

Ambivalent Blood:  
Religion, AIDS, and American Culture

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Ambivalent Blood* examines the unsettled status of religious language in the semiotic construction of HIV/AIDS in America. Since public discourse about HIV/AIDS began in 1981, a variety of religious grammars have been formulated, often at cross-purposes, to assign meaning to the epidemic. The disease's complex interaction with religion has been used to prophesize looming apocalypses, both religious and national, demand greater moral solicitude among the citizenry, forge political advantage within America's partisan political landscape, mobilize empathy and compassion for those stricken by the disease, and construct existential meaning for those who have already been consigned to physical and social death. Several studies fruitfully have explored specific registers of religious discourse and the AIDS epidemic, particularly in regard to processes of social stigmatization and combating its very effects. However, assumptions about the secular aims of scientific inquiry as well as the presumably secular trajectory of American national culture have dampened a more robust consideration of religion within the history of HIV/AIDS. In most synoptic histories of AIDS, religion is constructed as either a wincing footnote to the Religious Right or as an occasional and bland example of salubrious Christian charity posed against the backdrop of disease and death. *Ambivalent Blood* seeks to extend such analysis beyond a digestible footnote by disinterring the often polysemous and ambivalent interaction of HIV/AIDS and religious discourses within American culture. Though not a historiographic work, the current project illuminates the complicated ways in which religious and HIV/AIDS discourses

coalesced around the very definition of America itself. Like the Cold War that preceded and the Global War on Terror that followed, the AIDS crisis precipitated significant and contested recourse to the religious imaginary in the effort to forge conceptions of Americanness and citizen belonging.

## DEDICATION

The French performance artist Orlan made famous the dictum, “Remember the future!” *Ambivalent Blood* exists as a very small exercise in historical inquiry and cultural analysis that acknowledges that every present moment is an amalgam of past experience, immediate concern, and tentative longing for the future. The over determined rhetoric of death that rendered those with the HIV/AIDS – an accident of nature – as unnatural and unsuitable for life may seem, in hindsight, little more than an embarrassing artifact. But the past remains a predator, and it seems the rosy comforts of post-AIDS discourse promises almost as much as it forgets. Poet Tory Dent, a modern day Antigone, serves at the conclusion of this work as a counterfigure to the impulse to forget and compulsively paper over the exquisite vulnerabilities made so apparent in the first decades of the epidemic. Indeed, we would do well to remember from Sophocles’s *Antigone* that the challenges of one generation do not escape the next:

...as in ancient times I see the sorrow of the house,  
the living heirs of the old ancestral kings,  
piling on the sorrows of the dead  
and one generation cannot free the next –<sup>1</sup>

To that end, the present work is dedicated to all who have ventured forth to signify AIDS in ways which resist casting those with the disease as something other than objects of neglect. Consideration of their work, their struggle to represent HIV/AIDS, provides a framework for future generations needing to develop a praxis of resistance when the rights to be mourned, to be considered

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<sup>1</sup> Sophocles *Antigone*, lines 666-670.

American and acknowledged as human, are withheld, as surely will occur again with plagues, biological, discursive, and otherwise, looming on the horizon.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A single page of acknowledgements hardly seems adequate to recognize the generosity of the many who helped bring *Ambivalent Blood* into existence. The need for economy combined with the desire to extol with due poetry those who have shown me such intellectual and emotional kindness over the past five years make this, perhaps, the most anxiety-inducing part of the project. Those who know they merit my most sincere thanks already know. But just in case...

*Ambivalent Blood* would not have been possible without the guidance and endless patience of Tracy Fessenden, whose own insight, inimitable style, and penchant for intellectual bravery served as an inexhaustible source of inspiration that continues to drag my ideas out of the shade. Likewise, Linell Cady and Jacqueline Martinez provided encouragement, advice, and criticism that sharpened my writing and analysis alike. If only all graduate students were as lucky as to fall under their tutelage.

Work on *Ambivalent Blood* required many long hours and regularly exacerbated what I have come to accept as a crankiness endemic to my nature. Jeremy Smith proved an indispensable partner on the home front, providing equal measures of sunshine, comfort, and latitude. Elizabeth Hufford continued in her long-standing roles of therapist, editor, and disciplinarian, and Ruth Callahan provided most necessary reminders of the great pleasures of a life of mind.

And, to the three Cleworths, I extend my endless gratitude. They have long been supportive, unfailingly, of all of my endeavors, irrespective of their merit. My debt to them remains, as ever, unrepayable.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Notes from the Land of the Ill*

The genesis of *Ambivalent Blood* is situated in a peculiar experience of illness and shame. Born in the late 1970's, I represent the outer edge of the last American generation to be socialized into a world in which HIV/AIDS prefigured biological and national catastrophe. Though the biography of my adolescence is void of any intimate connection to the epidemic, I nonetheless recall being awash in vivid images of cadaverous patients, grave political speeches, temperate calls for tolerance and compassion, skeleton-clad protestors demanding action from City Hall, Catholic dioceses, and government bureaus, and spectacular celebrity revelations of seropositive status. As an undergraduate student, courses on diverse subjects such as disease and human evolution, queer theory, and the literatures of protest never allowed the global pandemic to stray too far from consciousness. Media flashbacks and intellectual abstraction, however, go only so far in locating one within the landscape of this disease.

In my early twenties, a Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosis forever changed my perspective on what it meant to inhabit a diseased body – that the experience of disease superseded the limited registers of physical pain. My body interchangeably became the site of social pity, treatments phrased as militaristic interventions (operation, extirpation, excavation, removal, etc), victimization and innocence, bodily surveillance, medical and personal heroism, and survivorship. Indeed, for a time I did feel quite brave, though in retrospect this bravery seems curious at best and occasionally wincing.

Accordingly, I became reasonably familiar with the rituals of the medical establishment and attuned to the various ways metaphors of the body became frames of lived experience. Annual oncology check-ups, the near solicitous scrutiny of my primary care physician, and the occasional well-intended inquiry into my health serve as gentle reminders even today that I forever reside in what Susan Sontag calls “the kingdom of the ill,” a place landscaped with inescapable metaphor.<sup>1</sup> Among the most devastating consequences of citizenship in the kingdom of the ill is a certain loss of trust in the world. Among those who have written most eloquently about this experience of loss is Holocaust survivor Jean Améry. In *At The Mind's Limits*, Améry suggests that trust in the world includes many things, including an inviolable yet indefensible and irrational belief in the “absolute causality” and the powers of inductive reasoning. More importantly, though, he argues that the most essential form of trust is one in which we all inhabit an expectation that the boundaries of our bodies will be respected from within and without; the respect of the physical self is synonymous with respect for the metaphysical self. “The boundaries of my body,” declares Améry, “are also the boundaries of my self. My skin surface shields me against the external world. If I am to have trust, I must feel on it only what I *want* to feel.”<sup>2</sup> The horrors of Gestapo prisons and death camps fail as analogy or transvaluation in any general discussion of chronic illness. Nonetheless, those who have experienced prolonged chronic illness and torture share a certain texture of feeling that

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 1989), 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, trans. Sidney and Stella Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 28.

remains permanent – a deeply imbedded psychic experience in which one intimately realizes that flesh is prey to death.

This hyperawareness of my body's vulnerability proved, however, inadequate preparation for my first experience with what has become, for many, a ritualized component of the engagement with sex in the era of AIDS: the HIV test. Narratives of HIV-testing experiences abound as a sub-genre of HIV/AIDS literature (testimonials, memoirs, and fictions alike) and my own experience is patently unremarkable. I thought nothing of consenting to a test that reassuring, paternal faces, such as C. Evertt Coop, designated as part and parcel of the repertoire of general healthcare screening. Nonetheless, the ten minutes I waited for the results of the rapid HIV antigen test proved curiously instructive. A progressive attitude regarding the expression of sexuality twinned with an actually conservative personal history of sex, failed to forestall an inordinate sense of shame and panic. I vividly remember parsing through, in excruciating detail, every offending sexual act, hoping that I wouldn't recall an indiscretion that would return a guilty verdict. Though participating in a health screening protocol that public health officials encourage to be routinized in the life of every sexually active individual, my very participation felt strangely like an exercise in penance and reconciliation. Somehow, the phlebotomist returning a negative result was a conferral of absolution, a truly ugly sentiment. There was no facile Freudian connection being made between sex and death. It was, instead, a stark reminder that rhetorical ownership of desire and disease – and thus the experience of both – had become spectacularly territorialized, only partially belonging to me. How was

it in that moment that I came to have fantasies of death so very separate from the realities of carnal experience? Though far removed from the most quintessential AIDS narratives – the panic of medical unknowing, the experience of bodies laid to waste, the irresolvable grief, and the conundrums of survivorship – I was stunned into a realization of the awful power of symbol to describe, elide, and invade the attending experiences of the physical and psychic self. This was an experience of loss of which I have only recently come to understand.

*Evasions and Post-AIDS Discourse*

*Ambivalent Blood*, then, is an exploration of the polysemy of certain forms of AIDS discourse, particularly its religious formations, that has so effectively enforced certain ideological positions which invariably root themselves deep within lived experience. Though the contours of the current project have been in place for five years, principle work on *Ambivalent Blood* began in June 2011, the thirtieth anniversary of the first clinical description of what would become known as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).<sup>3</sup> It seemed, then, a somberly fortuitous occasion to begin writing *Antigone* in earnest. Curiously, national commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary took me by surprise, not so much for the anticipated memorials, retrospectives, and reassessments, but, rather, the very lack thereof. The front page of *The New York Times* included stories on the Arab uprisings, the

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<sup>3</sup> A brief report in the June 5, 1981 Center for Disease Control's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) detailed the occurrence of a rare form of pneumonia, *Pneumocystis carinii*, in five Los Angeles men, all of whom self-reported as sexually active homosexuals. See "Pneumocystis Pneumonia --- Los Angeles, June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1981," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, [http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/june\\_5.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/june_5.htm) (accessed January 5th, 2011).

persistence of exasperating jobless figures, and President Obama's unfolding 2012 campaign strategy. The only HIV/AIDS feature was an op-ed qua living eulogy by Mark Trautwein. In "The Death Sentence that Defined My Life," Trautwein, with an almost syncopated rhythm, rehearses the line, "I haven't died on schedule."<sup>4</sup> The refrain serves as a device to introduce life lessons learned and forcefully voice his aspirations that a cure will be discovered before the ultimate execution of his metaphorized "death sentence." Indeed, Trautwein's gentle insistence on the need for continued vigilance in the search for a cure encapsulates the thematic emphasis reflected in *Times*' coverage of the epidemic in June – thirty years of AIDS, progress to report yet no cure. Of America's newspapers with national circulation, only the *Los Angeles Times* published a page one story on the epidemic's medical, epidemiological, and cultural history. The scant reporting on this somber anniversary reveals how much has changed in thirty years of HIV/AIDS in America.

The *Los Angeles Times* retrospective on the pandemic is interesting in that it trades in imagery almost unintelligible to most Americans for whom HIV/AIDS represents a generational challenge long since expired:

AIDS was a murderous, mysterious delinquent that emerged seemingly out of nowhere. Transmitted primarily through sexual activity and blood, it mowed down whole communities of young gay men, tore through a

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Trautwein, "The Death Sentence that Defined My Life," *The New York Times*, 5 June 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/opinion/05trautwein.html?r=1&scp=4&sq=aids&st=nyt> (accessed July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

generation of intravenous drug users and made orphans of millions of the world's children.<sup>5</sup>

However, this bleak synopsis, so replete with violent imagery more indicative of a story filed by a war correspondent, only barely veils the *past tense* rendering of this history. Seemingly, HIV/AIDS now operates only in the dustbin of America's historical imagination. Despite the fact that the disease has killed over 600,000 Americans, regardless of the 50,000 new HIV infections reported in the United States each year, irrespective of the newly accelerated rates of infection among gay men – HIV/AIDS in 2011 seems suspiciously absented from the story of America's present or future.<sup>6</sup> With the advent of antiretroviral drugs in the mid-to-late 1990's, the HIV/AIDS crisis, particularly in industrialized countries, turned a corner, both in the lives of the affected and in the discursive construction of the disease. The visible scars of HIV/AIDS, which had once prefigured sex as an act of existential apprehension, disappeared, and seropositive test results are now no longer held to be death sentences, suspended or otherwise. By the late 1990's, seropositive status did not equate to the physical transformation of a citizen into a veritable leper, a marked social pariah.

Indeed, the medical promise of protease inhibitors, the foundation of antiretroviral (ARV) therapies, in forging a livable HIV-positive life inaugurated what some have called post-AIDS discourse. Nowhere was end-of-plague discourse more famously articulated than in Andrew Sullivan's essay in *New York*

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<sup>5</sup> Melissa Healy and Thomas H. Maugh II. "After 30 Years, the AIDS War Still Rages." *Los Angeles Times*, 5 June 2011, <http://www.latimes.com/health/la-he-aids-at-30-20110605,0,2300265.story> (accessed July 6, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "HIV/AIDS Statistics and Surveillance," <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/surveillance/basic.htm#hivest> (accessed August 30, 2011).

*Times Magazine*, “When Plague Ends: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic.”

Though not disavowing the reality that the advent of new AIDS drugs would neither stem new HIV infections in American or abroad nor lead to improved public health for minority communities for whom AIDS drugs would prove costly if not unobtainable, Sullivan declares that something very real had changed:

But it is also true -- and in a way that most people in the middle of this plague privately recognize -- that something profound has occurred these last few months. The power of the newest drugs, called protease inhibitors, and the even greater power of those now in the pipeline, is such that a diagnosis of H.I.V. infection is not just different in degree today than, say, five years ago. It is different in kind. It no longer signifies death. It merely signifies illness.<sup>7</sup>

Sullivan follows this eyebrow-raising proclamation with an even more stunning historiographic claim in which he argues that very real horrors of the epidemic in America bore salutary fruit for homosexuals, with whom the disease has been linked rhetorically and, in America, epidemiologically. In essence, AIDS transformed a once despised population known for its licentious and libertine attitudes toward sex and drugs into an assimilation success story. The plight of gay men during the epidemic – the very visible signs of their suffering – engendered compassion and underscored the need for human charity. In response to both suffering and compassion, gay men began to exercise sexual restraint and disavow a lifestyle that had become physically, if not socially and psychically, linked to illness and death. Sullivan summarizes this transformation:

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “When Plague Ends: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic,” *The New York Times Magazine*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/11/10/magazine/when-plagues-end.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (accessed August 30, 2011). This essay appeared in the print version of *The New York Times Magazine* on November 10, 1996.



When people feared that the ebbing of AIDS would lead to a new burst of promiscuity, to a return to the 1970's in some joyous celebration of old times, they were, it turns out, only half-right. Although some bathhouses have revived, their centrality to gay life has all but disappeared. What has replaced sex is the idea of sex; what has replaced promiscuity is the idea of promiscuity, masked, in the increasing numbers of circuit parties around the country, by the ecstatic drug-enhanced high of dance music. These are not mass celebrations at the dawn of a new era; they are raves built upon the need for amnesia.<sup>8</sup>

The physical exercise of *untoward* sex has been replaced by, in Sullivan's view, a fortuitous nostalgia for sex no longer realizable. Douglas Crimp, in his scathing assessment of "When Plague End," condenses Sullivan's argument into an essentially homophobic fantasy, "Thank God for AIDS. AIDS saved gay men."<sup>9</sup>

Irrespective of the provocative assessments of Sullivan and Crimp, there appears to be widespread acceptance of the idea that the cultural engagement with AIDS has served to positively impact the landscape for the LGBT community.

Writing about the intersections of religions and AIDS in America for *The Huffington Post*, Diane Winston asks:

Did working through their theological response to AIDS help some mainline Christians come to accept GLBT people as God's children, equal members of the congregation, deserving of ordination and entitled to the sanction of religious and civil marriage? Likewise did reporting on mainline Protestants' beliefs about gays and activities around AIDS predispose news consumers to rethink their own opinions?<sup>10</sup>

Undeniably, post-AIDS discourse has rendered gay identities with no small measure of sanitization. In the fifteen years since the publication of Sullivan's

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Diane Winston, "Religion and AIDS at 30," *The Huffington Post*, June 7, 2011. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-winston/religion-and-aids-at-30\\_b\\_872018.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-winston/religion-and-aids-at-30_b_872018.html) (accessed July 28, 2011).

essay, public discourse about gay identities has moved away from the historical linkages to promiscuity, illness, and death to the recently polarizing debate about the full assimilation of gay identities to hitherto *heteronormative* aspirations: marriage, family-building, hospital visitation rights, etc. Undoubtedly, the entrée of gay rights discourse into the domains of marriage and family is significant in establishing *de jure* equality; however, it risks marginalizing not only a broader range of sexualities and identity positions, but obscuring a great deal besides.

Paul Butler warns:

In an effort to distance itself from death, illness, and the stigmatization of AIDS, the gay community has used this discourse to draw a Maginot line around the disease, declaring an end to AIDS in a perhaps too-successful attempt to avoid linking a context of shame, fear, and horror with queer identity. Rather than achieving its intended effect, however, post-AIDS discourse has been harmful to the gay community.<sup>11</sup>

Through this process of normalization, according to Butler, the gay community risks alienating itself from not only the crucible of its past but also the realities of its “ongoing history.”

That HIV/AIDS now operates *sub rosa* in America’s 24-hour news cycles and, thus, its collective consciousness, is the result of numerous developments representing different genealogies of post-AIDS discourse. With the physical manifestations of the disease concealed by protease inhibitors, HIV/AIDS became, at least from the American perspective, the central narrative of another continent. During the second Bush administration, HIV/AIDS, as a national discourse, became fully Africanized. Perception was that the plague had been

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Butler, “Embracing AIDS: History, Identity, and Post-AIDS Discourse,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 24, no. 1 (2004): 95.

tamed on the home front and was now, as it ever was, the ravage of a still dark and underdeveloped continent. In his speech on World AIDS Day in 2007, President Bush transformed the catastrophic dimensions of the epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa into an opportunity for America to exercise its “spirit of brotherhood and generosity” that has “long defined” America’s values as exercised in its two-hundred years of international engagement.<sup>12</sup> Curiously, Bush’s speech, which, like his overall attention to the global pandemic, has received praise in light of the many more controversial aspects of his presidency, notably constructs HIV/AIDS as an enduring problem only in its foreign dimensions – progress at home paired with opportunity to extend America’s influence abroad.

In the last decade, pharmaceutical companies and deftly conceived marketing campaigns have restructured the signifying practices of AIDS in American discourse. Remarkably, the construction of seropositivity now coheres to market logic that reifies the consumer as an *individual* sine qua non, a process achieved by marketing campaigns that render seropositive status as but one of a collection of designer identities. One recent pharmaceutical advertisement offered the following caption framing what surely could have been a model for an Armani underwear campaign: “I am a go-getter. I am romantic. I am a world traveler. I am HIV positive.”<sup>13</sup> The effectiveness of such campaigns is telling,

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<sup>12</sup> George W. Bush, “AIDS and America: World AIDS Day Address” (Mount Airy, Maryland, November 30, 2007), <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/11.30.07.html> (accessed June 21, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> *The Advocate*, Isentress Advertisement, June/July 2011, 19-21. The advertisement continues, “You are special, unique, and different from anyone else.”

and it is clear that the marketing of AIDS has epidemiological consequences. The majority of Americans under the age of thirty has never lived without access to effective HIV-therapy and, thus, operates without full understanding of the continued medical and economic risks posed by the virus. In 2003, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) established the National HIV Behavioral Surveillance (NHBS) system. Every year since its inception, the NHBS has reported statistical increases in the number of gay men engaging in unprotected sex. Astonishingly, the 2008 NHBS study, which randomly administered HIV-tests and behavioral risk factor surveys to over 7,000 participants, found that nearly twenty percent of study participants were HIV-positive; forty-four percent of those who tested positive were unaware of their serostatus.<sup>14</sup> The report's authors concluded that the data necessitated a redoubling of efforts to promote more frequent HIV-testing among at-risk populations. Though this plan of action is meritorious, it belies the trenchancy of AIDS apathy, an apathy that verges on flippancy. Coverage of drugmaker Gilead Science's piloting of a pre-infection dosing strategy called PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxi) is already laying the foundation for a new generation of marketing campaigns: "Will an AIDS Pill a Day Keep the Virus Away?"<sup>15</sup> For activist scholars like Douglas Crimp, such rhetoric is indicative of

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<sup>14</sup> Alexandra M. Oster, M.D., Isa W. Miles, Sc.D., Binh C. Le, M.D., Elizabeth A. DiNenno, Ph.D., Ryan E. Wiegand, M.S., James D. Heffelfinger, M.D., and Richard Wolitski, Ph.D., "HIV Testing Among Men Who Have Sex With Men -- 21 Cities, United States, 2008," United States Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention (3 June 2011), <http://www.thebody.com/content/62463/hiv-testing-among-msm-21-cities-united-states-2008.html?getPage=1> (accessed July 6, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Simeon Bennett and Tom Randall, "Will and AIDS Pill a Day Keep the Virus Away," *Bloomberg Business Week* (April 1, 2010),

a psychic change and a declension of intervening signifying practices that have rendered AIDS all but invisible and AIDS identities as natural.

*Why AIDS? Why Now?*

Accordingly, writing about HIV/AIDS thirty years after the disease's entrance into public consciousness – and ten years after the galvanizing events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, which forged a “new normal” in America's episodic fears of an inassimilable *other* – has cast me as either intellectually anachronistic or a historian by trade, of which I consider myself neither. The contrast between my preoccupation with this topic and the reality that as of 2009 only six percent of Americans identified HIV/AIDS as the most pressing public health concern facing the Nation – a decline of thirty-eight percent in fifteen years – points to an intriguing question.<sup>16</sup> As the natural history of HIV/AIDS points to various termini in the biological quest for vaccine and cure, has the social history of the disease in America, particularly in the evolution of representational practices formulating intelligible identity positions, reached, if not its denouement, a redoubtable stasis?

The answer to this question is complex and invites the normal vices of historical inquiry, such as historicism and presentism. It is an uncontroversial position to espouse skepticism about historicism. Just as historians of science and medicine are keen to observe that the human condition hasn't particularly

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[http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/10\\_15/b4173056260350.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/10_15/b4173056260350.htm) (accessed July 6, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> “2009 Survey of Americans On HIV/AIDS: Summary of Findings On the Domestic Epidemic,” The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, [www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/upload/7889.pdf](http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/upload/7889.pdf) (accessed July 6, 2011).

advanced in step with scientific progress, social and political historians do not conduct historical research intent on verifying positivistic goals that reified once-assumed trajectories – authoritarianism to democracy, monarchical sovereignty to republicanism and classical liberalism, subordination to freedom. Just as positivistic tendencies are eschewed in historical analysis, so too is presentism and so-called Whig-history. It is all too easy to populate historical analysis with a trenchant concern for present circumstances and future outcomes. At its worst, presentism engenders an imagined past that is little more than a convenient fiction. As Crimp and Butler rightly observe, the writing of AIDS is a dangerous enterprise when the inertia of today’s politics renders AIDS history as palimpsest. Much is lost when a more palatable historical script replaces the story of “what really happened,” a phrase borrowed from Charles Long, who has powerfully articulated the “dynamics of concealment” in the historiographic enterprise of American religious history.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, a present concern, rather than historical presentism, informs *Ambivalent Blood*. In 1984, Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler concluded a press conference announcing the identification of HIV as the AIDS-causing agent that United States hoped to have an HIV vaccine ready for clinical testing in two years. Twenty-eight years later, the promised vaccine remains elusive. Infections rates, after having declined in the late 1990’s, have accelerated. Prior to the 2008 financial collapse, nearly 50 million Americans

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1986). In particular, see Chapter 4, “Silence and Signification,” 61-70.

(16% of the population) were without any form of health coverage, a number that surely has increased in the past four years.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, a lacuna in coverage is particularly notable in minority communities experiencing the most rapid acceleration of HIV infection rates. Studies examining the long-term health impacts of protease inhibitors on HIV-positive patients remain few and far between. One need not be an alarmist to suggest that the confluence of these variables indicate that the story of AIDS in America has not, in fact, reached its terminus. If we accept both Sontag's axiom that diseases are invariably portrayed as indictments on society and James Morone's observation that the "American story is a moral tale" in which the nation develops from one revival to the next, unpacking the operations of AIDS discourses remains a pressing concern.<sup>19</sup> This is particularly the case in a society that stakes so much on technology's ability to guarantee both biological and social immunity. Elbaz and Murbach underscore the stakes when they question whether America's propensity for "risk control" will lead to a new and continued "panoptism," to borrow from Foucault, when the next epidemic, perhaps AIDS once more, proves impossible to domesticate.<sup>20</sup>

### *Ambivalent Blood*

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<sup>18</sup> "FASTSTATS," Health Insurance Coverage, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/hinsure.htm> (accessed July 21, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 72 and James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Mikhaël Erbaz and Ruth Merbach, "Fear and the Other, Condemned and Damned: AIDS, Epidemic and Exclusions," *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art & Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Allan Klusacek and Ken Morrison (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1992), 1-9.

Central to *Ambivalent Blood* are the species of religious rhetoric that have been deployed to construct occasionally contravening narratives of AIDS in American culture. It would surprise many, particularly among the diverse constituencies of contemporary AIDS activism, to assert that religion operated as a central pillar in the architecture of American AIDS discourse, thus providing a comprehensible public grammar for the disease. It is readily assumed that the domains for speaking about HIV/AIDS in 2011 are purely secular in discipline: virology, vaccinology, epidemiology, social work, global public health, etc. Furthermore, formations of post-AIDS discourse have obsolesced the powerful religious tropes deployed to imbue the epidemic with meaning beyond its (mis)understood biological reality. AIDS imagery, visual or otherwise, signaling apocalyptic wrath or invoking Christological suffering to sensitize perception of the ravaged AIDS body have all but disappeared. What remains of “religion and AIDS” in American discourse are the occasional and aforementioned references by American presidents to the nation’s duty to apply a secularized Christian charity to sufferers abroad.

That HIV/AIDS, let alone religious constructions of the disease, has largely vanished from America’s evolving narrative of millennial self-definition, I suggest, is less an indication of tolerance ascendant than a shift of preoccupation to other agents that more forcefully and visibly threaten the institutions of state. And this shift, by no means, has entailed diminution of religion’s hold in framing America’s existential threats, a process Peter Berger call *nomization*. As will be explored in detail in Chapter One, apocalypticism has been – and remains – a



particularly powerful convention in erecting an edifice “in the face of the potent and alien forces of chaos.”<sup>21</sup> In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag describes the particular persistence of cyclical apocalyptic panic in Western culture as a tool for identifying looming catastrophes:

With the inflation of apocalyptic rhetoric has come the increasing unreality of the apocalypse. A permanent modern scenario: apocalypse looms...and it doesn't occur. And it still looms. We seem to be in the throes of one of the modern kind of apocalypse...Apocalypse is now a long-running serial: not “Apocalypse Now” but “Apocalypse from Now On.”<sup>22</sup>

In post-9/11 America, Islamofacism, the war on terror, and the collapse of the global economy replaced fears of a “millennial plague” in the nation’s perceived assortment of existential threats. Anxiety about seropositive blood donors and contaminated toilet seats has been replaced by Muslims on airplanes, terrorists sequestered at Guantánamo Bay, and a new generation of robber-barons strolling Wall Street. Even highway construction on the Santa Monica freeway in Los Angeles has been imbued with apocalyptic significance. Much to the dismay of cable broadcasters everywhere, “carmagedon” failed to materialize.

Present day concealments aside, that religion has always been part of the diverse signifying practices within the broader spectrum of AIDS discourse by no means has gone unnoticed. The virulence of the Religious Right’s public condemnation of gays and their conflation of Christian and American apocalypses are part of the standard narrative repertoire of any synoptic AIDS history. Sociology, in particular, has offered the most concerted disciplinary examination

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 23.

<sup>22</sup> Sontag, *Illness and Its Metaphors and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 87-88.

of the epidemic, constructing typological responses to AIDS within defined religious constituencies and assessing applications of religious rhetoric to group maintenance functions.<sup>23</sup> The humanities, however, has proven surprisingly unresponsive to the epidemic, contributing only a fraction to AIDS scholarship long dominated by medical and public health disciplines. But even in the most considered studies of cultural construction of HIV/AIDS, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class supersede religion as a category of analysis.

Though an incredulity toward metanarrative may be the anthem of postmodernity, I would suggest that the impulse toward a unifying *mythos* remains as strong as it ever has in American culture. In Paul Shaffer's 1973 play *Equus*, psychiatrist Martin Dysart suggests that stories are the only way to see in the dark. To borrow a phrase from Hauerwas, America functions none too differently than a church in that it represents a story-formed community.<sup>24</sup> America exists inasmuch as a majority of its citizens continue to identify with a story with sufficient intensity as to behave in accordance to a storied vision of the nation. Herein resides the central thesis of the current project. Through a myriad of complicated interactions, HIV/AIDS and religious discourses actively produced narratives of American nationhood. The unfolding epidemic underscored the unpredictability of life, created a desperate need for interpersonal communion (particularly among the stricken), and invited questions of national

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<sup>23</sup> For representative examples, see Susan Palmer, *AIDS and the Apocalyptic Metaphor in North America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) and Thomas Long, *AIDS And American Apocalypticism: The Cultural Semiotics Of An Epidemic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2001), 171-99.

collapse and disenchantment. Moreover, the centrality of sex in the virus's transmission exercised tensions concerning moral ambiguity. To put it crudely, the wages of the diseases were as much existential as corporeal, thus inviting narrative interventions in the often furious and desperate attempt to come to an understanding of the disease. Such interventions were as relevant for the life of the nation as the individual lives of those intimately touched by HIV/AIDS.

As an imagined community, a nation persists only in as much as it is capable of reproducing a hegemonic form of belonging, or what Antonio Gramsci coined as "collective will."<sup>25</sup> Such collective will independently exists neither in the divine ether nor through the raw exercise of state power. As Raymond Williams explains, the mechanics of nationalism are always processual and contested. Hegemony is lived and negotiated:

A lived hegemony is always a process...It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits...it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not all its own.<sup>26</sup>

*Ambivalent Blood* operates as an exercise in discursive unpacking aimed at exposing the constitutive elements and inherent tensions when religious idioms and the rhetoric of illness are mobilized by governments, churches, schools, scholars, and artists to achieve an understanding of what AIDS means in an America debating its transcendent self-definition. The aforementioned tensions

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<sup>25</sup> Sue Golding, *Gramsci's Democratic Theory: Contributions to a Post-Liberal Democracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 68.

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1989), 112.

are a product of an inherent ideological ambivalence that marks the construction of national communities.<sup>27</sup> This ambivalence derives from the fact that the mythos of nationalism always operates at cross-purposes. To be effective, the repertoire of symbolic capital deployed to achieve *nationness* must be unifying and inclusive. National belonging requires a compelling narrative that includes diverse constituencies as principle actors. Yet, projects of nation building cohere to the logic of all group formation processes in that they must define *who and what they are not*. As Sheila Croucher contends, "Nation-builders employ a variety of tactics to ensure consent to the form of nation and to its particular content. In doing so, they must negotiate tenuous boundaries of inclusion and exclusion."<sup>28</sup> This is a process, she continues, that is dynamic and ferociously contested.

American nationalism remains deeply wedded to a mythos that certain religious notions form an inalienable core of the American experience. Dissenting churches, religious pluralism, religious marketplaces, all legacies of Reform Protestantism, operate as core constituents of the American story, so much so that they are often cited, perhaps ironically so, as the root source of America's secular collective identity. James Kurth posits that these aforementioned religious notions "provided a solid foundation for analogous and isomorphic secular ones,

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<sup>27</sup> In both ideological and psycho-social sense, ambivalence has become a cottage industry phenomena in the humanities and social sciences. Notions such as ambiguity, dissonances, indifference, and inconsistency are often used as functional synonyms for ambivalence. I would suggest that ambivalence is more than a case of mixed feelings. It is, rather, a state of simultaneous contrast in object-evaluation. Dissonance, mixed feelings, and ambiguity may be more accurately considered effects of ambivalence.

<sup>28</sup> Sheila Croucher, "Ambivalent Attachments: The Hegemonic Politics of American Nationhood," *New Political Science* 28, no.2 (June 2006): 183-184.

particularly political liberty, social equality, and economic enterprise."<sup>29</sup> For Kurth, Reformed Protestantism, in its secularized form, became the "American Creed" which, he argues, operates as the "least-common-denominator shared by large numbers, probably a large majority of Americans."<sup>30</sup>

The validity of Kurth's sweeping claims notwithstanding, there is little doubt that many hold this formulation of the American Creed to be transcendent and universal in nature. As Anatole Lieven suggests, the very power of the American Creed stems from both its universalism and "its immense importance in holding together the huge and immensely varied American Nation."<sup>31</sup> Its universalism claims to rest with a very elegant litmus test, which was articulated recently with astonishing simplicity by Rudolph Giuliani, "All that matters is that you embrace America and understand its ideals and what it's all about. Abraham Lincoln used to say that the test of your Americanism was how much you believed in America. Because we're like a religion really. A secular religion."<sup>32</sup> Assertions of outright belief in the American Creed may overreach by verging on an absolutism that infringes too much on both the individualism and liberty at the heart of the Creed itself. As Robert Hughes notes, the essential myth of the nation subsumed under the American Creed function at "an unconscious level for

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<sup>29</sup> James Kurth, "Religion and National Identity in America and Europe," *Society* 44, no. 6 (September 2007): 121.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>31</sup> Anatole Lieven, "Bush's Choice: Messianism or Pragmatism?" *Open Democracy*, February 22, 2005, [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/article\\_2348.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/article_2348.jsp) (accessed: January 2, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Farewell Address, available in the *New York Times*, December 27, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/27/nyregion/27CND-GIUL-TEXT.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed: August 1, 2011).

most Americans.”<sup>33</sup> Naming and interrogating them expose them to quite legitimate critique.

### *Notes on Theoretical Dispensation*

In a 1980’s America racked by unemployment, poverty, political and racial tensions, and a crisis of confidence stemming from the perceived threat of the Soviet Union, HIV/AIDS invited no small measure of interrogation of the very meaning of America and the durability of its creeds. In a wave of national anxiety, national news broadcasts, political speeches, pulpit jeremiads, public protests, and government reports and pamphlets littered the rhetorical landscape with religious and anti-religious statements seeking a more clearly articulated story of the epidemic. *Ambivalent Blood*, then, seeks to disinter the various genealogies of the religious construction of HIV/AIDS, including those issued from and in resistance to institutions of power. The term “disinter” intentionally invokes Foucault. Indeed, the method of the current project is undeniably Foucauldian in that it seeks to undercover the polysemy of meanings drawn from statements of discourse, both buried and apparent. How these discursive formations operate in tandem with and in opposition to relations of power constitute the genealogical component of this enterprise. As Cindy Patton, whose *Inventing AIDS* remains the benchmark for all cultural analyses of the epidemic, emphatically states that every statement concerning AIDS “refers to broad forms of social power relations which, in our collective Western history, have deep and

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<sup>33</sup> Richard T. Hughes, *Myths Americans Live By* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 8.

equivocal meaning.”<sup>34</sup> This project intends an exploration of a diversified set of AIDS representations, both religious and combatively irreligious, that actively contest the equivocal meaning of America.

It would provide a small measure of comfort to proclaim *Ambivalent Blood* as devoid of a theoretical or ideological dispensation, for such commitments inevitably become exercises in self-portraiture. Yet, certain affinities are unavoidable if one believes that disinterment is necessary, which I clearly do. Accordingly, the current study functions within a social semiotic framework. Social semiotics, as an extension of Saussurean linguistics and Foucauldian insights, frames cultural production not in terms of end-product analysis but rather as a social process in which the text is imbricated within a wider field of enabling and regulating discourses.<sup>35</sup> In *Literature as Discourse*, Robert Hodge illuminates the more expansive interpretative practices that can be brought to bear by a social semiotic approach:

Instead, social semiotics expands the scope of what it treats as a text, including contexts, purposes, agents, and their activities as socially organized structures of meaning, text-like objects which are themselves mediated by other texts if they are to be available for any kind of study. Instead of an opposition between a close but asocial reading of a specific class of texts (‘literature’) and a socially oriented refusal to be entrapped by specific reading strategies, social semiotics looks for strategies of

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<sup>34</sup> Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 2.

<sup>35</sup> It will not be deemed an act of intellectual laziness if I forgo a broader discussion of Foucault. As with Freud several generations ago, I believe we’ve entered a post-Foucauldian world in which his fundamental description of discursive forms and attending instrumentality are foundational assumptions in any cultural analysis in which discourse analysis prominently figures. Criticisms of the evidentiary elisions and accusations of “no new theory” leveled against the Foucauldian project are noted but not particularly relevant to the current project. I take as axiomatic his claim that bodies are particularly susceptible to appropriation by ideological discourses.

reading that are more intensive, more flexible, more comprehensive and more committed to the study of the social.<sup>36</sup>

The use of social semiotics allows for a two-fold appreciation of discourses as they construct sedimented layers of meaning in broader social contexts and contour the very possibilities for existential meaning over and against the headwinds of political force.

Though HIV/AIDS exists as an irreducible material reality, its linguistic construction is experienced no less realistically than the sum of the syndrome's biochemical parts. Language is not a substitute for reality, and the word is not the thing. Yet language is a primary vehicle through which experience of material phenomena is achieved and authenticated. As Merleau-Ponty argues, language "is a manifestation, a revelation of intimate being and of the psychic link which unites us to the world and our fellow men."<sup>37</sup> In Merleau-Ponty's famous reversal of Husserl, intersubjectivity is subjectivity – one cannot escape the social political dimensions of signification. Thirty years into the "millennial plague," it might be easy to dismiss the utterances of the Moral Majority and the Religious Right as unfortunate fantasies nesting among a constellation of metaphors surrounding HIV/AIDS. However, such metaphORIZING of the epidemic is intractably relevant in the production of the very signatures of intelligibility that make a life livable. Metaphors cannot but be inherited, their meanings felt and lived in the bodies of those living with and dying of HIV/AIDS. Herein lies another theoretical strain

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Hodge, *Literature and Social Semiotics: Textual Strategies in English and History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), ix.

<sup>37</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 196.



within the project: existential phenomenology's attention to the experience of the body in the lived world.<sup>38</sup> Whereas the few and fine analyses of religious representations of AIDS focus on sociological functions (i.e., group cohesion, political mobilization, boundary-maintenance strategies, etc.), *Ambivalent Blood* emphasizes the connection between religious rhetoric and the politics of national belonging. Much is at stake in the contest to establish a particularly American narrative canopy capable of explaining the AIDS epidemic. Those who find themselves on the losing side of the exclusionary gambits of national mythmaking suffer terrible and egregious loss. American history is littered with episodes of violence, both physical and ideological, in which Americanness is withheld from its own citizens.

In the first decade of the epidemic, many people with AIDS (PWA)<sup>39</sup> encountered a crisis of intelligibility. A seropositive diagnosis transformed the living subject into a dying one; moreover it foretold almost immediate social death. Discourses of otherization rendered PWA without recourse to the bonds of citizenship and communal belonging upon which the possibility of life rest. In *The Writing of Disaster*, Maurice Blanchet observes, "Dying means: you are dead already, in an immemorial past, of a death which was not yours, which you have

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<sup>38</sup> Again, Merleau-Ponty remains most instructive: "Insofar as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world" (408).

<sup>39</sup> *PWA* is a signifying term developed by activist Michael Callen. Given the ideologically fraught signifying practices that created a veritable hierarchy of shame and culpability (i.e., Gay-Related Immune Deficiency or *GRID*), AIDS culture workers sought terminology and acronyms that resisted designating specific vectors of illness or behavioral markers.

thus neither known nor lived, but under the threat of which you believe you are called upon to live...”<sup>40</sup> The *National Review* once opined that people with AIDS were skeletal specters feasting at the banquet of sexual liberation.<sup>41</sup> This macabre image of living skeleton serves as an apt metaphor for the dilemma confronting people with AIDS (PWA). Neither fully dead nor living, the PWA occupies a position of living death consigned to what Judith Butler calls the “domain of abject beings,” a social world made uninhabitable, unlivable by subjects denied the most basic status of community belonging.<sup>42</sup> As Sarah Brophy notes, a theme common in literary responses to HIV/AIDS is the frustration inherent in developing a vocabulary of unresolved grief for subjects who have no social standing to be grieved in the first place.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, a central theme explored in *Ambivalent Blood* is the discursive struggle of PWA to memorialize their grief by invoking their allegorical bonds of citizenship, Americanness, and belonging.

In light of the well documented schema of marginalizing rhetoric, the question for many American PWA became how to recover a presence intelligible to the body politic. Though modest attention has been given to the effective mobilization of religious language in ostracizing PWA from any claim to both salvation and citizenship, the role of religious language in creating existential

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<sup>40</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 65.

<sup>41</sup> “AIDS and Public Policy,” *National Review* 35, no. 13 (July 8, 1983): 796.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

<sup>43</sup> For representative examples, see Sarah Brophy’s *Witnessing Aids: Writing, Testimony, and the Work of Mourning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) and Ross Chambers *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

meaning for the “already-dead” un-American living within sedimented landscapes of already-resolved narratives has received little comment. Accordingly, the current project is not simply concerned with discourse analysis and the political explication of American metanarratives. It recognizes that much is at stake in the vertiginous engagement with the epidemic of meaning spurred by AIDS – the very ability of a subject to lay claim to existence. Judith Butler famously defined the subject as “the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency.”<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, *Ambivalent Blood* is particularly concerned to not lose sight of the fact that AIDS discourses inhabit the lived experience of those impacted by the epidemic. Accordingly, there is a pressing concern to understand the extant domains of meaning and the discursive regimes that shape the possibilities for semiotic agency for all those who will continue to be touched by the disease despite the halcyon promises of post-AIDS discourse.

### *Blueprints for Ambivalent Blood*

Chapter One, “An Issue of the Blood,” begins by extensively mapping how scholarship has articulated the connection between HIV/AIDS and various strains of religious discourse. The intention of this bibliographic excavation is to expose how conceptualizations of AIDS have been shaped by specific understandings of both the term “religion” itself and perceptions of its appropriate role in the modern world, American history, and civic life. As a biomedical reality, much HIV/AIDS scholarship has resisted the introduction of religion as a

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<sup>44</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997), 11.

meaningful category of analysis. Perhaps in reaction to the notable rhetorical excesses of the Religious Right in the first decade of the epidemic, most HIV/AIDS scholarship (certainly in the sciences but even from the disciplinary perspectives of the helping professions and liberal arts) seeks to return AIDS analysis to the putatively secular discussions of epidemiology, public health, race, class, and gender.

Where religion is rendered as fully present in scholarly inquiry, a sharp dichotomization of the guiding definition of religion is apparent. It is either public/political/social (therefore, construed as violating modernity's secular impetus) or private/apolitical/individual (ergo, "good religion") – both are distilled into opposing discourses. Sharply defined epistemologies and narratives emanating from diverse sources within America's sectarian landscape mark the former. Most notably within the prevailing history of HIV/AIDS, we find the polarizing rhetoric of both the Religious Right and AIDS activists who sought to frame the disease in apocalyptic and genocidal registers with the intention of mobilizing political agendas. The latter offers a disavowal of the marked, public nature of "religious" discourses in favor of locating "true religion" in the category of "spiritual," which can be harnessed as apolitical nourishment by those confronting the disease. Constructed as a connective field superseding sectarian divisions, discourses of spirituality found favor among those seeking to universalize the relevance, if not the experience, of disease. Spirituality as a discourse is no less political than its religious counterpart. Indeed, I read it as a synonym for a politics of pluralism and religious liberalism that, I argue, is less

innocent than its celebratory claims. Ultimately, meta-constructions of both religion and spirituality are wedded to very specific readings of American history in which conceptions of nation and religion operate synonymously.

This bibliographic reading, then, does not stand as a formal literature review but rather as an indication that the very social construction of HIV/AIDS was and is inescapably imbricated with the evolving story of America's self-definition. One of the most important and reoccurring themes throughout *Ambivalent Blood* is how notions of public grievability and mourning for those with HIV/AIDS rested so consistently on a sense of national belonging rooted in a religious ethos. The subsequent chapters in this project all, in various ways, attend to a semiotic struggle, both masked and unmasked, to represent AIDS and AIDS identities in culturally intelligible ways that satisfy religious definitions of Americanness. Even recourse to the category of the "spiritual" and all of its attending buzzwords affect a highly politicized rhetorical gambit in the effort to achieve meaningful pardon for the otherized AIDS-body.

Chapter Two makes the still controversial claim that people with AIDS, particularly in the first fifteen years of the epidemic, were subject to ideological state violence motivated by religious conceptions of America – this despite the putatively secular configuration of the state.<sup>45</sup> Many versions of U.S. history

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<sup>45</sup> This is, of course, an unoriginal claim. Larry Kramer remains the most ardent articulator of the position that the United States perpetrated an intentional genocide against people with AIDS. Kramer has explained his claim as both hyperbolic and true. See Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 384. For a more considered articulation of this position, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "White Glasses," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 252-266.

deploy a secular narrative of progress in which religious “atavism” is increasingly relegated to private franchise, whether of mind or market, thus constructing public space, most notably the domains of politics and governance, as appropriately rational and secular. Increasingly, this narrative of secularism triumphant has come under scrutiny, and that even those most heavily marked religious tropes, such as apocalyptic metaphor, remain as foundational as ever to America’s self-definition.<sup>46</sup> J.F. Maclear strenuously argues that apocalyptic thinking did not end with the Puritan errand and that by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans of every creed shared “in the inchoate conviction that the Republic constituted a divinely favored nation....fulfilling a worthy mission in directing all peoples to democracy, progress, and civilization.”<sup>47</sup> By the 1980’s President Reagan, building on nearly twenty years of an increasingly expansive “silent majority,” had revived the Puritan errand and belief in American exceptionalism. The AIDS epidemic unfolded as challenge to the full realization, under Reagan, of John Winthrop’s “city on the hill” over and against “godless communism” and the supposed moral degeneration endemic to certain parts of the American landscape.

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<sup>46</sup> See Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Also, Tracy Fessenden’s *Culture and Redemption* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), though making no special claims about apocalyptic rhetoric in particular, makes the compelling case that the apparatus of the American state remains, as ever, engaged with religious concerns, promoting certain forms of religious possibility over others.

<sup>47</sup> J. F. Maclear, “The Republic and the Millennium,” *The Religion of the Republic*, ed. Elwyn A. Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 213.

Accordingly, Chapter Two explores the various ways in which the presidential bully pulpit has functioned to further putatively religious frames for America's national AIDS narratives. The chapter begins with a brief analysis of one of the most famous plague texts, Thucydides' description of the plague in Athens. This excursion into antiquity provides a powerful lens through which to see how the rhetoric of disease coheres closely to civil religious conceptions of state and civic culture. The chapter then demonstrates that the unfolding of the AIDS pandemic at the climatic end of the Cold War challenged in fundamental ways the valence of religious narratives of the American state, thus provoking a vehement rhetorical response to fortify the very narratives the crisis seemed to undermine. Close readings of presidential speeches reveal the often nuanced ways in which the state promotes providential and utopia impulses that, as Jacqueline Foretsch argues, "promises safety and survival for the healthy few and encourages the abandonment of the ill and disempowered."<sup>48</sup> The purpose of this analysis is to presage arguments made later in this project that the appeal to religion to secure the rights of mourning is fraught with peril inasmuch as the state always-already sanctions very particular forms of religious discourses as normative in a country so lauded for its guarantees of religious freedom. In other words, the appeal to certain forms of religion to designate both humanness and Americanness are de facto appeals to the state and risk a double negation – people with AIDS are neither human nor American.

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<sup>48</sup> Jacqueline Foretsch, *Enemies Within: The Cold War and the AIDS Crisis in Literature, Film, and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 7.

Chapter Two concludes with an examination of the transformation of presidential rhetoric on AIDS from rhetorical forms which emphasized scientific exceptionalism and moral restraint to narratives of care and compassion. By 1987, opprobrium directed at PWA and communities of risk reached its apogee, as did the claims of apocalypse, holocaust, and genocide issued by the HIV/AIDS community. A variety of constituencies from numerous political enclaves sought a truce from the near hysterical vitriol of the rhetoric, and a principle strategy deployed was the invocation for tolerance. The appeal to tolerance exudes a type of rhetorical comfort buttressed by 150 years of classical and political Liberalism grounded in rhetorics (if not policies) of pluralism, consent, liberty, and egalitarianism, and deontological ethics. The nearly transcendent status of “tolerance” assumed in the past twenty years is, as Wendy Brown suggests, a category that is protean, historical, and, most importantly, instrumental.<sup>49</sup> In many of the official utterances of state at the height of the AIDS crisis, “tolerance” became a commodity of compassion befitting a nation of Christian charity. It is difficult – and often imprudent – to disavow tolerance as a type of practice or social grace that enables forging stronger bonds of affinity. Seen as a type of political discourse, one rooted in a presumably secular and liberal traditions, tolerance assumes a less salutary status, particularly when compassion and tolerance are framed as the means through which America meets its providential obligations.

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<sup>49</sup> Brown provides a particularly insightful overview of the depoliticizing deployment of tolerance as a centerpiece of multiculturalism and liberal democratic citizenship in the first chapter of her *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).



Chapter Three evaluates the complex intersection between nationalism, public mourning, and sexual regulation. Aside from the Vietnam Memorial, The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt is the most famous and lauded public monument memorializing an episode of collective American trauma. The quilt was conceived in reaction to the stigmatization associated with HIV/AIDS, and, in particular, the refusal of mainline churches and some funeral homes to accept the remains of the deceased and render the full range of after death services. The power of the AIDS quilt was its ability to tap into a quintessentially American modality of mourning. Quilting has a long history in American religious handicrafts and has been produced for manifold rites of passage (e.g., cradle and marriage quilts) and, more recently, quilting ministries and spiritual exercise.<sup>50</sup>

Cleve Jones, the conceptual author of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, devised the concept with the intention of locating the AIDS community within the American mythological topos of *e pluribus unum*. By doing so, the quilt attempted to transcend the stigma of AIDS as a “gay disease” and transform the story of AIDS into a national tragedy involving a plurality of Americans and American identities. Lawrence Howe has called the NAMES Project’s embracing an array of individual and idiosyncratic expressions of grief as a “broadly democratic undertaking” that “textualizes the democratic and

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<sup>50</sup> Gerard C. Wertkin, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Folk Art* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 430. Cleve Jones, creator of the Project NAMES AIDS Memorial Quilt concept, hails from Quaker roots; he discusses, at length, how numerous threads of Quaker sensibility permeated his conceptualization of the project.

novelistic principles of American cultural identity.”<sup>51</sup> Placing AIDS losses within the wider tableau of a sentimentalized America marked by agrarian images, community belonging, and a purer and folkish piety imbues the crisis with the vestiges of patriotic feeling, which is perhaps evidenced by similar quilting projects that have commemorated the losses endured by military personnel and their families in the seemingly millennial war on terror.

The overwhelmingly positive response to the quilt has been challenged recently by critics such as Daniel Harris,<sup>52</sup> who argue that the quilt represents a pernicious trend in gay culture to self-commodify community interests in response to assimilative pressures. Other have seen the quilt’s usage of an essentially “feminine” form of artistic production as a means to redirect attention away from the oversexed bodies of gay men; the quilt, thus, trades in its own brand of moralism. Reception to critiques of Project NAMES has been eclectic but generally consistent, with most observers voicing displeasure of the presumed critique of community grief. Chapter Three seeks to interrogate both sides of the argument by locating the central questions of the debate within the historical context from which the very argument arises. What are the assimilative pressures? Does assimilation provide for both grievability and community and an intelligible and functional citizenship? Does assimilation (or, in the parlance of American religious historiography, “consensus”) entail a type of sanitization that reinforces a specific genealogy of nationalism that thrives on the fantasies of

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<sup>51</sup> Lawrence Howe, “The AIDS Quilt and Its Traditions,” *College Literature* 24, no. 2 (June 1997): 111.

<sup>52</sup> See Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, reprint ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

erasure? Or does close consideration of the quilt itself, as an ever-growing public monument, reveal unaccounted for bricolage and idiosyncratic signification that resist both sanitization and sentimentalization? In exploring these questions, Chapter Three explores the broader contours of HIV/AIDS as a potential site of kitsch that renders disease palatable in a wider market of Protestantized consumerism.

Whereas the Project NAMES AIDS Memorial Quilt taps into the spiritual capital of an imagined Protestant individualism to forge a viable venue for public mourning, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* unifies the painful progress of religious minorities in America in an effort to forge a queer utopia capable of grieving people with AIDS. Kushner's 1991 Pulitzer Prize winning play presents a demanding and complex political program that, nearly twenty years after its thunderous reception by audiences and critics alike, remains relatively unexplored in a scholarly context.<sup>53</sup> *Angels* remains particularly difficult to assess given its usage of diverse historical contexts (e.g., McCarthyism, Reagan era urban decay, the AIDS crisis, etc.), its wide cast of characters representing divergent modes of historical experience, and its fascinatingly imbricated political vision drawing upon everything from Mormon communalism, Benjamin's apocalyptic materialism, and, quite critically for Chapter Four, the quintessentially American narrative of liberal progress and consensus. Chapter Four is particularly interested in the manner in which various forms of religious alterity in *Angels* are

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<sup>53</sup> The notable exception to this is the collection of mostly insightful essays contained in Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger, eds., *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

mobilized to normalize seropositive and AIDS stricken Americans as full citizens in a cultural landscape that has long succeeded (as the story goes) in building consensus by way of tolerating, if not consuming, difference.

In Kushner's world, the approaching millennium, a proxy for America's many and imagined apocalypses, provides a crucible from which the politics of radical pluralism are born. The emphasis that has been placed on *Angels'* apocalyptic program, which garners acute emotional resonance as the play's principle characters confront existentially undoing terror, overshadows the play's dénouement in *Perestroika* (the second of the play's two parts), a resolution that ends not in decisive apocalypse but in the affirmation of a liberal pluralism in which America is reconstituted as a happy melting pot in which nothing melts. As David Saran notes, this resolution (or compromise) is juxtaposed with the Kushner's more radical claims in which bodies, AIDS, queer, and Mormon, are placed at the center of the imaginary that structures the nation.<sup>54</sup> Chapter Five will argue that this, too, is not particularly radical and is suggestive of an ambivalent outcome. Does the AIDS body become any more grievable by virtue of being prefigured as one of the many traditional sites of conflict through which America forges self-definition? If African slaves, vanquished Indians, and 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormons can be reimagined as a type of capital for national spirituality built on tolerance, pluralism, and the hope for continued progress – though achieved through violence – can *Angels'* queer utopia represent any sort of refuge for an AIDS body that must be grieved radically, unconditionally, and, most

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<sup>54</sup> David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How 'Angels in America' Reconstructs the Nation," *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 2 (May 1995): 225.

importantly, now? *Angels'* millennial project operates within the topos of apocalypticism that promises a resolution in the comic mode – that is, the proverbial happy ending. But it is a happy ending banking on the promise of an imagined future rather than the grist of the present dystopia.

The utopia of radical, liberal pluralism Kushner arrives at relies heavily on a sophisticated program of nationalism in which America becomes the origin and meaning of history, an epistemology not foreign to either Puritan divines or Mormon prophets. *Angels* enacts a program of radical assimilation under the guide of providential cover wherein bodies queer and marked with AIDS stand at the center of the national imaginary.<sup>55</sup> This centering move, however, does not intervene in the play's heavy trade in binarisms, all hierarchically arranged, and the naturalization of these otherwise stigmatized identity positions reinscribes women's bodies with a host of pathologies figuring them as ancillary in the play's utopic project. Just as Mormonism has long been criticized for venerating the reproductive and maternal capacities of women at the expense of any possibility of public viability, so to does *Angels* forge a dynamic place for the otherwise objected AIDS body (read, gay and male) while exiling women – quite literally in the play – to the earth's troposphere.

This enacted exile, a point of some contention in the scholarly explication of Kushner's work, anticipates the focus of Chapter Five. As Paula Treichler notes, women, so often configured as antagonists in the semiosis of sexually

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<sup>55</sup> Even before *Angels in America*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observed that the masculine desire, particularly in its homosexual self-definition, serves as a centripetal force in the American literary canon. See Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

transmitted diseases, ceded their role in the typical script to gay and bisexual men.<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, women were profoundly absent in the protean story of HIV/AIDS during the epidemic's first fifteen years. Even when the disease became a heterosexual concern, biomedical and public health discourse relegated women to secondary status, as female-to-male transmission was deemed improbable or low risk. If cultural intelligibility is a prerequisite for grievability, and such intelligibility rests on religious, nationalistic, kin-based, and gendered signatures, women with HIV/AIDS found themselves profoundly alienated in the quest to forge what Judith Butler might call a body that matters. Whereas stigmatization, though in profound and adverse ways, crystallizes a community of marginality, symbolic absenting burnishes a subject that is as thoroughly incomprehensible as AIDS poet Tory Dent.

Tory Dent lived with a seropositive status for 17 of her 47 years and died in December 2005. She is best known for her fierce, lyrical verse that exposes a life transformed by AIDS and a body without standing before God, America, and self. Chapter Five underscores the aporia of religious language as type of social and existential capital in the construction of a grievable AIDS body capable of assimilating itself to some semblance of citizenal belonging. The actual religious language in Dent's *HIV*, *Mon Amour* and *Black Milk*, her most famous anthologies, suggests that construction of suffering as somehow "spiritual" and "sacred" should not be construed as uniformly effective or desirable, for recourse to such language seemingly gives comfort to an unnamed audience that tacitly

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<sup>56</sup> Paula A. Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 45.

participates in the poet's abjection.<sup>57</sup> At best, Dent's poetry illuminates a deep ambivalence towards the power of religious metaphor to reconstitute meaningfully her sense of gender (or, more specifically, her maternity) and Americanness.

Her poetic program suggests that the density of suffering surrounding HIV/AIDS places her body beyond the pale of religious language to reincarnate or revivify. How then might religious language that has been used so effectively for stigmatizing, ideological ends be repurposed to create a livable life, a grievable self, a loss worth mourning? A close explication of her two most prominent volumes of poetry, *HIV, Mon Amour* and *Black Milk*, reveals the seemingly intractable task of resignifying her body with religious metaphor in such a way to achieve any of the goals. Her poems create stormy and often contradictory movement between hidden gods evoked as unknown saviors, a forgiving transcendent, a brutish Father, a Marian figure moved to grief before the birth of an already-dead child, hellfire and heaven, and avenging angels. Dent's poetry resists invocations of such anaesthetized categories in favor of a fragmented, ambivalent, and perhaps self-negating religious metaphor. In a sense, Dent invokes a modern-day Antigone whose own appeals to nation, religion, and kinship failed.

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<sup>57</sup> Though *HIV, Mon Amour* (Riverdale-on-Hudson, N.Y: Sheep Meadow, 1999) remains Dent's most well known and reviewed anthology, consideration will be given to *Black Milk* (Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: Sheep Meadow, 2005) and *What Silence Equals* (New York: Persea, 1993), both anthologies which develop Dent's evolving attitudes about recourse to a religious imaginary and her status as a seropositive constituent without a socially articulated community and identity.

What then? It is my intention throughout *Ambivalent Blood* to suggest that religion interacts in nuanced and plural ways in the construction of nationalism(s), defensible body politics, and HIV/AIDS subject positions that are either consigned to unbelonging and death or retrievable as sites of distant pity, and, occasionally, meaningful loss. It is not my intention to conclusively argue that recourse to religious subjectivity always-already sows the seeds of exclusion and violence in the quest to establish the terms in which a subject can be mourned. Though religious narratives, some apparent, some cloaked in the secular, clearly have played a role in the rendering HIV/AIDS bodies as ungrievable sites of excess, it is foolhardy to assume religiously-inspired interventions are uniformly successful. Reconstitution of the religious imaginary as an intervention all too often accedes to disciplining parameters of what America defines as *religious legitimacy*. The Project NAMES AIDS Memorial Quilt, though undoubtedly meaningful and therapeutic for so many, trades in a salutary, bland, and American patriotism that, to paraphrase Michael Musto, allows everyone a cathartic and sentimental cry while forgoing any responsibility for past transgressions and future transformations.<sup>58</sup> Whether an appeal to civil religion, a vaguely defined spirituality, or Christological suffering, it seems that religious interventions in politics of public mourning always affect their own exclusions.

Equally important, the inclusive intentions of a direct appeal to the religious imaginary operates to draw those not directly suffering (physically, socially, psychically, and otherwise) from HIV/AIDS directly into a personal

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Musto, "La Dolce Musto," *Village Voice*, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1988, p. 46.



narrative of trauma, a universalizing impulse. Butler describes this impulse in her analysis of public mourning after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks:

In the U.S., we start the story by invoking a first-person narrative point of view, and tell what happened on September 11th. And it is that date, and the unexpected and fully terribly experience of violence that propels the narrative.. We have to shore up the first-person point of view, and preclude from the telling accounts that might involve a decentering of the narrative “I” within the international political domain.<sup>59</sup>

This conflation of the trauma of others with the personal “I” runs the risk of a pernicious sentimentalization that draws into sharp relief the difference between grievable and ungrievable lives. Trauma can only be grieved when it is my own; the trauma of others remains beyond grief. This impulse then to homogenize grief – and to resolve it through a variety of means from socially controlled public rituals to state violence – conceals that which is most important, the recognition of the trauma of another as a recognition of that which is, in fact, universal – our shared vulnerability, a point which Tory Dent’s poetic program makes painfully clear. *Ambivalent Blood* concludes with Derrida’s provocative claim that the work of mourning is never complete, that grief is never fully expiated. To tarry with grief, Butler argues, is to accept its unbearability and horror, to expose our shared vulnerabilities and temper the impulse towards violence as a means to resolve our grief. In this sense, grief is aporetic, productive, open, and fully unresolvable.

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<sup>59</sup> Judith Butler, “Explanation or Exoneration, or What We Can Hear,” *The Grey Room* 7, no. 1 (2002): 58.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *AN ISSUE OF THE BLOOD: MEDIATING AIDS BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS AND THE SECULAR*

“AIDS is an issue of the blood.” So declared Reverend Kenneth T. South of the AIDS National Interfaith Network in May 1997.<sup>1</sup> Reverend South’s proclamation, an attempt to dislodge AIDS from religiously motivated stigmatization, operates within a cluttered landscape of ever morphing bio-medical, epidemiological, political, and religious discourses generated by the now thirty years of the AIDS epidemic. As Susan Sontag noted prior to the onset of the epidemic, illnesses are always “spectacularly ... encumbered by the trappings of metaphor.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, HIV/AIDS has never been just an epidemic of disease. It is, as Paula Treichler suggests, an “epidemic of signification” in which the issue of the disease has resisted easy settlement.<sup>3</sup> AIDS has been (in)famously interpreted as a medical mystery, an epidemiological nightmare, a public health triumph and failure, a sign of imminent apocalypse, a national morality tale, a galvanizing source for identity politics, and fodder for science fiction and conspiracy theories. Needless to say, the cultural and linguistic construction of HIV/AIDS has been the source of extensive analysis, so much so that one may legitimately wonder if there exists any HIV/AIDS trope yet to uncover and render unto a finely hewn story explaining just what is the “issue of AIDS.”

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth T. South, “AIDS and American Religion: An Issue of Blood,” *The Body: The Complete HIV/AIDS Resource*, <http://www.thebody.com/content/art32943.html> (accessed August 6, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Treichler, 1 and 11-13.

Nonetheless, within the wider field of HIV/AIDS signification, religion remains curiously ancillary to other analytics, particularly race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status.<sup>4</sup>

The current chapter seeks to excavate the analytical tendencies in the vast body of scholarship which endeavors to achieve an understanding of HIV/AIDS as a cultural phenomena. Though recourse to religion constituted one of the most publically recognized rhetorical constructions of the epidemic as it came to national consciousness in 1981, religion has operated as an immeasurably ambivalent category in the ever-unfolding story of AIDS. In some disciplinary venues, a trenchant desire to contain the expression of the disease to secular configurations operates to either obviate religion from the story of the epidemic or to reduce it to an unfortunate but easily explained rhetorical excess. Expectations of a progressive and ever-modernizing secularization construct “old-time religion” as a stigmatizing atavism to ignore, resist, or actively extirpate. The intention to isolate or contain religion in the story of AIDS typically yields a narrative reduction of religion to the most inflammatory, thus dismissible, bombast of the Moral Majority, conservative politicians of the New Right, and country club Republicans. Conversely, those who attend to religion with more robust optics see religion in sharply delineated ways. It is either completely

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<sup>4</sup> Among the most often cited and influential studies of the cultural construction of HIV/AIDS are the aforementioned Treichler’s *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, Douglas Crimp’s *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), and Ross Chambers’ *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004). In all three texts, there is but scant analysis of the religious dimensions in the discursive construction of HIV/AIDS beyond the ceremonial but not inaccurate nods to the politicized jeremiads of the Religious Right.

public, political, and invested in shaping America's self-definition, or it is harmlessly depoliticized and privatized as a form of therapeutic, spiritual capital. In this chapter's bibliographic enterprise, I suggest that the contest to configure religion in HIV/AIDS scholarship implicates a broader argument about the very definition of religion itself and its appropriate application in signifying AIDS. The story of religion and AIDS is determined as much by academic suppositions as by the diverse application of religious imagination within the ever-unfolding context of the epidemic. By illuminating the analytical inertia that prevails in AIDS scholarship, I suggest that significant opportunities remain to understand the polysemy of religious discourses that have been used to both desecrate and consecrate people with AIDS.

#### *Disenchanted AIDS*

That religion operates as a secondary analytic in HIV/AIDS scholarship should engender little surprise, particularly among practitioners of literary and cultural criticism or those aligned with humanistic inquiry writ large. For many scholars, Weber's predicted *disenchantment of the world* has been taken as both welcomed and axiomatic, and numerous theories of secularization have predicted the inevitable withdrawal of religion from the public sphere, thus emancipating a host of public institutions from well-worn theologies and autocratic clerical concerns. Though the triumphal realization of secularization in its manifest and hypothesized forms has been tempered and/or disarranged, notably by Casanova, Asad, and Taylor, an intellectual conditioning to actively observe religion's absence and grimace over its perceived excesses when it spills over into public

domains remains pervasive.<sup>5</sup> As Tracy Fessenden observes, even within specializations in which religion figures as a principle concern, a “newly empowered secular” supersedes the “trappings of ritual, the limitations of historical communities, or the embarrassments of outmoded belief.”<sup>6</sup> In the modern world, particularly in domains dominated by scientific rationalism, religion’s absence is both expected and welcomed.

For centuries in the West, however, the vestiges of “outmoded belief” have provided a particularly stable framework for understanding diseases associated with transmittable death. Bodies have long been read as signatures of morality, and the deformations of the leper, the pustules of black death, the bodily disintegration attending cholera, and the pallid faces and consumptive lungs associated with tubercular romantics have all been read as manifest signs of sexual immorality, apostasy, and lethargy. Knowledge about the method of transmission for disease invariably becomes entangled with a host of theological, economic, political, and scientific epistemologies, all of which have hidden interests – enforcing moral codes, leveraging theologies, disempowering unassimilable populations, co-opting accumulated wealth, etc. – subsumed in the explanatory frameworks provided for the disease. All of the aforementioned

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<sup>5</sup> See José Casanova, *Public Religions and the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), eds. Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, provides an indispensable compendium of essays from theorists actively involved in the secularization debates of the past thirty years.

<sup>6</sup> Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Desire: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 1.

diseases proved particularly difficult to domesticate; stigmatization and social exclusions served to alleviate social anxiety stemming from fears of manifold contamination, biological, theological, social, political, ideological, and otherwise. Jews, the urban poor, accursed minorities, prostitutes, widows, homosexuals, and IV-drug users historically have been mapped as radical others threatening both biological health and social cohesion. Even long after the establishment of medical fact, religious orthodoxies continue to posit theological etiologies for otherwise secularized diseases, thus clinging to what they perceive as productive moralism.

The order of science and technology that exists in today's post-industrial society promised to place the construction of HIV/AIDS outside the order of yesterday's religion. The secular narrative of AIDS argues that the disease is a biological phenomenon and a public health issue. It is, therefore, necessarily secular and should not be rendered over to religious discourse, or as Susan Sontag would have preferred, any form of metaphorizing at all.<sup>7</sup> Within the Academy, I would suggest that HIV/AIDS scholarship has been particularly susceptible to secular expectations that have created pre-determined semantic programs for AIDS. Michel Foucault coined the phrase *régime of truth* to describe a reciprocal relationship between conceptualizations of truth, the institutions that produce such conceptualizations, and the effects of power brought to bear in the process.<sup>8</sup> Within HIV/AIDS scholarship there exists a strong tendency to engage in pre-

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<sup>7</sup> Sontag, 182.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Political Function of the Intellectual," *Radical Philosophy* 17 (Summer 1977): 13-14.

sorting mechanisms that distinguish “true” versus “false” representations of the disease. Consequentially, certain discursive forms and their attending institutions of power become particularly enabled and privileged while cloaking their claims under the rubrics of the “rational,” objective,” and “real.” Religion is often configured as antithetical to these desired rubrics. Sontag proclaims a need to “think critically, historically, about illness,” and, in doing so, liberate AIDS from “the script of plague” and all of its attending irrationality.<sup>9</sup> Though Sontag doesn’t state so directly, religion operates as the handmaiden of these indicted scripts in which plagues are sent, visited, and, inevitably, moralized. Accordingly, the standard academic script of HIV/AIDS necessarily characterizes religion as “outmoded belief” or obviates its presence all together. Yet, such analytical and diagetic tendencies in establishing the issue of HIV/AIDS belies not only the profound presence of religion in signifying disease but also the very nuanced ways in which surrogate constructions of religion operate in the broader cultural landscape of AIDS and American culture.

*AIDS: Apocalyptic or Else*

Even before the June 5<sup>th</sup> 1981 issue of the Center for Disease Control’s Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) – the bulletin which contained the first clinical description and epidemiological surveillance of what would become known as AIDS – religious language figured centrally in the signifying practices inaugurated by the epidemic. The earliest religious pronouncements about the disease left an indelible mark that would forever shape the interpretive

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<sup>9</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 135.

framework for assessing the relationship between religion and AIDS. As scores of gay men with unexplainable cancers and infections admitted themselves to hospitals in New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles in early 1981, hospital staff coined the perplexing and yet-undiagnosed medical phenomena as “wrath of God syndrome,” *WOGS*.<sup>10</sup> The early construction of HIV/AIDS paralleled a reinvigorated construction of the gay male body as against God and nature. The early coining of HIV/AIDS as *GRID*, Gay-Related Immunodeficiency, facilitated the time-honored tradition of linking plague and other endemic diseases to communities of “improper sex.” As was the case in Jeremiah’s Babylon and Oedipus’s Thebes, sexual deviance emerged as the root of the plague, and divining God’s intention a primary vehicle for rendering judgment. The Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority argued in 1983:

AIDS is the wrath of a just God against homosexuals. To oppose it would be like an Israelite jumping in the Red Sea to save one of Pharaoh's charioteers ... AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals; it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.<sup>11</sup>

California Congressman William Dannemeyer, writing in the late 1980’s, applied Fallwell’s logic to a broader historiographic formulation of this discourse.

Expounding on the civilizational threat of the epidemic, Dannemeyer explained:

In the greatest of civilizations, there is usually a common thread at the end, a corruption of spirit that leads to selfishness, and preoccupations with pleasure, eventually to the exclusion of what is usual and normal. At that point, excess and perversion come into fashion, and after that –

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<sup>10</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2007), 307.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Falwell, circa 1983 (attributed). Quoted in Robert S. McElvaine, *Grand Theft Jesus: The Hijacking of Religion in America*, 1<sup>st</sup> reprint ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 35.



catastrophe. There are numerous examples of such decadence, and at the end of great civilizations you almost always find homosexuality – widespread, energetic, enormously proud of itself.<sup>12</sup>

Conservative William Buckley's *National Review* opted for more modest claims in 1983 by constructing this disease as a mere generational indictment. AIDS, the biweekly magazine proclaimed, is a “prominent skeleton at the feast of sexual liberation,” a feast undermining “the City on the Hill’s moral struggle against godless regimes abroad.”<sup>13</sup>

Even those with apparently secular intentions found apocalyptic imagery not only useful as a descriptive grammar of the very real horrors of the disease, but as an alluring historical trope. The first systematic, “objective” account of the early stages of the epidemic, Randy Shilts’s famous and controversial *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, frames its narrative structure as a detective story unfolding under the shadow of imminent apocalyptic expectation.<sup>14</sup> His narrative framework deploys chapter titles such as “Behold a Pale Horse,” “The Gathering Darkness,” and “Battle,” all of which actively play upon established hermeneutical approaches to Revelations as both historical

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<sup>12</sup> William Dannemeyer, *Shadow in the Land: Homosexuality in America* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 222-23.

<sup>13</sup> “AIDS and Public Policy,” *National Review*, 8 July 1983, 796.

<sup>14</sup> I place quotation marks around *objective* due to the intense critique leveled against Shilts’s self-presentation as an objective journalist. Triechler has noted Shilts’s tendency to elide women from the narrative of AIDS, failing to recognize their roles both as patients, researchers, and caregivers. See Triechler, 63, 68, and 72-73. Douglas Crimp has taken Shilts to task for creating a phobic (and unsubstantiated) fantasy concerning Gaetan Dugas, the so-called “patient zero.” See Crimp’s “Randy Shilts’s Miserable Failure,” *A Queer World: The Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*, ed. Martin Duberman (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 645.

chronicle of Roman iniquity and augur of history yet to come. Shilts begins his history with an invocation of Revelation 6:8:

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.<sup>15</sup>

What immediately follows is description of twinned narratives: mysterious and gruesome accounts of hemorrhagic fevers in Zaire and the acute concentration of libertine sexuality and drug use within America's gay enclaves. Shilts avoids overt causal formulations such as those articulated by Dannemeyer. Nonetheless, the linkage between grisly death and perceived sexual vice is clear. When Shilts characterizes the sexual braggadocio of Gaetan Dugas, a Canadian flight attendant thought by some epidemiologists to be Patient Zero (the virus carrier responsible for introducing the disease into America's gay urban centers), as casting "the seeds of the apocalypse," the double entendre is no less damning and no more objective than a Dannemeyer or Falwell jeremiad.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Absenting Old Religion*

Particularly in the 1980's, religious imagery, theological claims, and moral indictments pepper the public statements about the disease. Religious discourse abounded, particularly in its most apocalyptic registers. However, a survey of the most prominent cultural studies of the disease would suggest that the religious imaginary operated in the background, occasionally – and embarrassingly – interjecting itself into public consciousness. The most frequently referenced

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<sup>15</sup> Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, revised ed., (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2007), 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-24.

studies of the linguistic construction of HIV/AIDS, Paula Triefler's *How to Have a Theory in an Epidemic*, Cindy Patton's near canonical *Inventing AIDS*, Douglas Crimp's *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, and Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors* make only the most casual references to religion in their impassioned analyses. Patton's introductory chapter is telling in its articulation of her commitments to a Foucauldian analysis of the epistemic assumptions at the heart of AIDS discourse. She writes:

In the Age of Reason, feudal and clerical explanations of human difference were reordered by constructing taxonomies of science. Now, the apparent irrationality of responses to AIDS has served to legitimate the reorganization of modern categories of class, race, and sexuality: in particular, the construction of "AIDS knowledge" and the specific educational strategies used to organize and control this knowledge have been mobilized to anchor a new, if dubious claim to objectivity.<sup>17</sup>

Here, religion is doubly configured. It represents an atavism belonging to pre-Enlightenment history. As modern phenomena, it is a problematic embarrassment that exercises irrational claims on more legitimate, hence secular, categories of analysis. The visibility accorded to AIDS in scholarly analysis predictably emphasizes religion as a problematic eruption into the public domain that threatens to disrupt now secular taxonomies of science, which already bear the burdens of metaphor and ideology. This is at the heart of Patton's excoriating critique of the New Right's pugilistic appropriation of AIDS discourse in the mid-1980's.<sup>18</sup> Jeremiads, moralism, and apocalyptic agitation made for savvy politics

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<sup>17</sup> Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 5.

<sup>18</sup> See Cindy Patton, "The New Right," *Sex and Germs: Politics of AIDS*, First Canadian ed., (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990), excerpted in Chris Bull, ed., *While the World Sleeps: The First Twenty Years of the Global AIDS Plague* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003), 25-42.

but lamentable public health policy. Of the near forty stock conceptualizations of AIDS Treichler lists in her chapter charting the “epidemic of signification,” only four reference religion, and, of those four, three make related claims to God’s intervention in history and apocalyptic expectation.<sup>19</sup>

In these studies, religion operates with almost startling uniformity as unchecked symbolic capital wielded to create and control deviant sexualities and inassimilable communities of difference. The vehemence of the Religious Right’s reaction to the unfolding epidemic in the early 1980’s dovetailed with all-too easy symmetry with the notable campaigns against “immoral” homosexuality in the 1950’s and 1960’s and the quest for gay rights in the 1970’s. Religiously conservative condemnation of homosexuality and the defense of family values found new narrative life with the outbreak of the disease. In essence, journalistic documentation of the Right’s biblical framing of AIDS was a retelling of an already-written story of homophobic opprobrium. Accordingly, most of the more considered studies of AIDS within American history and AIDS as linguistic and cultural construction almost always incorporate stock descriptions of the vehemence of the Religious Right’s reaction to the unfolding epidemic. Indeed, the aforementioned references to Dannemeyer and Falwell almost have become obligatory in any historical synopsis of AIDS.

By the late 1980’s, attempts to identify factors contributing to the stigmatization of people with AIDS occasionally, and often in passing, noted the confluence of various theological traditions and homophobia in the construction

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<sup>19</sup> Treichler, 12-13.

of AIDS as divine punishment and an indictment of moral and natural transgression.<sup>20</sup> Even here, religion operates uniformly and uncomplicatedly as an agent of stigmatization. By the early 1990's, however, a degree of complexity arose in the analytical matrix. From a disciplinary perspective, sociologists have been more attuned to the need to explore analytical linkages between theology, congregational identity, pastoral care, and broader issues of stigmatization and cultural belonging. But even here significant shortcomings are evident. Mark Kovalevsky, writing in 1990 laments the paucity of sustained analysis of the "religious construction of AIDS" beyond over-obvious comments about stigmatizing rhetoric.<sup>21</sup> Fifteen years after Kowalewski's initial observation, Pamela Leong observes with surprise in her study of African-American AIDS ministries that, as of 2006, that she was unable to cite a single ethnography of *any* AIDS ministry.<sup>22</sup> While studies of pastoral care in Protestant denominations and analysis concerning the Catholic Church's response to HIV/AIDS in light of its contested theology of the body remain standard fare in confessional scholarship, studies of the religious dimensions of AIDS from the perspective of postmodern

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<sup>20</sup> For representative examples, see Steven D. Johnson, "Factors Related to Intolerance of AIDS Victims," *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (1987): 105-110 and Dennis Altman, *AIDS in the Mind of America* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Mark R. Kowalewski, "Religious Constructions of the AIDS Crisis," *Sociological Analysis* 51, no. 1 (1990): 91-96.

<sup>22</sup> Pamela Leong, "Religion, Flesh, and Blood: Re-Creating Religious Culture in the Context of HIV/AIDS," *Sociology of Religion* 67, no. 3 (2006): 295-311. Also published in 2006, see Jerome R. Koch and Robert E. Beckley, "Under the Radar: AIDS Ministry in the Bible Belt," *Review of Religious Research* 47, no. 4 (2006): 393-408.

theory, humanistic inquiry, and the critical practice of what Stephen Greenblatt calls “cultural poetics” remain sparse.<sup>23</sup>

### *Drawing Down the AIDS Apocalypse*

In the past decade, scholarship has begun to slowly address this lacuna, and several considered studies have isolated religion as a category of analysis in the symbolic construction of AIDS. Unsurprisingly, the use of apocalyptic tropes in narrating AIDS has garnered the lion’s share of attention in those rare instances in which religion is configured as a meaningful optic in understanding the cultural response to AIDS in America. This scholarship is an outgrowth of both the well-documented jeremiads of the Religious Right, which are among the most famous public statements made about AIDS in the 1980’s, and the disciplinary prerogative of a number of scholars from religious studies and sociology who have made exploration of America’s apocalyptic traditions a near cottage industry.<sup>24</sup> For instance, the intersections of violence and millennialism have been interrogated in plentiful case studies investigating the People’s Temple, the

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<sup>23</sup> See footnote no. 4 for examples of religion’s striking absence from foundational texts devoted to the cultural constructions of AIDS and proposed discursive interventions to counter the projections of certain fantasies of sex, gender, and social class on diseased bodies. For representative example of more pastorally oriented approaches (from both confessional and objective perspectives), see James F. Keenan, *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2000) and Robert E. Beckley and Jerome R. Koch, *The Continuing Challenge of AIDS: Clergy Responses to Patients, Friends, and Families* (Westport, CT: Greenwood/Preager, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> A complete bibliography of monographs published in post-Waco and post-9/11 America would require many, many pages. Representative examples include Wilson and Zimmerman, eds., *A Kingdom at Any Cost: Right-Wing Visions of Apocalypse in America* (Little Rock: Parkhurst Brothers Publishers, 2009); Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Annie Rehill, *The Apocalypse is Everywhere: A Popular History of America’s Favorite Nightmare* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009).

Branch Davidians, and Aum Shinrikyo.<sup>25</sup> The normalization and secularization of the apocalyptic imagination during the post-Hiroshima Cold War era has been well-explored, and, more recently, the role of Judeo-Christian apocalyptic salvation in shaping the contours of America's imperium have found favor in reaction to and protest of neo-conservative foreign policy aims.<sup>26</sup>

Both Susan Palmer and Thomas Long have embraced the preoccupation with American apocalypticism in their considered studies of AIDS and the apocalyptic imaginary. Their monographs explore the volatile exchange between religion, the production of HIV/AIDS identities, and the manifold constructions of broader histories of the epidemic. Given sociology's disciplinary lead in examining AIDS and the communal dimensions of religious institutions, both studies are fundamentally sociological in methodology. Both investigate the complex ways in which apocalyptic language impacts group identity, group maintenance functions, and political mobilization.<sup>27</sup>

In *AIDS and the Apocalyptic Metaphor in North America*, Palmer examines the responses to AIDS of well-defined religious communities. Palmer makes explicit linkages between the individual body of the parishioner and the

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<sup>25</sup> See Catherine Loman Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (London: Chatham House, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Angela Lahr, *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Long's monograph, described later in the chapter, goes beyond the methodological purview of sociology. Indeed, the author situates his research with semiotics, and his work focuses much more on textual analysis than ethnography, interviews, surveys etc. Nonetheless, his semiotic analysis provides entrée into how various AIDS constituencies forged self-definition and a politics of opposition. To say Long's work has semiotic, activist, and sociological lenses is, I believe, a fair assessment.

collective body of the religious community. She observes that a common response to the epidemic within these communities was to heighten regimes of self-monitoring by enforcing the "particular sexual program of the community."<sup>28</sup> The end result is a binary construction between the purified body of the community and the diseased body of the world beyond. Palmer's insights draw heavily on Mary Douglas's observation in *Natural Symbols* that the phenomenology of the human body is the foundation for broader cultural constructions of bodies both individual and communal – the body as a microcosm of the social world. Palmer's analysis of self-monitoring regimes and policing of sexual behavior, however, seem equally indebted to the work of Talal Asad. In *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad describes sacramental penance and self-monitoring as a rational regime disciplining Christians to accepted forms of authority while transforming the body into a register of piety.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, the monastery becomes an environment of continual surveillance, always attuned to the presence of sanctity and Satan alike. In Palmer's study, the body, both healthy and diseased, represents a site of grave ambivalence. On one hand, HIV-infection becomes an arbiter of phenomenal and social death. Before the diseased body perishes, it registers a coterie of perceived behaviors and identity positions inimicable to community belonging. The anxieties of the physical and spiritual threat, however, are countered by the very fact that the absence of infection becomes yet another proof of proper devotion and heightens the prospects for

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<sup>28</sup> Palmer, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 83-84.



salvation. Particularly for evangelical communities in America, the horrors of the disease presage a most welcomed apocalyptic reality. AIDS is simultaneously salvific and satanic in function.

One major criticism of Palmer's work is that it describes a host of idiosyncratic religious responses to AIDS rather than the promised focus on apocalyptic rhetoric. The breadth of responses it covers is illuminating in its own right. However, the selection of discursive strategies cited is unsystematic; indeed, many of the responses Long cites can hardly be classified as apocalyptic. This lack of evidentiary coherence impedes Long's ability to outline a sustained portrait of conjunctions and disjunctions between various apocalyptic responses, and she only casually indicates the reciprocal engagement between apocalyptic metaphor and national discourses on the epidemic. Whereas Palmer's study focuses on the sociological dimension of the creative religious response to AIDS plied by select religious communities, Thomas Long's *AIDS and American Apocalypticism* situates the religious response to AIDS within the broader context of American religious idioms, particularly the nation's long flirtation with apocalyptic discourse. He examines how Christian fundamentalists and AIDS activists engaged in rhetorical symmetry by situating AIDS within apocalyptic narratives which follow rather predictable patterns: the discerning signs of the end, transacting of an Armageddon replete with very real casualties of war, and prospecting for individual and collective means of redemption. Long offers nuanced and satisfying readings of seminal AIDS texts, such as Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, and Douglas Sadownick's

*Sacred Lips of the Bronx*, and he confidently configures the selected texts as exemplum of apocalyptic tropes, such as exile, jeremiad, Armageddon, and ecstasy. Though Long's study is theoretically informed and makes recourse to American religious historiography, he leaves an important question unsatisfactorily answered: what motivates those who would seek to represent AIDS – particularly AIDS artists and activists – to so persistently reach for the very metaphors used to stigmatize PWA and declaim their citizenship?

Long cites the “pervasiveness of apocalypticism within the hegemonic Protestantism in the United States” as the likely cause of the “inevitability of apocalyptic tropes.”<sup>30</sup> Of their utility, he somewhat facetiously exclaims, “The master’s tools might not disassemble the master’s house, but see what work can be done with them!”<sup>31</sup> Evidence of apocalyptic ubiquity in American culture, however, hardly satisfies as an explanation. As a normative trope in American Protestantism, apocalyptic discourse clearly possesses what Derrida would call *iterability*, long-standing historical sedimentations whose continued valence depends on citing previous instantiations as their source of power.<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler argues that such structures of citation provide the very seeds of resistance to the norms critical in the subjection process. Though norms continue to form the subject, Butler argues, the agency inherent in the structures of iteration allow for the choice to either reiterate or redeploy the norm: “The idea of iterability is crucial for understanding why norms do not continue to act in deterministic

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<sup>30</sup> Long, 179.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited, Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 7-8.

ways.”<sup>33</sup> If the construction, or, as Butler would prefer, performativity, of AIDS identities represents an opportunity to affect the symbolic conditions of otherizing subjection, one rightly wonders to what species of agency does the use of apocalyptic tropes aspire. Long suggests the principle function of the trope is to construct a series of binary identity positions (e.g., us/them, pure/contaminated, innocence/guilt, etc.) that construct cohesive communities and play to what he cites as the inherent narcissism in American culture.<sup>34</sup> One possibility explored in subsequent chapters of the present study is that allure of religious semiosis for AIDS activists is deeply rooted in the imbricated relationship between religious self-definition and nationness (or, more specifically, Americanness), the quality of national belonging and intelligible citizenship. Despite the secular grounds upon which citizenship is established and conferred, the deployment of religious rhetoric in the construction AIDS seems uniquely preoccupied with establishing the boundaries that designate who counts as American – who can be grieved publically as an American.

Ultimately, Long voices, as both scholar and activist, a certain ambivalence about AIDS apocalypticism. He observes, “...while apocalyptic discourse is often framed in such a way as to enjoin action, a contrary and entropic desire for inaction frequently renders apocalyptic subjects inert.”<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately, apocalyptic tropes within the context of HIV/AIDS activism suffer from the very effects of its narrative schema. That redemption within the interior

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<sup>33</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 168.

<sup>34</sup> Long, 9 and 181.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

logic apocalyptic thinking requires suffering and destruction would seem to permanently forestall the call to action. There is also the predicament of continually unrealized millennial expectations which engender the routinization of trepidation, anxiety, apprehension, and chronic fatigue. This is the persistent and rudderless panic Susan Sontag describes when she refers to the transformation of “Apocalypse Now” to “Apocalypse from Now On” in Western culture.<sup>36</sup> Alas, AIDS apocalypticism becomes a type of citationality that reiterates the norm rather than redeploying it in such a way to undermine the very powers of ceaselessly marginalizing subjection.

The suspicions voiced by Long, Sontag, and others only serve to enhance puzzlement of the trope’s predominant usage in the semiotic registers of AIDS and religious discourse.<sup>37</sup> Is the influence of Biblical narrative and its apocalyptic expectation so pervasive in America’s aesthetic traditions as to be unavoidable capital in the semiotic processes inherent in signifying the disease? Does the stark binarism of apocalyptic metaphor provide certain institutions of civil society, particularly the media, a more easily-rendered narrative replete with clearly defined archetypal characters (i.e., saints, sinners, bogeymen, and victims)? In “A Sociologist Appeals to the Theological Hope in Postmodern Apocalypses,” Sarah MacMillen provides a provocative reading of the pervasive anxieties of the present historical moment and, perhaps, insight into the seemingly

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<sup>36</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 87-88.

<sup>37</sup> This is not to unnecessarily indict either Long or Palmer for a lack of analytical foresight. Rather, I wish to convey the point that apocalyptic preoccupation in scholarly analysis has to move beyond both documentation and alarm. Rather, there exists an opportunity to suggest the ways certain religious discourses, including apocalypticism, function to serve interests beyond theological sorting and moral indictment.

counterproductive allure of the apocalyptic trope. She suggests that secular domains that were once predicted to become progressively rational and unmoored from premodern habits have instead acceded to a dislocating uncertainty. Recent environmental concerns, natural disasters, financial calamity, political stalemates, and civil unrest abroad all resist resolution and transcendent certainty. This miasmatic atmosphere contrasts with structures of certainty and absolutism found in a myriad of religious orthodoxies and fundamentalist movements. MacMillen controversially observes, “Fundamentalists are *at work in bringing about God’s actions, thus denying the transcendent power of God to work on his own.*”<sup>38</sup> While God’s action remains a mystery, the work of fundamentalists imbues God’s world and the story of the hereafter with certainty. Without making specific claims to direct God’s actions, this much is clear: most Christian fundamentalists believe that other-worldly salvation and the implementation of apocalyptic narrative operates part and parcel with their very worldly actions. In this sense, secular concerns within the domains of public health, environmental, economic, and social policy are co-opted into a broader salvific system. Thus even seemingly inconspicuous political concerns, MacMillen notes, become deeply implicated in other-worldly salvation, and, I would argue, a national transcendence in which the meaning of America becomes inviolable and absolute. This will be evidenced in the next chapter wherein the voiced prerogatives of state parallel this nexus between citizen and government activity and achieving the aims of a transcendent national *telos*. This reactionary request for certainty becomes a

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<sup>38</sup> Sarah MacMillen, “A Sociologist Appeals to the Theological Hope in Postmodern Apocalypse,” *Crosscurrents* (June 1, 2011): 239. Emphasis original.

harbinger of hope that remains, to date, unrealized. But not just for socially conservative evangelicals for whom AIDS represented a signature of social ills indicating divine intervention. AIDS activists and dissidents, such as Larry Kramer, Tony Kushner, Andrew Holleran, and others who deployed the tropes of an AIDS Armageddon, have found the diminished role of AIDS in national discourse (despite the persistence of the epidemic) a disquieting sign of an increasingly disempowered rhetorical framework that fails to impart physical and social salvation unto the next generation of plague victims.

### *The Spiritualization of AIDS*

If not disavowed or configured apocalyptically, where else is religion in the story of AIDS? The location of HIV/AIDS within the secular domain of medical sciences (from virology to epidemiology and public health policy), which is characterized by progress and aspirations to discover both vaccine and cure, would seem to leave little room for religious signification outside an academic program gainsaying the excesses of apocalyptic tropes. This program of disavowal, I contend, is neither complete nor the total story of religion and AIDS constructed in scholarship. In the studies referenced so far, religion predominately operates to marginalize PWA while by arranging attending secular categories – gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, etc. – in ways conducive to produce stigmatizing effects. The agentic qualities of religion for the PWA are not an intellectual preoccupation, to say the least. A more complex narrative, however, emerges when religion is not pitted against the secular but rather against its genealogical cousin, the spiritual.

The complex interaction between religious discourse and the epidemic as reflected in ever-expanding bibliography of HIV/AIDS tells an interesting story of the vexing definitional, ideological, and political construction of the very category of *religion* itself. Of particular interest in HIV/AIDS scholarship are the discourses mobilized around the terms *religion* and *spirituality*, which are seen as analytically distinct. In popular discourse, the terms religion and spiritual are generally synonymous in referencing other-worldly or transcendent capital. Yet they trade in competing binaries, often involving perceived conflicts between institutional authority and individual autonomy, dogma and idiosyncratic experimentation, communal and personal identity, etc. A recent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life suggests that many Americans transition between religion and spirituality with greater frequency, or, perhaps, amalgamate the capital of each in their own practice.<sup>39</sup> Historical and sociological studies of the coined phenomenon “spiritual but not religious” or “seeker spirituality” abound,<sup>40</sup> but only two of their more salient points need be brought to bear here. Both suggest that the analytical distinctions between “religion” and “spirituality” operate as distinguishable discursive categories performing very different types of

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<sup>39</sup> “Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths: Eastern, New Age Beliefs Widespread,” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, December 9, 2009, <http://pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/Many-Americans-Mix-Multiple-Faiths.aspx> (accessed July 27, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Robert Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2001), Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), and Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation* (New York: Bantam, 2009).

cultural work. First, there is the historical argument that traditional religion operates as a pre-modern category whose very relevance undergoes generational erosion as domains (or, as José Casanova calls them, “functional spheres”) once dominated by religion become increasingly secularized. Conversely, the protean nature of spirituality, marked by its individualism, is assumed to be more conducive to a post-modernity in which the manufacturing of endless subjectivities becomes a principle preoccupation, if not industry. Second, an important distinction drawn between “traditional religion” and “spirituality” (or the ever messy and collapsed category of religion/spirituality) is that the latter is almost always conceived as depoliticized, private, experiential, and assessable only in regard to its salutary benefits, psychological or otherwise.

The idea of the “spiritual” (or, occasionally, the “sacred” or “numinous”) once operated within religious studies as the purview of perennial philosophers seeking undercurrents common among religious experience and manifest traditions. Once dismissed as an uncritically deployed phenomenal category barely obscuring confessional agendas, it has been revived recently as an ally promoting various forms of religious pluralism and tolerance. Indeed, a wave of recent reimaginings of American religious history have sought not only to explore the diverse manifestations of spirituality in American culture but to place it at the very center of the story of the nation’s religious past and present – or, at least, showcase it as a necessary counterbalance to stories involving Puritan origins and the exclusive claims of Christian salvation. American spirituality, according to Leigh Schmidt, is the product of a long disentanglement from pious forms of



Protestantism, and in *Restless Souls*, he makes the argument that the religious liberalism which flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is “the history that matters most, by far...”<sup>41</sup> Mitch Horowitz concurs with a strenuous argument that America’s dalliance with the occult in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries infused mainline Protestantism with the social and political liberalism indicative of American spirituality.<sup>42</sup> Catherine Albanese, in her acclaimed study of 19<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical religion, makes a related claim that the story of American religion has often been skewed by a sustained effort to protect and promote the role of Christianity in the Nation’s history, thus necessitating a newly imagined story.<sup>43</sup> Evident in these accounts of American religious history is a thinly-veiled partisan desire to underscore, if not reanimate, the putatively sustaining values of the “religious left” that, for both Albanese and Schmidt, figure prominently in America’s self-definition and democratic function. These values include aspiration to have knowledge of the mind, gnosis, self-divinization, comfort and conciliation, dissolution of difference, cosmopolitan attitudes toward diversity, and the immanent nature of the transcendent.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, all of these articulated qualities of religious liberalism will serve as a root source for several of the most prominent manifestation of AIDS activism and artistic representations, including the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in*

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<sup>41</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 6.

<sup>42</sup> Horowitz, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>44</sup> Schmidt, 12.

*America*, both which will feature prominently in subsequent chapters of *Ambivalent Blood*.

All of these values create a pooled source of apolitical capital to be consumed for individual comfort, thus wresting the category of the “spiritual” from much public concern.<sup>45</sup> It is in this configuration that the most sustained engagement with “religion” has been transacted in HIV/AIDS scholarship – religion rendered as an amorphously defined spirituality. This engagement, however, has not occurred in the humanities and social sciences; rather, the most consistently robust scholarly discussion of the interchange between HIV/AIDS and spirituality occurs in the so-called “helping professions,” which encompass fields such as public health, nursing, social work, and counseling. Much of the published literature in the helping professions on HIV/AIDS and spirituality emphasizes the perceived benefits of spirituality in a variety of clinical and therapeutic environments. Many of these studies share a common procedure in constructing operational definitions for research purposes. In “Spirituality and Religion in Patients with HIV/AIDS,” religion and spirituality are collapsed into “religion/spirituality” and defined as that “which gives meaning and purpose to life,” having both inward and outward forms of expression.<sup>46</sup> Church attendance served as the predominate form of outward expression cited by the study; all other expression, including others classified as “outward,” are marked by qualities such

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<sup>45</sup> Those occasions that spiritual currents outside of the Protestant mainstream impact standing political orders – when they are sought after historically – are often framed in celebratory fashion (e.g., Spiritualism’s impact on suffrage and abolition, etc).

<sup>46</sup> Sian Cotton, et al., “Spirituality and Religion in Patients with HIV/AIDS,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 21, no. 5 (December 2006): S5-S13.

as “peace,” “comfort,” “belief,” and “coping.” The study concludes that, as the majority of participants (75%) reported strengthening of their respective faiths and the use of “positive religious coping,” healthcare settings need to consider “spirituality/religion” in the holistic treatment of HIV/AIDS patients. A comprehensive review of nursing literature on spirituality and health-related quality of life (HRQOL) published in *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* operates with similar assumptions.<sup>47</sup> Spirituality is described by a catalog of nearly indistinguishable euphemisms, “well-intentioned forces,” “experiences of soul growth,” and “unfolding mystery.” It is inexorably innate and personal. Religion, in contrast, is rooted in “prescribed beliefs, practices, rituals, and social institutions.” It is circumscribed by boundaries, and, thus readily exorcised from the study. In “An Appointment with God: AIDS, Place, and Spirituality,” an essay considering the role of religion in formulating effective therapeutic models for sexologists, religious codes operate as stigmatizing boundaries, whereas spirituality provides a reservoir of resources for coping with social, psychological, and physical stress.<sup>48</sup>

From gerontology and sexology to occupational therapy and social psychology, there exists remarkable and consistent symmetry marking spirituality, not just in distinction to, but set over and against religion. A leitmotif running throughout the literature is a narrative of spirituality’s inclusivity contrasted with

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<sup>47</sup> See Safiya George Dalmida, “Spirituality, Mental Health, and Health-Related Quality of Life Among Women with HIV/AIDS: Integrating Spirituality Into Mental Health Care,” *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 27, no. 2 (February 2006): 185-198.

<sup>48</sup> Robert L. Miller, Jr., “An Appointment with God: AIDS, Place, and Spirituality,” *Journal of Sex Research* 42, no. 1 (2005): 35-45.

religion's continued recapitulation of theological and communal exclusions. Such inclusivity, however, seems to be achieved by virtue of a program of ambivalence toward difference. In so many of these studies, spirituality is allowed to stand amorphously, unmarked in any way except through perception of salutary benefit, while the particularism of religion – its institutions, theologies, rituals, and communal practices – loom as the source of marginalization. Spirituality benefits, apparently, from being unencumbered by culture. As a recent essay in the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality, and Aging* put it, “With religion and religiosity, the system of belief is more overt and embedded within a traditional or social context, whereas spirituality may be less fettered by such cultural and behavioral moorings.”<sup>49</sup>

The elision of difference in this construction of spirituality, transacted under an amorphous transcendent and in the name of tolerance, is far from unproblematic and innocent. Disciplinary self-criticism, particularly in counseling and nursing, has begun in earnest with trenchant critiques of the amorphous, existential definitions of spirituality and religion plied by practitioners and researchers alike. Lamenting the haphazard approach in establishing definitional parameters, Janice Clark argues, “...we now have to deal with broad ‘portmanteau’ terms which are difficult to articulate and difficult to put into practice, frequently being indistinguishable from psychosocial care.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> David Vance, et. al., “Spiritual and Religious Implications of Aging with HIV: A Conceptual and Methodological Review,” *Journal of Religion, Spirituality, and Aging* 19, no. 3 (2007): 24.

<sup>50</sup> Janice Clark, “A Critical View of How Nursing has Defined Spirituality,” *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 18 (2009): 1667.

Moreover, the aforementioned portmanteau operates contextually divorced from the communal, theological, and operational significance these terms may have for people with AIDS, which is to say this host of spiritual synonyms precludes any contact with or consideration of reality.

Irrespective of the clinical concerns regarding amorphously defined spiritual terminology in the helping professions, the notion of “spirituality” as an unmarked, transcendent category raises questions concerning the efficacy of AIDS identity positions that can be created through the very application of this spiritual discourse. And there is no small amount of activist and practitioner literature that has attempted to locate AIDS within a spiritual landscape, particularly within homosexual communities. The post-Stonewall era witnessed a marked proliferation of gay spiritualities, including denominationally oriented movements, such as Roman Catholic Dignity, Anglican Integrity, and the famous Metropolitan Community Church founded by Troy Perry. Native American therapeutic rituals and tribally sanctioned androgyny were embraced; Buddhist dharma was queered, and the Radical Gay Faeries met in the deserts of Arizona to liberate themselves from heterosexist norms while promising to cultivate the fairy prince within each gay man.<sup>51</sup> The *Village Voice* dedicated an entire 1993 issue to gay spirituality in which AIDS activism and gay liberation were said to be embarking on a vision quest.<sup>52</sup> The advent of AIDS, with its staging of intimate

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<sup>51</sup> For a detailed account of the Radical Gay Faeries, see Chapter Three in Peter Hennen, *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen: Men in Community Queering the Masculine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 59-94.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Goldstein, “Faith, Hope, and Sodomy: Gay Liberation Embarks on a Vision Quest,” *Village Voice* (June 29, 1993).

confrontations with death and degeneration, inaugurated an outpouring of literature on gay spirituality in which autobiographies of abject suffering became sources of meditation and treatises on homoeroticism operated as manuals for spiritual praxis.

A current running through much of the discourse on gay spirituality is both the excavation and creation of queer histories in which homosexuality itself is imbued with productive spiritual force. This enterprise has deep roots in American history. Walt Whitman spoke of “adhesive people,” a modification of the friendship tradition in which manifestations of same sex desire prefigured consciousness-raising and a new political order.<sup>53</sup> Whether framed as “enspiritment” or “spirisexuality,” queer sensibilities regarding aesthetics, conviviality, acceptance, tolerant piety, and empathy placed gays and lesbians at the fore of each generation’s cultural zeitgeist. With the advent of AIDS, the exacerbation of homophobic stereotypes underscoring the most unseemly aspects of gay culture (superfluity, perversion, avarice, cupidity, etc) challenged discourses of gay spiritual singularity, if not superiority. In many cases, the long-standing tradition of configuring queer exceptionalism found unlikely revivification in the pervasive experience of pain, loss, and death meted to gay communities by the epidemic. In Mark Thompson’s oft quoted *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning*, filmmaker James Broughton explains AIDS and gay transcendence in strikingly familiar terms: “Now we have a second terrible result of inhabiting a

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<sup>53</sup> Jess Chandler, “Identifying a Homosexual Poetics: Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, Allen Ginsberg, and the Inheritance of a Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry,” *The Litterateur* (October 17, 2009), <http://www.litterateur.com/identifying-a-homosexual-poetics> (accessed: July 7, 2011).

poisoned world that destroys our immunities. Gay men are in the vanguard of this tragedy,[sic] they are martyrs to the sickness of their destructive society. We hope their suffering may help find the cure that will save the rest of mankind.”<sup>54</sup>

The echoes of Christological suffering hardly ring faint and find plentiful reiteration in treatises such as Roger Lanphear’s *Gay Spirituality*, which blends Transcendental Meditation, Eastern body practices, and Age of Aquarius apocalyptic transformation to configure the AIDS body (invariably homosexual) as the suffering servant absorbing the planet’s most toxic detritus on behalf of humankind.<sup>55</sup>

For all of the spiritual bricolage subsumed under the rubric of “gay spirituality” that has, by some measure, been powerfully resourced for self-actualization, therapy, and shaping intelligible public identities, the attempt to spiritualize gay experience, including the terror of AIDS, makes substantial recourse to pre-existing Protestant tropes and salvific expectation. In “The Way of Some Flesh,” Frank Browning insightfully observes:

Evangelical Christians speak about “receiving Christ” and undergoing the rapture of the Holy Spirit, through which they, too, say they are born again. If the still new language of American gay liberation sounds remarkably like the Protestant language of reawakening and being born again, it is hardly accidental. For more than three hundred years American culture has been shaped by the paradigm of rebirth in the Promised Land. Queer activists’ embracement of terms like “safe space” and “liberated zones” falls easily into that tradition, just as nineteenth-century utopian socialist communities did and as twentieth-century spiritual cultists do. As radically different as their particular faiths and ideologies may be, the underlying spirit is a profoundly American faith in rebirth, both individual

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<sup>54</sup> Mark Thompson, *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 206.

<sup>55</sup> Roger G. Lanphear, *Gay Spirituality: Experiences in Self-Realization for Gay Men, Lesbians, and Enlightened Heterosexuals* (San Diego: Unified Publications, 1990).

and collective, in a place where we will come to a revolutionary comprehension of our place in relation to God or nature.<sup>56</sup>

Striking in Browning's analysis is the embrace of Protestant tropes in service of establishing a gay spirituality that is typical of "a profoundly American faith." Given the pejorative standing that the standard repertoire of Protestant religiosity has for many LGBT activists, Browning's assertion of religio-spiritual parallelism would likely engender no small amount of discomfort. Spirituality's perceived efficacy may not tarnish with these sometime subtle flirtations with the tropes of old religion; yet, the rhetorical dalliance with the perceived hegemon might provide pause for activists and artists alike seeking rhetorical forms and aesthetic frameworks through which AIDS identities might achieve broader social standing.

As striking as this confluence of supposedly queer spiritual and American religious essences, more striking is the virtual absence of meta-analysis of both constructive and defensive configurations of gay spirituality outside of confessional and practitioner literatures. In her analysis of the apprehensive relationship between queer theory, LGBT studies, and religious studies, Melissa Wilcox notes:

Many queer theorists, like many queer activists and perhaps many LGBT people in general, regard religion as so inimical to their purposes and lives that it is not even worthy of critique; references to religion in queer theory, queer studies, and even LGBT studies are usually sparse, brief, and generally derogatory. Likewise, within most of the field of religious studies, queerness is rarely an issue of concern or even consciousness

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<sup>56</sup> Frank Browning, "The Way of Some Flesh," in Brian Bouldrey, ed., *Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 114.



except in the context of organizational tensions over the proper roles of “homosexuals.”<sup>57</sup>

Overcoming the inertia of disciplinary silos also requires willingness for critique that goes beyond descriptive inquiry, the so-called “add queers and stir approach.” The conclusion of Thomas Long’s aforementioned study of AIDS and American apocalyptic rhetoric surveys the possibilities of an academic and activist engagement with spirituality. From his role as a post-Christian and, more specifically, a post-Catholic, he longingly notes, “After AIDS we yearn nostalgically for absent pleasures, including the pleasures of spirituality.” In almost the same breath, he defensively poses the question, “Is spiritual discourse always, then, only the recycling of trashed ideologies?”<sup>58</sup> His question reveals the crux of the matter, which is the seemingly pejorative regard in which the particulars of these idiosyncratic spiritualities are held. If the secular academy responsible for discerning the “issue of AIDS” has already disregarded *proper religion* as a false ideology, clearly “spirituality” has paltry standing, at worst as a frivolous sideshow or, at best, a private concern. Hence, spiritual discourse as related to AIDS inevitably becomes the purview of the practitioner: both the helper and the helped. The consolation of spirituality belongs to private subjectivity but fails to constitute itself seriously as legitimate cultural discourse. Yet, private subjectivity is only livable in as much as it is granted a modicum of social standing. Accordingly, the language of spirituality will prove quite

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<sup>57</sup> Melissa Wilcox, “Outlaws or In-Laws? Queer Theory, LGBT Studies, and Religious Studies,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 52, no. 1 and 2 (2006): 73.

<sup>58</sup> Long, 192.

resilient in the macro constructions of AIDS identity positions, particularly as such identities seek social and national recognition.

Accordingly, the cultural critic remains, with the paltry exceptions already noted, silent on the relevance of religion, let alone spirituality, in the construction of AIDS knowledge. Long, for one, wishes scholars to take seriously transcendent discourses without either reducing them or reinscribing them. In doing so, he argues that the mimetic plane upon which these discourses perform, that is, the manner in which they state to represent reality, is ultimately more important than their operation on a semiotic plane, that is, the cultural work performed by their signifying practices.<sup>59</sup> Of course, mimetic analysis is keenly important for those forging therapeutic, spiritual, and political praxis and for understanding the nuanced contours of subjectivity and lived experience. But the semiotic plane cannot be excluded from analysis; the very cultural work signification performs shapes the delicate ecology in which the contours of AIDS subjectivities are formed. In other words, the semiotic provides the terms upon which reality itself can be represented.

There is a palpable discomfort in turning a critical eye to queer theologies and spiritual praxis motivated by historical contexts of oppression. Teresa de Lauretis long ago imagined queer theory as a site of theoretical and activist disruption to normative power.<sup>60</sup> She would surely agree that this subversive impulse must extend to the attempt to queer any standing aspect of social order.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>60</sup> See Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities - An Introduction," *differences* 3, no. 2 (1991): iii-xviii.

The reticence to do so is, perhaps, derived from a fear of discovering that seemingly counter-hegemonic moves often powerfully reinscribe the hegemonic powers under critique (which, indeed, may account for why de Lauretis abandoned the moniker “queer theory” but three years after she introduced it into common academic usage). I contend that gay spirituality, even in its second order redeployment within the AIDS epidemic, eludes concerted scholarly analysis and critique because its very ambiguity masks a host of exclusions that run counter to spirituality’s own expansive embrace of inclusivity. I think this is particularly the case when we begin to see formations of spirituality as not merely private, therapeutic discourses but as publically fashioned commodities designed to achieve a broader sense of belonging in America’s religious landscape. This is to say, a very different story of spirituality in the construction of AIDS knowledge emerges when “spirituality” becomes a signature of Americanness.

*Spirituality, AIDS, and Nation*

Articulators of “gay spirituality” and some sympathetic AIDS activists, such as Thomas Long, insist that the *mélange* of spiritual discourses available in the marketplace should indicate the possibility for inexhaustible signification that resists a host of disciplining master narratives that determine, in advance, the story of AIDS. Here, dismissals of spirituality become nothing less than an assent to a meta-narrative of modern reductionism that fails to acknowledge how these discourses leverage themselves in agentic ways on behalf of the disadvantaged and dispossessed. Shades of grey between embrace and disavowal seem lost in both the advocacy for spirituality, and religio-spiritual discourse in

general, and its outright dismissal as irrelevant, backward, or pernicious. If we transform Lyotard's incredulity toward metanarratives into something more than a register of post-modernity but rather as an interpretive practice, the very amorphousness of spirituality's definitional parameters within AIDS discourse should suggest that something important lurks in its haziness. Though spirituality is typically defined as oppositional to the dogmatism of *old religion*, I argue that power leveraged by certain master narratives assert themselves into spirituality's claim to escape the orbit of traditional religion. To tell a story of AIDS spirituality requires neither reductionism nor trashing but rather textured analysis of how these discourses claim to represent reality and how they operate to conceal and enable forces of power responsible for producing not only constructing existential meaning for PWA, but laying the foundation for their citizenship claims.

As alluded to earlier, the enterprise of American religious historiography has taken a surprising turn recently in its adoption of liberal religion as a central plank of America's religious narrative. Here, the story of American religion parallels the nation's typically progressive and liberal story of democratization, individual liberty, Republican ideas, and open markets – all of which would lead to world progress, or, as Catherine Albanese suggests, parroting the famous Spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis, “the coming spiritual republic.”<sup>61</sup>

“Combinativeness” is a term found throughout Albanese's *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*. The term attempts to capture the extraordinary absorptive powers of America's spiritual traditions and their facility for constant repurposing and

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<sup>61</sup> Albanese, 218.

reinvention of spiritual commodities for individual progress, communal salvation, and the Edenic transformation of society. Throughout her analysis one encounters a variety of privileged constituencies who have a myriad of complaints regarding the institutional order of American Christianity. In their turn to spiritualism and theosophy, among other alternative spiritualities, these disaffected constituencies easily trade in spiritual capital purchased through episodic acts of violence, erasure and subordination that their own liberal sensibilities, in hindsight, would mostly likely seek to disclaim. Focusing on Albanese's extended examination of spiritualism and mediumship, Tracy Fessenden notes that no small amount of historical sanitization is required in this project of spiritual repurposing:

Séances, Albanese shows, not only render the future less threateningly uncertain but also enable the construction of a usable past. Albanese brings us into séances where slaves return to bless their masters and Indians to facilitate spiritual contact with family members, to sing of the spiritual homes to which they themselves had been restored, and to hail whites as bearers of the Christian gospel. By appearing to "forget" a history of Anglo-American conquest, séance Indians become the medium by which Anglo-America forgets the same history of conquest. In this way the spiritual energies through which native peoples confronted the trauma of their own near-destruction feed the metaphysical project by which white America erases the trauma of Indian genocide.<sup>62</sup>

In all these cases, comfort is the commodity to be traded, but it is comfort at a cost, for it perpetually forestalls deep engagement with the horizons of loss upon which spiritual felicity is forged. One need not mourn real losses if those losses can be transformed in such a way to enable the realization of religious liberalism's most pressing desires for comfort, pluralism, and collective salvation.

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<sup>62</sup> Tracy Fessenden, "Comments on *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*" (unpublished comments, the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Diego, CA, 17 November 2007).

Fessenden's "usable past" refers to a concept that has haunted the American historical enterprises for over a century. First introduced by Van Wyck Brooks in 1918 as a response to what Brooks perceived to be the stultifying pessimism of modernism, a "usable past" has become an evolving and much sought after historiographic chimera that promised to unhinge the story of America from triumphal and exceptional leanings.<sup>63</sup> For Brooks, the usable past consisted of a return to a democratic, if not revolutionary, participation in the arts and civic discourse. In his resourcing of Benjamin Franklin, Walt Whitman, and, most notably, Ralph Waldo Emerson, all of whom had fallen out of favor in the wake of the First World War, Brooks located the creative energies necessary to forge a cohesive and productive American artistic tradition, or, as Robert Bellah might assert, a coherent "community of memory."<sup>64</sup> In justifying the methods of creating a usable past, Brooks wrote, "For the spiritual past has no objective reality...it yields only what we are able to look for in it."<sup>65</sup> What should we look for in a history of AIDS spiritualization? Contrary to the characterization of spirituality as an idiosyncratic and private commodity in the lives of AIDS patients seeking solace and comfort, I contend that discourses on spirituality figure quite prominently in a hitherto untold meta-history of AIDS. They erupt from the surface and perform as much cultural and political work as even the most

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<sup>63</sup> Shelly Fisher Fishkin, "American Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Usable Past," *Journal of British and American Studies* 10 (2004): 34.

<sup>64</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 153.

<sup>65</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial* (April 11, 1918): 338.

strident attempts of conservative Christian theology to narrate AIDS in apocalyptic terms.

In subsequent chapters, particularly the third and fourth, the political dimensions of spiritual discourses will become central to the story of *Ambivalent Blood*. Despite the inclusive claims of AIDS spirituality, I suggest that this discourse, much like those spiritual discourses constructed on the backs of vanquished Indians, abused slaves, and damned infants, trade too casually in loss that need not be recognized as such because of its very utility. What do we make of an AIDS quilt that forges a spiritual experience of witnessing and a medium for collective mourning that insists on the sanitization of gay experience? Can spirituality stand as fully depoliticized only when difference is valued on the condition that it doesn't prove divisive or impede the social good? How usable are queer utopias and a pluralistic America when women are pathologized over and against the productive site of gay suffering? What is lost in the forging of an AIDS spirituality that so deeply enmeshed with gay identity as to render women with AIDS either irrelevant or monstrous? As *Ambivalent Blood* takes up these questions in subsequent chapters, I hope the story of what AIDS and religion is about begins to receive a more nuanced hearing.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE UNITED STATES OF AIDS

The emergence of the complex of illnesses in 1981 that would become HIV/AIDS challenged governments to construct and enact linguistic and policy designations designed to provide a stable explanatory framework for the yet uncharted course of the disease. As the United States forged its varied reactions to the emergence of HIV/AIDS, we would expect to see predominately secular responses channeled through the highly rationalized institutions of the state. The present chapter contends that response of America's most potent symbol of state, the office of the Presidency, did not cohere, nor does it continue to cohere, to fully rationalized, secular reasons. Indeed, Presidential rhetoric has often constructed AIDS as a looking-glass phenomena that transfigures disease into civil religious registers which essentialize normative morality and reify America's transcendent purpose. Inasmuch as the American state operated in concert with certain, if not unspoken, religious sensibilities, America in the age of AIDS has not drastically differentiated itself from perhaps the most famous, documented public health crisis of Antiquity, Athens in the age of plague.

The foray into Antiquity in the first part of this chapter provides an opportunity to assess one of the most striking examples of the relationship between the rhetoric of disease and the rhetoric of state. In 430 B.C., a plague struck Athens during the second year of the Peloponnesian War, which pitted the Athenian polis against the Sparta-led Peloponnesian League. The most detailed account of the plague is found in Thucydides' famous *History of the*



*Peloponnesian War*. In the text, the description of the plague follows Pericles' funeral oration, which praises the Athenian war dead and glorifies the virtues of the Athenian way of life. By any measure, the oration operates as a classic example of what Robert Bellah would term "civil religion." Thucydides as historian and Pericles, as orator, statesman, and suzerain both confront pressing rhetorical challenges: how to configure pressing existential threats (i.e., the plague and Spartan domination of Attica) as occasions for reifying the polis through religio-political symbolism. There is an uncanny parallel between this exercise of Athenian statecraft and the manner in which U.S. Presidents, from Reagan to Obama, utilized the AIDS epidemic to mobilize very specific, and oftentimes transcendent, definitions of America and American citizenship.

*Anomia, Miasma, and Antiquity*

In western imagination disease has long been imbued with sacred dimensions. In ancient Egypt, the etiology of all disease was sacred – leprosy, snake and scorpion bites, infertility, and common colds all were rooted in divine causality. The physician was both priest and prophet. A statuary inscription attributed to Contemned, a grandee of the twenty-fifth dynasty and a devotee to Amun, reads:

I bow down to your name,  
May it be my physician,  
May it remove my body's illness,  
May it drive pain away from me...<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Late Period*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 30.

Sekhmet, a deity associated with justice and war, possessed uncommon cultic endurance in Egypt due to her association with epidemiological causation and prevention. Indeed, the term “Sekhmet” became synonymous with “physician” by the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BCE). That physicians possessed sacerdotal authority and operated at the behest of the pharaonic court meant that diseases were managed by the imperial cult, and thus neither decisively secular nor religious. That diseases could be addressed outside the dominion of state or religion was impossible in an ancient Egypt that lacked both a term for religion and a concept of state somehow separate from religious beliefs.

Evidence from ancient Mesopotamia reveals a similar disposition toward illness and healing. A recovered text from Assurbanipal’s famous library in Nineveh, titled the “Treatise of Medical Diagnosis and Prognoses,” outlines the supernatural causes of a host of ailments while delineating methods of divine propitiation. Physicians divined the causative factors involved in the given ailment and proscribed the ritual cure, which often included some ameliorative care beyond ritual and sacrifice to the offended spirit or daimôn.<sup>2</sup> Clauses in the Code of Hammurabi (1700 BCE) evidence state control over physician-priests, permissible magico-medical means used in the field, and appropriate forms of compensation for rendering services to citizens of different social classes.<sup>3</sup>

Though the divine status of Mesopotamia’s god-kings is thoroughly documented,

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<sup>2</sup> For an illuminating analysis of “The Treatise of Medical Diagnosis and Prognoses,” see Stewart Wolf, “Early Medicine in Mesopotamia,” *Integrative Physiological & Behavioral Science* 34, no. 4 (October-December 1999): 217-18.

<sup>3</sup> See Allen D. Spiegel and Christopher R. Springer, “Babylonian Medicine, Managed Care and Codex Hammurabi, Circa 1700 B.C.,” *Journal of Community Health* 22, no. 1 (February 1997): 69-90.

it bears mention that the stele upon which 282 mandates of the Code are written contains a beautifully rendered engraving of Hammurabi paying homage to Shamash, the ancient solar deity of justice. As a divine representative, the king's sovereignty in regulating (and thus accountability for) health was unquestioned.

Egypt and Mesopotamia were not alone among Near Eastern cultures in its construction of an intimate nexus between illness, religion, and state. Large swaths of Jewish history, from Genesis through the Babylonian Captivity, resonate with patterns established by Egypt. The Tanakh repeatedly constructs disease as both an index of Israel's fidelity to its covenantal agreement with YHWH and as a predictable weapon wielded as divine punishment. Plague operated as a preferred punishment against Israel's enemies and was thus read as instrument safeguarding the national aspirations of the ancient Hebrews. Egypt, the Philistine city-states, and Sidon all succumbed to diseases sent to pave way for and defend the divinely-mandated nation. But disease predictably operated to coerce filial and spiritual piety among the descendents of Abraham, thus expiating persistent immorality and religious atavisms inconsonant with a vision of a politically-realized Israel. In its extensive list of curses for disobedience, Deuteronomy 28: 21-22 clearly imbues illness with divine causation: "The Lord will plague you with diseases until he has destroyed you from the land you are entering to possess. The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish."<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Biblical authors routinely

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<sup>4</sup> Deut. 28: 1-22 (New Oxford Annotated Bible).

construct plague as a common divine response to idol worship and the moral transgressions of its patriarchs and divinely anointed kings. The Tanach's progressively staunch monotheism and attending investment of Yahweh with awful powers necessitates that healing, too, be rooted in the will of the divine. Unlike other Semitic and Hellenistic cultures, the thoroughgoing power of Yahweh as the exclusive sender and healer of disease disempowered the Temple as a source of petitionary or therapeutic function. As Hector Avalos observes, the monolatrous nature of Judaism, particularly in the Temple periods, meant there were only two sources of authority: legitimate and illegitimate. Foremost among the legitimate were the *navi*, or prophets, who operated as the mouth and tongue of the divine, and the temple priests whose principle concern was ritual protocol and purity. The seriously ill were precluded from serving in the priestly hierarchy, which itself functioned to safeguard the Temple (the most prominent symbol of Jewish nationalism) from bodily impurities which were also translated as registers of spiritual blight.<sup>5</sup>

In western culture, the relationship between disease, healing, religion, and temporal authority achieves its most enduring and powerful articulation in Athens of the Golden Age. In the summer of 430 BCE, pestilence struck Athens one year after the commencement of hostilities with its adversary, Sparta. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides provides a famous and epidemiologically graphic portrait of the plague, the intimacy of his reporting achieved by virtue of

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<sup>5</sup> Hector Avalos, *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East: The Role of the Temple in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel*, Harvard Semitic Museum Monographs 54 (Scholars Press: Atlanta, 1995), 184.

having contracted and survived the disease himself. The composition of Thucydides' *History* owed much to the increasingly moral, philosophical, and ethical inquiry into world that attended Greece's Golden Age.

Though divine etiology persisted into the Golden Age, philosophers and politicians alike turned a skeptical eye to the old mythologies and sought more naturalistic explanations of phenomena. For example, seizures had long been attributed to offense rendered to Selene, an archaic lunar deity, or a sign of one's oracular potential. However, by the fifth century illness progressively became less a sign of divine turbulence or the capriciousness of the pantheon but rather an indication of something amiss in the natural world or, importantly, the social order of the polis. Hippocrates famously challenged the prevailing wisdom concerning divine etiology of a host of ailments, including seizures. Of epilepsy, which the Greeks called "sacred," Hippocrates dismisses divine diagnosis as the result of inexperience and a failure to reconcile the spectacular effects of the disease with its presentation in the natural world.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to both Israel, in which maintenance of the Temple's purity precluded it from appropriation in state health care, and Mesopotamia, where every illness entailed divine causation, the Greek *asclepieia*, healing temples dedicated to the divinity Aesclepius, were largely therapeutic in nature. As illness and individual immorality were not theologically linked, and a measure of egalitarianism marked the *asclepieia* both in the diversity of patients admitted to the cult and the backgrounds of those who could become temple physicians.

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<sup>6</sup> Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, The Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Hippocrates/sacred.html> (accessed August 22, 2011).

What intrigues about Thucydides' treatment of disease in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is his insistence on reading illness as neither an occasion for illuminating divine reasons nor an opportunity for sentimental reflection. Instead, the outbreak of disease is intimately linked to the morality and social order of the polis, much of which is defined by ostensible religious duties. As classicist M. I. Finley notes, for any serious Greek thinker, war, conflict, and disease could never be reduced to a matter of tactics and divine causes, which is history in the mode of Herodotus; instead, historical phenomena must be framed within a broader political and moral context to be understood properly.<sup>7</sup>

Thucydides' description of the plague functions not as epidemiological report but rather a treatise on the fragile political fabric of the polis. Indeed, anxieties concerning potential ruptures in the Athenian body politic motivate one of Thucydides' most intriguing editorial decisions: the placement of the plague's description immediately following the famous funeral oration of Pericles.

Athenian life elevated a host of civic virtues above all others. Pericles's funeral oration, given on the occasion of the Athenian public burial rite commemorating the war dead, delineates both the personal virtues and public morality that encompass the Athenian way of life. The speech performs more than a didactic function; it instills more than patriotism. Donald Nielsen labels the effect an "eros to country."<sup>8</sup> Nielsen explains that the funeral oration is a premier instance of what Robert Bellah famously coined as civil religion, a set of

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<sup>7</sup> M. I. Finley, introduction to Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Nielsen, "Pericles and the Plague: Civil Religion, Anomie, and Injustice in Thucydides," *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 399.

public rituals transacted not in service of a specific *cultus* but rather for the benefit of a transcendent notion of community, nation, or state. The speech trades in an idealization of Athenian civic virtue; the Athenian past is framed as golden and immemorial in order to secure present and future unity (tropes which will be rehearsed in the American rhetorical presidency in the age of AIDS). Public grieving, then, becomes a cathartic venue to mourn the lives and sacrifices of the war dead while reaffirm the enduring, eternal values of the polis.

As Nielsen argues, however, this idealization of Athenian civic life only comes to full expression when paired with an opposing set of values and circumstances which threaten to undo the fabric of public life. In the summer following the burial rite recounted in the funeral oration, plague struck Athens with ferocity. Though Thucydides purports to describe the manifest signs of the plague rather than explain or interpret (description, we are told by Thucydides, being the only appropriate rhetorical option due to the inability of physicians to identify a natural cause), he nonetheless uses the occasion to underscore the lawlessness inflicting Athenian society. “As for what is called honor,” Thucydides morosely explains, “no one showed himself willing to abide by its laws...”<sup>9</sup> Thucydides describes how the exigencies of the disease and the immediacy of death engendered behaviors (avarice, cupidity, etc.) antithetical to the harmony of the city. As egregious was the violation of human law and general civic virtue, the source of the greatest shame is violation of religious law. Thucydides sharply criticizes the disorganization of public burial rituals in which corpses remained

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<sup>9</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 155.

either unattended or ignobly burned on funeral pyres turned into public incinerators. He laments that the populous had become “indifferent to every rule of religion or of law.”<sup>10</sup> The perceived impotency of the gods rendered them and their attending ritual protocol obsolete.

Thucydides suggests that the plague precipitates offenses to religious law; that is, he doesn't explicitly state that the plague is result of religious decay. Despite the prevailing wisdom citing a natural etiology for diseases, the Greeks widely held that miasma, a contagious moral pollution, caused large outbreaks of illness.<sup>11</sup> The plague afflicting Thebes in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* stands as a principle expression of this belief, as does the House of Atreus which undergoes debilitating, generational tragedy due to the offense rendered to gods by Tantalus, who cooked his own son Pelops and served the seasoned body to the divine as a test of Olympian omniscience. In creating a perfect symmetry between the harmonious balance of civic virtues in Pericles's oration with the libertine immorality of Athens in the time of plague, Thucydides seems to argue that the soul of Athens is wrought with miasmatic decay; the plague not incited a dissolution of civic virtue but exacerbated a long-standing anomie that Pericles himself may have been attempting to mitigate in his famous funerary speech. In reading the description of plague as a meditation on Athenian anomie, Nielsen asks, “Was the Athenian breakdown under the plague not proof that Athenian character and moral order were already in a precarious state at the very outset of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>11</sup> See E.R. Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).



war?”<sup>12</sup> In the age of AIDS, the question of moral and religious causality is more assuredly proclaimed. The epidemic served for many as the very proof of creeping miasma, thus putting in jeopardy America’s longstanding civilizational contest with the Soviet Union and its communist satellites.

### *Pax Antibiotica*

“Ages ago,” begins Nicholas Wade in a 1995 *New York Times* editorial, “two tribes tussled for possession of the land. The battle raged for generation after generation, but neither side gained final victory. All that changed in the desperate arms race was that the weapons of the two rivals became ever more sophisticated. At last, one tribe developed a suite of cunning poisons.”<sup>13</sup> Human science was the victorious tribe, and the decisive victory belonged to Alexander Flemming and his accidental discovery of what would become penicillin in 1928. The *pax antibiotica* as Wade calls it promised to inaugurate an era in which sex, in all of its manifold forms, was to have been unencumbered, permanently, from the shadow of disease. The sexual revolution of the Sixties derived much of its impetus from the profound belief in science’s ability to curtail biological threats, thus alleviating the state’s need to defend its national borders and body politic through sexual regulation. Advances in immunology, argues Cindy Patton, contributed to the “growing perception of the human being as precariously perched in a world ecology.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nielsen, 402.

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Wade, “Method and Madness; Pax Antibiotica,” *New York Times* (October 15, 1995). Health Section.

<sup>14</sup> Patton, *Inventing AIDS*, 59.

Developments in the late twentieth century, however, entailed but a brief safari from biological reality. As Wade starkly notes, the pax antibiotica, painfully, was short-lived. Genetic mutations in a variety of bacteria have produced antibiotic-resistant superbugs that have transformed once treatable diseases, such as staphylococci and gonorrhea, into looming health crises impacting hospitals and the sexually active alike. And into an environment of increasingly relaxed sexual mores, HIV emerged, a virus, among others, that has proven immune to the most ardent attempts of virological immunology to contain it. Immunology, Patton reminds us, is a field of biological inquiry in which the human body is positioned quite tenuously: it provides both the material conditions for both the acquisition of and defense against illness. Accordingly, she argues, the very linguistic constructions used to describe immunological processes deeply influence how governments organize their public health regimes. She states, “Immunology provided the grammar for shifting dominant metaphors of disease from offense to civil defense.”<sup>15</sup> Nations began to configure themselves as bodies and utilized a host of surveillance tools both to prevent foreign invasion and to stave off internal infection, physical, ideological, and otherwise.

Such governmental reaction to the shattered assumptions of the pax antibiotica is far from novel. Both Hobbes and Jefferson long ago asserted that the fundamental responsibility of government is the preservation of life. From a Hobbesian perspective, commodious life is possible only in as much as individuals cede some freedom to a political community, or commonwealth. The

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 60.

commonwealth, as human simulacra, is as susceptible to disease as an actual human body, thus placing disease prevention at the heart of governmental concern. Governments throughout history, from the divinely monarchical to the presumably democratic, have exercised this prerogative in diverse ways – regulation of physician-priests, cataloging of maladies and their supernatural genus, mandating ritual sacrifice to the appropriate daemon, enforcement of behavioral norms through legal institutions (or, catholicization of perceived deviance), and bureaucratization of secularized public health protocols and scientific consensus. The preceding list is suggestive of key transformations in the nature of public health throughout the march of Western history – a disenchantment of disease and cure, the infusion of health with reason. Alas, despite dispensational, Hegelian, and positivist constructions of historical progress, public health history yields reasonably stable relationships between disease, religion, morality, sex, and death – all of which have been subject to variously configured state regulation.

As Michel Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality*, one of the principle activities of the modern nation state is the exercise of biopower, a set of institutional and rhetorical procedures designed to secure a “healthy” society.<sup>16</sup> Biopower has been theorized largely within the context of institutions regulating public health, normative sexuality and reproductive procedures, and other forms of citizen-oriented risk management. Foucault’s usage of the term seems restricted to the technologies of modern (i.e., post-Enlightenment) governments,

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 139.

though the amalgamation of human biology and the governance has a long pedigree in the Western culture. Though pre-modern societies did not exclusively apply “rational” measures in their governance, they nonetheless deployed what Foucault might call “pastoral power.” Foucault’s historical analysis provides that religion, as a set of coercive discourses and practices, essentially provides a template for the prerogatives of the modern state (channeled through a host of institutions, including modern social sciences). In other words, pastoral power gave rise to modern power. Inflammatory rhetoric of the Religious Right aside, the U.S. government’s response to HIV/AIDS has been marked by policymaking that surprisingly intertwines both rationalized and pastoral applications of power, using the former to cloak the latter.

*Cold War Siege on the City on the Hill*

Jacqueline Foertch argues that the historically proximal relationship between the Cold War and the AIDS crisis placed the epidemic squarely within discourses of civilizational struggle that so marked world and American politics in the near half century following the erection of the so-called iron curtain. In *Enemies Within*, Foertch’s impressive analysis of AIDS, postmodernism, and cultural production, the Cold War and the AIDS epidemic represent golden ages of both virology, with all of its attending metaphors of invasion and infection, and homophobia, a coordinated defense against invasions of immorality and godlessness. The rhetoric of plague proved uniquely adept in constructing a biopolitical phenomenon and mobilizing a sense of what Foertch terms

“collective affliction.”<sup>17</sup> The mechanisms and expression of this collective affliction provide the Cold War and AIDS an eerie rhetorical symmetry. As Foeretch eloquently summarizes, “...the cold war spawned a plague, not of communism or bomb-related illnesses, but of paranoia, xenophobia, and red-baiting that took on witch-hunt proportions. Likewise, the AIDS era will be remembered not for its *epidemic* of HIV but for its *plagues* of homophobia, germaphobia, racism, and classism.”<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the Fifties and Sixties, the United States enacted a fierce national, ideological narrative in its confrontation with the Soviet Union. Iron curtains and dominoes fell, and America’s proxy wars proved more indecisive in both their means and outcomes than either of the World Wars. A national ethos of patriotism, individual and collective health, public morality, and civil religious duty served as a bulwark against looming fears of the communist threat. America’s internal proxy war, best typified by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), placed a premium on expressions of morality that adhered to strictly regulated codes of masculinity. As David Savarn notes, “...the House Committee on Un-American Activities pursued a campaign against homosexuals almost as vigorous as its campaign against alleged Communist ‘subversives.’”<sup>19</sup> The prosecutorial efforts of Senator McCarthy, who chaired the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, and HUAC instigated widespread fears of both

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<sup>17</sup> Foeretsch, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>19</sup> David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 84-85.

homosexual and communist and contagion. In the nineteenth century homosexuality became pathologized, with both its very condition and deleterious effects widely believed to be transmissible by nothing more than a passing glance.<sup>20</sup> During the first half-century of communist political programming in Europe and the Soviet Union, episodic attempts were made to decriminalize homosexuality. These fleeting instances became sufficient historical evidence for anti-communist crusaders to link the two phenomena. McCarthy famously and unambiguously concretized the linkage when speaking to reporters he boasted, “If you want to be against McCarthy, boys, you've got to be either a Communist or a cocksucker.”<sup>21</sup>

As invisible conditions, both communist affiliation and homosexual identity became subjects of intensive self-monitoring and national scrutiny. As the inability to visibly discern “real Americans” from so-called pinks and reds invited a host of invasive and covert governmental procedures designed to both expose the enemy within and reinforce desirable, stable categories by procuring an atmosphere of comprehensive fear and panic. As HUAC proceedings made abundantly clear, one need not be a communist to be guilty; mere association with communist sympathizers was sufficient to confer guilt. Between the mid-1930’s and the 1950’s, when anti-communist oversight reached its zenith of governmental power, the crusade against the Soviet Union and its attending

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<sup>20</sup> Lee Edelman, “Seeing Things: Representation, the Scene of Surveillance, and the Spectacle of Gay Male Sex” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 93.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in K.A. Cuordileone, “Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960,” *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (2000): 521.

ideologies simplified the rhetorical muddle of otherizing communism by focusing on religion. Explaining the dynamics of totalitarianism and collectivism proved ineffective public arguments, but characterizing Soviets as arbiters of “godless communism” proved enormously convincing to an America embracing a popular or civil Christianity. Indeed, the linkage of Christian virtue, American patriotism, and anti-communist sentiment led to a post-War boom membership boom for mainline and evangelical denominations. Writing in 1954, Reverend Billy Graham famously delineated the Manichean dimensions of the ideological contest: “Either Communism must die, or Christianity must die, because it is actually a battle between Christ and the anti-Christ.”<sup>22</sup> More than just salvation lost, the stark binarism of this metaphor symbolically stripped those with any of the ascribed attributes of communism (atheism, homosexuality, etc.) the very rights of legal and symbolic citizenship. Tolerance of communism amounted to tacit licensure of cultural and political miasma.

### *Reagan and the Great Communicative Silence*

Perhaps nowhere did this metaphor reach its most clear and transcendent articulation than under the presidency of Ronald Reagan and his eponymous doctrine. After the turbulence of the Sixties and the political crises of the Seventies, Reagan sought to revive the myth of the millennial nation. Wade Clark Roof argues that the millennial nation “locates the nation outside of ordinary time, but at the end of history rather than at its beginning. It envisions America in a leadership role within the world, which in time will usher in the final golden age,

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<sup>22</sup>Steven G. Brint and Jean Reith Schroedel, *Evangelicals and Democracy in America: Religion and Society* 1 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2009), 156.

giving the entire world what the United States uniquely has to offer.”<sup>23</sup> The promised golden age, however, would be forestalled if America failed to address its domestic weakness in order to repel its international foes. Accordingly, Reagan’s anti-communist ideology remains a signature of his personal and presidential legacy. From his 1947 testimony in front of HUAC as president of the Screen Actors Guild to his farewell address from the Oval Office in January of 1989, Reagan sought to imbue America’s primacy by attaching the very cause of America to an unassailable divine mission destined to vanquish all godless, totalitarian comers. Indeed, he repeatedly called for a type of “rearmament” of America that entailed both a moral and militaristic revival. Though Reagan avoided ostensible alignment with the Christian Right, religious conservatives eagerly embraced the solicitude with which the president adopted discourses of traditional family values. He offered repeated rhetorical arguments for the reinfusion of religiosity in American public life as an antidote to the moral turpitude of the previous two decades:

I have found a great hunger in America for a spiritual revival, for a belief that law must be based on a higher law, for a return to the traditions and values we once had. Our Government, in its most sacred documents, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence and all, speak of man being created, of a creator, that we are a nation under God.<sup>24</sup>

This conviction in the continued allure of America’s providential religious imaginary animated the power of the Reagan presidency, particularly in the Administration’s looming confrontation with Mikhail Gorbachev’s “evil empire”

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<sup>23</sup> Wade Clark Roof, “American Presidential Rhetoric from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush: Another Look at Civil Religion,” *Social Compass* 56 (2009): 289.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Steve Tipton, *Getting Saved from the Sixties: Moral Meaning in Conversion and Cultural Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 261.



and its program of national revivification through the dismantling of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society." The emergence of HIV/AIDS in the first year of Reagan's presidency provided a stark challenge, both in terms of political rhetoric and policymaking, to the Reagan's reconstruction of America as "shining city on a hill."<sup>25</sup>

Howard Zinn argues that a central and mythic axiom inherent in America's self-definition is a divinely ordained expansion into the wilderness. He writes:

Expanding into another territory, occupying that territory, and dealing harshly with people who resist occupation has been a persistent fact of American history from the first settlements to the present day. And this was often accompanied from very early on with a particular form of American exceptionalism: the idea that American expansion is divinely ordained."<sup>26</sup>

The wilderness had long been territorial, but it has progressively become economic and ideological in nature. The Soviet Union's expanding influence post-World War II did not check American expansionism but rather gave cause for its acceleration. The very fear that Ford administration had accelerated Nixon's policy of détente despite Soviet territorial and military expansion led Reagan in a campaign address to argue that accommodation to the Soviet "straightjacket" was antithetical to America's purpose:

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<sup>25</sup> A reference to a phrase in John Winthrop's famous sermon on the Arbella, "A Model of Christian Charity," the "city on the hill" proved a favorite stock metaphor in Reagan's speeches, notably his 1984 acceptance speech for the Republican Party nomination and his farewell address in 1989.

<sup>26</sup> Howard Zinn, "The Power and the Glory: They Myth of American Exceptionalism," *The Boston Review*, Summer 2005), <http://bostonreview.net/BR30.3/zinn.php> (accessed September 12, 2011).

Well, I don't believe the people I've met in almost every State of this Union are ready to consign this, the last island of freedom, to the dustbin of history, along with the bones of dead civilizations of the past. Call it mysticism, if you will, but I believe God had a divine purpose in placing this land between the two great oceans to be found by those who had a special love of freedom and the courage to leave the countries of their birth.<sup>27</sup>

Once in office, Reagan's project of nuclear stockpiling and covert military expansion into developing nations served as the foundation of both his economic and foreign policy. The Administration also placed a premium on promoting the health of the body politic, supporting a host of positions purported to buttress the nuclear family, without which American survival became doubtful in the face of looming Soviet threat. Ironically, Reagan's commitment to a radical devolution of social welfare responsibility to the states portended disastrous outcomes for the healthy families protected by "pro-family" policies, such as the amplified war on drugs to increasingly pro-life positions (including support of the Human Life Amendment, which would overturn the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling).

Reagan's first public address on the AIDS epidemic occurred in the seventh year of his presidency, a full six years following the first clinical description of the disease. Given the ease by which so many politicians and their surrogates mobilized rhetoric linking the virus to the diseased body of the homosexual, which had already been subject to much rhetorical abuse in the anti-communist crusades of the Fifties and Sixties, Reagan's silence seems quite

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<sup>27</sup> Ronald Reagan, "To Restore America" (televised address seeking Republican presidential nomination delivered 31 March 1976), available from [http://reagan2020.us/speeches/To\\_Restore\\_America.asp](http://reagan2020.us/speeches/To_Restore_America.asp) (accessed September 12, 2011).

striking. However, the evolution of executive propagandizing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided the White House an effective way to speak without speaking. This post-WWII reshaping of the presidential bully pulpit is what Jeffrey Tulis has famously dubbed the “rhetorical presidency.”<sup>28</sup> Beginning with the Truman administration, the executive branch co-opted many of the functions of official propaganda services, such as the Writers’ War Board, the United States Office of War Information, and, later, the United States Information Agency. Using a host of surrogates from multiple levels of the executive branch, many of whom had considerable access to America’s burgeoning television broadcast industry, the presidency’s rhetorical power expanded beyond the immediate confines of the bully pulpit. As Shawn Parry-Giles illustrates, the expansion of executive control over the nation’s propaganda apparatuses proved enormously effective in naturalizing Cold War ideology.<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, Reagan need not rely on the bully pulpit to offer an official state response to the epidemic. Careful not signal a too-close connection between the business of the nation, Biblical ethics, and fundamentalist narratives, the White House opted for a strategy of communicative silence, allowing other surrogates of the state (in addition to the White House’s political allies among the New Right who had proven instrumental in his 1980 and 1984 national campaigns) to shape the government’s rhetorical construction of the epidemic. As

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<sup>28</sup> Tulis’s argument is that the rhetorical presidency evolved as a means of providing the executive branch the license to speak directly to the people rather than to the legislature, thus bypassing congressional oversight of executive rhetoric. See Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> For more information, see Shawn Parry-Giles, *The Rhetorical Presidency, Propaganda, and the Cold War, 1945-1955* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishers, 2001).

already noted, the resistance of HIV/AIDS to any easy scientific and epidemiological definition allowed a religiously conservative framework for the disease to saturate public discourse. Jonathan Engel smartly calls this “a vacuum for the homophobic moralist.”<sup>30</sup> At the forefront of the effort to assert a coherent conservative, federal response to the epidemic were California congressmen William Dannemeyer and Robert Dornan, North Carolina senator Jesse Helms, and Education Secretary William Bennett. As has been referenced previously in both the Introduction and Chapter One of *Ambivalent Blood*, the religious rationale of their arguments was hardly transparent, and they forcefully articulated the connection between the disease, homosexual profligacy, and divine consternation. Scott Appleby aptly describes this narrative framework on which homophobia become directly tied to a broader religious narrative: “...the AIDS epidemic, pornography, a rising divorce rate, teen-aged pregnancy, and, especially, abortion are read not simply as society’s failings, but as clear warnings of something much worse at work, the forces of evil struggling with God for mastery of this planet.”<sup>31</sup> Dannemeyer’s characterization of AIDS as a heaven-sent antidote to homosexual affrontry parallels Dornan’s framing of AIDS as a divinely-called “reaper’s scythe.”<sup>32</sup> Both actively sought reductions in federal budget allocations to HIV/AIDS research, and, in 1989, Dannemeyer introduced

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<sup>30</sup> Engle, 72.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Gustav Niebuhr, “Week in Review: Kneeling at the Altar of Death: From Belief to Fanaticism,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> *Congressional Record*, October 20, 1987, H 8801, cited in Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000), 124. See page in the introduction for a representative sample of Congressman Dannemeyer’s many public statements about HIV/AIDS.

H.R. 3102 which would have tied federal grant monies to the willingness of individual states to engage in mandatory AIDS-testing and epidemiological data reporting procedures.<sup>33</sup> The bill, referred to the House Subcommittee on Health and the Environment, never made it to the floor of the House for a vote; however, the congressional rhetoric which preceded and informed H.R. 3102 inspired a host of other state-level initiatives, principally ballot propositions, to protect the general public from the scourge of “high risk” groups, a demarcation that exceeds a bland epidemiological specification.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of Reagan’s second term, much of the official propaganda concerning HIV/AIDS, irrespective of specific religious statements, had naturalized the idea that HIV/AIDS represented a public health threat that endangered the American family. Accordingly, the family and its very defense became metonymically linked with conceptions of America over and against diseased and undesirable constituencies at home and godless communists abroad. As reported in Engle’s *The Epidemic: A Global History of AIDS*, Republican consulting firms saw an opportunity to speak to the reasonable, middle class, and suburban sensibilities of the American electorate by framing the war on AIDS, even its more severe rhetorical and policy expressions, as an effort to secure the nuclear family. One consultant wrote in 1987, “If we are low-key, sound logical,

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<sup>33</sup> See H.R. 3102 listing in THOMAS, the Library of Congress database of federal legislative information. <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/D?d101:5:./temp/~bda6ko>: (accessed: November 7, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Representative ballot initiatives include Lyndon Larouche’s attempt to get California voters to approve mandatory quarantine for HIV-Positive individuals and a Florida ballot measure proposing mandatory jail sentences for people with AIDS who knowingly donated blood.

and stress the importance of ‘protecting’ families from the disease, then we could find ourselves in excellent shape in 1988.”<sup>35</sup> The White House’s emphasis on framing public health in terms of family values infused even Reagan’s most robust federal response to the disease, the formation in the summer of 1987 of the Presidential Commission on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus Epidemic, more commonly known as the Watkins Commission. As has been widely noted, the President’s Domestic Policy Council, which had broad leeway in formulating the administration’s response to the epidemic, appointed no physicians who had any experience treating PWA to the Watkins Commission. Moreover, a number of the appointed commissioners, such as New York archbishop John Joseph O’Connor, were staunch opponents of sex education and condom distribution.<sup>36</sup> “Good morality is good medicine” was a favorite O’Connor maxim.<sup>37</sup> In his opposition to condom distribution, O’Connor made explicit connection between sustained moral vigilance and the viability of the American project. In an analogy fitting of an avid Mets and Yankess Fan, O’Connor explained that in capitulating to condom distribution, “...you bring all of society down. You’re saying we lost the ball game.”

On May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1987, speaking at the Potomac Restaurant in Arlington, Virginia, President Ronald Reagan gave his first and final public speech on

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<sup>35</sup> Engle, 75.

<sup>36</sup> See “O’Connor Defends AIDS Panel Role” in *The New York Times*, 31 July 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/31/nyregion/o-connor-defends-aids-panel-role.html> (accessed September 12, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Glenn H. Utter, *The Religious Right: A Reference Handbook*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Amenia, NY: Grey House Publishing, 2007), 104.

AIDS.<sup>38</sup> Invited by Elizabeth Taylor, then national chairman for the American Foundation for Aids Research (amfAR), the President sought to dispel perception of a laconic, if not patently indifferent, federal response to the AIDS crisis. Given that Reagan, “the Great Communicator,” had mentioned the word “AIDS” but twice in the preceding five years, the speech confronted a daunting rhetorical challenge. HIV/AIDS emerged into a politically divided America, particularly in regard to matters of sex and reproduction. In an interview for *Frontline’s The Age of AIDS*, a documentary commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the epidemic, Landon Parvin, a Reagan Administration speechwriter, noted three policy aims the White House wanted to communicate in the speech. “The first goal,” Parvin explains, “was to find a cure; the second goal was to be compassionate; and the third goal was to make sure that the focus was on protecting those Americans who did not have the disease.”<sup>39</sup> The speech’s handling of the third policy aim has proven the most decisive in shaping the ever-proliferating construction of AIDS-narratives. Irrespective of the ostensible rhetorical and policy aims of the speech, close analysis reveals that Reagan and his speechwriters used the amfAR speech to communicate two overriding messages: 1) the necessity to safeguard healthy Americans and 2) to clearly differentiate healthy Americans from morality-adverse diseased Americans. The

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<sup>38</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the American Foundation For Aids Research Awards Dinner” (speech, Potomac Restaurant, Potomac, MD, March 31, 1987), <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/053187a.htm> (accessed September 1, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Landon Parvin, interview from *Frontline* documentary *The Age of AIDS*, dirs. Brent E. Huffman and Katerina Monemvassitis, transcript available online, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/interviews/parvin.html> (accessed August 21, 2011).

religious rationale of each message is manifest throughout the speech's rhetorical program.

In regard to protecting healthy Americans, Reagan made considerable recourse to putatively secular reasons, actions, and actors. The story of AIDS, as presented in the speech, begins as a story of scientific progress, achievement, and heroism. The speech begins by thanking the surgeon general, doctors, and researchers for taking inordinate personal risk in fighting the disease in the shadow history of the disease's first years. After quoting Auden's assertion that scientists are the true men of action, Reagan declares that governmental action can only do so much, for only "medical science can ever truly defeat AIDS."<sup>40</sup> Toward that end, Reagan provides a laundry list of the federal government's fiscal investments in both corporate and public AIDS research. The underlying assumption of these remarks is that science operates as the enlightened beacon amidst the considerable rhetorical and policy haze of the public sphere. Cindy Patton notes that this value-neutral assumption concerning science is a time-honored tradition that places scientific inquiry somehow "above and outside the polis."<sup>41</sup> In the context of the cultural history of AIDS, both Patton and Treichler have clearly demonstrated that such assumptions are not only super flawed but deadly. Patton observes:

This view of science not only obscures the power relations between science and public policy; it is fatal to people in danger of HIV infection...It masks the way in which medical research reconstructs colonial relationships under the dual guise of scientific objectivity and efforts for the "good of mankind." It obscures the ways in which pressure

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<sup>40</sup> Reagan, "Remarks at the American Foundation for AIDS Research Awards Dinner."

<sup>41</sup> Patton, 70.



to adopt the organizational schema of science as representative of lived experience reinscribes hierarchies of social difference.<sup>42</sup>

Examples abound. The first immunological description of what would become known as HIV/AIDS was GRID, gay-related immune-deficiency. First conceived as a value-neutral designation, epidemiological evidence later revealed the moniker to be unduly prejudicial. An editorial in *Nature* described the inherent irony in the allocation of substantial resources toward treatment and palliative care of AIDS patients. The editorial asked whether this would simply accelerate the possibility of future infections.<sup>43</sup> The editorial's observation implies that money would be better allocated toward the quest for a vaccine or an anti-viral prophylactic rather than treatment strategies of existing patients. The connection between the disease and sex also stimulated a proliferation of *scientific* discourses on the gendered body. As reported by Treichler, a 1988 advice column in *Cosmopolitan* magazine presented a physician's assessment that women need not worry about HIV infection in the course of "normal" sexual intercourse, an assessment conveying the assumption that vaginas, unlike the rectum so abused by homosexuals, was sufficiently sturdy to resist HIV.<sup>44</sup> All these examples attest to the observation that scientific knowledge and its presentation fail to resist the vicissitudes of culture.

For the Reagan administration, the objectivity of science provided the rationale and cover for inaugurating the most controversial aspect of the White House's HIV/AIDS policy: mandatory HIV testing. With the advent of the HIV-

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>43</sup> "AIDS Now a Tractable Disease?" *Nature* 340, no. 6236 (31 August 1989), 663.

<sup>44</sup> Treichler, 236.

antibody tests ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) and WB (Western blot) in 1985, hopes arose that mandatory testing might effectively ferret out all HIV-positive Americans and thus achieve the primary public health aim of stemming future HIV-infections. Despite concerns regarding the abrogation of civil liberties, prohibitive costs, and questions concerning the accuracy of HIV-antibody testing,<sup>45</sup> the Reagan Administration supported mandatory testing, arguing that failure to institute such a policy constituted an abnegation of its responsibility for the public health concerns of the electorate. According to Parvin, the President justified mandatory testing by framing the Administration's approach to HIV/AIDS as parallel to any other federal response to contagious disease. Parvin explains, "One of the things the president wanted was to treat AIDS as any other contagious disease would be treated. He told me that several times: That's what we should do -- it's a contagious disease; it should be treated as such. We, at the time, would keep immigrants out of this country if they had contagious diseases. The president was just going to add AIDS to that list of contagious diseases."<sup>46</sup> Again and again, the putative language of objective science and public health policy inscribes an inescapable moral and political judgment placing the very lives of seropositive patients at risk.

Near the end of the amfAR speech, Reagan delineated the actions to be taken by the Administration to protect "healthy Americans." The President announced the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) would add the

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<sup>45</sup> See J. Silberner, "AIDS Blood Test: Qualified Test," *Science News* 128 (10 August 1985), 84.

<sup>46</sup> Landon Parvin interview from Frontline documentary *The Age of AIDS*. See footnote no. 39.

AIDS virus to the list of contagious diseases for which the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) could deny entry to prospective immigrants. Additionally, the President announced mandatory testing for all federal inmates (which was already underway in the military and diplomatic corps) and encouraged the States to institute mandatory testing for those seeking marriage licenses. Particularly in the immigration reform policy and mandatory testing for marriage licenses, the hygienic imperative of maintaining the national body becomes evident. Such proposals were clearly at odds with the activist amfAR audience, and they voiced their disapproval with audible “boos” and cries of “No! No!” Despite the fact that funding for AIDS research exponentially grew from \$5.5 million in 1982 to \$204 million in 1986,<sup>47</sup> the negative reception to the President’s specific proposals became the seminal moment defining the Reagan White House’s public response to the AIDS-crisis. The negative reaction of the audience served as a ready-made sound bite that would make its way into any number of AIDS retrospectives, including the *Frontline* documentary, aired during 2006. In its evaluation of Reagan’s speech, the moderate *New York Times* editorialized the White House as a “torpid spectator” of the crisis and its policy response as unforgivably “flaccid.”<sup>48</sup>

Such criticism, though convincing in retrospect, fails to annunciate the broader aims of the speech that reached beyond the reification of science and the drawing of a rhetorical maginot line around healthy Americans. For all of the

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<sup>47</sup> Engle 77.

<sup>48</sup> “The Reagan AIDS Strategy in Ruins,” *The New York Times*, 11 October 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/11/opinion/the-reagan-aids-strategy-in-ruins.html> (accessed August 15th, 2011).

invective commentary generated by Reagan's specific policy remarks regarding protecting public health, the speech's underlying narrative went unnoticed. After lauding the scientific advances of the first six years of the epidemic, Reagan curiously limited the faith the public should put in science. "Science," the President cautions, "is clearly capable of breathtaking advances, but it's not capable of miracles."<sup>49</sup> At first this tempering of scientific claims would provide occasion to bolster the federal government's social response to HIV/AIDS via education, enhanced public funding for treatment, and de-stigmatizing propaganda. In regard to the latter, Reagan provides a persuasive call for compassion. Values such as "understanding," "compassion," "dignity," and "kindness" are presented as the salutary responses to "panic," "blame," and "ignorance." But as if voicing the reservations of religious conservatives who filled the rhetorical vacuum provided by six years of White House silence, the President paternalistically reminds the audience that just as science is not capable of miracles, "final judgment is up to God."<sup>50</sup> In the wider context of the speech, this divine caution against rendering judgments against fellow citizens is by no means designed to short circuit bigotry, stereotypes, and discrimination. Indeed, it has the adverse effect by not-so-tacitly asserting that God will indeed serve as the final arbiter of the moral dimensions of HIV/AIDS. The President makes this quite clear by speech's end when advocating for education (note, not science) as the only recourse Americans would have for halting the unfolding epidemic.

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<sup>49</sup> Reagan, "Remarks at the American Foundation for AIDS Research Awards Dinner."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

Education, as imagined by the President, constituted more than the dissemination of known facts:

...I hope...that AIDS education or any aspect of sex education will not be value-neutral. A dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London once said, 'The aim of education is the knowledge not of facts, but of values.' Well, that's not too far off. Education is knowing how to adapt, to grow, to understand ourselves and the world around us. And values are how we guide ourselves through the decisions of life. How we behave sexually is one of those decisions.<sup>51</sup>

Regan continues by asserting that morality is part and parcel of self-esteem and mutual respect; diseases promoting behaviors, such as sexual promiscuity, drug use, etc., vanish in society's embrace of a moral foundation for individual and collective existence.

Throughout the speech Reagan deftly trades in a binary logic that hinges on a transcendental signifier deployed to dichotomize the national order. Natural/salubrious behaviors/identities are framed in radical distinction to deleterious agents that threaten to undermine the nation its very transcendent logic. In the amfAR speech, America is defined in terms of its heroic scientists, compassionate volunteers, and innocent babies and moral adults whose health must be safeguarded. But safeguarded against what? The disease? Assured death? God's impending judgment? The implication throughout the speech is that health is linked to life, morality, and moral individuals; illness and death cannot escape a particularly moral etiology. Indeed, illness and death inhabit those who abuse their divinely endowed dignity by abusing controlled substances and engaging in untoward sex. Not only is their behavior deemed antithetical to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

health but also to morality and God's will. Though the President is mere mortal, he presides as a superseding symbol of the nation and one, who in this instance, mobilizes an argument for "values" under the promise of an impending valuation of nation and individuals by God. With an almost syncopated rhythm, Reagan extols the virtues of those who show compassion to PWA without fear and malice. By the same turn, PWA are framed as victims of their own behavior. The distilled message condenses itself into the classic adage, "Love the sinner. Hate the sin." This neo-liberal emphasis on personal responsibility obscures the intimate relationship between behavior and identity, as if manifest acts are somehow wholly separable from identity. Moreover, it is a philosophical equation that, particularly in the case of intravenous drug users, fails to take into consideration the material conditions under which drug trade and use become options for economic viability and psycho-social escapism.

Only once in the amfAR speech is the voice of an AIDS patient figured as anything but a pitiable victim of dubious moral fiber. Reagan concludes the speech by sharing a comment made to him by young man with AIDS. "While I do accept death," the young man piteously conceded, "I think the fight for life is important, and I'm going to fight the disease with every breath I have." Reagan concludes, "Ladies and gentleman, so must we."<sup>52</sup> These concluding remarks would seem aspirational and designed to restore dignity to PWA. However, the comment seems to reinforce the moral schema already promulgated throughout the speech. The young man with AIDS is already consigned to death. He

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

concedes as much himself. There is a cruel and inescapable irony in mobilizing an-already-dead in the fight for life. As has already been demonstrated, the fight for life in the amfAR speech is oriented toward protecting the healthy and enforcing the Judeo-Christian moral schema of the nation. In declaring “so must we,” Reagan signals that the fight for life is not a fight for the already-dead. PWA may be recipients of tolerance and kindness, and surely they benefit from emotional and practical support. Yet, the fight for life as configured here transforms the AIDS patient into a usable subject for the very demonstration of the morality and mutual respect purportedly lacking in those who acquired the disease from a deficit of moral foundation. Here, the already-dead become a usable resource in promulgating a divinely-mandated moral order necessary for a healthy American nation. As of 1987, Progressive era moral hygiene programs were alive and well in America.<sup>53</sup>

#### *AIDS and Providential Freedom*

In no respect did the Reagan presidency represent the high watermark of HIV/AIDS rhetoric mobilized at the highest level of government for the purpose of delineating an explicitly religious understanding of American and America’s mission in an increasingly globalized world. Indeed, a more aggressively religious embrace of HIV/AIDS would come nearly fifteen years after Reagan left office. In the interim, many of the rhetorical patterns established by the Reagan

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<sup>53</sup> Moral (or social) hygiene programs represented the apogee of Progressive era reforms which sought to eliminate venereal diseases, prostitution, and other forms of vice. Such program often indicated preferences for Darwin-inspired eugenics programs. See Christina Simmons, "African Americans and Sexual Victorianism in the Social Hygiene Movement, 1910-40," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 1 (July 1993): 51–75.

White House would serve as common stock for presidential AIDS rhetoric through the Nineties. Reagan's successor in the White House, George H. W. Bush, deployed many of the same strategies of the previous administration, including communicative silence,<sup>54</sup> the promotion of immunological science as equivalent to the technological boon of the space race, and the continued promotion of compassionate treatment for PWA by separating the person from their offending behaviors. In his 1990 address to the National Leadership Council on AIDS, the first President Bush repeatedly confirmed that HIV transmission was the result of "not what you are but by what you do and by what you fail to do."<sup>55</sup> Blame rests with manifest behaviors, not demographics. America was to wage a war on AIDS and would do so through addressing its moral failures and spurring on its scientific heroes. In regard to the former, by the beginning of the 1990's, intravenous drug users accounted for the majority of new HIV-infections, thus intertwining the war on AIDS with the ongoing war on drugs. Bush's war on drugs rhetorically began in late 1989 in a primetime address in which he outlined the Administration's strategy to combat escalating drug use across America's demographic spectrum. Over 70% of new budget dollars was to be allocated to law enforcement rather than prevention and care.<sup>56</sup> The consequence of

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<sup>54</sup> The first speech on HIV/AIDS delivered by the 42<sup>nd</sup> President did not come until the 14<sup>th</sup> month of his presidency, a fact underscored by several protestors who interrupted his March 1990 address to the National Leadership Coalition on AIDS.

<sup>55</sup> George H. W. Bush, "Remarks to the National Leadership Coalition on AIDS," (speech, Crystal Gateway Marriott, Arlington, VA, March 29, 1990), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=18309#axzz1pxzW7zFi> (accessed, September 1, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Bernard Weintraub, "President Offers Strategy for United States on Drug Control," *The New York Times*, 6 September 1989. A1.



rhetorically connecting HIV-infection to undesirable behavior was now more than just a device to engender compassion; it successfully linked seropositivity to criminal behavior.

One would have expected that the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 would have curtailed the usability of the epidemic in defining American over and against the threats of a nuclear-armed communist empire. If anything, the ideological triumphalism of the post-Soviet era, in which open elections, free markets, and permeable international borders were promoted internationally as handmaidens of democracy and capitalism, transfigured the AIDS epidemic into an opportunity for extending its influence in developing nations whose strategic loyalty seemed more accessible than ever. This opportunity, however, did not parlay itself into political rhetoric or policymaking instantaneously. At the end of the Cold War, several decades of promoting American security interests among pro-Western governments through military aid and training decelerated, and little appetite was shown for either a post-Soviet revivification of the Marshall Plan or a general amplification of humanitarian aid to developing nations. By the late 1990's, however, a new and powerful vehicle for extending American influence abroad emerged: transnational pharmaceutical companies equipped with their own scientific miracle. The age of the AIDS cocktail had arrived, and no other development in the history of the epidemic internationalized the disease from an American perspective more than effective AIDS treatment.

By the late 1990's, the introduction of protease inhibitors and other antiretroviral (ARV) therapies for treatment of PWAs had an enormous impact on

the dialectical symmetry between discourses on AIDS and nation. The so-called AIDS cocktail halted the rapid replication of HIV in infected bodies, thus protecting the immune system from viral debilitation. In a matter of weeks, patients taking a sometimes onerous and combinative regimen of protease inhibitors witnessed their viral loads reduced to nearly undetectable levels. Patients with advanced AIDS saw their symptoms rapidly retreat. Some of the most opportunistic infections, which had become the hallmark of AIDS, pneumocystis carinii and Kaposi sarcoma, all but disappeared among AIDS patients who could afford the costly treatment regimen. The phenomena of rapidly restored health was so startling that it was labeled the “lazarus effect,” and in HIV/AIDS historiography the advent of the cocktail is almost uniformly framed as a scientific miracle.<sup>57</sup>

Under the Clinton administration, government funding of HIV/AIDS treatment, prevention, and research significantly increased (94% for Health and Human Service sponsored programs, 260% for Ryan White Care Act programs, and 57% for general AIDS research).<sup>58</sup> Expenditures on foreign AIDS relief reached over one half billion dollars in Clinton’s second term. Nonetheless, the sense that the medical nightmare of AIDS had been brought to an end in America by ARV treatments dampened a sense of alarm among the general public over the unfolding realization that the AIDS epidemic had exploded into a global

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<sup>57</sup> Engle, 246.

<sup>58</sup> The Clinton/Gore Administration, “A Record of Progress on HIV/AIDS,” June 1999, National Archives and Records Administration, <http://clinton2.nara.gov/ONAP/pub/hivacc.pdf> (accessed, September 2, 2011).

pandemic wherein only 5% of PWA in developing countries would have access to life-saving drugs.

In 2003, fifteen years after Reagan left office, AIDS would return as one of the defining issues defining the rhetorical presidency. Two developments would make this so. First, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> fundamentally reordered (if not reawakened) the American public's awareness of international horizons and responsibilities. Creating what Neil Smelser has labeled "cultural trauma,"<sup>59</sup> September 11<sup>th</sup> engendered among many that palpable sense that the American way of life was under attack and its divine purpose potentially undermined. Jarred out of its consumer-driven isolationism, the national climate became hospitable for foreign investments and interventions. Second, Christian evangelicals, whose electoral support ushered George W. Bush into the White House, increasingly rallied behind HIV/AIDS as a pastoral concern and an opportunity to enhance public outreach.

An editorial in *Christianity Today*, "Killing a Pandemic" (caption: The Church May Be Best Equipped to Deal HIV/AIDS a Crippling Blow), proclaimed in 2002 that churches should reorient their missions on practical, compassionate care. Whereas the federal dollars could be spent through organizations such as USAID to subsidize the purchase and distribution of generic ARV drugs to hard-hit populations, churches could work to foster environments to stem the tide of transmission. Compassionate care and proselytization would go hand in hand:

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<sup>59</sup> Neil J. Smelser, "September 11, 2001 as Cultural Trauma," Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka eds., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 276.

In a world desperate for a solution to HIV/AIDS, Christians and their congregations needn't be shy in publicly proclaiming the biblical message that abstinence and fidelity work to save lives. There are legitimate needs for orphan care and for people who are HIV-positive. Christians worldwide are unrivaled in their potential to be model communities, coherently teaching sound sexual ethics to young and old.<sup>60</sup>

In February 2002, Franklin Graham, son of the “pastor to presidents,” Billy Graham, convened the first international Christian conference on HIV/AIDS, a meeting of over 800 evangelical Protestant and Catholic leaders. Conference organizers issued a clarion call to all Christians to participate in the halting of the pandemic in developing countries. A highlight of the conference included an address by Senator Jesse Helms, who like Billy Graham nearly a decade before, proclaimed to have failed in his moral duty by not doing more to help PWA. As a *Foreign Affairs* exposé two years later articulated, Helms’ about face wasn’t so much a reversal of ideological position but rather a mobilization of the now *en vogue* “compassionate conservatism” ushered in under the second Bush administration. In articulating his sincere enthusiasm for the cause, Helms reiterated on multiple occasions the need to protect “innocent victims” from the infection, thus underscoring no small level of Biblically-sanctioned heterosexism of Sodom and Gomorrah panic.<sup>61</sup> In a *Frontline* interview, Bill Clinton unambiguously credits evangelical communities for providing Republicans the political will to embrace HIV/AIDS as a cause, an impetus entirely lacking during

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<sup>60</sup> “Killing a Pandemic,” editorial, *Christianity Today*, 18 November 2002, 40.

<sup>61</sup> As Holly Burkhalter notes, Helms repeatedly draws attention to the epidemiological fact that HIV-transmission was predominately heterosexual in nature. Therefore, the Africanization of HIV surely could not be God-sent punishment. See, “The Politics of AIDS: Engaging Conservative Activists,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 1 (January/February 2004): 10.

his own tenure in the White House: “Then after I left office, the Christian evangelical community essentially embraced the cause of fighting AIDS, and it changed the votes of the Republicans in Congress. They joined with the Democrats, who were already in favor of doing more.”<sup>62</sup>

The role of religious rhetoric in the second Bush administration has generated numerous and timely discussions. As Helen Daley Schroepfer surmises, the debate remains unsettled and opinions sharply divided on whether Bush’s policymaking follows secular or religious reasons and the extent to which religion serves as either the reason or rhetorical cover for those very same policy decisions.<sup>63</sup> Irrespective of the conclusions drawn from this debate, almost all observers concede that the concept of freedom is the moral value most salient to the policymaking aims of the second Bush administration. The singular purpose of the United States as guarantor of global freedom became a leitmotif in Bush’s presidential addresses. In his 2003 State of the Union address, which the administration used to rhetorically pave the way for the preemptive war in Iraq, the President declared, “Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world, (sic) it is God’s gift to humanity.”<sup>64</sup> America may

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<sup>62</sup> Bill Clinton, interview by *Frontline*, web-published transcript, 26 April 2005, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/aids/interviews/clinton.html> (accessed, September 3, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> See Helen Daley Schroepfer, “Pursuing the Enemies of Freedom: Religion in the Persuasive Rhetoric of the Bush Administration,” *Political Theology* 9, no.1 (2008): 27-45.

<sup>64</sup> George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address” (speech, Capitol Building, Washington D.C., 28 January 2003), [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-250\\_162-538336.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-250_162-538336.html) (accessed, September 2, 2011).

not be the progenitor of human freedom, but Bush clarifies that the nation is, indeed, its guarantor:

our calling, as a blessed country, is to make the world better...Once again this nation and our friends are all that stand between a world at peace and a world of chaos and constant alarm. Once again, we are called to defend the safety of our people and the hopes of all mankind. And we accept this responsibility...and we go forward with confidence because this call of history has come to the right country.<sup>65</sup>

The providential trajectory of the country, though riddled with fits and starts, has but one movement: forward toward freedom.

It might seem an overreach of the Academic Left to assert some sort of parallelism in Bush's war on terror and his administration's doubling-down on the global AIDS pandemic. However, the President himself announced the linkage under no uncertain terms in his 2003 State of the Union address. In that address, Bush articulated what would become known as PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which would provide \$15 billion of AIDS-related funding over 5 years, the majority of which would target the epidemic in Africa and the Caribbean. After outlining the basic premises of the plan, Bush declared, "This nation can lead the world in sparing innocent people from a plague of nature."<sup>66</sup> In almost the very same breath in which he articulated the beneficence of American purpose, the President continued, "And this nation is leading the world in confronting and defeating the man-made evil of international

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

terrorism.”<sup>67</sup> In the span of two sentences, America is conceived as the liberator of humankind from both natural and man-made bondage.

To further these policy aims, Bush embarked on a fundamental restructuring of the relationship between religious institutions and the public sphere, most famously providing significant new opportunities for faith-based organizations to receive public dollars for humanitarian services. By 2007, over 25% of PEPFAR’s partners were faith-based organizations.<sup>68</sup> That HIV/AIDS continued to be framed as a moral issue necessitating emphasis on moral education licensed the inclusion of faith-based organizations in the vanguard of international humanitarian assistance. Holly Burkhalter notes, by the time funding for PEPFAR received authorization in late 2003 under the United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and Tuberculosis Act, conservative legislators who had recently taken up the HIV/AIDS cause successfully directed the bulk of federal funding either to programs administered by faith-based groups or initiatives that stressed moral programming in its prevention strategies. Programs that did not stress abstinence or fidelity were routinely categorized as sponsoring feckless condom airlifts.<sup>69</sup> The approach most popular with the Bush administration and its faith-based allies was the Ugandan ABC program; the acronym stands for Abstinence, Be Faithful, Condoms, and there is little doubt that the ordering of the acronym also suggests a discernible policy preference.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Stanley W. Carlson-Thies, “Faith-Based Initiative 2.0: The Bush Faith-Based Community Initiative,” *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2009): 939.

<sup>69</sup> Burkhalter, 12.

Abstinence and fidelity would be the first line of defense against the epidemic despite copious research suggesting that the two single most powerful variables leading to sizable decreased in HIV-transmission in Africa and elsewhere were (and are) the reduction of sexual partners and condom usage. Moreover, the emphasis on proscriptive sexual mores plied by programs such as ABC marginalized hard-hit demographics, particularly sex workers, intravenous drug users, and homosexuals, experiencing the most dramatic increases in infection rates.<sup>70</sup>

Irrespective of the epidemiological wisdom and public health merit of PEPFAR policies, Bush's full embrace of global AIDS provided the administration with a coordinating narrative of American providential aims to compliment the more contested rhetoric framing the global war on terror. On World AIDS Day 2007, the president delivered an address that beautifully condensed the rationale of America's continued vigilance in responding to the AIDS pandemic:

When Americans witness this suffering, they feel a duty to respond. Some are motivated by conscience and a conviction that America should use its great influence to be a force for good. Many others are driven by faith -- by the call to love your neighbor as yourself, even when that neighbor may live on the other side of the world. This spirit of brotherhood and generosity has long defined our country. And over the past six years, we have rallied that spirit in the fight against HIV/AIDS.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Elaine M. Murphy, Margaret E. Greene, Alexandra Mihailovic, and Peter Olupot-Olupot, "Was the "ABC" Approach (Abstinence, Being Faithful, Using Condoms) Responsible for Uganda's Decline in HIV?" *PLoS Medicine* 3, no 9. (2006): e379.

<sup>71</sup> George W. Bush, "AIDS and America: World AIDS Day Address" (speech, Mount Airy, MD, 30 November 2007), <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/11.30.07.html> (accessed September 4th, 2011).



At first it would seem that the President provides a meaningful distinction between Americans motivated by secular and religious reasons. Yet that distinction collapses under the invocation of a transcendent “spirit of brotherhood and generosity” as a hallmark of the American character. The use of “spirit” interjects a transcendent *topos* into the President’s assessment, thus abusing any possibility of an overriding secular morality. In this regard, Bush utilizes the exigencies of the global pandemic much in the same way Pericles, through Thucydides’s interpretation, uses the Peloponnesian War to develop a type of militaristic eros to country. Indeed, any ambiguity regarding this ideological position dissolves by speech’s end wherein the President extols the virtues of those participating in faith-based organizations receiving PEPFAR funding. He characterizes their efforts as follows: “Faith-based groups like these are the *foot soldiers in the armies of compassion*. They are changing behavior by changing hearts -- and they are helping to defeat this epidemic one soul at a time.”<sup>72</sup> This remarkable declamation serves to fully unveil the religious mission inherent in American involvement in the pandemic. Treatment and prevention are, of course important, but they are superseded by the imperative to change hearts and save souls. In the very next paragraph of the speech, Bush describes the Mututa Memorial Center in Zambia, which had been the recipient of PEPFAR assistance. The Center hosted Laura Bush earlier in the year, and, as part of the welcome programming, a choir of HIV-positive orphans who had received treatment at Mututa serenaded the First Lady in song that repeated the refrain, “God, you are

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

really there when I pray, when I cry, when I am ill, you are there."<sup>73</sup> Here, God's presence is felt courtesy of American taxpayer dollars. Here, the religious rationale of America's intensive involvement in the global HIV/AIDS pandemic in the last decade proclaims itself quite openly.

Approximately one year earlier, then Senator Barack Obama gave a stirring address at Saddleback Church. Invited by the church's founder, the evangelical minister Rick Warren, Senator Obama attempted to provide a modest critique of the Bush Administration's insistence on ABC-oriented prevention programs. Obama's analysis of the pandemic strives to stake out autonomy for human nature in regard to sexuality, thus licensing an argument for condom distribution and emphasizing efforts to lobby transnational pharmaceutical companies to manufacture and distribute more affordable generic ARV therapies. Yet his analysis, particularly viewed within the rhetorical context of his speech, evidences the powerful and pervasive wedding of religious reasons, moralism, and the spinning of American mythos within the substrate of HIV/AIDS discourse. Even when mobilizing an argument for more epidemiologically sound approaches to prevention, Obama capitulates to not only religious reasons but to the old arguments that HIV/AIDS should suggest a moral indictment of the American fiber:

Let me say this - I don't think we can deny that there is a moral and spiritual component to prevention - that in too many places all over the world where AIDS is prevalent - including our own country, by the way - the relationship between men and women, between sexuality and spirituality, has broken down, and needs to be repaired....It was striking to see this as I traveled through South Africa and Kenya. Again and again, I

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

heard stories of men and women contracting HIV because sex was no longer part of a sacred covenant, but a mechanical physical act; because men had visited prostitutes and brought the disease home to their wives, or young girls had been subjected to rape and abuse.<sup>74</sup>

These comments represent *mélange* of heterosexism, reification of family, and proscriptive sex. Here and throughout the speech Obama fully participates in the “Africanization” of the disease, and he uses the epidemic as a mirror for moral reflection leading to a relocation of sex within marriage, a relationship imbued with, according to the future president, a sacred purpose. Accordingly, we once again encounter an argument for the moral intervention of religious reasons in the HIV/AIDS advocacy both here and abroad. Obama opened his remarks at Saddleback by circumscribing the power of governments to effectively halt the pandemic. That power resides predominately with people of faith: “The resources of governments may be vast, and the good works of philanthropists may be abundant, but we should never underestimate how powerful the passion of people of faith can be in eradicating this disease.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Barack Obama, “Race Against Time” (World AIDS Day speech, Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, CA, 1 December 2006), <http://www.asksam.com/ebooks/releases.asp?file=Obama-Speeches.ask&dn=World%20AIDS%20Day%20Speech%3a%20Race%20Against%20Time> (accessed, 8 September 2011).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

### *CHAPTER THREE*

#### *QUILTING AN AMERICAN IDOL*

Five years following the first clinical description of what would become HIV/AIDS, the epidemic's attending discourses devolved from an initial haze of public health uncertainty to a myriad of ideologically fraught metaphors and narratives. The rhetoric styled for the American public's consumption rarely failed to trade in absolutes and archetypes. Combatting the Right's vitriol, which traded the demagoguing tropes of guilt and fear, AIDS activists and their allies forged asymmetrical message campaigns constructing PWA as innocent, fearless, and all too often victimized. The disease, apparently, only afflicted angels and demons, heroes and pariahs. Very quickly, like poverty and cancer before and obesity and terrorism after, AIDS became subsumed in the "war" metaphor, thus conscripting those with the illness into a plague of battles – political, psychological, epidemiological, and pharmaceutical – to which they would have every right to conscientiously object.

The complete saturation of the public sphere, both stigmatizing and ameliorative, combined with alarmingly accelerated rates of AIDS-related deaths, prompted some AIDS culture workers and activists to ponder both the need and appropriateness of a public memorial. The stigma attached to HIV/AIDS in the first years of the epidemic manufactured a veritable cloak of silence concerning dying and death. Indeed, Cleve Jones, the conceptual founder of the NAMES Project, notes in his memoirs that the invisibility of death galvanized his AIDS activism. He recollects speaking to a friend in 1985 that too many of his friends

had died behind closed doors and drawn curtains. The Castro had become populated with ghosts without anyone to properly mourn them. “I wished we had a bulldozer, and if we could just level these building, raze the Castro, “ Jones laments in his autobiography, *Stitching a Revolution*, “...if this was just a graveyard with a thousand corpses lying in the sun, then people would look at it and they would understand and if they were human beings they’d have to respond.”<sup>1</sup>

The origin of the Quilt is now a well-known story and has entered the annals of American political folklore. On November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1985 Jones exhorted a crowd that had gathered for the annual Harvey Milk memorial march down Market Street to City Hall to bring to public light the AIDS dead. Jones and his colleagues supplied markers and poster board to those gathered and asked that they write the names of people they knew and loved who had succumbed to AIDS-related illnesses. By the end of the march, several hundred placards had been made, all illuminated by the candle light which had long been part of the Milk vigil. The placards were then taped to the wall of the Federal Building. Descending from the ladders used to scale the building, Jones surveyed the landscape of placards. His description of what follows, albeit a polished *post facto* construction, reads like Biblical prophecy:

Standing in the drizzle, watching as the posters absorbed the rain and fluttered down to the pavement, I said to myself, *It looks like a quilt*. As I said the word *quilt*, I was flooded with the memories of home and family and the warmth of a quilt when it was cold on a winter night...And as I scanned the patchwork, I saw it – as if a Technicolor slide had fallen into

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<sup>1</sup> Cleve Jones, *Stitching A Revolution: the Making of an Activist* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), 105.

place. Where before there had been flaking gray wall, now there was a vivid picture and I could see quite clearly the National Mall, and the dome of the Congress and a quilt spread before it – a vision of incredible clarity.<sup>2</sup>

One year later, Jones, born of Quaker roots, constructed the inaugural panel of what would become the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.

Though Jones's inspiration for the Quilt had multiple references, perhaps none figured more prominently than the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which had been dedicated on the Washington Mall but three years before Jones's epiphany on Market Street. Maya Ying Lin, then twenty-one, conceived the project during a Yale University senior seminar on funerary architecture. Her design, one of nearly 1,500 submissions to a national competition, was one of absolute simplicity: the etching of the names of the 58,261 war dead into V-shaped granite slabs piercing an all-too vulnerable earth. When asked about the memorial's focus on the visual rendering of individual names, Lin offers that she was guided by a fundamental set of questions. "How are all of these people going to overcome the pain of losing something? How do you really overcome death?"<sup>3</sup> For Lin, the significance of the names resides in the visible commemoration of each soldier as a viable individual lost in the dislocating haze of national trauma. This emphasis on particularization in the context of a conflict-ridden and unresolved national trauma endowed the Memorial with a powerfully emotive, if not cathartic, impact that continues to the present day. As visitors to the Memorial stream by the granite panels, scanning them for the names of fallen

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Peter Trauber, "Monument Maker," *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 February 1991, 54.

friends and family, their faces are reflected in the mirror-like quality of the polished gabbro. A nexus is created between the named dead and the public through the superimposition of a known and visible face upon named inscriptions. The very power of this artistic rendering of particularization ultimately allows for a more intimate connection between those who perished in national sacrifice and a general public whose attitudes concerning the politics of the Vietnam War would otherwise obscure the tangible losses meted by the conflict. In this nexus resides the capacity for at least publically rehabilitating the memory of the dead whose losses had long been obscured by the divisive nature of a war that had not been won. A public geography for expressing grief and mourning real and consequential losses provided, for many, an opportunity for long forestalled healing.

Jones himself acknowledges the influence of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in his own internal debates concerning whether an AIDS memorial would prove too morbid to be helpful to both a community terrorized by illness and a country unable to productively come to terms with the epidemic outside of overdetermined narratives of innocence or guilt. Jones recalls an initial hesitation in his memoir, in which he describes the impulse to memorialize as perhaps déclassé and in violation of his religious sensibilities:

Was a memorial morbid? Perhaps it was. And yet there is also a healing element to memorials. I thought of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall. I did not expect to be moved by it. I was influenced by the Quakers, who are suspicious of war memorials, which they believe glorify war rather than speak to the horrors of it. But I was overwhelmed by the simplicity of it, of that black mirrorlike wall and the power it had to draw people

from all across America to find a beloved's name and touch it and see their face reflected in the polished marble and leave mementos.<sup>4</sup>

At its heart, the AIDS Memorial Quilt operates as a double memorialization, one which names and commemorates private losses in the public sphere while, as Rein Rand argues, renegotiating AIDS identities with a broader public that had long been suspicious of or openly hostile to PWA.<sup>5</sup> The Quilt has been widely applauded for its success in providing very particular yet public space for individual grief while transforming, if not universalizing, the national narrative of the disease from one which condemned demonized minorities to one in which all Americans shared a stake in the epidemic. Peter Hawkins provides a veritable prototype of this positive assessment. He affirms, "It was also a brilliant strategy for bringing AIDS not only to public attention but into the mainstream of American myth, for turning what was perceived to be a 'gay disease' into a shared national tragedy."<sup>6</sup> In regard to permutations of national myth structuring the Quilt's conception and physical presentation, Lawrence Howe argues that the Quilt is "a broadly democratic undertaking" that embodies a patchwork of individual expressions coalescing around a unifying concept.<sup>7</sup> The Quilt is, in other words, a manifestation of *e pluribus unum*. Such praising assessments certainly speak to the venerable regard with which the public, the media, and

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, 108.

<sup>5</sup> Erin J. Rand, "Repeated Remembrance: Commemorating the AIDS Quilt, and Resuscitating the Mourned Subject," in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007): 656-57.

<sup>6</sup> Peter S. Hawkins, "The Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (summer 1993): 757.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Howe, "The AIDS Quilt and Its Traditions," *College Literature* 24, no. 2 (June 1997): 111.



many critics hold the Quilt; it remains a standard bearer for one of the few effective national interventions in the signifying practices of the AIDS epidemic. Yet for all of the halcyon praise, the Quilt too engenders a disquieting ambivalence. The criticisms that have been leveled against the Quilt, such as accusations that it too easily expiates guilt or dabbles too greatly in kitschy sentimentality, are well documented. What I would like to suggest in this chapter is that the very achievement of expiation and comforting sentiment derives from a sanctified vision of America and acceptable models of multicultural citizenship socialized into the public's national imaginary irrespective of the many disconcerting and violence-addled stories of what *really happened*. The deployment of convenient fictions in public memorials, such as the Project NAMES AIDS Memorial Quilt predictably engenders ambivalence, at least for some, which forestalls the work of mourning.

*A Democratic Idol of Cross Stitch and Grommets*

Critics who have praised the efficacy of the Quilt in facilitating private grief and transforming public attitudes about HIV/AIDS in America often point to this notion of the Quilt's inherently democratic nature. The individual panels, when grommited together, create a cacophony of voices united in purpose. This notion of unity, or even the stitching together of a community of people with a common cause grief, is framed as a counterpart to the Quilt's inherent heteroglossia. Howe cites the Quilt as an example of Bhaktian dialogism in which a social text manifests a layered "polyvocal discourse" that aspires to both Bhaktin's and the gay community's vested interest in *carnivale* as a mode of

individual expression and community praxis.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Hawkins likens the Quilt to a “subversive text” that “hybridizes traditional discourses and modes of representation.”<sup>9</sup> The subversive nature of carnivale features prominently in Hawkins’s assessment of the liberating quality of the Quilt’s assemblage of restyled *memento mori*. Its very anarchy is a supreme expression of freedom, and Hawkins asserts that “...there is no large principle of organization at work; no hierarchy, no subordination, or ranking; no ‘metanarrative’ that tells a single story or even settles on a particular tone. The Quilt is the ultimate collage, one that is constantly being reformed, reinvented. Its center is wherever you find it...”<sup>10</sup> Inherent in these somewhat standard interpretations of the Quilt is a positive valuation of the ever- transforming, ever-growing, ever-signifying nature of the memorial. The memorial accommodates a future of inevitable AIDS-deaths by allowing for new panels to be included in the collection. The Quilt, though now stored in residence in Atlanta, travels and avails itself to new public configurations and displays. With every new public display, the Quilt signs anew by connecting a reinterpreted past to an ever-changing present moment. In this view, the Quilt has an *iconic* function inasmuch as it triggers memory rather than codifying a stable linkage between memory and the object.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In his seminal essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin defines dialogism as “the intense interanimation and struggle between one’s own and another world.” See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (University of Texas Press Slavic Series), ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 354.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>10</sup> Hawkins, 764.

<sup>11</sup> My understanding of the dynamics of both iconic and idolatrous modes of representation are informed by Oren Baruch Stier’s influential work, *Committed to*

Such assessments, however, are as hopeful as they are true. In forging a renegotiated relationship between established AIDS identities and a broader public whose attitudes toward the disease were marked by fear, disdain, and apprehension, the Quilt trades heavily in various conceptions of Americana. Indeed, the Quilt, not so unlike the rhetorical campaigns assessed in Chapter Two, works to forge, if not a metanarrative, an American *idol*. To label the Quilt an idol is not to heap abuse upon it from a confessional perspective but rather to suggest that the Quilt's representational practices, far from being an assertion of democratic freedom and artistic bricolage, succumb to an array of ideological manipulations which should provide every reason to assess cautiously the proposed salutary benefits of the memorial. One of the principle critiques of memorials is the obviation of internal memory; once a memorial has been established, the external object assumes the burden of memory and dispossesses the voyeur, experiencer, and mourner of his or her own native, interpretive agency. The memorial becomes a fetish. Pierre Nora warns, "The less memory is experienced from the inside, the more it exists through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs."<sup>12</sup> The Quilt's very substance derives from translating personal objects and images of the deceased to a public space. This very act of private to

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*Memory: Cultural Meditations on the Holocaust* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003). Stier writes that in the context of memorials, icons and idols function very differently in terms of their ethicality and their structuring of memory. He explains, "Icons thus call attention to the gap between then and now, there and here, to the necessary vicariousness of their (re)presentational strategies. Idols often erase that distinction, offering too much closure. When the icon's memorial trajectory is turned in a different direction – inward or toward some contemporary, immediate form of redemption – idolatry rears its ugly head. Icons are dynamic; idols are static. A religious icon is a medium for worship; an idol is itself the object of worship" (32).

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 13.

public translation invariably leads to an accretion of unintended meaning.<sup>13</sup> The objects used to construct a quilt panel (such as photographs, pages from journals, trinkets, favorite posters, articles of clothing, etc), though in service to memorialize a particular individual, come to mean something quite different when the constructed panel is grommeted together with others and subsequently displayed in public. A shirt of a lost beloved cannot resist an eidetic transformation when repurposed in the construction of a memorial panel, translated to another environment, and displayed publically. The preservation of these artifacts in an institutionalized setting, such as the Washington Mall, serves to forge a specific identity concomitant with the time and space of their display. This grafting of particular memories of individuals, no longer present, to specific objects operating in space and time opens these very memories to a host of unintended and thoroughly sedimented meanings. Like objects placed in a museum, the AIDS Quilt panels become susceptible to their own version of a “museum effect,” in which meaning becomes legislated by the institutional and rhetorical contexts which exceed even the most well-meaning subject-object relationships.

*Between Sanctification and Sanitization*

As with all public memorials, the Quilt produced affine relationships between Americanness, homosexuality, and AIDS through the reification of shared values. As Erin Rand notes, “the presumption of shared values and

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<sup>13</sup> The term “translation” is deployed purposefully here to suggest the movement of sacred objects from one location to the next, much like the frequent travels of holy relics in Medieval Europe. The connotation of the term will be developed later in the chapter.

identity of the 'nation' is rhetorically built, in part, through the construction and consumption of public memorials."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, national memorials, using available reservoirs of shared values that define the nation, can alleviate anxieties and conflict in times of turbulence. As surveyed in previous chapters, the rhetorical structuring of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s was driven by religiously-inflected jeremiads emphasizing the lascivious, ungodly, and unnatural body and behaviour of the homosexual male. Even putatively secular responses to the unfolding epidemic could only thinly veil the opprobrium heaped upon ostentatious and dangerous gay sex. The resuscitation of seropositive gay men and homosexuals in general as mournable subjects required a direct offensive against the very value assertions used to render them ungrievable. Seropositive gay men lacked the childlike innocence of Ryan White, whose public persona Daniel Harris has likened to a Tiny Tim performance of Victoriana,<sup>15</sup> or the virulent heterosexuality of Magic Johnson, who George H. W. Bush deemed a hero for anyone who loves sports following Johnson's public acknowledgement of his seropositive status.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, the Quilt trades heavily in tropes of Americana to effect a veritable rehabilitation of identity positions which had been symbolically and ideologically absented from the rhetorical fabric of America.

This process of national rehabilitation, of course, cannot occur on its own; it cannot be self-fashioned by individuals. As a public memorial constructed and consumed within the work of mourning, the Quilt works by tapping into national

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<sup>14</sup> Erin Rand, 657.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 224.

<sup>16</sup> Michael A. Messner, *Masculinities, Gender Relations, and Sport: Masculinities, Gender Relations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications USA, 2000), 54.

discourses that are intelligible to national memory. In reusing official histories of public memory, the Quilt tackles a present and pressing concern of ever-escalating AIDS casualties by rediscovering them in terms consistent with the sanctioned myths of the nation. As Rand correctly observes, the Quilt, its imagined community, and conceptions of nation operate reciprocally. Rand observes, "...while the Quilt clearly does important work for the nation – by providing a site for ritualized mourning and absolution – it also directly affects the living by producing a subject position through which certain people are able to be socially recognized and to act."<sup>17</sup> In the execution of both functions, the Quilt authorizes the work of mourning for both nation and individuals. The work of mourning performed here, I contend, comes at a tremendous cost, which can best be illuminated through an explication of the few strident critiques of the Quilt voiced since its conception.

In *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, Daniel Harris articulates the most famous, sustained, and excoriating critique of the Quilt. In one of the volume's essay, "The Kitschification of AIDS," Harris outlines the ideological complexity of the disease in terms somewhat reduced as compared to Treichler, for example. The crux of his argument is that radical ideological regimes have so ravaged already marginalized groups directly impacted by AIDS as to limit the gamut of acceptable, effective rhetorical responses. The hyper-sexed homosexual contravenes nature. The IV-drug user serves as the crystalized poor of the inner-city racial poor. Prostitutes corrode the sacred covenant of marriage. Only the

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<sup>17</sup> Rand, 658.

epidemiological albatross, the rare haemophiliac victimized by a transfusion of dirty blood operate in the social landscape exulted in light. The political repercussions of AIDS, argues Harris, create “an urgent need to render its victims innocent.”<sup>18</sup> Rather than creating a wholly new iconography for the disease, the AIDS culture industry, aided by activists and Madison Avenue advertisers alike, has tapped into the deep reservoirs of American folk piety to fashion a symmetrically oppositional tableau of innocence. For Harris, the Quilt represents the most problematically stylized of AIDS artifacts, a monument he might characterize as one of excruciatingly dangerous and bland palatability.

Many defenders of the Quilt laud how the symbolism of the quilting pattern achieves a harmonious, stable *mélange* achieved through a cultural cross-stitching pattern that unifies gender, class, and racial opposites. This method of neutralization did not occur by accident. Speaking reflectively in 1991, Cleve Jones offered that the idea of a homey monument was the most effective way he could think of to deflect attention from the near prurient examination and demonization of homoerotic desire and sex. Jones explained, “We picked a feminine art to try and get people to look beyond this aggressive male sexuality component.”<sup>19</sup> Deemphasized sexuality, accordingly, created the possibility for a new form of AIDS-related visual literacy, one that could forgo the tropes of leather, needles, bathhouses, unprotected sex, and orgies. By downplaying the visual symbols of pariah cultures, memorialization at last achieves a diversified

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel Harris, 224.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Marita Sturken, “Conversations with the Dead: Bearing Witness in the AIDS Memorial Quilt,” *Socialist Review* 92 (April-June 1992): 77.

community of mourners. As Suzi and David Mendell note in the Quilt documentary *Common Threads*, the very nature of a familiar, safe, and historically rich crafting medium such as quilting allowed their middle-America sensibilities to interface with the purportedly decadent subcultures of inner city America.<sup>20</sup> Whereas Lawrence Howe and other Quilt defenders see sanitization as justified in the possibility of community sanctification, Steve Abbot suggests that the absencing of sexuality from the maintenance of memorialized identity should be cause for concern. He contends that “one reason the Quilt was so readily embraced by the media is because it can also be read as a memorial to a *dying subculture*.”<sup>21</sup> Abbott then satirizes in the most scathing terms an exemplification of the public’s impulse to embrace the Quilt:

We didn’t like you fags and junkies when you were wild, sexy, kinky, and having fun. We didn’t like you when you were angry marching and demanding rights. But now that you’re dying and have joined “nicely” like a “family sewing circle,” we will accept you.<sup>22</sup>

Abbot’s assessment ultimately aligns with Harris, who characterizes the Quilt’s historical procedure as one resurrecting a “prelapsarian America” in which “AIDS is stripped of its stigma as the scourge of depraved homosexuals.”<sup>23</sup>

Harris’s pension for snark often overwhelms what is perhaps the most significant and astute part of his analysis. He repeatedly invokes the apparent lure

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<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Lawrence Howe interprets the very same vignette from *Common Threads* as celebratory example of the Quilt’s social and cultural cleaving capacity (see Howe, 115).

<sup>21</sup> Steve Abbot, "Meaning Adrift: The NAMES Project Quilt Suggests a Patchwork of Problems and Possibilities," *San Francisco Sentinel* 16, no. 2 (1988): 21, 24. Emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Harris, 227.



of the aforementioned “prelapsarian America,” which he goes on to describe as a “bucolic community,” a “faux antique,” and a “community of good-natured rustics of unspoiled simplicity.”<sup>24</sup> He connects all of these characterizations to nostalgia for a long lost American wilderness. Indeed, so much of the explanatory rhetoric surrounding the Quilt speaks to a certain and quiet hominess in which the spirit of the AIDS-dead are cleansed from the patently stigmatizing and un-American rhetoric of marginalization. Elizabeth Taylor’s published dedication in *The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project* explicitly places the Quilt within an American tradition of noble and courageous perseverance. In keeping with the tropological schema of the presidential rhetoric examined in the previous chapter, she notes, “As Americans, we have always risen to meet the most difficult of challenges. And in the historic tradition of compassion and caring, hard work and commitment, and perseverance, we will continue to rise and meet the challenge.”<sup>25</sup> In the very next breath, she places the act of memorialization with this noble American project, in which the work of the Quilt is done in service to keep the spirits of the dead alive. This curatorship of memory is not without a disciplining interdiction. Amidst the fun, carnivalesque, and campy panels that create the massive landscape of the Quilt, an overhanging ideology structures their construction and presentation. Jones explains the interior logic of the Quilt’s affective rhetoric and politics: “We want to create something that is beautiful. The Quilt touches something in people that is pure and good – this how the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, “Introduction,” in Cindy Ruskin, *The Quilt: Stories from the NAMES Project* (New York: Pocket Books, 1988), 7.

country should respond to the AIDS epidemic.”<sup>26</sup> The Quilt serves as an argument to halt the political movement seeking to further marginalize those most vulnerable and indelibly impacted by the disease. But the project’s rhetorical procedures affecting this intervention are more than a bucolic appeal to the salubrious aspects of human nature. They represent a rather dramatic rescripting of the AIDS dead within a broader topos in which American history is itself rendered beautiful and pure.

The default image of the Quilt remains its episodic display on the National Mall in Washington D.C. between 1987 and 1996. Displaying the Quilt among the myriad of famous memorials on the Mall was quite intentional. As Hawkins suggests, the visual and symbolic association between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) and the Quilt effects a symbolic linkage in which the death of gay men can be interpreted, like the tragic deaths of 58,272 soldiers during the Vietnam War, as a noble blood price paid on behalf of the nation.<sup>27</sup> The sanctification of the AIDS-dead is achieved by the Quilt through the transformation of the memorial into a spiritual artifact that becomes publically recognized as such in no small part through the organized rituals attending the Quilt’s display. Each Quilt’s panels must cohere to a standard dimension of an individual gravesite. Much like the United States Flag Code, a standard protocol for folding, displaying, and storing the panels is strictly observed. Volunteers who unfold and position the panels for public display typically wear white. Though white originally signified the white uniforms of the thousands of health care

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<sup>26</sup> Ruskin, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Hawkins, 760.

workers who plied care and mercy in hospital AIDS wards across America, the color has come to signify the sacrality of the vigil and the purity of the mourned. And much like other memorials, such as the VVM or the Western Wall, visitors leave personal mementos, written prayers, and other funerary offerings on or near individual panels. Accordingly, Hawkins has declared the piety surrounding the Quilt (and the VVM) as the “most vital examples of popular civil religion we have.”<sup>28</sup> In an extraordinary if peculiar essay published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Kimberly Rae Connor elaborates on Hawkins’s claim. She suggests the Quilt operates within the purview of sacred geography, enacting the “transformation of profane space into sacred space.”<sup>29</sup> This occurs, according to Connor, through the Quilt’s ability to establish a “symbolically embodied” geography common not only to all touched by AIDS but to all Americans. The necessity of this common geography, Connor argues, is drawn from the averse metaphorizing famously cited by Sontag. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag describes the banishment of the sick to a “kingdom of the ill,” a place which resists admission of the healthy due to the “lurid metaphors by which it has been landscaped.” For Connor, the Quilt enacts a transformation of the kingdom of the ill into one of the living; moreover, it abolishes the closet and the intimate location of the diseased among the dispossessed. The public nesting of the Quilt on the National Mall in Washington, a site bordered by all the symbols of governmental power, suggests that the names commemorated by the Quilt have at

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 762.

<sup>29</sup> Kimberly Rae Connor, “‘A Common Geography of the Mind’: Creating Sacred Space in the Autobiographical Writings of Paul Monette and the NAMES Project,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no.1 (March 2000): 50.

last found sanction in America's political culture. The hazy contours of the Quilt's spiritual vernacular and its attending rituals enact a universalizing move in which AIDS trauma becomes imbued with a readability. The terror, loss, intractable pain, joy, desire, and deaths of PWA are all hypostasized in such a way that, to allude to Ross Chambers' important work on the rhetoric of haunting, they become orphaned memories.<sup>30</sup> Such memories are symbolically transformed into something pure, good, and eminently digestible, thus enabling collective amnesia that marginalizes contact with intimacy of lived experience and a more authentic phenomenal history.

#### *Quilting a Negotiated Settlement*

The achievement of a common memory of AIDS enshrined within the threads of the memorial Quilt and the sacralised space of the National Mall represents a great achievement to observers such as Hawkins, Howe, and Connor. No question is raised, however, whether the conflation of memory and the resulting reconfiguration of a grievable AIDS identity operates more at the behest of a national prerogative to dispense with divisive and increasingly unproductive conflict than creating the political foundation for mourning performed on its own terms. The uneasiness the Quilt's establishment of national sanctuary for reflecting on AIDS is perhaps best summed up by Michael Musto in a 1988 *Village Voice* column. Musto famously suggested that the Quilt should come attached with a warning label that reads, "Don't feel that by crying over this,

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<sup>30</sup> Chambers, 200-01 and 209-10.

you've really done something for AIDS."<sup>31</sup> Though Hawkins dismisses Musto and other detractors (such as Abbot, cited earlier) as senselessly advocating for only masculine militancy and, thus, succumbing to a peculiar sense of threat activated by the feminine associations of quilting traditions, Musto's somewhat caustic proviso suggests an uneasiness with universalizing grief through a set of civil religious procedures. Hawkins explicitly states – and celebrates – this universalization. He quite triumphantly, concludes, “the Quilt redescribes the entire nation in terms of the epidemic – it says, America had AIDS. Here sorrow would knit together the social fabric and personal loss to become the common bond of citizenship: we're all in this together.”<sup>32</sup> Beyond the immediate consequences of this program of common national identification with the tragedy of AIDS (the sanitization, the glossing over of the vexed politics, etc), it is immeasurably difficult to read such an assessment without reference to September 11<sup>th</sup>. To what extent did the universalization of the sorrow, the universalization of injury and grief, stemming from the events in Manhattan, Washington D.C., and western Pennsylvania provide a national sentiment legitimating a now decade-long and seemingly limitless war on terror? My reading of the Quilt is that it enacts a set of civil religious procedures to not universalize grief and sorrow to the nation but rather foreclose the possibility of deep recognition of shared vulnerability and sorrow. If we accept the premise that an important guarantee of liberal politics in the past two centuries has been a progressive effort to confer safety upon its citizens, we can then see the Quilt as a type of shield to render its

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<sup>31</sup> Musto, 46.

<sup>32</sup> Hawkins, 777.

own citizens invulnerable to the nation's own taste for violence, both ideological and physical. As Judith Butler has suggested, the rush to war after the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> represents a reactive desire to paper over loss and grief and transfer vulnerability (i.e., thinly veiled revenge) to another.<sup>33</sup>

The comparison here is not needlessly hyperbolic. No one will argue with the fact that the very work of the Quilt created a national climate more conducive to tolerance and acceptance of AIDS identities and, to a certain extent, homosexuality writ large. Tolerance, however, is neither unconditional nor free from oppressively normative effects. Erin Rand, in her brilliant analysis of the Quilt and the creation of "mourned subjects," illuminates the uneasy and negotiated status of the Quilt's rhetorical work:

To put this differently, the rhetorical form of activism enacted by the Quilt serves to stitch together the conflicting national sentiments that are wrought by AIDS. That is, the Quilt makes possible a suturing of wounds that the AIDS crisis inflicts on the identity of the American Nation: it allows the mourning and grief for those named by the Quilt panels to cover over the underlying homophobia and neglect that sustained the severity of the epidemic in the early years.<sup>34</sup>

The very sanitization procedurally built into the Quilt's production represents the terms upon which homosexuality, now cleansed of its supposed death driven activities and pugnacious militancy, can be stitched into the national fabric. In agreeing with Rand's assessment of this troubling trade off, I would add that this negotiated settlement becomes all the more unimpeachable because of its appeal

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<sup>33</sup> Judith Butler, "Peace is a Resistance to the Terrible Satisfaction of War," interview by Jill Stauffer, in *The Believer* (May 2003), [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200305/?read=interview\\_butler](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200305/?read=interview_butler) (accessed, September 28, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Rand, 246.

to transcendence. This transcendence is labelled “American,” and only vaguely conceals a secularized Protestantism which uses the institutions of state to promulgate its moral standards. Accordingly, the Quilt is an artefact of affective politics that oppressively structures the terms of the new affective relationships it licenses. For some, such as Andrew Sullivan who I cited in the Introduction as a harbinger of post-AIDS discourse, the experience of AIDS represents an almost spiritual conversion from stigmatization to integration, an experience too powerful to forsake:

AIDS, then, was an integrator. If the virus separated, death united. But there was a twist to this tale. As the straight world found itself at a moment of awkward reconciliation, the gay world discovered something else entirely. At a time when the integration of homosexuals into heterosexual life had never been so necessary or so profound, the experience of AIDS as a homosexual experience created bonds and loyalties and solidarities that homosexuals had never experienced before. As it forced gay men out into the world, it also intensified the bonds among them...<sup>35</sup>

The Quilt then becomes a somewhat static emblem of this transformation.

National wounds opened up by the epidemic heal. We all wear red ribbons once a year. Gays redirect their militancy toward laying claim to the conventions of heterosexual life such as gay marriage and adoption rights. AIDS Africanizes and becomes a scourge of heterosexuals from an ever remote dark continent, now a recipient of American largess. The need for displays of the Quilt on the National Mall dissipates (the panels have not been collectively displayed in public since 1996), and the panels, now folded, reside storage in Atlanta, as if a mourning quilt

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<sup>35</sup> Andrew Sullivan, “When Plague Ends: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic,” *The New York Times Magazine*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/11/10/magazine/when-plagues-end.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (accessed August 30, 2011).

stored in a Shaker trunk only to be rediscovered on an episode of *Antiques Roadshow*.<sup>36</sup>

### *Mourning Pleasure Lost*

What then are the psychological dynamics of sanitization performed by the Quilt? What does it mean when demonized subjects, so often depicted as dubious citizens resurrecting Sodom and Gomorrah in major American cities, become the site of collective mourning licensed by the radical reordering of the memory of the deceased? Sartre long ago argued that saints and thieves are philosophically bound together by their affinity for ceaseless desire. Yet for the AIDS-dead, their constructed sainthood consists of a censored hagiography in which all the details of lives thick with desire are sequestered in the confessional. Despite the ebullient feelings of coziness and safety the Quilt engenders, it represents a symbolic graveyard of tens upon thousands AIDS-dead, the vast majority of whom were gay. The celebratory embrace of the Quilt by the public, in turn, does not represent a social embrace of lives of manifest desire but rather celebrates their very disappearance (or, as Crimp suggests, it makes such a celebration more socially “decorous”).<sup>37</sup> The ambivalence with which some, including Crimp, regard the Quilt is indicative of the fact that the Quilt, with all of its attending civil religious ritual, participates in a long-standing American religious tradition of idolizing its vanquished others to elide shame from its ceaseless process of self-narration. The AIDS-dead join an illustrious list of

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<sup>36</sup> Authorial hyperbole aside, a small sample of Quilt panels tour America and are exhibited at churches, HIV/AIDS treatment/counseling facilities, schools, etc.

<sup>37</sup> Crimp, 201.



dubious assimilation success stories, including the vanquished indigenous now consigned to reservations and New Age musings, enslaved and lynched African Americans upon whose loss we now celebrate through Negro spirituals, the Blues, and speeches on the National Mall in Washington, Japanese Americans, once interred in the desert Southwest, now celebrated for imparting their Buddhism into the pluralism of the “new religious America,” and the Vietnam war dead, whose blood sacrifice sanctified on the National Mall. The idolatrous inclusion of the aforementioned in the canon of American multiculturalism obviates serious reflection on the pernicious ideologies that authorized their doom – of Americans whose memory are palatably reconstructed as to align with and actively produce the American Creed.

As a now static archive of memory rendered inflexible by its ideology and public persona, one rightly wonders about the Quilt’s efficacy in the important work of mourning. That the Quilt codifies a certain memory of the AIDS-dead with its established rituals and thematic prescriptions is indicative of its idolatrous function. The Quilt, as an idol, organizes memory in inflexible ways figures it as a problematic memorial enacted in the service of mourning. Indeed, the ideological constraints of the Quilt, particularly their tendency to reinforce quaint notions of American folk piety and civil religious ritual, may forestall the work of mourning and authorize the perpetual maintenance of melancholia.

Mourning has long been the topic of inquiry, and, as Catherine Guisan notes, it has become an increasingly prominent topic in political debate.<sup>38</sup> Freud remains the point of departure for all discussions of mourning. His *Mourning and Melancholia* articulates mourning in processual terms. The work of mourning consists of the relinquishment of a lost object, thus allowing the libido to form new attachments. Melancholia occurs when the emotional attachment persists so aggressively as to abnegate the libido's function, thus forcing it to withdraw into the ego and creating a strong identification between the ego and the lost object. Self-identification and consciousness become indelibly bound up in the object that is no more. The resulting psychic impact can be one of trauma and self-loathing: As Freud describes, "If the love-object, which cannot be given up, takes refuge in narcissistic self-identification, while the object itself is abandoned, then hate is expanded upon this new substitute-object, railing at it, depreciating it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic gratification from its suffering."<sup>39</sup> Presumably, the Quilt operates as a symbolic conveyance facilitating the manumission of the lost love-object. It names the object and publically acknowledges it as respectable subject to be mourned. By virtue of the Quilt's construction of the love-object on terms palatable to the national culture, a more primal, psychic motility perhaps is rendered beyond the pale of mourning.

In his influential essay, "Mourning and Militancy," Crimp suggests that the memorialization process for PWA, of which the NAMES Project AIDS

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<sup>38</sup> Catherine Guisan, "Of September 11, Mourning and Cosmopolitan Politics," *Constellations* 16, no. 4 (2009): 564.

<sup>39</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," (1917) *Standard Edition* 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 251.

Memorial Quilt serves as a national anchor, is rightly the site of ambivalence for it fails to address the fullness of loss meted by the AIDS epidemic. The staggering loss of so many AIDS-dead provoked, particularly in the gay community, a highly polarized debate concerning the appropriate course of community action which pits the need to publically grieve against the need to publically fight. Crimp quotes Larry Kramer, who, in his typically antagonist style, labels the culture of mourning as little more than feckless sentimentality. In *Report from the Holocaust* Kramer observes with incredulity,

I look at faces at countless memorial services and cannot comprehend why the connection isn't made between these deaths and going out to fight so that more of these deaths, including possibly one's own, can be staved off. Huge numbers regularly show up in cities for Candlelight Marches, all duly recorded for the television cameras. Where are these same numbers when it comes to joining political organizations...or plugging in to the incipient civil disobedience movement represented in ACT UP?<sup>40</sup>

As Crimp rightly notes, memorialization even in its publically ritualized forms performs its own political work, though perhaps in ways too quietistic for more militant forms of political agency. Intriguingly, Crimp argues that the very violence done to the AIDS-dead within certain transactions of the mourning process (that is, the enforced masking of AIDS and homosexuality within the context of mourning rituals) is the origin and cause of militancy itself. Crimp recounts Simon Watney's anecdote about a funeral service in which a dear friend Bruno's eulogy contained no mention of AIDS and provided no ritual space for mourning him outside of explicitly British and masculine expectations of a stiff

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<sup>40</sup> Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 264-65.

upper lip.<sup>41</sup> This compulsion for social bleaching constructs grievable losses so distanced from the identities of the dead as to transform funerals into parades of anonymous specters. As Crimp notes, this effected violence is the root source of activism: “For many of us, mourning *becomes* militancy.”<sup>42</sup>

Among the most brilliantly realized passages in Crimp’s essay is the recognition that the tension between mourning and militancy, so often pitted as a fiercely ambivalent contest between sentimental resignation and therapeutic agency, is secondary to an even more profound ambivalence focused on the nature of loss itself. The focus of AIDS mourning, in its conception, *en media res* performance, and critical assessment, has been on the irreducible reality of death and its attending absences (of presence, friendship, love, future, etc). Crimp suggests there is something more, something particularly primal in these memorialized losses. Freud defines mourning as not only precipitated by the loss of a loved one but by “the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”<sup>43</sup> To this list Crimp adds the ideal of sexual pleasure, even in its most perverse forms. The post-Stonewall era saw an increasingly dismantled closet in which gay subjectivities could be formed and performed in the public sphere; equally important, it licensed a broad landscape of sexual pleasure. The age of AIDS engendered discourses and attending policies that once again pathologized homosexuals and their sex. Crimp

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<sup>41</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 136.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>43</sup> Freud, 153.

speaks forcefully about the need to recognize the loss of this “ideal.” He provocatively suggests,

For those who have obeyed civilization’s law of compulsory genital heterosexuality, the options we’ve lost might seem abstract enough. Not widely acknowledged until the advent of the AIDS crisis, our sex lives are now publically scrutinized with fascination and envy, only partially masked by feigned incredulity... To say that we miss uninhibited and unprotected sex as we miss our lovers and friends will hardly solicit solidarity, even tolerance. But tolerance is, as Pier Paolo Pasolini said, ‘always and purely nominal,’ merely ‘a more refined form of condemnation.’ AIDS has further proved his point. Out pleasures were never tolerated anyway. We took them. And now we must mourn them too.<sup>44</sup>

The scrutinizing gaze directed toward the pains and pleasures of gays manifests itself in no small measure of public moralizing which further renders the loss inaccessible as an object of reflection, as a love-object lost. The Quilt and its attending performances, in this context, becomes a national salvation ritual in which the country’s moral fortitude is revitalized at the expense of “offending” pleasures.

Such moral opprobrium, particularly in its religiously invective forms, has been detailed elsewhere in *Ambivalent Blood*, but it bears mentioning that the attending impact of such rhetoric compounds itself when issued in secular terms or as a point of community self-critique. Jonathan Engle’s widely regarded history of AIDS, *The Epidemic*, begins with a detailed exposé of the burgeoning culture of promiscuous and anonymous sexy in the gay community. After detailing the sex on presumably neutral terms, Engle goes on to observe that “gays left themselves open to such vitriol, at first through sexual excesses, and later through

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<sup>44</sup> Crimp, 140.

impolitic protestations. Many people who harboured vague homophobic feelings might have expressed some sympathy for the beleaguered community, had they not discovered the extremes of some gay sexual activity.”<sup>45</sup> In this “objective” assessment, one can readily see Crimp’s point that gay pleasures were never tolerated; Engle evidences the searing drips of moral judgment which necessitated the sanitization plied by the Quilt. Randy Shilts’s *And the Band Played On* has received thoroughgoing critiques for its construction of Gaetan Dugas, the so-called “patient zero” responsible for introducing the virus to a group of seropositive men studied in the famous CDC cluster.<sup>46</sup> Shilts describes Dugas in terms that render him an archetype of gay vice (“lovers were like suntans to him”) and, later, more an unfeeling psychosexual monster than a human.<sup>47</sup> Shilts recounts that in early 1983 friends of Dugas, who knew that he had acquired AIDS, exhorted him to give up sex. He demurred, and, one report, states that he would turn on the lights after sexual encounters and announce, “I’ve got gay cancer. I’m going to die, and so are you.”<sup>48</sup> The quote is unattributed, and many, including the CDC research, Bill Darrow, who interviewed Dugas on several occasions, have sharply challenged Shilts’s characterization of Dugas in *And the Band Played On*, a supposed exercise in “investigative journalism.” Engle and Shilts, both working in domains predicated on objectivity (as one casually expects from disciplines such as academic history and investigative journalism), conjure a

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<sup>45</sup> Engle, 71.

<sup>46</sup> The CDC cluster represented the first epidemiological attempt to chart possible lines of transmission, thus isolating the disease as sexually transmissible.

<sup>47</sup> Shilts, 22.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

“truth effect” further problematizing the memory of pleasures lost. Such negative proscriptions against the lost ideal may sublimate its very acknowledgement to consciousness or, at least, antagonize the ideal with an irresolvable ambivalence. The result, in either case, is an adamant refusal of closure, melancholia. In articulating this dilemma, Crimp offers, “When, in mourning our ideal, we meet the same opprobrium as when mourning our dead, we incur a different order of psychic distress, since the memories of our pleasures are already fraught with ambivalence.”<sup>49</sup>

Ambivalence, of course, is at the very heart of mourning. As Freud describes the phenomena, the work of mourning requires attending to a seemingly intractable conflict between honoring, recognizing, and cherishing the memory of that which has been lost while simultaneously disabusing the libido’s now internal attachment to the object of loss. The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, as Erin Rand argues, works to create a “mourned subject,” or as I would prefer, a “grievable subject” by consecrating these losses in terms intelligible to not only individual mourners, but to the nation writ large. The individual capacity to grieve does not operate autonomously from macro-cultural forces that deeply influence who can be grieved and on what terms. Indeed, Jones, reflecting on the efficacy of the Quilt’s capacity to license a meaningful commemoration of the dead, notes that each panel is quintessentially American and that the Quilt “seems a fixture in American life today.”<sup>50</sup> Yet, this insistence on the Americanness of the Quilt’s ethos at first seems at odd with the more universal claims made by the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, 145.

Quilt's many supporters. Jones underscores this tension when reducing the Quilt into its absolute essence. Offering a digestible reduction of the Quilt's work, he explains, "That's what the Quilt is all about – the connection between all of these people united in one particular challenge through a message that transcends AIDS and sexual orientation, and teaches us to understand that all lives are sacred, all lives are valued."<sup>51</sup> If the past decade of American geopolitical policy has made abundantly clear, conceptions of "America" and universal-anything (i.e., freedom, democracy, dignity, rights, etc.) are not at odds; indeed, they are mobilized as self-referencing signs. Thus the Quilt insists on deploying a transcendent Americanness as the terms through which universal sacrality is conferred unto the dead.

If we accept Crimp's observation that the psychic work of mourning requires an open-acknowledgement of a double loss – the loss of loved ones and the landscape of desire homosexuals once cultivated as the foundation of affective politics, community, and culture – the Quilt symbolically sacrifices one loss for the commemoration of the other. This is neither to disavow the power of the Quilt in facilitating mourning of individual losses nor its effectiveness in bringing needed attention to the epidemic. This critique draws attention to the operations of power in which a mourned subject is formed. Butler reminds us that the process of subjection is a deeply ambivalent one. Subjects, including those to be mourned, attain viability and autonomy only through their subordination to the power which makes the subject possible in the first place. Legitimated subjects

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 249.



ultimately assume their own power in some measure, but any agency transacted in resistance to subordinating power thereafter is intimately indebted to – if not contingent upon – that very same terms and conditions which created the subject in the first place.<sup>52</sup> Applied to the Quilt, this suggests a need to temper critical assessments of the Quilt that celebrate its essentially transcendent American and democratic ethos, for the very insistence on regulating the Americanness of each Quilt panel is to also insist that the AIDS-dead can only be symbolically redescribed as American losses. This seems a terrible burden, an intractable double-bind. Beyond the truly good and salutary impact of the Quilt on popular perception of the AIDS-epidemic in general and PWA in particular, I am deeply suspicious of a mourned subject constructed under a host of unimpeachable signs representing a transcendent America, which are none other than the same signs which engendered the apathy, fear, silence, and loathing that necessitated the Quilt in the first place. When I question the substitution of pleasure and pain with an American idol of cozy and secure citizenship, I do not intend to trivialize the Quilt but direct attention to the demands of a species of American nationalism whose religious foundations obviate differences that matter in the intimate, psychic lives of the country's citizens.

Finally, the pervasive rhetorical power of American nationalism that informs the analysis of this chapter is perhaps best exemplified by the veritable decommissioning of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. There has been no public display of the Quilt's 44,000 panels since 1996. Critics have

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<sup>52</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection*, 9 and 83.

commented on what is thought to be the decreased relevance of the Quilt in the post ARV therapy age, wherein the visible markers of AIDS have disappeared and the clinical assessment of the disease transformed from certainly fatal to merely chronic. In “How to Have History in an Epidemic,” Kyra Pearson insightfully charts the various explanations for why the Quilt has come to be seen as relic of the past. The Quilt no longer represents the face of an epidemic that has become marked by an increasingly ethnic, female, and foreign profile. The Quilt’s panels, stored in an Atlanta warehouse, occasionally are now parsed out to museums, HIV-prevention centers, and schools.

Even with 40,000-50,000 new seroconversions each year in America and increased HIV-infection rates among white gay youth, meth addicts, and racial minorities, particularly African-American and Hispanic women, the Quilt as a national artifact seems destined for retirement. Pearson suggests this has to do with the temporality which governs the contours of AIDS activism and rhetoric.

She argues:

As a ‘potent symbol of continuing epidemic,’ the Quilt’s continued growth has been a recurrent feature of the public discussion of the national displays. It once grew with “dizzying speed.’ If panels now only ‘trickle’ in, the Quilt risks losing its reputation as a ‘symbol of *continuing* epidemic.’ But if it does circulate as a symbol of a continuing (and fatal) epidemic, it makes itself vulnerable to charges of obsolescence, as it competes with the prevailing views that AIDS is a chronic, manageable condition.<sup>53</sup>

Though I agree with this assessment, the temporality Pearson cites needs to be extended to a broader understanding of the Quilt as a national memorial, as a

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<sup>53</sup> Kyra Pearson, “How to Have History in an Epidemic,” Charles E. Morris III, ed., *Remembering the AIDS Quilt* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 287.

national text. If the valence of the Quilt rested in its appeal to the national imaginary, it follows that the continued relevance of the Quilt would be tied in part to its need to signify a feeling of shared national trauma. Surely in a certain historical context it has this capacity, but in a post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world which has redirected quite dramatically America's sense of existential dread, the Quilt's power as a national idol seems antique. If the Quilt does not simply mark a single historical moment, its continued commemoration, diminished as its status may be in the national conversation, reinscribes the negotiated settlement the Quilt enacted through its public performance. And with that, the commemoration of names only papers over the broader horizons of loss concealed by the attending myths and rituals of *e pluribus unnum*.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *WE ARE ALL CITIZENS NOW*

In the preceding chapters, I have suggested that American nationalism shares an intimate rhetorical geography with the metaphorical, and, thus irresistibly political, construction of the AIDS epidemic. Implied in the analysis thus far is that American civic nationalism is staunchly assimilationist in nature, despite the most ardent multicultural claims of *e pluribus unum*. The rhetorical regimes of stigmatization belonging to the Religious Right, the reification of compassion, progress, and moral restraint articulated by Presidents, and the attempts of AIDS activists to rehabilitate AIDS identities all respond to the ethos of America as a common thread, if I may allude to the “common threads” of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. One of the most famous of all AIDS texts, Tony Kushner’s 1993 Pulitzer Prize winning play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, also makes recourse to the national imaginary by utilizing the diseased, seropositive body as a metaphor for a Reagan-era America vexed by gross inequality, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, ever-escalating crime rates, sky-rocketing abuse of controlled substances, and, of course, the unfolding AIDS epidemic. In response to many of the aforementioned crises, America in the Eighties launched new policy and rhetorical wars while sustaining old campaigns. Wars on drugs and AIDS joined existing wars on poverty and cancer and the millennially-fraught Cold War. In a complex engagement with a host of political ideologies, Kushner’s play attempts to construct a program of civic repair and nationalism predicated not on assimilation,

but rather an embracing pluralism forged by violence and tragedy. In constructing a model of plural belonging – a sense of viable community moving forward in a broken America – Kushner forsakes the sanitization necessary in the assimilative politics of the AIDS quilt. As the protagonist of *Angels*, Prior Walter, asserts at play’s end, human beings cannot accept a world evacuated of messiness simply for the sake of assuaging trauma and redirecting vulnerability. “It’s *animate*,” Prior explains to a host of traumatized angels seeking stasis, “it’s what living things do. We desire. Even if we desire stillness, it’s still desire *for*.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the most consistently voiced commendations afforded *Angels in America* (other than its often characterization as the savior of American theater, which has been much maligned in the age of Andrew Lloyd Weber for its insistence on spectacle over substance) is the play’s provocative insistence on theoretical promiscuity that licenses multifarious forms of audience engagement and political praxis. Frank Rich’s original 1993 review in *The New York Times* articulates the importance of *Angels* not just in terms of its revivification of the Great White Way but rather for the play’s demonstration of the transformative power of *art in life*. Rich declares that Kushner’s play is “a true American work in its insistence on embracing all possibilities in art and life” and that the playwright “makes the spectacular case” that art, politics, and the lived experience

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia On National Themes* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1995), 264.

of average Americans “can all be brought into fusion in one play.”<sup>2</sup> The possibilities Rich refers to are enabled by what has intrigued most critics about *Angels* – its apparent undecidability. That is the play (or, plays; *Angels* is, indeed, two plays, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*) ferociously engages an assortment of ideological positions and just as quickly disavows them through strategically plotted ambivalence. Indeed, in a later essay, Frank Rich argues that the innovation *Angels* represents rests largely in its “refusal to adhere to any theatrical or political theory.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, David Savran correctly characterizes the heteroglossia of the play when he notes, “The opposite of nearly everything you say about *Angels in America* will hold true.”<sup>4</sup> This ambivalent program of undecidability produces a freer future predicated in uncertainty. Geis and Kruger, editors of the volume *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, speak to uncertainty’s generative power. They argue, “*Angels*’ constructions of the future – pointing perhaps toward an apocalyptic, cataclysmic ending, perhaps toward the negotiated ending of ‘perestroika’ – clearly express uncertainty about where the politics of the current moment might take us.”<sup>5</sup> And this very uncertainty produces “visions of human possibility” that “urge us to a particular

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Rich, “Angels in America; Millennium Approaches; Embracing All Possibilities in Art and Life,” *The New York Times*, 5 May 1993, <http://theater.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?res=9f0ce2dc1431f936a35756c0a965958260> (accessed, January 2, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Frank Rich, ‘Following an Angel for a Healing Vision of Heaven on Earth’, *New York Times*, 24 November 1993, available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/24/arts/review-theater-perestroika-following-angel-for-healing-vision-heaven-earth.html>

<sup>4</sup> David Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How ‘Angels in America’ Reconstructs the Nation,” *Theatre Journal* 47, no. 2 (May 1995): 225.

<sup>5</sup> Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger, eds., “Introduction,” *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 2.

kind of action.”<sup>6</sup> Stasis is not a possibility, and, indeed, the last line of *Angels* serves as a mantra invoking the challenges of creating new futures in a world which insists on spinning: “The Great Work Begins.”<sup>7</sup> In a sense, Kushner’s play realizes Derridean hopes for a program of free-playing signifiers capable of escaping the orbit of transcendental signifiers.

Despite all of the invocations of radicality and revolution the play has engendered – both in terms of its politics and significance in the history of American theater – I contend *Angels in America* ultimately is a conservative AIDS text in that its celebration of diversity and plurality is achieved through its own systematic exclusions. Moreover, Kushner’s engagement with theology, history, and conceptions of the essence of American religion, all of which have been lauded for their emancipatory deployment within *Angels*, actually construct notions of citizenship and American belonging that replicate the exclusions which the play seemingly disavows. In this sense, *Angels in America* as a readable AIDS text shares much in common with the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt and Andrew Sullivan’s famous essay in *The New York Times Magazine* “When Plague Ends,” both of which operate under an ultimately assimilative sign. These texts operate within a program of political and cultural consensus that reconfigures AIDS as a crisis through which the recognition of hope enables the most vulnerable to come to terms with their fear and establish for the rest of us the possibility for transformation, including an embrace of a more broadly inclusive

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>7</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 280.

concept of citizenship. But at what cost? On this count, the play's undecidability is patently more decidable than first meets the eye.

*The Jewish Citizen: Between Community and Assimilation*

At the end of the play's second part, *Perestroika*, Prior Walter, the play's recalcitrant prophet, sits on the edge of Central Park's Bethesda Fountain. While his companions, Louis Ironson, Hannah Pitt, and Belize banter beside him, Prior tunes them out and delivers in direct address to the audience what amounts to the play's philosophical colophon:

The disease will be the end of many of us, but not  
nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will  
struggle on with the living, and we are not going away.  
We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only  
spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.  
Bye now.  
You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.  
And I bless you: *More Life*.  
The Great Work Begins.<sup>8</sup>

If anything is decidable in *Angels*, it's the declaration that "We will be citizens." It is a statement that is both hopeful and suggestive of an irreducible and perhaps comforting aphorism imparted by Kushner unto *Angels*' audience. The insistence on citizenship and more life punctuates a sprawling narrative over this two-part play, which canvases a seemingly disparate array of historical themes, political ideologies, moral vacillations, and theological speculation. Citizenship as a political concept resists clear definition in the play, but Kushner does not shy

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<sup>8</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 280. *The Chicago Manual of Style* and Turabian's *A Manual for Writers* is silent on the retention of artistically intended formatting within a play. As such formatting by custom is retained for poetic works, I have opted to present Kushner's editorial choices for formatting evidence in all standard editions of *Angels in America*.



away from introducing the political, cultural, and communal variables that construct a sense of citizenship belonging. To ground this analysis with a useful frame of reference, citizenship will be conceptualized here as a tripartite phenomena: 1) legal status wherein an individual is endowed with certain political, social, and legal rights; 2) participation in a society's political institutions as located in the public sphere; 3) identification with a political community or ideology that engenders a sense of identity and belonging.<sup>9</sup> None of these dimensions operates in isolation. As Rawls has duly noted, the legal rights afforded a citizen may operate in direct proportion to his or her willingness or ability to engage politically with the institutions of state, thus making provisional the intensity with which one experiences a citizenship identity.<sup>10</sup> Of all three dimensions, however, *Angels* most intensely interrogates the nexus between political action and a broader sense of national belonging.

In Act One, Scene One, the play commences with the funeral of Sarah Ironson, grandmother of Louis Ironson. Standing next to the coffin with the yareit candle burning at its side, Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz delivers a eulogy that begins to create a historical homology between Jewish and homosexual experience – more specifically, the experience of the post-Holocaust Jew and the AIDS-infected homosexual. The rabbi professes not to know Sarah Ironson but yet acknowledges a deep understanding of the *type* of person she represents:

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<sup>9</sup> These three dimensions are drawn from recent summative scholarship of citizenship theory. See Jay Cohen, "Changing Paradigms of Citizenship and the Exclusiveness of the Demos", *International Sociology* 14, no. 3: 245–268 and Will Kymlicka, "Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory", *Ethics* 104, no.2 (1994): 352–381.

<sup>10</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 544.

So I do not know her, yet I know her. She was...  
...not a person but a whole kind of person, the ones  
who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America  
the villages of Russian and Lithuania – and how we strug-  
gled, and how we fought, for the family, for the Jewish  
home, so that you would not grow up *here*, in this strange  
place, in the melting pot where nothing melted. Descen-  
dants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in  
America, you and your children and their children with  
the goyische names. You do not live in America. No such  
place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shetl,  
your air the air of the steppes – because she carried the old  
world on her back across the ocean, in a boat, and she put  
it down on Grand Concourse Avenue, or in Flatbush, and  
she worked the earth into your bones, and you pass it to  
your children, this ancient, ancient culture and home.<sup>11</sup>

The rabbi's "melting pot where nothing melted" paired with an America that does not exist is indicative of what has been coined a differentiated citizenship model of citizenship wherein deference to cultural particularism both culturally and legally serves as the pre-condition of a functioning, democratic republic. Inherent in this argument is the recognition of minority rights and culturally situated positions as a starting point for political action.

The implied spirit of differentiation and pluralism that permeates the play derives in part from Kushner's active engagement with two religions which have storied narratives in the broader context of American religious history: Judaism and Mormonism. Both have been historically signified as historical others, and from the grinding pressures of their position on the margins of American culture, they are now considered either stakeholders of religious consensus (particularly in the case of Judaism) or as standard bearers of the "made in America" religious

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<sup>11</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 16.

moniker (as is often suggested of Mormonism). Through the work these religious worldviews perform in the play through their surrogate characters, America from its mythic dimensions to the actualization of its many promises is constructed, reconstructed, critiqued, and, ultimately, valorized. The dialectical work performed from the contesting of these views of America's mythic geography, the play begins to arrive at some sort of theory of citizenship and attending political praxis, even if but provisional. As Hannah Pitt surmises at the end of *Perestroika*, "You can't wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory."<sup>12</sup> Without such a theory or "an idea of the world," the preconditions of citizenship and its associated provisions are undermined. Accordingly, Kushner has no choice but to stake out a decidable theoretical position in order to render "We will all be citizens" more than a fungible declaration.

As a historically persecuted minority and outsider, a Jewish perspective serves as a surrogate in the play to stand witness to the litany of disasters meted on America in the Eighties through bigotry, ideological absolutism, and benign neglect by the public and government alike. When asked about the influence of Judaism in configuring the grander themes of *Angels'* narrative structure, Kushner indicates Jewish sensitivities to violence, from the Pale's pogroms to the Holocaust, necessitate a Jewish witnessing presence in the moral universe of the play:

I'm an inheritor of at least a 2,500-year-tradition of oppression and murder and holocaust, and so I know, like all Jews know in a bone-deep way, what political mischief, bigotry, and xenophobia lead to. The only thing that we can actively do to speak to the Holocaust now is to make sure no

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 278.

other holocaust happens, and if we do make sure that no holocaust happens—of course they're happening all the time—but if we struggle against that, every time we're successful, in some way I believe the dead are comforted.<sup>13</sup>

The play's entanglement with Judaism is not to simply conflate the AIDS epidemic with the Holocaust, as some activists, such as Larry Kramer, have done to startling rhetorical effect. Instead, the invocation of Jewish emphasis on memory, ethical living in the present, the ultimate termination of linear history, millennia of immigrant experience, and, above all, a history of negotiating the pathologization of their collective and individual bodies allows Kushner to, as Alisa Solomon asserts, create and queer a worldview that just might create space for citizenship without assimilation.<sup>14</sup>

But as with the entire program of ambivalence woven through the play, the Jewish ethos of the play is polymorphous, clearly evidencing American Judaism's heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting contributions to American religious and political culture. The two principle Jewish characters in *Angels* are Roy Cohen and Louis Ironson, both representing Jewish typologies readily intelligible (or, more specifically, identifiable) in American culture. Roy Cohn is a bellicose character who bears much resemblance to the eponymous redbaiting McCarthy era lawyer and conservative icon. Throughout the play, Cohn, whose proudest moment is orchestrating the execution of Ethel Rosenberg, voices a near continuous monologue defending an America of laissez-faire capitalism and neo-

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<sup>13</sup> Tony Kushner, "Staging Change: The Revolutionary Rigor of Tony Kushner," interview by Sara Marcus, *Heeb* 4 (2003), 60.

<sup>14</sup> Alisa Solomon, "Wrestling with Angels: A Jewish Fantasia," Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger, eds., *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 119 and 132.

conservatism against communists, homosexuals, and traitors of any sort. The Cohn diatribes are set in sharp and tragically ironic relief against the reality of Cohn's own diseased, seropositive body. In confronting the fear of death, Cohn constantly distances himself from both the homosexual and Jewish ecology of the play. When receiving an AIDS-diagnosis from his doctor, Henry, Cohn proceeds to unleash the logic of his semiotic and political distancing from what his AIDS diagnosis means. For Cohn, identity labels are markers of clout (or a lack thereof), the only thing that matters in his model of participant citizenship. As he explains to his private physician:

...This is what labels refer to. Now to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?<sup>15</sup>

The aversion to powerlessness permeates Cohn's character, and it is through belief in a hierarchical and bureaucratized conception of American national culture that Cohn profits. Accordingly, we misjudge Cohen by labeling him simply as an American Shylock. As Ron Scapp contends, Cohn is not some Puritan ideal of civic participation but rather "the democratic fantasy at work."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Ron Scapp, "The Vehicle of Democracy: Fantasies Toward a Queer Nation" in Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger, eds, *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 95-96.

Cohn operates in that democratic register which insists “on profiting from the promise of tomorrow, from the hard work of others today.”<sup>17</sup>

Politically, Cohn not only stands as an emblem of Regan era politics and policies, he represents a very clear and normative understanding of America and its civic promises. In the aforementioned second dimension of citizenship, the emphasis is placed on political participation in the civic institutions of state – that is, the ability to both govern and be governed to ensure citizen self-rule. Citizen self-rule, however, is purely provisional in the history of American democracy. Though private citizens are called upon to become public, not everyone counts, most notably women, African slaves, and Native Americans, and governing deference is given to those with a paternalistically derived and legally encoded leadership profile. But as Howard Zinn notes, there is more than meets the eye with this conception of citizenship and attending freedom – a minoritizing effect conceived in majority rule. Zinn argues that it is “not simply the work of wise men trying to establish a decent and orderly society, but the work of certain groups trying to maintain their privileges, while giving just enough rights and liberties to enough people to ensure popular support.”<sup>18</sup> Cohn espouses an adherence to this ideology and metaphorizes its valence in terms of a father-son relationship. Asserting this relationship as the commodity he values most, Cohn explains, “I’ve had many fathers, I owe my life to them, powerful, powerful men.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>18</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 97.

Walter Winchell, Edgar Hoover. Joe McCarthy most of all.”<sup>19</sup> Cohn is the recipient of their legacies that, in part, cultivated power by isolating and prosecuting both personal enemies and perceived enemies of state, which were often framed as one and the same. Foul-mouthed and bossy, Cohn not only represents a strand of conservative-leaning American patriotism rooted in a defense of America’s most cherished myths, he is what Alisa Solomon has called the quintessential “tough Jew.”<sup>20</sup> The tough Jew is one who overcomes all pathologization of the Jewish body – one marked historically as effeminate, hyper-sexed, and hematically tainted – through performing an exceedingly masculine topos announcing that Jews had, in effect, arrived on the inside of American power, even as they, Solomon reminds us, “still cannot pass at the country club.”<sup>21</sup>

Louis Ironson operates as a liberal Jewish humanist doppelganger to Roy Cohn’s arch-conservatism. Their ideological pairing is intentional inasmuch as the two characters operate as mutually critiquing political ideologies. Louis espouses disgust for the Reagan zeitgeist, waxes on at length about equality and enfranchisement, and consistently critiques the vision of disempowering citizenship participation enacted by Cohn. Yet, Louis is no liberal warhorse and functions to lay bare much that is ambivalent in this historical trajectory of American liberalism. Indeed, Belize says as much after Louis diatribes at length about his theory of American democracy and its many promissory notes. Belize

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<sup>19</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 62.

<sup>20</sup> Solomon, 125.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

derisively observes, “All your checks bounce, Louis; you’re ambivalent about everything.”<sup>22</sup> Beyond the *a priori* assumption of “liberty” that liberalism putatively safeguards, political liberalism in America has most often concerned itself, first, with establishing liberty through orderly markets and securing private property and, second, instituting a series of reforms enacted to address the very inequalities produced by *laissez-faire* capitalism of liberal markets. As David Savran notes, this tension between classical liberalism and the lip service paid to tolerance and equality under the welfare state renders liberalism as “hopelessly schizoid.”<sup>23</sup> Louis exposes these inherent contradictions in one of his many diatribes. Here, after having abandoned his boyfriend Prior, whose condition is rapidly deteriorating, Louis explains to Belize that America has historically succeeded by devolving power to the people as a safeguard to freedom. Under liberalism, tolerance becomes both a failed watchword for and guarantor of this freedom. Louis scathingly indicts discourses of tolerance when he observes that “...what AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance...because when the shit hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth.”<sup>24</sup> He startlingly asserts, “Power is the object, not being tolerated. Fuck assimilation.”<sup>25</sup> In regard to power, Louis could be channeling Roy Cohn, but as is often the case in *Angels*, Louis’s own actions deflate any sense of conviction. His abandonment of Prior is an abandonment of not only intimate responsibility but the disavowal of a type of

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<sup>22</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 101.

<sup>23</sup> Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How ‘Angels in America’ Reconstructs the Nation,” 220.

<sup>24</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 96.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.



civic participation required to engender the type of emancipatory freedom he envisions in his version of American democracy. Ironson may eschew assimilation, but he himself not only flees the blood, decay, death, and homosexuality attending AIDS, but in the presence of others, particularly other Jews, Louis plays it “butch,” masking his own gay identity in public space. That is, Louis assimilates in proportion to his manifest fears, which are many.

Indeed, Louis’s fears render only certain forms of diversity palatable. In Act Two, Scene Four of *Perestroika*, Louis learns from Belize that Joe Pitt, the young Mormon lawyer with whom he has struck an uneasy romantic relationship after abandoning Prior, is affiliated with Roy Cohn politically and interpersonally. Louis waxes incredulously over the suggestion before delineating the various ways in which Cohn is the “polestar” of evil. Condemning Louis for his impotence, Belize chides, “Louis and his big ideas. Big ideas are all you love. ‘America is what Louis loves.’”<sup>26</sup> The America Louis loves is one predicated on the liberal consumption (and commodification) of diversity and pluralism enacted under the emblem of *e pluribus unum*. Sacvan Bercovitch speaks to this process in noting the American process through which cultural fragmentation is spun into consensus, in which America alternates “between harmony-in-diversity and diversity-in-harmony,” thus dissolving all problems into the multicultural melting pot that has always-already been deemed good medicine.<sup>27</sup> This cultural reflex is far from innocent, and, as David Savran notes, it foregrounds a seemingly

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>27</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Summer 1986): 649.

progressive, pluralistic worldview while “reaffirming a fundamentally conservative hegemony.”<sup>28</sup>

And a violent one at that. Louis babbles into this realization himself, and the irony of his analysis would be humorous if it didn’t lay bear the violent concealments of a society that simultaneously consumes diversity while forgetting the programs of conquest, colonization, and Christian conversion through which usable difference is achieved. Louis concedes,

It’s – look, race, yes but ultimately race here is a political question, right? Racists just try to use race. Like the spiritualists try to use that stuff, are you enlightened are you centered, channeled, whatever, this reaching out for a spiritualist past in a country where no indigenous spirits exist – only the Indians, I mean Native American spirits and we killed them off so now, there are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there’s only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to maneuver around the inescapable battle of politics, the shifting downwards and outwards of political power to the people...<sup>29</sup>

Of course, this is exactly right and precisely wrong. Through Louis, Kushner exposes liberalism’s continued complicity in the perpetuation of inequality by so voraciously consuming a colorful past sanitized of the territorial expansion, genocide, and coerced assimilation that forged multicultural America. Louis correctly draws attention to this violent past which makes usable the spiritual capital of vanquished Indians, slaves, and a host of religious others. Indeed, there are angels in America defined by its utopian desires, transcendent missions, and

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<sup>28</sup> Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How ‘Angels in America’ Reconstructs the Nation,” 220.

<sup>29</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 98.

restless spiritual seeking, but they are purchased at a terrible price. Yet, at the very same time Louis invokes a liberal rights-based politics that appropriates these differences for political combat without coming to grips with this vast historical tableau of loss. In Louis's view, America as the cultural smorgasbord doesn't really have a race problem; it has a political problem, principally conservatives who resist devolving power to the people while profiting all the same. Famji Minwalla correctly observes that Louis can conceive of race as surmountable given his embrace of Jewishness not on racial but ethnic terms; Judaism provides Louis "all those cultural stabilizers – community, identity, belonging, and history –that make him different from white people."<sup>30</sup> Yet, the claim to one "cultural stabilizer" requires a disavowal of his homosexuality as the basis for any form of communal belonging and political praxis.

The guilt seeping through Louis's pores derives from the fact that he can only speak through a minoritizing perspective sanctioned by leftists politics, without which he would have to openly confront his position of privilege as an educated white man who can disavow specific forms of public difference at a whim. Indeed, when Louis finally visits Prior in his hospital room to give an account for his abandonment of their relationship and familial duties, Louis shockingly explains that he just needs "some privacy" to which Prior sardonically responds, "That's new."<sup>31</sup> In the encounter with blood, sores, lesions, and death –

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<sup>30</sup> Framji Minwalla, "When Girls Collide: Considering Race in *Angels in America*," Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger, eds, *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 112.

<sup>31</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 83.

all which terminally resist the instantiation of a political position – Louis confesses, “I have to find some way to save myself.”<sup>32</sup> In this assertion Kushner seems to lay bare the inability of new liberalism’s ability to forge a moral and just community through programs of material redistribution and the extension of legally adjudicated tolerance. Louis’s embrace of his masculine Jewishness provides a desired sense of communitarianism and non-whiteness; his politics allow him to retreat into a private sphere that safeguards his individuality within a Hobbesian liberal paradigm.

Louis’s naïve though somewhat standard assessment of American democratic potential is set into stark relief by Belize, an enigmatic figure in *Angels*’ characterological menu. As a black drag queen turned nurse, Belize neither proves central to the plot of *Angels* nor typical of a certain ideological or political position. Rather, he operates as breakwater upon which the inertia of politics crashes and recedes. Belize exhibits little tolerance for Louis’s reification of the American project. When he asserts that all of Louis’s checks bounce, he may as well as be channeling the failed promissory note (sent back marked “insufficient funds”) made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr in his speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Near play’s end, Belize evokes the “true” America:

Well, I hate America Louis. I hate this country. It’s  
just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you.  
The white cracker who wrote the national anthem  
knew what he was doing. He set the word “free” to a  
note so high nobody can reach it. That was deliberate.  
Nothing on earth sound less like freedom to me.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 85.

You come with me to room 1013 over at the hospital,  
I'll show you America. Terminal, crazy and mean.  
I live in America, Louis, that's hard enough, I don't  
have to love it. You do that. Everybody's got to love  
something.<sup>33</sup>

Belize's diagnosis of America receives added impetus in the play's complicated apocalyptic framework. All throughout the play, registers of decay are foregrounded to create a sense of historical foreboding. Harper Pitt, Joe Pitt's valium-popping Mormon housewife, draws metaphoric line of sight between the hole in the ozone layer, AIDS, and a world seemingly bent on dissolution. Early in the play she sheepishly observes, "But everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving away."<sup>34</sup> Later in the play, a schizophrenic woman in the South Bronx, who declares to Hannah Pitt that she once dated Nostradamus, puts a finer point on the impending pre-millennial apocalypse. As an emblem of failed 1980's domestic policies, including Reagan's contraction of social welfare funding which led to widespread deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, she breaks her incoherent babel with the stark assertion, "In the new century, I think we will all be insane."<sup>35</sup>

*The Mormon Citizen: A Painful Journey to Zion*

David Savran correctly observes that Mormonism intimately informs the epistemology of *Angels in America*, particularly in the hieratic quality of the play (i.e., prophecy, angels, holy books, etc). Indeed, I would argue that Kushner's recourse to Mormon theology and history operates more than a device to generate

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 111.

tension-assuaging laughs at the expense of Mormon stereotypes and the religion's associating with squeak-clean conservatism. If Kushner's invocation of the Jewish-American experience actively exposes the limits of assimilation, power-wielding conservatism, and leftist identity politics as models of citizenship, the play's engagement with Mormonism seems to provide Kushner with terrain to explore the possibilities of progress citizenship and transcendent communitarianism.

The presence of Mormons in the play (three major characters) creates an interesting if unexpected parallelism between gay and Mormon experiences in America. As the play progresses, new affective relationships are formed, and the most powerful and surprising ones develop between Prior, Harper, and Hannah. In a sequence early in *Millennium Approaches*, Harper and Prior share a drug-induced dreamscape. One of the more humorous exchanges introduces the gay/Mormon dyad:

Harper: It's terrible. Mormons aren't suppose to be addicted to anything.  
I'm a Mormon.  
Prior: I'm a homosexual.  
Harper: Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals.  
Prior: In my church we don't believe in Mormons.<sup>36</sup>

Through this initial exchange, they establish a "blue streak of recognition" which transcends their immediate conditions of abjection. True, Prior's AIDS-ridden body meets a social parallel in Harper's valium-addicted body which has no purpose within her putatively sacred marriage that is undermined by her husband's closeted homosexuality. But this shared unintelligibility connects them

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 38.

to historically unintelligible communities savaged by physical, judicial, and social violence, violence which became the very grist through which their communities were formed and Zions established in Utah, San Francisco, and elsewhere. Indeed, no small amount of this perpetrated violence operates as censure for perceptions of dubious sexuality antithetical to the conventional atomic family (i.e., plural marriage, sodomy's non-procreative capacity, etc.).

The agrarian communitarianism of the colonial era, both real and imagined, found itself profoundly transformed in the National Period, a time of economic expansion, industrialization, nationalization, and individualization. In some respects, the birth of Mormonism at the dawn of Jacksonian America owes much to a pressing nostalgia for this lost history. The oftentimes-violent implementation of the reforms of the Jacksonian democracy signaled a convulsive end to the communal, arcadian fantasy, which, accordingly, lent Mormonism its decidedly apocalyptic millennial quality, as well as its emphasis on restoration and communitarianism. As Bernard McGinn describes, common elements of apocalyptic thinking are the intimate connections between community and heaven, prophecy and the unfolding of time:

Apocalypse originally signified a genre of text containing a mediated unveiling of heavenly secrets dealing either with the description of the celestial realm or with the course of history and the imminent end of the present age. These two poles of the apocalyptic imagination—the vertical one connecting heaven and earth and the horizontal one stretching out through time into the prophetic future—have always coexisted.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bernard McGinn, "The Meanings of the Millennium," lecture presented at the Inter-American Development Bank, Washington, D.C. (17 January 1996), quoted in Ranen Omer-Sherman, "The Fate of the Other in Tony Kushner's "Angels in America," *Melus* 32, no. 2 (summer 2007): 14.

Accordingly, Mormon self-conception has always been utopian. Human action through time leads to progress, and progress points toward Zion and perfection beyond. Restoration in the present tense of profane time creates an aperture for perfection in sacred time yet to come. Indeed, this is enshrined in the famous couplet attributed to the Fifth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Lorenzo Snow: “As man now is, God once was; as God is now man may be.”<sup>38</sup> For Mormons, America operates as the sacred cradle through which progress is achieved, for the community’s scripture locates the genesis of all creation, The Garden of Eden, in the Americas. Accordingly, Mormonism’s emphasis on restoration not only entails a rehabilitation of humankind’s moral order but a re-naturalizing of a once pure America, or, as Saran succinctly puts it, Mormonism constructs “America as both the origin and meaning of history.”<sup>39</sup>

As with many thematic stratagems within *Angels*, Kushner’s invocation of Mormonism functions ambiguously. On one hand, the Mormon relocation of all antediluvian history to America would seem to auger well for America’s promise as a site of purity and millennial potential. There is a clear citational line between John Winthrop’s “city on the hill,” Joseph Smith’s “cause of Zion,” Reagan’s revived “shining city on the hill,” and the contemporary configuration of Mormons leadership as Moses in a three-piece suit.<sup>40</sup> In a sense, the Mormon

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<sup>38</sup> Lorenzo Snow, cited in Clyde J. Williams, ed., *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft Publishing, 1984), 1.

<sup>39</sup> Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How ‘Angels in America’ Reconstructs the Nation,” 218.

<sup>40</sup> The analogy between Moses and Mormon prophetic/corporate leadership is humorously suggested by Grant Underwood in “Mormonism, Millenarianism, and



construction of America as a sacred and timeless Zion exhibits striking parallels to what Richard Hughes has described as America as “Nature’s Nation,” an America conceived by the Founders as outside of both time and tradition.<sup>41</sup> In Mormon history, the fall of humankind introduces both apostasy and the profanation of time that Mormonism contests through a progressive return to purity. Similarly, convulsions in American history, particularly for conservative and religious interpreters of the national project, represent a restorable rupture to America’s purpose. In his 1987 State of the Union address, President Reagan invokes an ahistoricity that could serve as an apt description of Mormonism’s own timeless utopianism. In defining the American project, Reagan aspirationally argued, “The calendar can’t measure America because we were meant to be an endless experiment in freedom, with no limit to our reaches, no boundaries to what we can do, no end point to our hopes.”<sup>42</sup> Here, Reagan asserts that politics operate in service to a providential reality. Joe Pitt, Harper’s husband and closeted LDS Reaganite, recapitulates this assertion when explaining to his wife his desire to participate in America’s return to its transcendent purpose:

I think things are starting to change in the world...For the good. Change for the good. America has rediscovered itself. Its sacred position among nations. And people aren’t ashamed of that like they used to be. This is a

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Modernity,” Eric A. Eliason, ed., *Mormons and Mormonism: An Introduction to an American World Religion* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 203.

<sup>41</sup> See Chapter Three in Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 45-65.

<sup>42</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union,” Capitol Building, Washington, D.C. (27 January 1987), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=34430#axzz1nLDhTbvK> (accessed February 1, 2012).

great thing. The truth restored. Law restored. That's what President Reagan's done, Harper.<sup>43</sup>

Martin, Roy Cohn's Justice Department flackman, explains to Joe the conventional, political ramifications of the Reagan zeitgeist as the "end of Liberalism," "New Deal Socialism," and "ipso facto secular humanism." It's the "dawning of a genuinely American political personality. Modeled on Ronald Wilson Reagan."<sup>44</sup> As Roy Cohn ails in his hospital bed, he reminds the audience that "Nature's Nation" hold many promises, but not for the diseased because illness and death cannot hold court in a history-less nation. He wistfully explains to the haunting ghost of Ethel Rosenberg (who he helped send to the electric chair), "The worse thing about being sick in America, Ethel, is you are booted out of the parade. Americans have no use for the sick. Look at Reagan. He's so healthy he's hardly human, he's a hundred if he's a day..."<sup>45</sup>

Clearly, Kushner satirizes and savages the real world ramifications of Reaganomics, particularly the manifest conservative rhetoric and priorities which seek to achieve an atemporal American utopia by stigmatizing and marginalizing its unassimilable citizens, including the now AIDS-ridden Roy Cohn. Yet the very invocation of Mormonism argues that the restoration of and already-extant Zion occurs only through progress, or what Harper more insightfully calls "a kind of painful progress," in which even the marginalized citizen longs "for what we've left behind" and "dreams ahead."<sup>46</sup> Pain, savage and deeply felt, is the

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<sup>43</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 32.

<sup>44</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 69.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

crucible of transformation. Through Harper's character, the play begins to present a tenuous, provisional, and all-too painful cartography of citizenship. In some of the most amusing exchanges in the play, Harper engages in a valium-induced dialog with plastic characters in a diorama at the Manhattan Mormon Visitor Center, where she and her mother-in-law, Hannah, have taken up temporary residence. In one scene, Harper listens to an exchange between a Mormon father and his sons, Orrin and Caleb. The sons ask their father a litany of questions about the Promised Land. When will arrive? Will there be lots to eat there? Harper, now joined by Prior, provides sidebar commentary explaining that they will never arrive ("Never. You'll die of a snakebite...") and the Promised Land is no cornucopia ("No. Just sand.").<sup>47</sup> Only later does the diorama's Mormon mother explain to Harper the process through which change and progress are achieved. This "painful progress" polysemously operates in the play to signal a host of conversions: the emancipation of Mormon women, the (dis)establishment of political identity, the transformation from fragmentation to integration, from closet to out and proud, from isolation to community, from devastation to creation, from other and immigrant to citizen. Harper simply asks the diorama's Mormon mother, "How do people change?" The answer constitutes one of the more breathtaking of the play's pronouncements. The Mormon mother replies,

Well it has something to do with God so  
it's not very nice.  
God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from  
throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in, he

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 195-196

grabs hold of your bloody tubes and they slip to evade his grasp but he squeezes hard, he *insists*, he pulls and pulls till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! We can't even talk about that. And then he stuff them back, dirty, tangled and torn. It's up to you to do the stitching.<sup>48</sup>

As Steven Kruger elucidates, this passage suggests that the politics and experience of change require nothing to be cast off. The self is abused, mangled, and devastated, "yet change somehow occurs through a violent rearrangement over which one may have no control but also through patching one's own wounds..."<sup>49</sup> Progress comes at a high price for those placed on the nation's moral and mortal probation.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, there is an assurance that history has a purpose and all human action, including its manifest pains and frailties, are subsumed under a divine purpose. How far does this theological construction of transformation fall from claims, like those made by Andrew Sullivan in "When Plague Ends," that AIDS enacts a painful but necessary social integration for the gay community?

*The Limits of a Fabulous AIDS Community*

Though the politics of the 1980's met terrible damages upon the most vulnerable members of the body politic, Kushner suggests that there is nonetheless something hopeful and promising in an America that dreams utopia and fantasizes progress. Despite the ambivalence-steeped political program which

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>49</sup> Steven Kruger, "Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*," Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger, eds, *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 166.

<sup>50</sup> In Mormon doctrine, "mortal probation" refers to the earthly life of those called from a previous, spiritual existence to a mortal. Salvation comes from successful execution of religious morality while enduring one's mortal probation.

permeates *Angels in America*, the final scene with Prior, Louis, Belize, and Hannah affirms that, though the future is uncertain, we will nonetheless all be citizens. It is a provocative promise. But the question that begs is at what price. Is this a price that can be endured? The final scene of *Angels* leaves us with a comforting tableau of a redefined family. Prior has faced his fears, chosen movement and more life. Louis, chastened by both his abandonment of Prior and his dalliance with Joe Pitt and his politics, returns to the “family” still grappling with the inherent contradictions of his liberal politics. Belize’s presence symbolizes the powers of forgiveness and compassion (he insists that Louis say the kaddish over Roy Cohn as a way to commemorate his hard death and thank him for his cupboard full of the not-then-approved experimental drug, AZT). Hannah, the once inflexible Mormon housewife transformed by her supposition-deconstructing experience in Manhattan, joins the family as the veritable fag hag. As Savran suggests, though *Angels in America* queers American history by placing the disenfranchised other at the heart of the otherwise unchallenged story of a providential America (or an America whose identity and manifest nationalism remains incontrovertibly creedal rather than ethnic), we are nonetheless left with a message that “liberal humanism remains the best hope for change.”<sup>51</sup> How else do we come to the historical formula in which outsiders, religious and otherwise, become the quintessential Americans?

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<sup>51</sup> Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How ‘Angels in America’ Reconstructs the Nation,” 223.

If this is the coherent message to be drawn from the vast, confusing, and contradictory tableau of *Angels*' politics,<sup>52</sup> it remains unclear the role AIDS itself, as both a political issue and tragic lived reality for so many Americans, plays in fostering this newly conceived sense of citizenship belonging. As has been articulated throughout *Ambivalent Blood*, the very discursive construction of AIDS has so often placed AIDS-identities outside the boundaries of the national body politic. In the previous chapter, the discursive work of the Project NAMES AIDS Memorial Quilt is shown to be a demonstrably conservative endeavor designed to resuscitate AIDS identities from the adverse social and political effects of previous AIDS identity formations. Clearly, Kushner avoids sanitization procedures to enact this resuscitation. Indeed, homosexual desire is foregrounded as the very affective bonds through which citizen-belonging in his queer nation is achieved. The play is, after all, subtitled "a gay fantasia." AIDS itself, in all of its torturous and tormenting manifestations – biologically, politically, socially, experientially – operates as the crucible for establishing hope and community. At several points in *Angels*, Kushner seems to actively channel Nietzsche's famous assertion in *The Birth of Tragedy* that visions of human wreckage are god sent, for nowhere else does the capacity for the redemptive

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<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that Savran's suggestion that *Angels in America* reinscribes liberalism's conservative hegemony has not been accepted part and parcel in the broader scope of *Angels* criticism. James Corby argues that Savran mistakes Louis's politics as somehow being indicative of the play's political program, whereas a closer reading of the text suggests that a speculative, messianic politics exceeds the constraints of humanistic liberalism. See James Corby, "The Audacity of Hope: Locating Kushner's Political Vision in *Angels in America*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 47, no. 1 (2011): 17.

vision reside.<sup>53</sup> Or, as Harper explains to Prior, “ I feel like shit but I’ve never felt more alive. I’ve finally found the secret of all that Mormon energy. Devastation. That’s what makes people migrate. Build things.”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in the forward to his post-9/11 play *Homebody / Kabul*, Kushner writes, “Tragedy is the annihilation from whence new life springs, the Nothing out of which something is born. Devastation can be a necessary prelude to a new kind of beauty.”<sup>55</sup>

Implied here is a certain ethics of tragedy, that the future must remain hopeful for change and progress even while we gaze longingly (or, at least, commemoratively), toward the past. Indeed, this consistent theme throughout *Angels in America* is in no small part inspired by Walter Benjamin’s ninth thesis from *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In his famous interpretation of Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus,” Benjamin describes the relationship between history and progress:

There is a picture by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 33-34.

<sup>54</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 253.

<sup>55</sup> Tony Kushner, *Homebody / Kabul* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2002), 150.

<sup>56</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257-258.

Progress is not achieved in the positivist sense of an assured forward-looking teleology grounded in absolute faith in post-Enlightenment epistemologies but rather by a sustained pause in which human wreckage is assessed, witnessed, and commemorated. But then the storm, the emergency, snaps the smooth progression of history and jolts us outside of its constraints perhaps just long enough to pause the ascent of human debris toward heaven. Is AIDS then the “weak messianic” power, which is the possibility for fulfillment and redemption? As Andrew Benjamin explains, weak messianic power is not something inscribed in human being but rather a “vanishing point of missed possibilities and of their demand for fulfillment.”<sup>57</sup>

If for Kushner AIDS operates as this arresting moment, a messianic angel of history, then his perspective is not entirely divergent from Andrew Sullivan who, in his controversial essay “When Plague Ends,” also argues that AIDS serves as a type of historical function through which a certain group (in this case, America’s homosexuals) seize an opportunity to convert trauma into progress. In an oft-cited passage, Sullivan argues that the experience of AIDS is one in which homosexual identities, at last, become American:

But AIDS was different from the beginning. It immediately presented a political as much as a public-health problem. Before homosexuals had even been acknowledged as a central presence in American life, they were suddenly at the heart of a health crisis as profound as any in modern American history. It was always possible, of course, that, with such a lack of societal preparation, America might have responded the way many Latin American and Asian countries responded -- with almost complete silence and denial -- or that the gay world itself might have collapsed under the strain of its own immolation. But over the long run something somewhat different happened. AIDS and its onslaught imposed a form of

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<sup>57</sup> Andrew E. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and History* (London: Continuum, 2006), 42.



social integration that may never have taken place otherwise. Forced to choose between complete abandonment of the gay subculture and an awkward first encounter, America, for the most part, chose the latter. *A small step, perhaps, but an enormous catalyst in the renegotiation of the gay-straight social contract.*<sup>58</sup>

Sullivan, who at first disavows the overburdened analogy between AIDS and the Holocaust in his thesis, nonetheless suggests that these catastrophes “changed forever the way the minority group was viewed by the world.” Just as the Holocaust operates in Jewish messianic time as a catalyst for viable Jewish citizenry safeguarded by the state of Israel, AIDS successfully created gay Americans.

Ultimately, such claims to historicizing AIDS citizenship, whether viewed through the lens of the secular or the intervention of messianic forces in history, are somewhat unsettling and leave many questions unanswered. Who counts in AIDS citizenship? Who is permitted to take a seat at integrated table of newly defined family? How do we conceptualize past losses? Do women in the context of AIDS have standing in ways other than nursemaids to the stricken? It would seem Kushner’s sense of futurity invites all minority constituencies into an America dissolved of dogmatism. However, in “Messing with the Idyllic: The Performance of Femininity in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*,” Natalie Meisner cautions that the play achieves an outcome of radical pluralism at no small cost, and the canon status bestowed upon *Angels* belies the systematic exclusions generated by Kushner’s program of ambivalence. Specifically, *Angels’* queer nation forgets its debt to feminist theory and achieves its queer

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<sup>58</sup> Sullivan, “When Plagues End,” emphasis added.

utopia through a celebration of male homosocial desire. Indeed, the play's treatment of identity politics, the limits of compulsory heterosexuality, and the stigmatization of the AIDS body plays out predominately on biologically and socially male-coded bodies. Meisner suggests that while the naturalization of gay erotic affiliation does important cultural work, absent from criticism is comment on the play's reliance for coherence on "complex representations of femininity."<sup>59</sup> These complex representations of female iconicity in *Angels* are, according to Meisner, static narrative tools for the play's ascension from melodrama to the male-dominated fabulous, the fabulous citizenry promised at play's end. Here, "the figure of the female...provide(s) obstacles and impediments to the pursuit of male desire," thus producing the play's various punch lines.<sup>60</sup> Though *Angels* has emerged as one of the most venerable texts in queer theory, its queering potential is limited for it reifies an active (if not conflicted) male subjectivity at the expense of recycling a fragmented, disembodied female subjectivity. Or, as Savran mentions but doesn't fully develop in his 1995 essay, the play offers "yet another pathologization and silencing of women."<sup>61</sup>

By the play's dénouement, Harper finds herself in an airplane, free from the stasis that enveloped her Brooklyn apartment. She gazes out of the window and observes a vast network of departed souls linked together in O<sub>3</sub> molecules, ozone. Looking out the window, Harper offers her now famous line which seems

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<sup>59</sup> Natalie Meisner, "Messing with the Idyllic: The Performance of Femininity in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16 no. 1 (2003): 177.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>61</sup> Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How 'Angels in America' Reconstructs the Nation," 208.

to encapsulate Benjamin's angel of history: "Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead." Her monologue ends, however, quite tentatively with, "At least I think that's so."<sup>62</sup> Whereas the play's denouement seems to offer hope of a newly defined community of free-flowing, multicultural, affective, if not erotic, affiliation, we are left with Harper sailing through the troposphere, disembodied, disconnected from community at very moment in which the promised community gathers at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. As Meisner, elucidates, even this brave new world of connection is eerily bereft of femininity outside the performance of drag. She observes,

How should spectators relate to the separation of the female characters from every kind of community within the plays? Even Hannah, who is included in the final group, does not take part in the political discussion but only parrots unsolicited citations from the Bible. One wonders if there are any women who can play their parts sufficiently to become fabulous and hence to become citizens.<sup>63</sup>

In a perverse twist, the very discursive processes used to rehabilitate AIDS identities within the broader context of Americanness yield their very own exclusionary effects. Is there any discursive space for women to become AIDS citizens? The final chapter of *Ambivalent Blood* will explore the combinatory discourses in which AIDS, nationalism, and religion interact to define, in terms of gender, the limits of cultural and national intelligibility. For women with AIDS in America, this has no small bearing on whether they have any claim to humanness, let alone national belonging.

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<sup>62</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America*, 275.

<sup>63</sup> Meisner, 182.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SILENCE OF FAILED IMAGININGS

I know all there is to know about the crying game  
For I have seen him turn his face  
away from me  
So now I can say I've seen the Lord  
his aquiline nose  
his long sandy blond hair streaked with blue and red  
No tears were streaming down *his* cheeks  
- - -  
O they say he loves us all but for some reason he stopped loving me  
One day soon I'm going to tell the moon about the crying game  
and we'll cry together like the day I told my father I was HIV positive.<sup>1</sup>

In the preceding chapters of *Ambivalent Blood*, I have attempted to map the various ways in which religious grammars, in their overt, spiritual, and secular manifestations, have been deployed to address the crisis of intelligibility that has so marked the AIDS epidemic. So often the recourse to religion has served to index conceptions of America – its meaning, its purpose, and, most importantly, its prescriptions for citizen-belonging. In this final chapter, I wish to press further the self-evident criticism that the religious constructions of AIDS seduced by the language, aesthetics, and political exigencies of nationalism do not exist as neutral capital in the public sphere. Presidential assertions of American compassion for those stricken with disease, activist constructions of a cozy, desexualized AIDS spirituality, or the theatrical construction of AIDS as a messianic intervention in

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Tory Dent, "The Crying Game," *HIV, Mon Amour* (Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1999), 28-29. Tory Dent wrote three volumes of poetry which explore the dimensions of her experience as an HIV-positive woman, *What Silence Equals*, *HIV, Mon Amour*, and *Black Milk*. The second of these volumes, *HIV, Mon Amour*, is the winner of the 1999 James Laughlin Award of The Academy of American Poets.

history are not simply symbolic commodities left to individuals to consume as they please. These discourses are real and operate in the public sphere to shape what can be lived as “real.” As Paula Treichler elegantly argues, “...the social is as much the reality we inherit as a river or a body or a virus and often even more intractable.”<sup>2</sup> This intractability is precisely my concern. What is the cost of even the most elegant, aesthetically pleasing, and politically palatable construction of HIV/AIDS when such attempts necessarily must exclude as much as they include? What of this an understanding of a palatable AIDS achieved by virtue of the imperial and/or evangelical possibilities of Africanizing the epidemic? What is the existential, let alone experiential and social, consequence of laying claim to a desexualized citizenship? And what of a new affective community, for which AIDS serves as a reveille, that embraces a host of identities in salutary participation in a new political community – that is, all but women who may be invested in their own sexual desire? The final chapter of *Ambivalent Blood*, “The Silence of Failed Imaginings,” accents this last question above all others. In a discursive terrain which generates such diverse narrative options for AIDS identities – from Holocaust victimhood and survivorship to American prophethood and citizenship, from trenchant secular disavowals to amorphous spiritual embrace – how do we signify AIDS identities whose experiences and social markers exceed the available representational language designed to imbue their experiences with meaning and shelter their identities within an affective community? Despite the most sophisticated activism and discursive strategies,

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<sup>2</sup> Treichler, 328.

the crisis of signification of AIDS remains for those whose pain is thrust “outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and mastery.”<sup>3</sup> The poet Tory Dent, a modern day Antigone, represents a litmus through which so many of the representational interventions of AIDS are rendered shibboleths at best.

*The Illusory Seropositive Woman as Frankenstein’s Monster*

In “The Better Half Got the Worse End,” a 1997 article in *The New York Times* reporting on the striking disparity of reductions in AIDS-related deaths among men and women, articulated very divergent narrative trajectories in the history of HIV/AIDS in America. The article reinforces long-standing suppositions that the early history of HIV/AIDS mapped itself explicitly to the bodies of gay men, thus casting women in a host of stereotyped identity positions.

The *Times* reporter, Sheryl Gay Stolberg, reports:

In a sense, the AIDS gender gap reflects the history of women with AIDS, a history in which women have always lagged behind men. AIDS made its first appearance in the United States in 1981 in homosexual men, who are now reaping most of the benefits of early prevention and education efforts.<sup>4</sup>

One may rightly object to the characterization of homosexual “reaping the benefits” of their community’s identification with the diseases, particularly in

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<sup>3</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 69.

<sup>4</sup> The article, published in 1997, several years after the introduction of ARV therapies, noted that AIDS-related deaths had dropped by over 22% in men, whereas women experienced a decrease of but 7%. Moreover, infection rates, which had been in decline among male (predominately gay) populations, women were contributing in greater numbers to the HIV-infected roster. See Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “The Better Half Got the Worse End,” *The New York Times*, 20 July 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/20/weekinreview/the-better-half-got-the-worse-end.html> (accessed, January 5, 2012).

light of the many thousands of AIDS-deaths that preceded ARV therapies and the diminution of death and HIV-infection rates. Nonetheless, Stolberg's assertion is telling in that it powerfully reinforces the impression that women, who now constitute the majority of global HIV-infections, remain ancillary in the broader narrative of AIDS in America. As Paula Treichler notes in her now seminal essay "Beyond *Cosmo*: AIDS, Identity, and Inscriptions of Gender," the broader program of AIDS signification has worked "to discourage the formation and mobilization of meaningful identities for women."<sup>5</sup> The meaningful identity positions afforded to women are marked by a host of biomedical and social assumptions: Women have durable, rugged vaginas which resist HIV-infection in the course of normal penetrative heterosexual intercourse; women are less sexually assertive and aggressive than gay men; women are ideally positioned as caretakers; HIV-positive women are those who violate social normativity, prostitutes and IV-drug users, for example; HIV-positive women are socially disenfranchised on account of being poor women of color. Such inscriptions of HIV and gender inevitably sever chiasmatic relationships between the unique signatures of individual identity and experience and participation in broader registers of social belonging.

In the preceding chapter we have seen how the macro-construction of HIV/AIDS has long rested on the pathologization of gay men and their attending subject recuperation through an AIDS-activism driven by diverse constituencies within the gay community. Constructions of gender deployed in the effort to

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<sup>5</sup> Treichler, 235.

conceptualize AIDS-identities as (non)citizens and (un)American predominately often rendered women in an ancillary position in which the feminine becomes a signature of resuscitation, either of physical or social health. The opprobrium heaped upon gay men in the early-to-mind Eighties often underscored the aggressive appropriation of femininity by gay men. The intensification of Jerry Falwell's famous refrain, "God made Adam and Even, not Adam and Steve" suggested not an intensification of masculinity but rather emasculation if not sissification. The substitution of Eve by another Adam did not, in the Judeo-Christian context from which the Religious Right coordinated its stigmatization of PWAs, manumit the second Adam from two thousand years of Christian misogyny which identified Eve, in the words of Tertullian, as "the devil's gateway" through which death entered the world.<sup>6</sup> As we have seen with the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, invocation of the feminine has been deployed to alternately deemphasize perceptions of gay sexuality, constructed as perversely hyper and completely unproductive, and license male homosocial desire as the foundation of a newly defined community of diversified kinship relations. In both cases, the very present symbolic and social conceptualization of women and the feminine within the wider signifying practices of AIDS has, ironically, rendered women strangely absent in the metadiscourses which seek to explain what AIDS "really" is and who PWA really are in America.

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<sup>6</sup> See Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, Book 1, Chapter 1, available online from the *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm> (accessed, February 2, 2012).



The frames deployed by activists and artists alike to achieve some understanding of AIDS in America purportedly operate to negate the equation, SILENCE = DEATH. For Tory Dent, a poet who lived 17 of her 47 years with a seropositive status, these very frames, though well-meaning, coalesce in a discursive collage of erasure and entrapment, which she describes in her poem, “The Crying Game,” as the “silence of failed imaginings.”<sup>7</sup> In many respects, she represents the outer limit of representation in American AIDS discourses. Dent, a graduate of Barnard and New York University, lived as an educated white woman of apparent privilege; the attending appurtenances, in retrospect, afforded neither capital nor comfort in the discursive domain of AIDS dominated by complex articulations of religiously-informed morality, desire for American belonging, and gay communal experience and identity politics. Like Harper from Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, who is exiled to troposphere spectatorship in the final scene of the play, Dent’s work repeatedly expresses a terrifying sublimation of her own experiences as an HIV-positive woman. Dent clarifies the reality of Harper’s upward, tropospheric movement at the dénouement of the play, as little more than a feckless drive toward oblivion:

I have fallen a long way. I lie at the bottom, smashed  
like a dinner plate against the kitchen tile, china chips and jagged bits.  
I lie at the bottom, shattered and dangerous, looking up  
with a baby’s stunned engrossment. I’m moving closer to Plato and Mars.  
Clouds are flowering blue and mystical over the face of the stars, -  
It will not be quick. Death drinks me in, slow as syrup.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dent, “The Crying Game,” *HIV, Mon Amour*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Tory Dent, “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” *Black Milk* (Riverside-on-Hudson, NY: The Sheep Meadow Press, 2005), 24.

All of the available frames for witnessing AIDS as a socially comprehensible phenomena render her spectral, unmoored, and incomprehensible to anything but death. She has no citizenship in a perceived “risk group” with all of the discursive identifications associated with a community defined as other than the “general population.” She’s not a prostitute, the so-called “quasi-homosexual.” Negative identification is identification nonetheless. She has no community of gay homosociality forged and refined in the crucible of AIDS. She is not the recipient of the countless interventions, charitable, religious, and otherwise, extended to the new face of AIDS: heterosexual African women. Dent’s individuality is, as she proclaims, “instantly annihilated in the category of spectatorship.”<sup>9</sup>

Tory Dent’s work expresses the intractable perils of performing available subject positions in a public sphere in which she has no standing. Her poetic output interrogates the limits of grievability and intelligibility when constructions of AIDS accede to the constraints of religion and nationalism, the latter, which as Benedict Anderson reminds us in his 1983 landmark study, *Imagined Communities*, operates as secular religion securing the *Gemeinschaft* of a people threatened by the exigencies of modernity. *Gemeinschaft* communities forged on a national level operate through the logic of ascribed status, a status which is neither chosen nor achieved but rather assigned. Dent’s inherent dilemma derives from the discordance between the available AIDS assignments and the social profile through which she has access to the world beyond the hospital beds,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 20-22.

clinics, and medical offices which provide the one domain in which her subjectivity has any recognition, a monstrous one at that:

Out of depravation into ambivalence,  
out of misery into bravado, partisanship into evidence, crisis into  
narrative: she enters, recruit for scientific demonstration,  
the Frankenstein specimen of newfangled experimentation.<sup>10</sup>

The analogy to Shelly's Frankenstein and his infamous monster may seem an exercise in hyperbolic identification, but it operates as the first premise of Dent's poetic argument. She is a catachresis: the living dead. As Shelly's monster finds no succor in a world incapable of accepting its alterity, so too does Dent find the exigencies of her illness a type of social mask both unrecognizable and unacceptable. She declares, "HIV overrides my body as if overwriting the flesh."<sup>11</sup> This overwriting spells death, aborted life.

Indeed, the specter of abortion hangs over Dent's poetic outputs nearly as much as in *Frankenstein*. Victor is wracked with teeth-gnashing guilt throughout the novel for having denied his impulse to exterminate his thoughtless creation, a second-guessing he does not repeat when he chooses to destroy a second monster created to provide the first with companionship. Eventually, the abortive logic becomes ingrained within the monster itself. Before vowing to end his life on the funeral pyre, the creature proclaims over the death of his maker, Victor, "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on."<sup>12</sup> This moment of unusual insight suggests that a creature rendered

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<sup>10</sup> Dent, "Woman, Resurrected," *Black Milk*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Dent, "Fourteen Days in Quarantine," *HIV, Mon Amour*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Johanna M. Smith (Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's Press, 2000), 188.

incompatible with the world of the creator engenders a violence-legitimizing suffering. In the eighth stanza of Dent's most famous prose poem, "HIV, Mon Amour," she alludes to a startling event voiced nowhere else in her oeuvre. Somewhere in the South she basks in the picnicking atmosphere of a halcyon day, an atmosphere shockingly interrupted by a violent pronouncement:

The sound waves still surround me, red streamers, "Mommy!" "I think women who are HIV positive that have children are murderers, don't you?" said the woman on a lawn chair as she applied sunscreen to her legs with a kind of industry that now scares me. I looked to the lack of maintenance, made malevolent its static condition, the patches of scum stagnating on the surface buzzed in unison with the southern sun that forced itself into my face, an interrogation light, until I broke like an egg into sobs and let out the secret as if vomiting. The swimming pool, the kudzu, the lawns banded together in a lynching of green, Republican homogeneity, that later so convinced I allowed them to scrape me out, a batter bowl. The operating lamp like the southern sun shone down with satisfaction.<sup>13</sup>

HIV renders Dent, as an expectant mother, a murderer, a social status that becomes psychologically inscribed when abortion avails itself as the only remedy. Just as the monster uses the moment of his maker's death to articulate his own necessary erasure, Dent's own enforced monstrosity forces her to step outside of her suffering "and stare at it, self-contained as a miscarriage."<sup>14</sup> Her "silhouette erased in the process of acknowledgment," transports her to her own tomb, "sepulchral and low budget." And, as if directly addressing Shelly's monster, she fails to find any sensible origination of either her pain or existence: "Like aliens we rise out of nothing in order to return to nothing."<sup>15</sup> Yet, the return to nothing occurs while the body phenomenally lives in a sort of burnt-over winter. Dent

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<sup>13</sup> Dent, "HIV, Mon Amour," *HIV, Mon Amour*, 66.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

sarcastically suggests that something must proceed her in this living death: “Make a doll for me then, *faux* freak for its sister, produced from a factory of freaks as if someone really accepted you.”<sup>16</sup> In the creation of some sort of homunculus, society finds a way to assimilate the inassimilable. Yet, as she notes, this is destined to fail as tragically as Frankenstein’s experiment, for even the fabric of this surrogate human simulacra will continue to suck through its eyes “desire after desire” until the flesh and bone body, “bound and gagged like a rape victim,” is carted away in an ambulance.

### *Soldiering American Denials*

In her discursive embrace of a monstrous alterity to articulate the “failed imaginings” of AIDS discourse, Dent remains ferociously anathematic to any program of reclaimed citizenship that embraces a soteriologically defined America. Her poetic program avoids too many overt references to a sense of nation or citizenship, as both require stories which are both too big to articulate her diminishment and too small to encapsulate her overriding pain and ceaseless desire. Yet, when she does invoke the national imaginary, it is through the lens of an impossible rapprochement, in which her body serves a diegetic function marking America’s dark tastes for genocide, slavery, and blood sacrifice. And, more often than not, these sparse references often ambivalently invoke the complex status of the citizen-soldier, which, along with general references to war metaphors, is not an uncommon trope in the broader corpus of AIDS poetry. In “Fourteen Days in Quarantine,” she describes her release from medical quarantine

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

as an opportunity to once again don “civilian clothes.”<sup>17</sup> Her quarantine in the tuberculosis ward of the hospital resists clear definition, as it is unspecified whether Dent is a prisoner of war, a soldier drafted into service for biomedical research, or both. In another poem, “The Pressure,” Dent dissects the iconicity of American masculinity. American soldiers, the Marlboro Man, and even Marky Mark (whose naked torso was a near ubiquitous presence on billboards in the early Nineties) all represent images of health, courage, and the ideal configuration of properly proportioned and arranged sinew and muscle. Yet, as so many World War I poems convey with devastating clarity, the exigencies of war inevitably augers trauma, horror, and the vulnerability of physical perfection to mangling and slaughter. Dent responds to the referential instability of pain by breaking down into a “sloth of tears, their salty aftermarks imbricating my face, a kind of warrior’s mask of a warrior’s failure afore the clandestine ideal of physical perfection.”<sup>18</sup>

Paul Monette’s 1988 collection of poems, *Love Alone: 18 Elegies for Rog* represents one of the classic examples of a developed intertextual relationship between the trope of war, particularly as refined in World War I poetry, and the metaphoric construction of AIDS. Monette prefaces *Love Alone* with Wilfred Owen’s famous exordium, “Above all I am not concerned with poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity.”<sup>19</sup> Common among AIDS poems is the emphasis on the trauma and pain of combat, the mourning of lost

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<sup>17</sup> Dent, “Fourteen Days in Quarantine,” *HIV, Mon Amour*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Paul Monette, *Love Alone: 18 Elegies for Rog* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), xi.

brothers, and, perhaps most significantly, soldierly camaraderie. Invocation of the war metaphor has proven controversial in the broader analysis of discourses of illness and trauma. Susan Sontag's work has long argued that the metaphorization (and, hence, the macro-narrativization) of illness be retired, particularly those metaphors which infuse illness with militaristic meaning.<sup>20</sup> Military metaphors, she argues, amplify the fear and stigmatization of illness, creating both physical and psychic pain beyond the material reality of the disease as well as licensing burdensome political and government intervention. Like Sontag, Susan Jeffords has investigated the infiltration of military metaphors in the cultural production following the Vietnam War, and her work exposes how the rampant proliferation of soldier-hero images has led to a remasculinization of American culture, in which more parochial applications of power discover sanction.<sup>21</sup>

Sheryl Stevenson, arguing that invocation of the military metaphor may indeed serves broader signifying purposes that counter Sontag's aforementioned concerns about remasculinization and authoritarianism, posits:

Coming from those most deeply affected by the epidemic--and often from gay male writers--military metaphors have a decidedly different impact from that of martial imagery in biomedical discourse and mainstream journalism. For writers associated with what was once depicted as a "gay disease" to adopt the heroic stance of the warrior, or to claim that image for a PWA, is to reinvent, not simply reinforce, the dominant ideology of warfare. By writing their war, AIDS poets elevate their heroes, underscore

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<sup>20</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 94.

<sup>21</sup> See Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989).

their many losses, proclaim their alienation as embittered veterans, and chastise an indifferent public.<sup>22</sup>

As Stevenson notes, recourse to the war metaphor in AIDS poetry was most rigorously embraced by gay writers in 1980's when the countervailing narratives of the epidemic enumerated images of deportation, containment, ghettoization, pollution, and aversion. As a straight woman writing at the turn of the millennium, Dent's participation in this tradition may seem curious at first. Yet, the bulk of her allusions to soldiering and war operate not to inculcate either a sense of sorority or fraternity with fellow seropositives. It is, instead, to draw attention to the radical unmournability of her particular status as the HIV-already dead, an alienation so total that even the most revered symbolic interventions in AIDS signification, such as the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, seem not just paltry comfort but an undignified sham. If anything, Dent, as a living casualty, voices an increased agitation in bearing witness to commemoration for a death she has not yet experienced but nonetheless must perform. Preemptive commemoration affects a faulty citizenship.

Indeed, the intersection of commemoration and citizenship is a leitmotif running throughout Dent's work. Though she rarely addresses citizenship in explicit terms, she often scathingly deconstructs the monuments through which the unassimilable and unmourned are sewn back into the fabric of nation. Dent describes her lived existence as a sort of preamble to death in which every day is cleaved between the ferocious desires of the body which continued unabated and

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<sup>22</sup> Sheryl Stevenson, "'World War I All Over': Writing and Fighting the War in AIDS Poetry," *College Literature* 24, no. 1, (February 1997): 241.



her physical and social mutilation which annihilates all metaphors of social belonging. She describes this metaphoric lack as “hungry mouths in an orphanage,” as “starvation driven so deep inside me it’s written in the mutilation of my body, separating me, irreparably from myself, so I am left to keep vigil over a kind of vegetable, a love death...”<sup>23</sup> In one of her last published poems, “Black Milk,” she muses expands upon this imagined vigil:

Black trees, blue trees, white trees, bare trees --  
Whatever was my body has been returned to me  
in a made-of-trees coffin  
killed in action like a veteran husband, its flag  
a pitiful consolation,  
its flag a smug presupposition,  
for some greater cause more important  
apart from what you know to be the most important to you:  
his voice, his smile.<sup>24</sup>

The body delivered back to Dent as a “made-of-trees coffin” is both the somatic body wracked by “vomiting, allergic reactions, orgasm, coughing; involuntary humiliations, proof of living, of precious humanness”<sup>25</sup> – and the socially constructed body hewn and damaged from biomedical and religious discourses, both of which seem to alienate the poet from the exigencies of self. Invoking the glorious war dead, Dent declares the falsity of any transcendence to be conferred by “presuppositions for some greater causes.”<sup>26</sup> There’s nothing heroic in her physical putrefaction and social death. Dent juxtaposes the somber return of the war dead to American shores, an event rendered so sacred that even photographs are considered a profane offense, to her own reimagined inconsolable return

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<sup>23</sup> Dent, “The Crying Game,” *HIV, Mon Amour*, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Dent, “Black Milk,” *Black Milk*, 41.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

choked with the “kickback of jet fuel fume.”<sup>27</sup> This image impugns the sanctity of military ritual in which the long journey home for the war dead concludes with unperturbed solemnity on the tarmac. Whereas the mourning military family regards the coffin as nearly an unbearable hallmark to courage, duty, and, foremost, the desire for more life, for Dent the coffin only barely illuminates “wherein only regret to be alive alights in contrast.”<sup>28</sup>

The anesthetizing and purifying procedures of American memorialization hold no comfort for Dent. In “The Defeat of Linear Thinking,” she condescends to any program of commemoration or reporting that portends to bring AIDS atrocities into the homes of suburban families, wherein the seropositive living and dead beg for sympathy while vested citizens read the paper and make Sunday morning pancakes. Dent likens the attempts of friends to engage her suffering through sympathetic platitudes to a “war documentary photograph which can only be tolerated by a series of retouching until stripped of the hard edges, the deformations.”<sup>29</sup> Dent insists on the deformations as much as the public requires their removal in order to comprehend, to accept, to render palatable the indigestible other. In “Black Milk,” she prays not for the social pleasures of prosaicism or any “human enhancing stuff” that might finally differentiate her from any other “faceless mammal.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, she confronts Cleve Jones’s prelapsarian, desexualized quilt and transgresses its coded ethos. The insistence by many AIDS activists and the American public alike to proffer a quilt panel as a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>29</sup> Dent, “The Defeat of Linear Thinking,” *Black Milk*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Dent, “Black Milk,” *Black Milk*, 71.

newly-imagined birth certificate enacts its own violence, which Dent renders in sexually transgressive terms:

Doom me to sew the AIDS quilt from scratch, to re-engrave the names  
on the memorial wall in San Francisco, with my Bic fine point,  
alone in the fog and wind. Rape me there with rain,  
the black tears of my shame while chiseling the dark,  
for no atonement, I assure you, will come.<sup>31</sup>

In her disavowal of the type of reconfigured citizenship proffered by the Quilt, Dent recognizes her own isolation as a “traitor to the living, a traitor to the dead.”<sup>32</sup> When surveying the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial, Dent has a similar sense of negative identification. She imagines the wall glinting “as if a sheet of water slid, a garter snake, eternally down it like a waterfall formulated originally, as it were, in hell.”<sup>33</sup> She identifies not with the chiseled names on the gabbro walls, as she ruefully reminds us that more *people* than soldiers died in the Vietnam and Korean conflicts. Rather she establishes a metaphoric concordance with the origination of the water, the black snakes originating in hell that constrict Dent unto a “death spasm.” Ultimately, she rejects any bland comfort memorials provide for those living with and dying of AIDS. She closes her assessment of the Quilt with a staunch indictment that overrides the renegotiated contract for the diseased provided by memorials: “There are two truths no one will ever admit to: it can always get worse and there are things worse than death.”<sup>34</sup>

The aforementioned death spasm speaks to the undeniable interdiction on grief that confronts all communities, all people who at one time or another find

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>33</sup> Dent, “HIV, Mon Amour,” *HIV, Mon Amour*, 78.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 52.

severed the mediating link between a private individuals' irreducible pain and the public sphere that legitimates how grief may be exposed to the light of day. Dent speaks to the utter exhaustion of mobilizing effort to express what all of the well-worn public discourses on AIDS have rendered inexpressible:

After efforts to communicate, to rationalize, barter  
talk sense into twilight, its stubborn menu of aggregated darkness,  
we kneel defeated by our limits, a muddy knell within; that threshold  
of self-control, just a stick-drawn line in the dirt.  
There we pay homage, finally negotiating with terrorists  
to reason beyond our control –  
by resigning ourselves to befuddlement,  
the dizzy, invisible taste of it,  
the idiotic sublimation of you, Death.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, the invocation of negotiating with terrorists removes Dent and her imagined “we” from much semblance of sympathy, if not intelligibility, even in a post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world in which “We do not negotiate with terrorists” has been elevated as a civil religious mantra, particularly by the “Republican homogeneity” which previously rendered Dent a de-facto murderer.

Assigned a host of identity positions which render her powerful cries for justice ineffectual, leaving her with but one option: to name her pain. Indeed, the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> landscape marked by national grieving and dangerous nostalgia, provokes one of Dent's few direct political addresses. First, she returns to a modification of the soldiering motif, declaring “Our best men, at least twenty I knew personally, and our best women and children, gay or straight, died from AIDS.”<sup>36</sup> Though the language drips with militaristic patriotism, she incants once again that more people than soldiers perished in the Vietnam and Korean conflict.

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<sup>35</sup> Dent, “The Legend,” *Black Milk*, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Dent, “Black Milk,” *Black Milk*, 79.

The “people” are wrested from obscurity by virtue of metaphoric soldiering. Yet the citizen-soldiers, the AIDS-soldier, despite the most ardent attempts to resignify them, remain unknown, ungrieved losses, much like the millions of civilian dead throughout Vietnam, Cambodia, and Korea. Dent excoriates an indifferent public and an incompetent government for this unfathomable elision:

No Yankee Stadium tribute saluted those citizens.  
Patriotism turned its patrician cheek away,  
ignored their heroism. No appearance of the mayor,  
nor did Mariah Carey perform.  
And George W. who threw the first ball  
in defiant tribute, honoring the American Everyman  
before a backdrop of televised tears and frantic flag-waving,  
where was he when his dad said nothing about the plague?  
Did his father urge the Old Gipper to say it, to warn the country  
of the disease that is now dramatically reducing the world population?  
He could not say it. He could not say the word “AIDS.”  
If he had, half my friends might be alive.<sup>37</sup>

Though this stanza may invoke the old AIDS shibboleths explaining what silence equals, her invocation of the American everyman elucidates the extremity of her transformation into a subaltern. The everyman serves as the protagonist at the heart of a particularly liberal American story in which the Whitman “I” finds landscapes to exalt the body and self. Dent’s body, somatic and social, auger the imminent failing of language to restore her to a place of tribute wherein she becomes the American celebrated in the febrile nationalism of Yankee Stadium. Indeed, she addresses this linguistic failure directly – “Was I supposed to supply metaphor, beautify the language....What linguistic twirls would you prefer?”<sup>38</sup> If the language of patriotism and citizenship fails to resurrect Dent from her position

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 80.

as culturally intelligible and publically ungrievable, can she then turn to the “linguistic twirl” of religious discourse to find the solace of spiritual pleasure?

*The Breathtaking Indifference of Angels*

A pressing question that pulses through most AIDS cultural criticism is how to recapture positive presence in the world for the HIV/AIDS body. The *National Review*'s allusion to PWA as living skeletons feasting at the table of sexual liberation serves as an apt metaphor for the intractable dilemma confronting PWAs.<sup>39</sup> Neither fully dead nor living, the PWA occupies a position of living death, consigned to what Butler calls the “domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies.”<sup>40</sup> An emerging body of scholarly literature has charted with great sensitivity the various ways PWAs have memorialized their grief and invoked allegorical bonds of citizenship and belonging. As Sarah Brophy notes, a theme common in literary responses to HIV/AIDS is the frustration inherent in developing a vocabulary of unresolved grief for subjects who have no social standing to be grieved in the first place, a problem made insoluble by Treichler's “epidemic of signification” that renders all discursive choices already cemented with overriding meaning. As has been suggested in the previous two chapters, as well as in the analysis of Thomas Long's *AIDS and American Apocalypticism* from Chapter One, religious rhetoric has been asymmetrically mobilized as an appeal for compassion, meaning, and justice to parry condemnatory and marginalizing speech and policies. But due to the still-lingering toxicity of what Cindy Patton has described as the “crude mix of crusading authoritarianism and

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<sup>39</sup> See the Introduction, footnote no. 41.

<sup>40</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, xi.

religious populism” of the New Right,<sup>41</sup> many AIDS cultural producers have embraced affirmative approaches to religion which evince the hazy categories of the “spiritual” and “sacred” that are unhinged from the perceived institutional moorings of “old religion.” These rhetorical gambits were motivated/licensed in part by the gay community’s long distrust of organized religion (though it actively embraced and secularized its aesthetics and rituals) and by certain attempts within liberal mainline Christian denominations to recast the Gospels as a compassionate, ethical charter rather than emphasize its apocalyptic bombast. The construction of the suffering of Jesus with that of AIDS patients in one such example, perhaps best typified in a recent thesis that “Jesus has AIDS” propagated by minister Russell Moore of Highview Baptist Church.<sup>42</sup> As Toby Johnson argues, “Christians interpret the passion of Jesus, for instance, as of evidence of his saintliness, not of his sinfulness.”<sup>43</sup> In the United Methodist Church’s 1988 “Statement on AIDS,” the denomination’s bishops forcefully repudiate the Farwell’s analysis of God’s providence and quip “AIDS is not a sin....it is a virus!” and that all AIDS sufferers, “even homosexuals,” are

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<sup>41</sup> Cindy Patton, “The New Right,” 26.

<sup>42</sup> The connection between AIDS care and Jesus’s own ministration to the ill has a long pedigree in AIDS discourses. Dr. Russell Moore’s elaboration on this theme represents the pinnacle of this motif’s sloganeering gestures. For more Moore’s complete development of this charged aphorism, see his open blog post “Jesus has AIDS, 1 December 2009, <http://www.russellmoore.com/2009/12/01/jesus-has-aids/> (accessed, February 14, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> Toby Johnson, “Facing the Edge: AIDS and Spiritual Wisdom” in *Confronting AIDS Through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation*, ed. Judith Laurence Pastore (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1993), 127.

“individuals of sacred worth.”<sup>44</sup> The strategy employed by more secularly minded writers, like the aforementioned Toby Johnson, retains the ambiguous categories of the “spiritual” and “sacred.” Johnson, recapitulating the mapping of HIV/AIDS to the gay male body, mythologizes AIDS as an opportunity for gays, who are always “at the vanguard of spiritual intuitions,” to incite metareligious changes to humankind’s approach to the divine.<sup>45</sup> The characterization of gay men as the nouveau *homo religiosus* is well developed by Tony Kushner in *Angels in America*, wherein the suffering HIV/AIDS body discovers a spiritual realm in which God has absconded and left the regulation of society’s devastating encounter with AIDS to befuddled angels who repeatedly request that humans “stop moving!” Divine absence in heaven invites society to embark upon the “great work” promised by a radical and assuredly secular liberal pluralism in which fear is overcome and homosexual desire re-sanctioned. Here, new bonds of kinship and affinity transform the abject HIV/AIDS body (so well portrayed in early scenes featuring the play’s protagonist, Prior Walter) into an intelligible, livable body, both phenomenal and existential, embraced by a radically pluralized world of newly imagined kinship relations. Kushner’s is a secular program rendered in the most implicitly spiritual vernacular possible.

The allure of the “spiritual” and “sacred” as analytics is strong, particularly when applied to the evident suffering of the HIV/AIDS body. Spirituality, with all of its apolitical, idiosyncratic, commercial, and private

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<sup>44</sup> Council of Bishops, United Methodist Church, “A Statement on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome,” 20 April 1988, <http://gbgm-umc.org/health/aids/bishops88.stm> (accessed, February 14, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, 128.



connotations, seems a desirable alternative to tapping into a religious root source already laden with millennia of history, theology, and institutional inertia. Given her inability to connect with communities defined by national belonging, sexual identity, or stereotyped AIDS commitments, the language of spirituality would seem an entirely predictable discursive strategy through which Tory Dent could begin the process of rescuing herself from Butler's domain of abject, unlivable bodies. Her two most successful volumes, *HIV, Mon Amour* and *Black Milk*, were predominately composed a decade after the most virulent rhetoric of the Religious Right had subsided and well into the ARV-therapy era of AIDS treatment, both factors which would seemingly provide more hospitable discursive grounds for a rehabilitative approach utilizing a broadly defined religious imaginary. Indeed, Dent's poetry pulsates with religious language and themes, so much so that her work has been described as spiritually complex and vital. During a nearly hour-long 2001 Library of Congress interview with Dent, Grace Cavalieri repeatedly evoked the "spiritual" and "sacred" to describe the energies issuing forth from Dent's readings of her own poems. Cavalieri interpolated the interview with affirmations such as, "I can feel the energy, Tory," "There is something powerfully sacred in these poems," and "I wish everyone could hear these words and learn from this spiritual wisdom."<sup>46</sup>

Dent, however, demurs from affirming the interviewer's reaction, and it is clear that the invocation of these categories – energies, spiritual, sacred – represent

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<sup>46</sup> Tory Dent, interview with Grace Cavalieri (7 December 2001), The Library of Congress Webcasts, [http://loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature\\_wdesc.php?rec=3289](http://loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=3289) (accessed, February 14, 2011).

thematizations that have become habituated in certain sympathetic discourses from which Dent derived neither meaning nor solace. Indeed, after several more attempts by Cavaleri to “spiritualize” the poems of *HIV, Mon Amour*, Dent unexpectedly described them as “psalms for atheists.” Needless to say, from that moment on Cavaleri desisted from further attempts to thematicize Dent’s work beyond the poet’s own self-assessments. The poet’s resistance to spiritual characterizations is most clearly articulated in the twenty-second stanza of “HIV, Mon Amour” wherein she lambasts her sympathizers, her friends, for begrudging her disavowal of the AIDS nimbus. After summarizing the litany of procedures through which she is rendered but a simulacrum, a veritable rag doll, she incredulously asks, “And you give me attitude about not being spiritual?”<sup>47</sup>

Accordingly, the sumptuous but by no means redolent religious language suggests that these constructions of the “spiritual” and “sacred” should not be taken as an existential or social program of rehabilitation. At best, Dent’s poetry illuminates a deep ambivalence towards the power of religious metaphor. Her poetry suggests that the density of meaning surrounding HIV/AIDS places her beyond the pale of religious language for bodily resurrection or social repatriation. Her poems interrogate with curiosity, oftentimes verging on incredulity, how so many have reimagined religious tropes to create a livable life, a grievable self, and a loss worth mourning with the very same transcendent symbols used ideologically to produce “a crisis of stigma, the social death” that

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<sup>47</sup> Dent, “HIV, Mon Amour,” *HIV, Mon Amour*, 80.

forged so many “humiliated hearts.”<sup>48</sup> With every linguistic turn toward a religious rapprochement, her verse reveals the seemingly intractable task of signifying her body with religious metaphor in such a way to achieve anything capable of arresting her social entombment and phenomenal death. Her poems create stormy and often contradictory movement between hidden gods evoked as unknown saviors, a forgiving transcendent, a brutish Father, a Marian figure moved to grief before the birth of an already-dead child, hellfire and heaven, and genocidal-minded angels. Dent’s poetry resists invocations of such anaesthetized categories of the “spiritual” or “sacred” in favor of a fragmented, ambivalent, but nonetheless concrete religious landscape that leaves the reader with an overriding sense of her devastation. This devastation is unmitigated in dimension, and there is no comic relief, no hope for the happy ending promised in the queer utopic nation of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*.

In Kushner’s play, angels, couching and befuddled, are strategically deployed to call the play’s protagonist to prophecy. Prior Walter, ill beyond imagination, abandoned by his boyfriend, and terrified by impending death, learns that human activity and desire have left heaven in ruins and the universe without a godhead. Walter ultimately rejects the Angel of America’s book of prophecy and the call for human stasis; in doing so, Walter realizes his desire for more life and love and returns home, much like Joseph Smith, to enact the restoration of his tattered community. In her startling poem, “When Atheists Pray,” Dent pleadingly inquires, “Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders?”

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<sup>48</sup> Dent, “When Atheists Pray,” *Black Milk*, 5-6.

In what follows, Dent deconstructs, if sometimes indirectly, Kushner's deployment of angels, symbolic or otherwise, as an auger of messianic transformation. She describes petitions to angels as reflexive response to "gross marginalization" in which "We return to angels like a dog to the grave of its dead master, out of lack of recourse to something greater than ourselves, because we cannot make sense of suffering."<sup>49</sup> Eventually, she predicts, the silence of angels reveals prayer for what it is, "the act of begging really."<sup>50</sup> If through begging Angels finally do arrive, Dent laments, "it's so late that, desecrated by loss and disease, it's the stumps of our amputated limbs we thank them for, our most natural, instinctual capacity to love ruined, pitied, abolished."<sup>51</sup>

Diseased love deprives Dent of the very means to forge the affective relationships required to participate in an imagined community – the community fabricated by Jones's stitched revolution and Kushner's millennial promises. This depravation elicits within her poetic program a repeated and provocative dalliance with fascist references. She indicts angels as fascists and then proceeds to adopt a fascist persona in imaging the angels' AIDS-enabled deaths, which forecloses their transcendent powers. She places one in a hospital to become her doppelganger:

I will the nurse who's responsible for your morphine  
to run behind schedule. She can't be located.  
Therefore, you die, horrid angel, a horrible death;  
you die incrementally, without honor or counsel,  
while I watch, like a victim's family member  
in the auditorium of your execution chamber.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 5.

I regard you coldly as if I were an angel, while you pray to angels,  
pray to me. I observe disdainfully while you pray hard for pardon,  
matted wings shaking with emphasis, your idiot angelic eyes  
clouding up with cataracts incurred by grief.  
You pray, which means you beg, homeless angel, veteran angel, hostage  
angel, beg of me for the pain to stop. But the pain will not stop,  
it will not, My Angel. I shake my head, shrug,  
“But these are the mysteries of life,” I say with my shoulders,  
my pretend wings. I enjoy your suffering as you enjoyed mine.<sup>52</sup>

This stanza is no exercise in sadism. It performs a series of disavowals that resonate within the broader program of AIDS discourses. Throughout Kushner’s *Angels in America*, Reagan era policies are often linked (usually through Louis Ironson’s broadside political critiques) with the fascism of the Third Reich. The allure of fascist political landscapes is that they necessitate counterrevolution, which is, after all the promised, if heterodox, messianic intervention of Kushner’s play. Dent, however, evokes fascism not in terms of counterrevolutionary politics but rather for underscoring with terrifying effect the mutilation of bodies licensed by any regime that imagines suprapersonal community forged by religion, clean blood, medical experimentation, and, perhaps even mythologized homoerotic ancestry.

The suprapersonal community, *Gemeinschaft* actualized, no matter how much it nods to diversity, enacts violent and indifferent exclusions to maintain the mythos of unity among a welter of diverse constituencies. In “The Defeat of Linear Thinking,” Dent makes a startling claim that parallels her calculated satisfaction as the handmaiden of angelic death. She reveals, “So when I imagine the face of God, I imagine Hitler” and, later, “I identify my reflection as either

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 6.

Hitler's or God's."<sup>53</sup> At first the claim reeks of a hyperbolic distortion in the tradition of dramatic self-identification as saint or anti-Christ, but in subsequent stanzas, Dent unpacks the statement. She claims identification with the self-destructive God "who can't seem to help himself from harming others."<sup>54</sup> At the heart of the poem is a polarization of identity in which Dent is torn between two incompatible subject positions. She pantomimes on a stage of "a few flattering though shameful referrals."<sup>55</sup> These referrals are the most salubrious tropes of empowerment conferred on the ill: innocence, victimhood, courage, fighting spirit, rise-up for the future, more life! The tropes prove exhausting. Dent elaborates on this faux reality when she concedes, "It's art that perpetuates my sputtering life, fueled by diluted petrol."<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, Dent cannot acquiesce to these tropes, to platitudes such as "bad things happen to good people," nor can she accede to the sympathetic facades that display themselves before her own pathetic figure. She returns to a narrative alluded to in *HIV, Mon Amour*, in which the ravages of the virus or, perhaps, the pugilistic rhapsody of AIDS discourse rendered her child stillborn or, more likely, authorized the author's decision to abort what otherwise would have been a celebrated pregnancy. Casting off the platitudes of affirming AIDS speech, she invokes her life as a "murderess" and equates it empathetically to Andrea Yates, who notoriously drowned her five children in a bathtub in 2001. She empathetically wishes she could drown her own isolation and helplessness, conditions which engender feelings of a POW

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<sup>53</sup> Dent, "The Defeat of Linear Thinking," *Black Milk*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

never to be released to the homeland. In fantasies of interior tyranny, she finds an emotional closet of black and white impervious to the ever-exhausting and provisional shades of grey, a black and white capable of entertaining genocidal fantasies. She concludes the poem, “I know because I’ve acquiesced to the face of Hitler, to the face of God, and watched myself as if through the eyes of God engage in an act inconsequential and benign.”<sup>57</sup> Though not explicitly stated, Dent equates her interior world populated by unsanctioned violence to both the physical genocide of the Third Reich and the bio-political genocide of AIDS-era America. All have acceded to a banal, “inconsequential” violence sanctioned by ideologies promulgated by the state.

Unlike the motifs which so readily populate most AIDS writing, Dent refuses an easy identification with history’s extensive tableau of victimhood. There is no spiritual nourishment located in consistent invocations of the world’s extensive roster of genocide, for such consumption, in Dent’s view, is akin to chewing on human cinders and furthering the diminishment, if possible, of the dead. Conversely, the identification with the tyrant God, the fascist dictator, serves as rebuke to the panoply of ideologies, discourses, simply-hewn narratives, and memorials that would otherwise attempt to achieve a comprehensive solution to the plague’s epidemic of signification. She likens all of these interventions, the symbolic wars, to celebrated bonfires of victory, commemorations in which “the bowed heads of loved one, baleful flowers lean obliquely toward the nothing with

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 32.

which their relationship continues.”<sup>58</sup> These bonfires “encourage the russet horizon to burnish darker, hotter, red as a Doberman’s tongue and as reliable in its destructive motives.”<sup>59</sup> Russet horizons and red Doberman tongues invoke the AIDS red ribbon. Conceived in 1991 in a partnership between the Visual AIDS in New York and Broadway Cares organizations, the red ribbon became an international symbol of AIDS community and solidarity. Like the Quilt, the red Ribbon seems incapable of masking the “mass graves outnumbered by singular ceremonies.”<sup>60</sup> Of socially enforced ritual of communal belonging and existential self-creation, Dent finds but turmoil in which she becomes increasingly an inassimilable immigrant in her own country. The expectations of Quilt memorials, red ribbons, emancipatory politics, and messianic angels enact their own authoritarianism. Dent describes her own capitulation to this surveillance as being akin to gun-point prayer to her wished-dead angels. Of being reduced to prayerful begging, she explains,

We hated the world that made us do it,  
while the calamity of angels defaced us gleefully in their light.  
They belittled us beneath the vile feathers of their interwoven wings,  
their pinched judgmental expression, their pursed lips,  
rasping tsk-tsks like the rattle of hunger from viper snakes.<sup>61</sup>

When Dent asserts in this poem, “I believe in nothing, I mean just that,”<sup>62</sup> the reader has every cause to believe her. She exhorts the reader to “stop glamorizing the eternal,” for it gives her no peace of mind. The identification of her image to

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<sup>58</sup> Dent, “Time on Fire,” *Black Milk*, 103.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>61</sup> Dent, “When Atheists Pray,” *Black Milk*, 9.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



that of a Hitleresque God exposes, with raw intensity, the severity of her abjection for which alliances with a crucified Christ or a gassed Jew can serve no panacea.

*Wherein the Body Remains*

Dent would surely resist this analogy, but the experience of reading her prose is akin to explication conducted in sheol, the underworld of Hebrew imagination in which all souls, regardless of their moral signature, exist in perpetual shade, cut off from both the divine and the exquisite pleasures of materiality. Peace, harmony, and citizenship all seem commodities too cruel and absurd to populate Dent's diageitic framework. In "The Crying Game," Dent exhaustedly confesses,

Don't want no more  
of the purifying, of the placating, of the penury ritual  
of self-deprivation of the crying game, the goals, overly ambitious, of its  
refinement like spiritual fasting for which fasting, broth and  
bread, then bread and water, then just water, only water, itself will  
not provide a spiritual dimension, an exaltation that results from  
impoverishment, base in expectation, ingenuous intent by being void  
of intent, of sacrificial ecstasy comprised of only one desire, only one  
like water, a fasting of desires until living upon one, desiring only one  
desire, the desire for atonement is only that.<sup>63</sup>

What we confront in this stanza is evidence that nothing ensures that embodied suffering, emotional suffering for that matter, are meaningful. There is for Dent no fortuitous orientation toward religious metaphor that reigns in the crisis of the somatic body and reduces it to a stable and intelligible existential body for self and others. Rather than a life made meaningful by a transcendent signifier, Dent admits that her strongest communicative bond is with death. She confides in the poem "What Calendars Have Become,"

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<sup>63</sup> Dent, "The Crying Game," *HIV, Mon Amour*, 30.

I felt a relationship with death, a communication, it was more familiar than I had ever imagined...It was not foreign, but it was not a homecoming either. There was no god, no other land, no beyond; no amber, no amethyst, no avatar.”<sup>64</sup>

Elaine Scarry famously makes the argument that acute bodily pain contracts the world and actively destroys language. A parallel process might well hold true for the epidemic of signification surrounding AIDS. The density of certain prescriptive grammars contracts the world and provides experience only the most ambiguous menu of meaning. At what point do the operative discursive codes evoked by AIDS erect an immutable chasm between the sufferer and society wherein the HIV/AIDS body is condemned to death prior to any possibility of life?

By forsaking the sedimented speech of modern American spirituality, I suggest that Dent powerfully underscores the crisis of meaning in this epidemic of signification. Her body phenomenally and existentially bears the weight of the AIDS’s discursive history. Hers is a convex world. As her body lurches forward in disintegration, the horizon she approaches becomes ever more pinched for lack of possibility. In the thirty-third stanza of “HIV, Mon Amour,” Dent’s psalms for atheists, the poet concedes,

Only that which I can carry  
am I allowed to bring with me in exodus from my life, the total sum I  
know from its part, a cruel prescience; the seer of my skeleton before  
pared to actuality.”<sup>65</sup>

Here she starkly reveals what is left when all of the “what silence equals” interventions have pared away all meaningful inscriptions. She continually

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<sup>64</sup> Dent, “RIP, My Love,” *HIV, Mon Amour*, 38.

<sup>65</sup> Dent, “HIV, Mon Amour,” *HIV, Mon Amour*, 91.

inquires, “What will humanize me from faceless mammal?” and “What then after faith for the lost?”<sup>66</sup> What is left is a body, which despite all of its somatic reductions, continues to desire. She concedes that we have a pressing need to make up something to rationalize the savagery meted to the phenomenal and social body worthwhile. For Dent, the pressing question is why fight, why press forward in a sand-sack of a virus-laden body that evades all interventions, particularly those of the “fraudulent reassurances” of country and faith? She derives no answer but one – and that is that the body requires no humanization, no rationalization. The body, even in its putrefaction, desires. Dent concedes as much, in the final line of the final poem in *Black Milk*, she declares, “The last sound heard will be my stomach growling.”<sup>67</sup> The stomach remains indifferent to cultural consensus. There is “just flesh” and to know physical closeness “is what makes anything matter, ineffable or otherwise.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Dent, “Black Milk,” *Black Milk*, 71.

<sup>67</sup> Dent, “Drug Holiday,” *Black Milk*, 115.

<sup>68</sup> Dent, “Black Milk,” *Black Milk*, 71.

## EPILOGUE

### ANTIGONE IN THE AGE OF AIDS

On October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute opened an exhibition entitled “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture.” Among the exhibition’s works was a truncated, four-minute version of David Wojnarowicz’s (1954-1992) silent film, *A Fire in My Belly*, which the artist created shortly after being diagnosed with HIV in the late 1980’s. The film addresses both the psychic and physical suffering of those living with HIV/AIDS, as well as the artist’s own ambivalence concerning his Catholic upbringing. The inclusion of a fourteen-second segment of the film featuring ants crawling over a crucifix drew opprobrium from the Catholic League and conservative legislatures, including then soon-to-be House Speaker John Boehner. The video installation was characterized as “hate speech” against Christians, anti-Catholic, and an exhibition of religious criticism that would not be tolerated if “the body of Mohammed” had substituted for the crucifix. Martin Sullivan, director of the National Portrait Gallery, enacting orders delivered by the Smithsonian’s chief executive, G. Wayne Clough, removed the video installation from the exhibition not wanting to further incite the ongoing conversation in Congress concerning federal spending for cultural organizations.<sup>1</sup>

The Smithsonian’s removal of *A Fire in My Belly* resurrected sharp rhetoric from public art controversies of past decades, such as those concerning Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* and Chris Ofili’s elephant dung-adorned *The Holy*

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<sup>1</sup> Dave, Itzkoff, “National Portrait Gallery Removes Video Criticized For Religious Imagery,” *New York Times*, December 1, 2010.

*Virgin Mary*. The attending debate has typically centered on free speech, censorship, the role of the federal government in public arts programs, and the immemorially blurry line separating church and state. Such debates are as important as they are predictable, but they mask the cultural and epidemiological subtexts in which Wojnarowicz's work continues to operate. June 2011 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the cultural, political, intellectual, and, for so many, embodied engagement with HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup> So much, and so terribly little, has changed in these thirty years. With the advent of antiretroviral drugs in the mid-to-late 1990's, the HIV/AIDS crisis, particularly in industrialized countries, turned a corner. The visible scars of AIDS, the wasting and the Kaposi's sarcoma, disappeared, and seropositive test results were no longer held to be death sentences. Indeed, during the second Bush administration, HIV/AIDS, as a national discourse, had become fully Africanized; the plague was under control at home and was now, as it ever was, the ravage of a still "dark continent." In post-9/11 America, Islamofacism and the war on terror has replaced fears of a "millennial plague" in the nation's perennial apocalyptic fantasies. Seropositive status has succumbed to marketing campaigns and red ribbons that render HIV/AIDS as but one of a collection of designer identities marketed with all of Madison Avenue's creative capacity in every gay periodical.

But the developments of the past ten years belie the reality of the epidemic in the West. A report released by UNAIDS (United Nations Joint Program on

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the Arts, Literature, and Religion section of the American Academy Religion's annual meeting program will solicit proposals on the theme of "Thirty Years of AIDS."

HIV/AIDS) attests to the sobering reality. In 2007, an excess of 2.5 million people became newly infected with HIV, with 33 million people now living with HIV across the globe. Another 2 million died of AIDS. In America, the 1990s witnessed first a stabilization of new HIV infection rates and then a decline of AIDS-related deaths. Yet, by the end of 2007, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that HIV-infection rates, thought to be around 40,000 per year, would need to be revised upward by 50% for 2001-2005 and that certain sub-populations, mainly ethnic minorities and gay males, showed evidence of surging infection rates surpassing rates last seen in the early 1990's.<sup>3</sup> The history of AIDS signification may feel well-worn and part of a culture long vanquished in our age of rapidly changing landscapes; the epidemiology, however, suggests that the era of HIV/AIDS signification is by no means a completed project.

As the Wojnarowicz affair suggests, however, the discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS remains unsettled and intimately linked to religious constructions of sexuality, selfhood, and citizenship. It is a mistake to reduce the controversy to either a question of censorship or proper commemoration of a completed chapter in American history. Plainly stated, HIV/AIDS continues to invade the cultural space of living and dying in America. The vigorous condemnation of Wojnarowicz's installation evidences the fact that recourse to religious language for the purpose of rendering HIV/AIDS scrutable is by no means a discursive

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<sup>3</sup> Gardiner Harris, "Figures on HIV Rate Expected to Rise," *The New York Times*, 2 December 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/02/health/02aids.html> (accessed, August 13, 2011).

practice without incumbent risk. Much remains at stake for the continued cultural and existential construction of HIV/AIDS, particularly as infection rates rise among discernible sub-populations and the long-term efficacy of antiretroviral drugs remains uncertain. The signifying practices for HIV/AIDS remain – and will remain – relevant and contested.

The impulse to signify AIDS is irrepressible and, oftentimes, crucial. Stephen Crites has long argued that an essential mark of humanness is the ability to articulate one's experience as history, and, accordingly, human experience is infused with a narrative quality. In his famous essay, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," Crites offers his thesis with lyrical simplicity: "Narrative quality is to experience as musical style is to action. And action and experience interpenetrate."<sup>4</sup> Or, as Paul Ricoeur suggests, life is a story in a "nascent state," and that living is "an activity and a passion in search of a narrative."<sup>5</sup> So too is AIDS. *Ambivalent Blood*, in many respects, voices a significant caution in the endeavor to transform thousands of *petits récits* from inchoate narratives of suffering, isolation, and closeted death into a fabled story of patriotic Americana. The final chapter's exploration of the oeuvre of poet Tory Dent forcefully argues that even the most salutary attempts to resuscitate HIV/AIDS identities within the story of America risks perpetuating an unrealizable fantasy of innocence and invulnerability. Dent is, in many respects, Antigone in the age of AIDS.

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39, no. 3 (September 1971): 291.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of a Narrative," in David Wood, ed., *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1992): 20.

The figure of Sophocles's Antigone, then, may seem a curious, final point of departure for an analysis of HIV/AIDS and religious discourse. The most popularly articulated legacy of Antigone is that of a feminine heroine who resists the authoritarian claims of the state. The representation of Antigone as a political subversive and feminist icon is certainly a powerful appropriation of Sophocles' heroine. Yet, it is just one many possible readings and should not be regarded as a static formula. Following Diana Fuss in calling for an interpretive theory that allows for transgression and dissidence, Antigone can be framed as a site of countermovement to normative configurations of politics, sexuality, and violence.<sup>6</sup> In the emerging body of Judith Butler's political philosophy, Antigone operates as a source of meditation on the connection between violence, mourning, and what it means to be human. Butler has argued that grievability, the ability to be mourned as a consequential loss, is a prerequisite for communal belonging and intersubjectivity. In *Precarious Life*, Butler asks how it is – under which conditions and through what processes – that America defines its enemies as so radically otherized that they become objects unworthy of mourning, thus deemed inimical to citizenship and existence. This is a question of importance not just to those who undergo otherizing subjection, but to Americans in general who only recall the precariousness of life when (re)alerted to the dangers of sex during times of pestilence or the fragility of quotidian life when airplanes, unimaginably, fly into skyscrapers of shimmering glass. Here, mourning, which Freud defines as a psychic response to loss and the process through which a mourner expiates

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<sup>6</sup> See Diana Fuss, "Inside Out," in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1-10.



grief and moves on from the vestiges of past attachments, becomes not merely a psychological construct but as an implement of affective politics, the condition through which citizens are to engender feelings of affection and loyalty to the state. The state plays no small role in determining which emotional relationships between citizens receive sanction and recognition and, even more intimately, how citizens are also encouraged to feel about and represent others in the public domain. As has been suggested throughout *Ambivalent Blood*, the work of affective politics can be structured oppressively, forestalling the formation of new affective relationships. But can it also be transformative, creating otherwise impossible affinities?

What does it mean to be ungrieveable, to be placed beyond the capacity to mourn? Grievability is the very condition through which a society can recognize vulnerability and identify forms of meaningful loss, both of which have a regulatory impact on state and social violence. For Butler, the figure of Sophocles's Antigone possesses an epiphanic function through which the issues of mourning and cultural intelligibility are linked to notions of kinship, which Butler argues is an ontologically critical variable in establishing what it means to be human. In *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, Butler interrogates how dynamics of power and desire operate in Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, the third sphere of the "right," which Butler describes as a field of cultural intelligibility through which "reciprocal recognition is possible."<sup>7</sup> Kinship and sociality, rather than being distinct, are presented as operating in tandem.

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 13.

Repudiating the long held episteme that kinship is formed pre-socially through “natural relations,” kinship is revealed to be constructed by forces of power that precede a life’s entrance into the social world. As recognition of kinship is determinative of one’s ability to operate visibly and successfully in the social world, a livable life is thus constructed upon society’s recognition of legitimate kinship, which is an ascribed, not a natural, conception. Antigone represents a rupture in the representational practices of normative kinship. She is of the House of Thebes, daughter of Oedipus. As a product of incest and violence, she exceeds the vocabulary of kinship that Butler argues is the precondition of the human. The parallel to those touched by AIDS said to operate in the sexual margins – homosexuals, prostitutes, and seropositive women whose procreative capacity becomes suspect – is by no means subtle.

As Antigone emerges onto the stage in Sophocles’ tragedy, she plays a human, yet she is not recognized fully as such. In accepting her death sentence for having defied Creon’s decree prohibiting the burial of Polynices, her brother, she exclaims to her sister who shall escape death, “ Courage! Live your life. I gave myself to death, long ago, so I might serve the dead.”<sup>8</sup> Even prior to her physical entombment, Antigone represents living death; in her final lament she decries the misfortune of the House of Laius and how the fate of an incestuous marriage bed murders her own hopes for marriage and drags her “down to death alive.”<sup>9</sup> She operates, as Butler suggests, as a catachresis:

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<sup>9</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, and Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1984), lines 630-631, 947-58.

She is not of the human but speaks in its language. Prohibited from action, she nevertheless acts, and her act is hardly a simple assimilation to an existing norm. And in acting, as one who has no right to act, she upsets the very vocabulary of kinship that is the precondition of the human, implicitly raising the question for us of what those preconditions really must be.<sup>10</sup>

Antigone operates as a paradox of the subjection process in that she, in demanding burial rights for her “treasonous” brother, is confined in her ability to effectively (if meaningfully) affect resistance to the dictates of the state. This confinement is due to the fact that Antigone must launch the claim for her brother’s grievability within the very subjugating/disciplining context that creates the conflict. In other words, she, too, is a product of her environment and thus makes appeals utilizing the already extant discursive capital presented to her: appeals to state, religion, and kinship. With all three appeals she fails to subvert the order; her disobedience is read as an untenable transgression and she, too, becomes, much like Tory Dent or Harper Pitt, a precarious life.

Antigone represents the limits of human subjectivity, which remains deeply rooted in the conventions of future. Her womb is symbolically diseased by her forefathers’ transgressions. The Greek polis provided few juridical entitlements to women, but even fewer so for women, like Antigone, unable to progenerate the future. Antigone’s alterity prohibits our gaze and we cannot mourn her, a fact that she knows in advance:

No one to weep for me, my friends  
No wedding song – they take me away  
In all my pain . . . the road lies open, waiting.  
Never again, the law forbids me to see  
the sacred eye of day. I am agony!

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<sup>10</sup> Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 82.

No tears for the destiny that is mine,  
no loved one mourns my death.<sup>11</sup>

No loved one mourns her death, save for her bridegroom Haemon who ultimately perishes, and she is condemned to a perpetual melancholy, for her desire to grieve never finds sanction in Thebes. She is dismissed as the product of untoward sex accursed by the gods who only sanction her actions through the blind prophet Tiresias after it is too late – we ought not have pity. Modern audiences, which have sympathetically regarded Antigone as victim and feminist heroine, nonetheless operate in a world where configurations of untoward sex are used strategically to enforce various programs of otherization, oftentimes for the purpose of justifying state-sponsored violence. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, constructions of deviant sex have been deployed effectively in the United States’ justifications for various forms of state-sponsored violence. Al-Qaeda operatives have been depicted as cave-dwelling troglodytes prone to carnival sexuality. Military intervention in Afghanistan has been, in part, rationalized by outcries over the Taliban’s manifold abuses of burqa-clad women. A hoard of pornography was, allegedly, among the items confiscated from Osama bin Laden’s Abadabad compound after the capture/kill operation in May 2011. Among the most sought after targets in the United Nations on-going military offensive against the Libyan regime is Colonel Gaddafi’s harem. The Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal provided a brief moment of uneasiness as the apparatus of state failed to fully manage the public’s *droit de regarde*. Images intended to construct a tableau of Oriental sexual deviance were revealed to be something

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<sup>11</sup> *Antigone*, lines 963-969.

quite different: a ritual of imperial masculinity, enforced sodomy, and racialized violence. The stain of Abu Ghraib spectacle, however, served but as visual ephemera that has done little to alter the American public's perception of the true costs of war.

It is unclear that Sophocles's tragedy intends to impugn state violence. By play's end, Antigone hangs herself rather than suffer death by entombment. Her suicide sets into motion more death. Haemon, son of Creon and bridegroom to Antigone, resolves his inviolable loyalty to kin and his desire/lament for Antigone by committing suicide, upon which his mother, Eurydice, follows suit. Creon comes to lament the tragic events his edict has set into motion, but it seems his reconsideration is provoked by a sense of personal loss, not a realization of the morally tenuous position created by the absolutism of state or the manifold ways in which the *reasons of the state* compel violent ends. It is left to the Chorus at play's end to announce the wisdom Creon failed to apprehend. Yet the wisdom espoused by the Chorus addresses only the imperative of religious claims: "reverence toward the gods must be safeguarded."<sup>12</sup> As many have noted, Creon's position prohibiting the burial of Polynices, grounded in sanctity of a polis safe-guarded by the gods against treason and defilement, is just as religious as Antigone's claim for the rites of burial.

Though Butler makes but one reference to AIDS in her work on Antigone, it is nonetheless powerful. The illegitimacy conferred unto Antigone by virtue of her removal to regimes of normative sex and kinship makes her publically

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<sup>12</sup> *Antigone*, line 1467.

unrecognizable – her plight alien, her fight futile, and her loss ungrievable. Butler suggests that Antigone “in this way prefigures the situation that those with publically ungrievable losses – from AIDS, for instance – know too well. To what sort of living death have they been condemned?”<sup>13</sup> In her final soliloquy, Antigone starkly articulates what life equals in a world that precludes any possibility of meaningful public recognition, political agency, and sexual freedom: “In all my pain...the road lies open, waiting.” The open road is death. Her suicide by hanging in a walled tomb provocatively indicates the failed and fatal consequences of her transgression. Nonetheless, the *raw exposure of her pain* – to Creon the king, to the Chorus, to audiences today – produce a *kairos*, an opening in the aforementioned road to dissolution. For the Greeks, *kairos* represented a rupture of synchronous time, and in-between time, in which the ordained scripts open themselves to critique, to modification, to repair, to renewal. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag argues that the spectacle of pain – when honest, devoid of prurient spectatorship, and unhinged from the rhetorical frames that would otherwise explain the pain way – can become a conveyance to “moral or psychological adulthood.” She argues, “To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about that hell, how to moderate hell’s flames. Still, it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one’s sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Tory Dent, a modern-day Antigone, serves an

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<sup>13</sup> Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 114.

epiphanic function through her raw articulation of pain that cannot be nearly explained away or justified through any discursive regime sanctioned by America's affective politics so disciplined by the myths Americans live by. For Dent, these myths, including their attending memorials designed to reconstruct loss, are cul-de-sacs of torment. Through intimate contact with Dent's pain and ravaged body (or Antigone's), a contact devoid of prurient rubbernecking, the future's mythic continuity, with all of its disciplining scripts, perhaps will yield their transcendent, unimpeachable claims. In their pain, the road lies open and waiting. We need a future that resists glamorizing the eternal and a present made bearable without regarding the past as a banquet of nostalgia-inspired cannibalism. Continuing as we have ensures the road's vanishing point is always near at hand.

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