmission of the HIV virus). But Jarman’s first-person testimony of what cruising on the Heath is really like in the context of the epidemic also works to demystify it: “For those who know,” Jarman insists, “the place has changed.” While its pleasures remain “exciting and joyous,” they are marred by the absence of friends (84). Jarman’s observations about the Heath emphasizes how grassroots activism within the gay community has affected sexual practices, taking aim, probably, at the stubborn perception amongst those who identify as heterosexual that they are by definition not at risk for HIV (an assumption which dangerously clouds more important questions of sexual practices and precautions). In reality, “Sex these days [on the Heath] is as safe as you’ll find it, few risk penetration, it’s mostly confined to what my mum would call ‘horseplay’” (84). Despite the clarity of these explanatory statements, as Jarman establishes by including as an appendix to *At Your Own Risk* a series of letters originally published in *The Evening Standard*, there was a tendency for the press to interpret his public acknowledgment of visits to the Heath as contradicting efforts at HIV

prevention (127).³⁰ On the contrary, as Jarman emphasizes in *At Your Own Risk*, in the “early eighties ... there was a confusion in which we acted responsibly. All our energy was spent looking after friends and raising money. It was *we* who provided *you* with the information that may have saved *your* life” (84). In this connection, then, Jarman’s memoir mobilizes what Cindy Patton calls for in her indictment of the failures of safe-sex education in the 1990s, namely an acknowledgment of “the practical logics of erotic survival that already exist in communities” (*Fatal Advice* 139).

The project of demystification is deeply entwined, still, with the aim of celebrating the range of sexual practices that might be collected provisionally under the category “queer.” And, as though to flout their editorially controversial inclusion in the text, Jarman’s accounts of his experiences are bound together, we might say, with “a glue of surplus beauty,” the “sweetness” of the “May blossom” and the “indigo” sky, that refuses the logic of annihilation (Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” 28). In a sense, the encounters on the Heath are returned to the space where, as Patton argues, they were “once partially protected as they reverberated beneath the range of audibility” (139). This is a move that promises to resuscitate expurgated or prohibited knowledge in that it makes legible “bodily pleasures that might easily save lives if they were not now

³⁰In these letters from April of 1991, Jarman responds to film critic Alexander Walker’s critical review of *Edward II*, and, in particular, his attack on Jarman’s Hampstead Heath passages as encouraging a kind of indulgence in “revelry” that contradicts “willingness to help foster more sensible attitudes to HIV” (127). Jarman’s retort stresses that “HIV is not linked to promiscuity ... if safer sex practices, which are widely known by gay men and ill publicised in the straight press, are adhered to” (128).

condemned as dangerously perverse” (145). As in Jarman’s evocation of a “separate and parallel world” in which sex is consensual and explicitly negotiated (172-3), “in cruising,” according to Patton’s formulation, “the body talks, it speaks its location, its intention, as it takes space” (149). Reading Jarman’s writing about illness and the performance of sexuality in the context of illness, we may note a subtle but remarkable shift in the significance of his melancholy. Disengaging his experiences from a framework that would pathologize precisely the practices that promise to save lives, Jarman’s testimony takes on the dimensions of love-melancholy: a wrenching but inescapable fascination with the sensuous world. Through his fractured tale of a body under siege, he testifies to a desire once unbounded by “morality” and profoundly bound by ethical imperatives. Even in the absence of a final “cure,” regard for others and self-love prompts him to reject narratives founded in the protective promise of abjection, and moves him from despair and withdrawal to the possibility of continued engagement with the world, in work and in love.

IV: Derek Jarman’s Pedagogy

With the publication of *Modern Nature*, Jarman began to receive letters from all over the world, making him into a global “literary” phenomenon (Peake 479-480). Yet, as I have been suggesting, *Modern Nature* is emphatically “local” and introspective in the sense that it is committed to recording daily life; the journals document both the beginnings of Jarman’s garden at Prospect Cottage and his body’s shift from non-symptomatic to symptomatic HIV. If *Modern Nature* has an “educational,” “therapeutic,”

or what Sedgwick might call “reparative,” role to play, on a cultural stage vaster than Jarman’s own life, then what precisely does it have to offer its diverse readership?³¹ The memoir’s “message” is far from being simply consolatory; the positing of the garden as a “pharmacopeia” (as a source of refuge, and of hope for a spiritual if not a bodily “cure”) is consistently questioned by Jarman. Rather, by opening up the forces of memory, and in particular, by connecting his present experience of illness with his childhood and adolescent memories of education, *Modern Nature* pursues a radically *pedagogical* project — in a queerly provocative sense. Following Deborah Britzman’s writings on what she calls “queer pedagogy,” I want to suggest that Jarman’s memoir seeks to educate readers about what happens when moral panic about social hygiene takes the “sex” out of education and about how we might “re-educate” education, to employ Britzman’s phrase, so that it might speak to the flux of desire, particularly in the context of childhood and adolescent sexuality (66).

Increasingly in the late eighties and early nineties, Jarman found that as one of “the few [publicly] identifiable HIV+ men in the world,” he was called upon to speak to questions of “AIDS and civil liberties” outside as well as within the national British context (*MN* 251, *AYOR* 108). And while he reports frustration about trying to talk about

³¹Based on his reading of Jarman’s unpublished papers and correspondence, Peake suggests that Jarman saw himself as “writing specifically for the young men of the nineties,” but the reception of *Modern Nature* — particularly the slew of “unbidden letters” Jarman received — indicates that “Jarman’s persona and message were starting to reach a wider much wider circle” (488, 479-480).

“responsibility when there is no information on these matters, and none of our political parties will give a lead,” the urgency of this project increased exponentially once his activism took an international turn (*AYOR* 5). For instance, Jarman’s documentation of his visit to Warsaw in February of 1990 suggests how his role as visiting filmmaker was superseded by the need for an HIV+ spokesperson to address just-emerging activist groups. With the recent “democratization” of the “Second World,” or at least its partial integration into the global circuit, the spread of HIV rages.³² And in Poland, the combined conditions of a decayed infrastructure and Catholicism’s prohibition against condoms seemed to Jarman to render the project of taking action next to impossible. As he reports

The situation here is so desperate, there is literally no information and the subject is treated completely negatively. The doctors won’t contemplate treating people. One of the floors of a ministry has been invaded by desperate people who are body positive. There are no syringes and condoms are old-fashioned and not lubricated. At the moment there has been no intervention by the government — perhaps they have so many other problems that AIDS is marginalized. (245)

Should it surprise us that AIDS should be marginalized in the ex-Second World when it is so pervasively sidelined in the First World (while at the same time serving as a wide-screen for the projection of cultural phobias)? Still, Jarman’s account is effective in furthering the

³² According to the UN AIDS / WHO Joint HIV/AIDS Program, “In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the HIV/AIDS epidemic began in the early 1990s.” However, “By the end of 1998 it is estimated that there will be 270,000 people living with HIV/AIDS in these countries. Most of the infections are recent, approximately 30% having been acquired during the past year” (“UN AIDS Statistics”).

connection between illness and new opportunities for state violence to impress itself upon the bodies and the minds of those labelled “deviant” or “delinquent” as against an imagined “general public.” This is a problem that Patton summarizes, in the American context, as “the doubly and truly fatal homo-annihilation project of the national pedagogy” (155). In the Polish context, responsibility redounds on Jarman as a representative of the West: “The only hope is seen as coming from the West: funding from the World Health Organization or Dutch gay groups” (245). But responding to this call has inherent risk as well: Jarman’s trip to Poland, his physical presence there as an advocate for seropositive people and as a proponent of safer sex, brings him into contact, in an ironic and revealing twist, with a new flu virus (a bug he nicknames “General Jaruzelski”) that results in his hospitalization (*MN* 260). He thus brings home, in a strikingly literal, bodily way, the crisis he witnesses abroad.³³

Though Jarman displays considerable confidence in his autobiographical writings about what Peake describes as his self-conceived role as “prophet,” “spokesman,” “cultural irritant,” and “Controversialist” (319-320, 533), what makes Jarman’s sadness so persistent is the connection he sees between his losses to AIDS and the losses and exclusion he experienced as a child and adolescent. *Modern Nature*’s project is, at least in part, to provide a context for considering the significance of the childhood memories that

³³As Ulf Hannerz observes in *Transnational Connections*, “the varied kinds of linkage” produced by globalization (that is, by “increasing long-distance interconnectedness, at least across national boundaries” but also “between continents”) “do not combine in the same way everywhere” (17-18).

are being unleashed in the context of illness. I want to conclude by arguing that Jarman's recollection of several scenes of education from his early years become a platform for his more general, wide-reaching criticisms of the failure of traditional, punitive modes of education, and sex education in particular, to address the issue of desire and pleasure. (This is a question that is especially pertinent, of course, in the context of the pandemic, where the rhetoric of AIDS performs a similar sidelining of pleasure and love.)

Revisiting what it was like to live under a cultural regime that he could barely even recognize as repressive, Jarman contends in retrospect that he lived his "adolescence so demoralised [he] became reclusive" (*At Your Own Risk* 32). Sustained throughout his autobiographical writings and films are a series of pointed and plaintive criticisms of his experiences in English public schools during the 1950s, criticisms that contradict the response of gratitude that his parents by all accounts expected. His critique of "contextualisation by Heterosoc" within the school system is encapsulated in the repeated detail of his father "proudly present[ing] me with a complete set of receipts on my twenty-first" birthday (*MN* 58); in particular, his parents' choice, nay sacrifice, to educate him amongst the elite, though his father occupied the ambiguous social position of a military officer and New Zealand immigrant, suggests the class associations this kind of education possessed. As Jarman notes with unmistakable sarcasm, "Paradise Perverted was intended to set us up for life – dimly perceived as starting some time after our eighteenth" (59). With this epithet "Paradise Perverted," he deploys the label "perverse" against the system which would define *him* as its constitutive other, as the threat to normalcy,

preparing readers for his remembering of the system's baroquely interested and complex strategies for containing sexuality: "To divert us from the temptations of the flesh a muddy, muscular 'christianity' was employed – 'healthy body, healthy mind'" (59). What are the consequences of this situation but the continuation of repression by the subjects of this education themselves, in the form of various cruelties and exclusions? Jarman pinpoints the connection between this prohibitive system and systemic violence amongst the pupils: "Smarting under this tortured system, the boys tortured each other, imposed valueless rules and codes of conduct, obeyed imaginary hierarchies where accidents of origin and defects of nature were magnified" (58). In an unpublished interview that perhaps marks his very first foray into autobiography, Jarman describes public school as "the isolation ward," noting its prophylactic or hygienic social function, namely to cut us off "from any contamination from real life" ("Jarman Interviews," BFI 8). Subsequently in *Modern Nature* Jarman poses an emphatic riposte to these assumptions, setting it apart from the flow of the anecdote: "Could all of this conceivably be thought 'a normal upbringing'?" (58). This question initiates a process of re-education that highlights the pathological, even perverse, displacement of sexuality motivating the public school system's passion for discipline. Gardening and painting, by contrast, he sought out and nurtured, only a little knowingly, as markers of his difference from the heterosexual norm. So, while "On holiday, he [my father] sailed – I pruned the apple trees" (192).³⁴

³⁴As a child Jarman is drawn to what Dick Hebdige explains in reference to Jean Genet, as "the subversive implications of style," to practices of "Refusal" that, although they invoke

If, as Patton argues, in the context of AIDS “the advice given by the national pedagogy has killed more people than it has saved,” Jarman’s approach to “childhood memories” provides a clue as to how we might “turn the tables, not through direct opposition, but through pulling the plug on advice, through living our desires as a sex that saves instead of finding and vilifying people and practices that do not” (155). “Turning the tables” becomes particularly urgent in the context of HIV/AIDS because of the sense in which, as Edmund White observes, the epidemic “repatriates” gay men to “lonely adolescence,” to “the time when I was alone with my writing and I felt weird about being a queer” (“Esthetics and Loss” 69). Corroborating Patton’s exhortation to “pull the plug on advice,” Britzman meditates on the classroom as a site where subjectivity and identities are formed, tested, and potentially reconfigured. She foregrounds how the classroom is constituted as a political space, one that may be implicated in what she calls the production of “normality.” “Normality” she argues, employing a phrasing that is particularly resonant in the context of a culture that so insistently specularizes “AIDS,” is “built when the other is situated as a site of deviancy and disease, and hence in need of containment” (85). What strategies might remedy the exclusionary constructions of normality? Britzman rejects the strategy of encouraging an “empathetic” response to difference, arguing that “such hopes are able to offer only the stingy subject positions of the tolerant normal and the tolerated subaltern” (87). Only when the teacher or writer or

suspicion and rage in authority figures, “become forbidden signs of identity, sources of value” (“Introduction: Subculture and Style” 3).

artist's authority is dismantled from within does it seem that we might be able to imagine something different, to think the "unthought" of normality as constructed by the discourses of education. For Britzman the central question in thinking about education is how "to provoke conditions of learning that might allow for an exploration that unsettles the sediments of what one imagines when one imagines normalcy, what one imagines when one imagines difference"(95). Returning to Jarman's journals, I want to suggest that through the fragmentation and recontextualization produced by the force of melancholy in his memoirs (his unresolved grief for what he has lost and what he fears losing), Jarman's stories of education resist what Britzman calls "the simple and moralistic romance that we ... call 'self-esteem, 'role models', and 'childhood innocence,'" claiming, as we shall see, a remarkably provocative role for his memories of education, one that asks us to think differently about "difference."

Multiple retellings of certain educational encounters over the course of Jarman's several memoirs (*Modern Nature*, *At Your Own Risk*, and *Dancing Ledge*) suggest their significance in addition to their continuing power to wound.³⁵ Here, however, I will focus on their rendering in *Modern Nature*. Jarman's technique of recording bits and pieces of stories that amuse or console him, and then glossing them with a contextualizing "essay" that "tampers" with the memory in order to release its more unruly side, is well-captured

³⁵See Peake's chapter "School House and Manor House" (26-33) for detailed comparisons of Jarman's multiple retellings of these events. I shall, however, restrict my analysis to the accounts offered in *Modern Nature*.

in this entry for February 23, 1989. In this anecdote, Jarman recounts the myth of the god Apollo's love for the boy Hyacinth, going on to observe that

We learnt nothing of the love myth of these heroes in a Dorset school in the 1950s — Ovid was off-limits. Instead we marched to the beat of Caesar's interminable *Gallic Wars*. The Latin teacher Mr. Gay (long before this word had any connotations except joyful abandon) confined himself to '*we undertook a forced march of 80 miles and set up camp.*' — Are you listening Jarman? ...

bellum, bellum, bellum

Ancient history was an interminable war. All violence and
no sex.

bellum, bellum — No *amo, amas*.

War underpinned an English education. After all, we were also an Empire — the sun shone out of the arses of the Royal Guards. But we never knew they were selling them when the Knightsbridge pubs closed; or that the detachment who guarded the Bank of England, where all the gilt of empire was deposited, were called 'the bum boys', on service to service the Officer-in-Charge....

In the dorm sex was smutty innuendo, surreptitious jerk-offs before the breakfast bell, sizing the lengths of each other's cocks in the showers — a well-thumbed expurgated copy of *Lady Chatterley* falling to pieces in our grubby hands — uncomfortable as we adolescents were with our bodies, with no-one to teach us, or love us — our cocks and our bums a forbidden world; and the unknown female body the terrain of the Curse. (63)

Surfacing in the first section of the memoir (winter / spring 1989) and then again towards the end of *Modern Nature*, these memories of Jarman's schooling provide us with a sort of retrospective narrative in the midst of a fragmented text, but the story is far from nostalgic. Like the descriptions of the "demon Disney world" of hospitalization, or the passages documenting (and attempting to demystify) cruising on Hampstead Heath, we might call the passage "ethnographic" in that it documents a certain place and time. The

central purpose of this passage is to record what the curriculum consisted of (and what it excluded). In particular, Jarman emphasizes the gap between two accounts of history — a queer account and a military account — with the suggestion the former might disrupt the latter, which would focus exclusively on the expression of violence. Jarman thus suggests that the violence and mystique of military culture is rooted in the repression of love between men. In turn, the passage is also reflective, critical, and anxious, moving us (subsequently) towards recognition of the adolescents' frustration, searching in desperation through a novel (D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley*) which they've heard is "dirty" but is in fact edited in a way that removes precisely what they are curious about. Indeed, this scene of education was particularly resonant for Jarman in the context of Clause 28 (cited previously in Section III), a law exhorting local authorities to block public funding and support for any material (in the arts and in the classroom) that would "intentionally promote homosexuality" or even suggest its "acceptability." (Although the legislators attempt to make the point that "nothing" in this set of regulations "shall be taken to prohibit anything for the purpose of treating or preventing the spread of disease," the slippage from "homosexuality" to "disease" reveals the homophobia that undergirds the surface posture of "tolerance.") This legislation — a formal articulation of the kinds of cultural biases I have been discussing apropos of several different but overlapping national contexts, American, Antiguan, and Australian, as well as British — served to heighten Jarman's rage against the "debris" of governmental denial and "inaction" (20). The ironic juxtapositions of his school memories with these present details highlight the

continuation of 1950s-style censorship and misinformation in the present, with television, for example, which will only show Jarman's films late at night and feeds the public with "loathsome inept youth-orientated arts programme[s] which dro[p] any issue before [they have] picked it up. Devalues everything, all ideas, all values" (82).

The journal entry adds to this account of censorship a description of how sex education proper was dealt with in the schools Jarman attended, emphasizing how the students' curiosity prompts them to read reparatively, figuring out for themselves the unacknowledged motivations of adults. According to Jarman, he and his fellow students were thus able to obtain from the distorted, punitive lectures to which they were subjected some of what they needed to know, although no adult had taken on the responsibility "to teach us, or love us":

The bell would ring three times to summon us to assembly, where a certain Dr. Matthews, sex educator, would demonstrate to us scientifically, and with the help of an ancient epidiascope, the birds and the bees of Paradise, Adam and Eve and the old serpent VD.

Dr. Matthews rummaged in his battered Gladstone bag, pulling out ancient slides as if from a lucky dip at a gymkhana. Silver hair awry, eyes glistening, the dirty old sex educator to the crowned heads of Europe eyed his blushing audience who squirmed with embarrassment as their innermost secrets were revealed to them — huge images of private parts, 20 ft pubescent and pre-pubescent cocks, balls dropping, huge lost sperms wandering into a slide rather than the fallopian.

Sections, diagrams. Our secrets were invaded, as when the doctor grabbed your balls in the first school medical and twizzled them about before letting the elastic of your pants snap back with a sting. 'What,' asked Dr Matthews 'are little boys made of?' — 'Slugs and snails and puppy dog's tails.'

After it was all over the good doctor gave private sessions to any boy who thought he had ‘a problem’; but I never went, knew my ‘problem’ was so encompassing it could never be solved by him, even if that had been my wish. (63).

As Britzman reminds us, when it began to be formally constituted as a component of adolescent education at the beginning of the twentieth century, sex education became “*the* site for working on the bodies of children, adolescents, and teachers” (67), in order to rid them of so-called “problems,” basically any failure to conform to an increasingly rigidly defined norm. Observe the stinginess of the subject positions being carved out and assigned in Jarman’s story of Dr. Matthews: boys are taught self-loathing, and queer kids that their desires are “problems.” Jarman’s anecdote conveys the violence and voyeurism of this scenario, with its “invasion” of “secrets” and its blurring of the scientific and the mythic. At the same time, though, the journal’s return to this scene disinters the expurgated knowledge hiding behind the “glistening eyes” of the “dirty old sex educator.” In a sense then, we “relearn” the story of sex education as *Modern Nature* “stages the return of the repressed” (68), pulling to the surface of the text interpretive possibilities that have excluded from the story of sex education as a result of its pervasive normalizing strategies. While the lasciviousness of Dr. Matthews is subjected to a parodic (and critical, I think) reiteration, another reading of the educator is also made possible, for Jarman attributes to Dr. Matthews a sexuality that exceeds the bounds of the message of utility he preaches — after all, someone is responsible for the fact that the sperm is on the slide, mysteriously astray from its “proper” receptacle. Jarman, future pioneer of Super-8

filmmaking, reads the sex educator's use of visuals as home movies, even taking from them perhaps a kind of model. One filmmaker and sex educator teaches another who would go on to become a filmmaker and a sex re-educator.³⁶ The specter of the masturbating boy thus reappears in the person of the authority figure himself, who starts to appear as a kind of "revenant." The Greek pederastic scene — of initiator/initiated — haunts this memory, invoking the specter of another school that never happened: where adults might have something to teach adolescents about wanking. More generally, though, the point of the anecdote is to foreground how sex and desire circulate even when they are not acknowledged: would it not be more responsible to address and articulate these desires (however fractured they must remain), rather than thinking we might pretend them away? It is precisely this (what Britzman calls) "not yet tolerated" approach to sex education, Jarman is implying, that might address difference and desire without invoking a policy of correction. Neither Britzman's nor Jarman's model suggests, I want to stress, that education should become a free-for-all. Indeed, as Foucault argues in *The Use of Pleasure*, with the Greeks "it is in the reflection on the love of boys that one sees the principle of 'indefinite abstention' formulated" as an "ideal of a renunciation" (245). Taking the Greek model of ethicized (as opposed to strictly rule-governed) subjectivity, understood as "the elaboration of a form of relation to self that enables an individual to

³⁶Jarman's school years were not entirely lacking, however, in more nurturing influences. Robin Noscoe, his art teacher at Canford School, made the school's art room a place of refuge for Jarman and others, and was the first in a line of influential, supportive teachers of art and architecture in whose orbit Jarman flourished (Peake 53-58).

fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct,” Foucault, like Jarman, advocates the adoption of “an aesthetics of existence, the purposeful act of freedom as a power game” (251-252).³⁷

Despite the humour of these scenes, there is a “feeling of trapped unease” (21) that follows Jarman from such early experiences, and this feeling now threatens to overwhelm him in the face of the loss of his friends and his own illness. Its source is encapsulated in

³⁷I understand Jarman’s approach to these question not as prescriptive, but as provoking thought about new kinds of exchanges and possibilities that will help to save and nurture lives in the time of AIDS, especially the lives of young people. But in all of this Jarman’s reiterated claim that he wishes he had been initiated by an older man, in the Greek tradition, is a reconstruction of the past that I am not sure what to do with (*AYOR* 18). In *Dancing Ledge* he argues that “the old Greek way of men and women initiating adolescents of their own sex, helping them to discover their own sexuality in an atmosphere of responsibility, contained much humane and practical wisdom” (50). Still, as Sedgwick implies in *Epistemology of the Closet*, this ideal of pedagogy in male-male pederasty may not be one we can retrieve. Foucault glancingly acknowledges that what he calls the “aesthetics of existence” were available only to “the smallest minority of the population, made up of free adult males”; however, this paradox of “legitimacy” is even more problematic in a contemporary context and may not be so easily sidestepped (*The Use of Pleasure* 245-252). As Sedgwick argues, “the ‘Hellenic ideal,’ insofar as its reintegrative power is supposed to involve a healing of the culturewide ruptures involved in male homosexual panic, necessarily has that panic so deeply at the heart of its occasions, frameworks, demands and evocations that it becomes not only inextricable from but even a propellant of the cognitive and ethical compartmentalizations of homophobic prohibition” (*Epistemology of the Closet* 138). Furthermore, as David Halperin stresses, “pedagogy was not, even among the honorable members of that *beau monde* [in Ancient Greece], the essence of pederasty” (*One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* 91-92). Thus, “despite modern appearance-saving claims to the contrary, the erotic excitement and bittersweet longing aroused in Athenian men (whether low- or high-minded) by attractive boys do not seem to have been primarily of a philosophic nature” (92); these erotic attractions were governed, moreover, by the laws of citizenship, which made it “extremely difficult and hazardous for a male resident of Athens in the classical period to gain sexual access to any person of citizen status” (92).

his father's injunction against his perceived weakness and tears: "Don't be such a pansy, Derek" (29). Echoing Dr. Matthews's offer to assist "any boy who felt he had a problem," Lance Jarman's words wield the adage of a "muscular, muddy christianity" "healthy body, healthy mind." Childhood memories, if they are to serve the function of sustaining rather than sabotaging Jarman, must be recontextualized. Indeed, the juxtaposition of such reconfigured anecdotes with other fragments, the stories of flowers, of herbs, and with medical language, figures prominently among the memoir's rhetorical strategies. And it is in this way that painful memories are interrogated from within, reconfigured to form a "personal mythology" that refuses to settle accounts: "A personal mythology recurs in my writing, much the same way poppy wreaths have crept into my films. For me this archeology has become obsessive, for the 'experts' my sexuality is a confusion. All received information should make us inverters sad. But before I finish I intend to celebrate our corner of Paradise, the part the Lord forgot to mention" (23)

Such celebration is evident, for example, in Jarman's reiteration of his father's words, in the context of a friend's administering of herbal remedies as well as companionship: "Pink pansies," he pronounces, "are good for you" (217). The impertinent recycling of education resounds throughout Jarman's corpus of films, and is especially resonant in *The Garden* (1990), the film whose making Jarman documents in *Modern Nature*. The leering schoolmasters in *The Garden*, with their chorus of rapping canes, parallel the police who torture the gay couple and the infernal Santas who taunt and crucify them. Likewise, scenes of punitive, "demoralizing" education predominate in *Wittgenstein* (1993), where

the brilliant philosopher's relation to the world is shown to be so damaged by his own experiences of education that he cannot teach, only pass on the brutalization he experienced as a child.

Another particularly painful memory for Jarman involves being discovered in bed with another boy at boarding school:

The idiot who betrayed us was the one who thought that if he masturbated his brains would spurt out. They prized his hands from my tight cock and left us to shiver naked in the cold at the foot of the bed. We were hauled out of our element and left to asphyxiate by the Noes.

'Christ! What are you doing?' 'You'll go blind!'

Then the blows rained down, millennia of frustrated Christian hatred behind the cane. What a terrible God to take on the hurt and then hurt us all! That day a childhood idyll died in the bells and sermons, the threats to tell our parents and derision; and we were shoved into the wilderness they had created, and commanded to punish ourselves for all time. So that at last we would be able to enter their heaven truly dead in spirit. (50-51)

While, in the first example, the adult Jarman voices a series of ironic questions that reconstruct the teenager's hypothetical knowledge, this passage captures a child's confusion. Jarman presents his impulse to explore sexuality as integrally connected to the imagination, curiosity, spirit and desire of children, and of children's literature as well; and so we are drawn into a critical view of the pathologization of children's sexuality as a "problem in need of education or normalization" (Britzman 71). Indeed, as Sedgwick argues, suggesting the link between this pathologization and Western culture's homosexual panic, "the scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people is unimaginably large," and "effeminate boys" are

particularly vulnerable to this “war,” perhaps to the extent that they constitute “the haunting abject of gay thought itself” (“How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” 161, 157).

The most powerfully uncanny connection lies, again, though, in the way the words of adults resound in the present context, linking childhood losses with present ones: “Christ! What are you doing? You’ll go blind” (51). It is this curse, so full of performative power, that condemns the boys to suffering, not their actions. In the larger context of the memoir, Jarman discovers that he is afflicted with AIDS-related CMV, an eye infection leading to blindness; and in 1990 he suffered a significant loss of sight. But his overwhelming determination remains to celebrate “how happy I am” (168). Spurning the “neurotic anxiety” that such an incident might instill (that is, the tendency to internalize the normalizing point of view that would lead to self-blame), Jarman’s retelling of the anecdote creates an occasion, instead, for anxiety of a more “existential” kind in order to articulate two linked agendas (Britzman 68). First, “VD” loses its status as “the old serpent”; what wrecks the “idyll” in this recasting of Genesis are the cruel curses of the pedagogues, the amateurs as well as the professionals. Second, the anecdote emphasizes that childhood sexuality be considered as “polymorphously perverse,” not rendered “stabl[e] through the consolation of” definition (Britzman 66). Resisting the reconstruction of his childhood self as “innocent,” devoid of sexuality, then, Jarman’s retelling quietly preserves the ambiguous eroticism of the event, the way in which the memory survived all of that “hatred” after all. That he survived the hatred of his school years fuels his determination to survive HIV and AIDS with his self-love similarly intact.

These memories of education continue to return, however, over the two year period covered by *Modern Nature*, suggesting that however much Jarman has been able to disarticulate the system that sought to punish him, they remain unresolved. I would suggest that it is the unpredictability of memory as a force that gives this memoir its dynamism and fuels its critique. The openness of the text to the complications of memory is crucial to Jarman's offering of his own experiences as a source of information for others, as an ambiguously exemplary personal genealogy of desire, and particularly, in the time of AIDS, as a warning against the dangers of euphemism in sex education. He writes a fragmented, memory-ridden text that actively shapes the reading practices by which his potential audience consumes the stories. Readers of Jarman's autobiographical writings are actively encouraged to resist collaborating in what Sedgwick describes as the "nightmarish overdeterminations" ("Gender Criticism" 286) that equate HIV and AIDS with death, and with "diseased" sexuality. Constructed as curious, and acknowledged as anxious, readers of *Modern Nature* become Jarman's students, impertinent scholars of his "fragments of memory," and so we may begin to think of a new future for sex and for education, even though that hope for the future (as Jarman's rage, pain, and doubt insist) exists only as torn and improvisatory.

Conclusion

One strand of questioning that this study has considered is the persistence (as well as the insistent interrogation) of organic metaphors in AIDS memoirs, especially in connection with *My Brother* and *Modern Nature*. It is by focusing briefly on the contours of Derek Jarman's garden, the physical, visual analogue to *Modern Nature*, that I wish to conclude. Casting himself as a latter day Kentish "saint" — and indeed canonized as Derek of Dungeness by the gay group Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in 1992 — Jarman created Prospect Cottage as a retreat to be sure, but also as a work of art with a cultural register. The cottage and its immediate surroundings stand as a self-mythologization or self-memorialization that would ensure his survival on something like his own terms beyond the event of his death. But Prospect Cottage has also, as the journals explain, been the scene of confrontations between Jarman and the media and other prying strangers, with people, that is, who expressed surprise to find him still there. That there exists a record of these uncomfortable encounters forces the question of mourning upon any visitor. And certainly my own recent journey to Dungeness has raised the question of what needs, desires, and fears I bring with me and that shape my reading of the place. Like Sedgwick editing Gary Fisher, I have found myself struck by an "odor of profanation" around my visit. Was it a kind of tourism? voyeurism? an act of memorialization? an attempt at exorcism? Clothes flap on the line, the wind filling them as

though giving them bodies. Keith Collins, Jarman's surviving partner, tends the garden, listens to top of the charts radio while transplanting, trimming, keeping the plants at bay in this strangely fertile desert. I arrive for a mere hour to watch someone else's grief.

But there are other lingering responses, too, besides this feeling of trespass. The intense suspicion that I had no right to be there has given rise subsequently to a series of questions about memorials and their (im)permanence — and to the crucial ongoing cultural work performed by written memoirs, which insist on these same questions and demand that readers engage with them in perpetuity. The “fragments of memory” that make up *Modern Nature* have a corollary in Prospect Cottage, and, in both cases, Jarman's text foregrounds the imbrication of his project of reparation in hostile surroundings and draws attention as well to its tenuousness. The plants flourish in the midst of industrial debris, and under the minimal dispensation of the wind and sun, with the sea kale, broom, and poppies set amidst Jarman's beachcombing finds — driftwood, shingle, an anchor, a weather-beaten boat — appearing as an intensification of what is already present in the local environment, such that the “garden” both resembles and contrasts with the “ordinary” randomness of the decay that surrounds it. Intimating a lurking danger, and creating the impression of entering a military compound of some kind, munitions fields line the road to Dungeness. All the more astonishing then the somehow slight, transient-seeming row of fishermen's cottages dotted along the coast. And on the day of my visit an amateur fashion shoot took place on the beach south of the main road, a bizarrely appropriate apparition of photographic technology in the midst of this

barrenness, an apparition reminiscent, too, of Jarman's film record of Dungeness, *The Garden*, a film that, like *Modern Nature* and *Prospect Cottage*, also foregrounds its own making.

But perhaps the most striking way in which *Prospect Cottage* foregrounds its own ephemerality is the melting of the inscriptions rendered in tar, particularly the citation from John Donne's love poetry on the building's west wall. Jarman's rendering of Donne's words enact a knowing and morbid calculation, as the "busie Sunne" performs the work of time against which the poem complains. The effect of this melting is to make the text increasingly illegible as time passes. Can these words even be considered inscriptions, given the impermanence of the materials and their placement, exposed as they are to the very element to which they are most vulnerable? Tar, Jarman's symbol of choice for representing majority culture's torture and excoriation of people readable as queer (as in "tar and feathers"), is shown to be in this context subject to the "unworking" powers of time and the elements. The history of violence fades, melting into a material that strengthens the dwelling's ability to withstand the ravages of this weather, though it, too, will ultimately be subject to the same disintegrative process.¹

Another reading: looking at the blurred, dripping lines of text, my companion offered the remark that the garden is bound ultimately towards disintegration or to

¹Esch analyzes Jarman's representation of his garden in light of Derrida's essay "Biodegradables," arguing that Jarman seeks not to transmit a message but rather to "nourish" the future (133-34).

become a National Trust Property, with gift shop and parking lot. I shot back heatedly that being designated “National Trust” was a very unlikely future for this place. Caught amidst the rush of my feeling at once that I had no right to be there at all, and my sense of being so immersed in thinking about Jarman — even thinking as him — I assumed the right to ventriloquize what I had internalized as his likely opinion on such a proposal. I have found myself wondering since about the future of Prospect Cottage. How long will Collins continue this work of maintaining the garden, a labour I imagine can be incredibly lonely? Under what conditions should it be preserved and what would “preservation” mean? Would preservation mean precisely the destruction of the spirit of the cultural critique that the cottage embodies and enacts? As Jarman’s railing against the mausoleum-like gardens at nearby Sissinghurst underlines, public institutions for perpetuating memory are tied up with forgetting, with the streamlining imperatives of heteronormative culture that allow only love across genders to count as “a love and loss worthy and capable of being grieved, and thus worthy and capable of having been lived” (Butler 138). On the other hand, has Jarman not extended the reparative, improvisational project of Vita Sackville-West and Nigel Nicolson, albeit in an uncloseted and somewhat less elitist manner? This is one of the ways we may read Sissinghurst, for it is framed with its own weird amalgam of (dis)avowals of and prurience about what has been left out of this famous performance of compulsory heterosexuality.²

²See O’Quinn’s comments on Jarman’s critique of the “heritization” of Sissinghurst as an example of “monumental” history (120-121).

Jarman's legacies persist, however, albeit in a sometimes ambivalent way, in his copious body of literary and filmic texts. As Sedgwick observes, commenting on the disruptive potential of literary representations in the context of a culture that would forget AIDS by declaring (repeatedly) an end to the epidemic, "That's the wonderful thing about the printed word — it can't be updated instantly. It's allowed to remain anachronistic in relation to the present moment" (Barber and Clark, "Interview with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick" 10). Still, although the prosopopoeias by which Jarman posthumously perpetuates his legacies literarily are perhaps less likely to disintegrate completely than the cottage, the "inassimilable remainders" his texts constitute are still vulnerable to assertive revisions, to the projection of readers' desires for consolation. But the three memoirs I have read closely in this study anticipate and exploit their potential for their "anachronistic" disruption of narrativity and, more specifically, the discourses of self-restoration. *I have accordingly attempted to read them with attention to moments of discord and of contradiction.*

More specifically, I have emphasized the memoirs' incoherence — their strange mixing of narrative frameworks with distinctively non-narrative impulses — with the aim of elaborating, to return to Derrida's phrasing, "this respect for justice for those who are not there." I have sought, in other words, to perform a melancholic reading "strategy" that might correspond to the melancholic "at odds-ness" of these texts. The abjected specters that haunt the boundaries of the "clean and proper body" (and, in turn, of the "clean and proper body politic") are, in the context of Hoffman's, Kincaid's, and Jarman's memoirs,

neither “mute” nor “garrulous.” Rather, they are shown as haunting the boundaries of what is deemed proper to the self, stalling its restoration, and even (at certain moments) revoking the belief in the possibility of restoration. Most crucially perhaps, what these memoirs show is that the pressures exerted by this “domain” cannot and should not be regulated or resolved by invoking the proprieties (the illusory as well as costly securities) of gender relations, of the rule or law bound system of governance that David Halperin describes as promulgating various “versions of pastoral” (145). The correlation between duty and women’s self-sacrificing labour is a set of cultural assumptions that these texts seem to be asking us to reject, or at least to suspend, as we imagine other ways of relating, where responsibility could be acknowledged as complicated, as loving, as difficult, as replete with viscerally felt gaps, as predicated on irresolvable differences.

Furthermore, as in the case of Kincaid’s relation to her brother, Devon, there is no legitimacy to the personal “position” that I explored in Section II of my discussion of Jarman — and perhaps nothing more than a series of potential pitfalls. If I have emphasized Jarman’s reparative impulses — the “arts of existence” that his memoir seems to be modelling — might this reading emerge from my own grief for a personal loss, my grief for the loss of my uncle, and specifically for his role in introducing “nonconformity,” urbanity, and a sense of the powers of performance into what was otherwise, in most ways, a sealed-off rural childhood? Still, there is a curiosity — as well as a morbid, sentimental, and paranoid potential — in the situation of grieving for someone who is neither parent, husband, lover, or brother to me, a curiosity that make me doubt the

knowledge I thought I had about what marks certain relations as significant and others as marginal. As Michaels writes anticipating his niece's visit from the United States, "It will be interesting to see what gaps we can bridge and which distances we enforce during this week or so of a sustained encounter of mutual admiration, but comparative mystery" (*Unbecoming* 28). Subsequently, Michaels registers his suspicion of these differences, observing (with some of the same hesitations registered by Gary Fisher in his analysis of white femininity) that "she seems sensitive and perhaps might hurt easily, only I don't know how to go about calculating these sorts of things so I was blunt" (39). This discourse or posture of forthrightness constitutes perhaps less an innocent blundering than it does another kind of calculation, a performed experimental articulation of "the profound moral imperatives and ethical calculations that ultimately do drive the great gay queens throughout this century" (25). And what I can't help but read into Michaels' comments is an awareness of "the space for nonconformity carved out by the avunculate," their adumbration of "a less hypostatized view" not only "of what and therefore how a child can desire" but of what bonds kinship and friendship, and perhaps reading or literary criticism, might entail and enact (Sedgwick, "Tales of the Avunculate" 63).

Jarman's reparative strategies are not, I want, moreover, to emphasize, a backtracking on the memoirs' collective questioning of the ethics of a rush to consolation. On the contrary, they emerge in the midst of unresolved grief, out of a persistent attachment to bodies that a heteronormative, sexist, and racist culture would banish, would cut off from nurturance, would, in a word, exorcise. Reparation may be, so my

reading of Jarman insinuates, the perpetuation or fulfillment of melancholic subjectivity—what is melancholy but a complicated, rending love, above all else? What is possible for Jarman in this regard seems less so for Amy Hoffman, however, who worries about being consumed by her grief: reparation, if there is any, must it seems be read very much between the lines in *Hospital Time*, although Hoffman’s disavowal of the kaddish does strike me now as perhaps a more knowing calculation than my initial encounter with the text suggested. And Jamaica Kincaid, in grappling with a person and a place deeply compromised by social inequalities, raises perhaps more questions about the temptations of consolatory fictions than she does strategies for thinking and living differently. None the less, *My Brother* also keeps in play a nagging hypothesis that Devon’s life might have been more valued and more visible had he any access to the “arts of existence” to which Kincaid herself has recourse, like Jarman, Hoffman, and Mike Riegle, and like Eric Michaels and Gary Fisher, in the project of shaping her life and various affections.

Reading these memoirs with a focus on their melancholic powers of estrangement — and their diverse and incoherent powers of reparation — may provide leverage for seeing, thinking, and writing differently about the affective and the bodily in the context of HIV and AIDS. These are historical, cultural, and political projects of great urgency, for they unfold in the midst of a crisis that is far from over, whether in terms of the increasing numbers of people infected and affected worldwide or in terms of the personal and cultural traumas the pandemic has permanently established for everyone, though this “universality” is inescapably crossed by many differences, disadvantages, and disavowals. The fragility

of these texts' questioning of consolation may, furthermore, be the very index of their value to us in that they probe (though in fits and starts) "to what extent it might be possible to think differently instead of legitimating what is already known" (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* 9). If reading these memoirs might be described as burdensome, it is never predictably so. More than simply, or perversely, depriving us of our usual strategies for coping, they push the limits of what we may be capable of imagining and remembering. If a burden constitutes a load, a duty, a responsibility, and especially one that is oppressive or worrisome, even one that threatens to become parasitical and to impinge upon the self's integrity, it refers also (in an older, technical sense of the term) to the *capacity* for carrying that burden. As Hoffman's, Kincaid's, and Jarman's memoirs explore, unresolved grief may destabilize the systematic disavowals by which we ordinarily sort out and hierarchize different kinds of love, and so make us test (and perhaps to expand) our various capacities for love. In turn, these texts ask readers to think again, and to think differently, about the social and institutional frameworks that shape the lived and felt experience of HIV and AIDS, although they offer no guarantees, no salvation, only a call to responsibility.

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