UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

Of Fear and Hope:
A Phenomenology of HIV in Danez Smith's Poetry

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Ph.D. Dissertation

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Cover Image © Xurxo Gómez-Chao. *Vanitas de las magnolias*, 2018. Photograph. Courtesy of the author.

Abstract

According to estimates, 40.1 million people have died from AIDS-related health complications since the onset of the AIDS epidemic. The official implementation of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) in 1996, however, made it possible for millions of people to live with HIV without developing AIDS, and today the health conditions of seropositive people accessing HAART are practically the same as those of seronegative people. Yet, to what extent can we claim the current, medicalized experience of HIV as separate and disconnected from AIDS? Wondering about the psycho-social and emotional legacy of the crisis, in *The Gentrification of the Mind* (2012) Sarah Schulman asks: "What have we internalized as a consequence of the AIDS crisis?" Indeed, how has AIDS affected our experience of HIV, and of sexuality more broadly?

Published in 2017, Danez Smith's Forward Prize-winning poetry collection *Don't Call Us Dead* explores the experience of being diagnosed with HIV. Despite the medical advances, Smith's work is imbued with a set of imagery evoking death and decay. So, how to explain the persistence of this supposedly outdated association between HIV and AIDS? What role may Smith's social position, as a queer, Black American, play in the association of HIV to AIDS seen in their work? In this dissertation I delve into a phenomenology of HIV in the 21st century based on comparative close-readings of Danez Smith's poetry. While most literary analyses of HIV and AIDS literature approach the experience of contagion through trauma and stigma, I am interested in exploring the hope and joy that shines through in Smith's work in spite of the fatalistic imagery, considering the possibility to experience an HIV-positive diagnosis optimistically.

Focusing on the perceptive experience of HIV and how it might evolve over time, I read Smith's poems in chronological contrast, bearing in mind the year of publication and the position of each piece within the volume, but giving most importance to whether the speaker's perspective in each poem is pre- or postdiagnosis. I suggest that there is a narrative arc spanning Danez Smith's poetry, from pre-diagnosis fear of contagion in the first collection, *[insert] boy* (2014), through post-diagnosis fear of developing AIDS and becoming ill in the second collection, *Don't Call Us Dead*, to ambivalent acceptance of the virus, to embrace, thankfulness, and even love for it in the third collection, *Homie* (2020). To do so, I draw from literary theory (Augier, Bachelard, Felski, Fuss, Ramazani, Sacks, Spargo), as well as Afropessimism (Douglass & Wilderson, Melton, Sexton, Warren), queer theory (Ahmed, Butler, Berlant, Love, Muñoz, Snediker), HIV and AIDS historiography (Basu, Castiglia & Reed, Cheng et al., Cvetkovich, Schulman) and phenomenology (Esposito, Nancy, Merleau-Ponty, Spillers), among other sources, to shed light on HIV as a flexible ontological experience in the pharmaceutical context of a 21st-century global North.

The four chapters of this dissertation approach the impact of HIV with different interests. Chapter 1 explores the impact of HIV on Smith's style and use of the elegiac mode. Engaging with elegy scholars I argue that Smith's verse subverts the dichotomy attributed to the distinction between consolatory elegy and anti-elegy through the use of spatio-temporal deictics. Chapter 2 considers the impact of the virus on the speaker's

self-perception as a Black American by contrasting the thought of Afropessimist thinkers to Queer Optimism. In Chapter 3 I study the spatial metaphors used to convey the speaker's body engaged in sexual intercourse and note the implications of how those metaphors evolve throughout Smith's verse according to the speaker's experience of the virus, and what this may say about the possibilities for intimacy before and after the diagnosis. Chapter 4 claims that Smith's poetry engages with HIV to activate a sense of aliveness through pleasure, thus reproducing its own aesthetics of vanitas. Finally, I suggest that HIV continues to be a crisis and that we must conceive it as one if any social change is to be reached.

Resum (català)

A *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017), Danez Smith s'endinsa en l'experiència d'un diagnòstic positiu de VIH al segle XXI. Actualment els tractaments antiretrovirals disponibles no només permeten mantenir un nivell de salut gairebé equivalent al de les persones seronegatives, sinó que impossibiliten la transmissió del virus a altres persones. Tot i així, als poemes de Smith, el contagi sovint s'il·lustra amb un imaginari de malaltia i mort que equipara el VIH al seu estat més desenvolupat i mortífer, la sida. Però a què es deu la continuació d'aquesta associació entre VIH i sida en el context mèdic actual? Per contra, en els poemes que reflexionen sobre aquesta condició amb la distància que permeten el temps i l'experiència, el jo líric expressa no només una acceptació del seu *seroestatus*, sinó també agraïment i, fins i tot, amor pel virus. A partir d'aquesta ambivalència, en aquesta tesi analitzo els poemes de Danez Smith transversalment i comparativa, des del primer volum, *[insert] boy* (2014), fins al tercer, *Homie* (2020), per tal d'estudiar el desenvolupament de la concepció que el subjecte *queer* i negre dels Estats Units d'avui dia té del virus, així com de l'impacte que el contagi té sobre el jo, la seva auto-percepció i les seves relacions interpersonals. Amb l'objectiu de traçar aquesta evolució, en aquesta tesi comparo l'estil i els recursos literaris emprats al llarg dels tres poemaris basant-me en els estudis literaris, així com en la teoria queer, la fenomenologia, l'afropessimisme i els nous materialismes, entre d'altres corrents analítiques.

Resumen (español)

En *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017), Danez Smith se adentra en la experiencia de un diagnóstico positivo de VIH en el siglo XXI. Actualmente los tratamientos antirretrovirales disponibles no solo permiten mantener un nivel de salud prácticamente equivalente al de las personas seronegativas, sino que imposibilitan, además, la transmisión del virus a otras personas. Sin embargo, en la poesía de Smith, el contagio se ilustra a menudo a través de un imaginario de enfermedad y muerte que equipara el VIH a su estado más desarrollado y mortal, el sida. ¿Pero a qué se debe la continuación de tal asociación entre VIH y sida

en el contexto médico actual? Por otro lado, en los poemas que abordan la condición seropositiva con la distancia que brindan el tiempo y la experiencia, el yo lírico expresa no solo aceptación del propio *seroestatus*, sino también agradecimiento e incluso, sorprendentemente, amor por el virus. A partir de esta ambivalencia, en esta tesis analizo los poemas de Danez Smith transversal y comparativamente, desde el primer volumen, *[insert] boy* (2014), hasta el tercero, *Homie* (2020), para así estudiar el desarrollo de la concepción que el sujeto queer y negro estadounidense contemporáneo tiene del virus, así como el del impacto que el contagio ejerce sobre el yo, su autopercepción y sus relaciones interpersonales. Con el objetivo de describir tal evolución, en esta tesis comparo el estilo y los recursos literarios utilizados a lo largo de los tres poemarios en base a los estudios literarios y culturales, así como a la teoría queer, la fenomenología, el afropesimismo y los nuevos materialismos, entre otras corrientes analíticas.

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Introduction

At the heart of Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017) is the poet's most visually gripping piece—"litany with blood all over." In this dazzling tour de force, the speaker embarks on a reckoning with a positive HIV diagnosis, probing into the darkest depths of blood to examine the experience in its full gravitas but also its intriguing ambivalence. Like other poems in the collection, "litany" testifies to some of the emotional responses to the news of contagion: guilt over one's own behavior ("test results say i talk too much / test results say i ask none of the right questions" 49), the equation of desire to danger ("the prettiest fish are poisonous / and the same is true for men" 49), and the assumption of one's own upcoming death ("test results say i am the father of my own end / & i am / a deadbeat"). The somber resignation which surrounds these affirmations, however, is juxtaposed to the utter fascination the poem conveys for blood and its symbolic power.

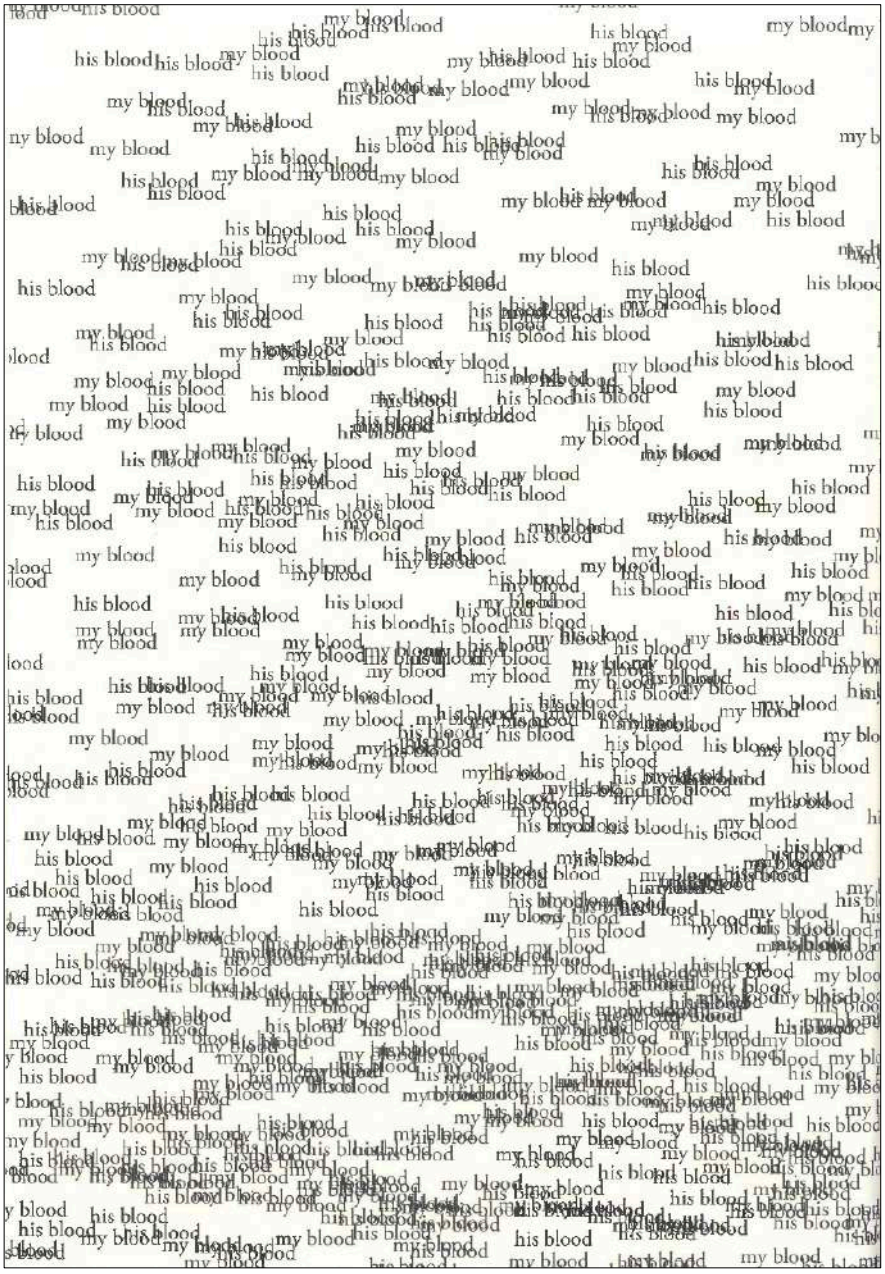
In "litany," the presence of HIV highlights the potential of blood as a force at once generative and deadly, since the penetration of the virus into the speaker's body threatens to kill unless it is treated, but it also holds a promise of life. Indeed, HIV leaves the speaker "with child," in fact with "rivers" of "children" making the speaker's blood "thick" (51). Illustrating what Tim Dean has referred to as the "blood brotherhood" of HIV, the poem conveys the idea that the virus might come to be perceived as a source of kinship.[1] Yet, the children in "litany" always inevitably die. The moment of serotransmission is thus presented as a double-edged ritual; contact with the virus is remembered as uniting speaker and lover in "our bloodwedding—our bloodfuneral" (50). Life and death appear in the poem not so much as two separate, mutually-exclusive

[1] Dean first presented this idea in "Breeding Culture: Barebacking, Bugchasing, Giftgiving" (2008), and then developed it in depth in *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (2009). I engage with Dean and other scholars of HIV as a potentially optimistic source of kinship and intersubjective connection in chapter 3.

conditions but rather as two sides of the same coin. This ambivalence becomes increasingly complex throughout "litany" until it reaches its climax at the end of the poem. Here, the mention of the speaker's veins leads to a closer look into the blood running through them. Lyric description disappears, giving way to visual evocation, when the last lines are reduced to two words—"my blood" (51). This phrase drips down the blank page repeatedly like crimson stains: "my blood / my blood."

Then, unexpectedly—"his blood." First, "my blood" and "his blood" appear separately on the page. They keep a certain distance. In what looks like a menacing dance, the phrases become increasingly close, then gain some distance again, then start overlapping. As the poem advances, the superposition of "my blood" and "his blood" increases. The words begin to overflow the poem, extending onto and out of the margins of the page. By the end, "my blood" and "his blood" are practically indistinguishable. The effect is deafening. Overwhelming. As if through a microscope, we zoom into the speaker's veins to discover the presence of somebody else's blood. The relentless repetition of "his blood" through the poem then suggests the continuous reproduction of the virus inside the speaker's veins. Yet, at the same time, it also evokes another form of multiplicity. Each time "his blood" is mentioned, we can think of a different "he," a new connection. The openness of "his blood" thus evokes not only the lover-made-husband alluded to in the poem, but an indefinite number of lovers united in a chain of serotransmission. The speaker's blood turns into a network. It becomes crowded. It contains multitudes.

As we know, HIV can prove deadly. Yet, as Smith's poem showcases, it can also be captivating, almost magical. Terrifying *and* extraordinary. Exploring this double potentiality, "litany" captures the contemporary complexity of HIV contagion. There is



Last page of Smith's "litany with blood all over" (52) in *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017).

guilt and there is remorse. There is fear; but that does not prevent fascination, wonder, or awe. Throughout the ensemble of Smith's poetic work, the presence of the virus sparks a set of imagery evoking death and decay. Yet, alongside this medico-material pessimistic perspective, contagion is also examined under the light of optimism and hope. Based on this duality, in this dissertation I read Smith's unique, poignant insight into the phenomenology of contagion, focusing on the experience of becoming HIV+ in its potential ambivalence. With this idea in mind, I draw from literary theory as well as Black American metaphysics, queer theory, and new materialism, among other sources, to shed light on HIV as a flexible ontological experience in the pharmaceutical context of a 21st-century global North.

From HIV to AIDS, and Back: Literature for an Epidemic

On June 5, 1981, the US Center for Disease Control published an article describing five rare cases of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) in young, previously healthy, gay white men in Los Angeles.[2] The fungus which causes PCP normally affects elderly or extremely weak people, so Michael Gottlieb, the doctor in charge, was initially unable to explain the exact reason behind these infections, all of which occurred over a short period of time. The five men died shortly after their diagnoses. After numerous studies gathering information from thousands of other patients affected by PCP as well as by other rare illnesses, the cause of these deaths was confirmed to be the result of a condition affecting the immune system, a condition which would come to be known as acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Those were the first diagnoses of the deadliest epidemic to have lasted into the present.

[2] CDC. "Pneumocystis Pneumonia --- Los Angeles." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.*

The fact that those five young men were openly gay was crucial, since doctors originally highlighted it as the differential aspect which they all had in common, and so interpreted it as necessarily relevant to their acquisition of the disease. In other early analyses, the population segments associated to the disease expanded to include Haitians, heroin users, and hemophiliacs, all of whom were categorized, alongside homosexuals, as groups at high risk of contracting the "4H disease." The ever-increasing number of patients with AIDS who did not fit any of these groups eventually proved that AIDS can affect any person, but by then the previous names given to AIDS had left their mark. "Gay cancer," "gay-related immune deficiency" (GRID), "gay compromise cancer," "pink cancer," and "community-acquired immune dysfunction," all ringing with the homophobia of the earliest interpretations of the disease, were specific enough labels to generate a widespread association between homosexuality and AIDS lasting well into the 21st century. We now know that AIDS was already affecting people as early as in the late 1950s and was widely spread in the United States in the late 1970s. The fact that it took a group of white, middle-class, young gay men for the medical community to start studying it points to a history of racism, sexism, homophobia, and medical privilege, which, as I will be arguing throughout this dissertation, is far from obsolete.

After the official discovery of AIDS, it still took over a year for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) to be discovered as its cause. The finding was the result of the research carried out in 1983 by Luc Montagnier and his team at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, France, and confirmed in 1984 by Robert Gallo's team at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland, as well as by J. A. Levy's team of scientists from the University of California, San Francisco, collaborating with the California Department

of Health Services in Berkeley.[3] The virus was given different names by the different research groups—lymphadenopathy-associated virus, human T cell leukemia virus type III, and AIDS-associated retrovirus, among others—but it was not until 1986 that it was given its official name: "HIV-1."[4] By that time, 64,200 people had died from AIDS-related health complications, and that year alone 925,900 people were newly diagnosed with AIDS.[5] In the early 1990s, the figures continued to escalate at dizzying speed. No treatment was in sight. President Ronald Reagan famously broke his silence about AIDS in September 1995, but the initial governmental inaction and its insufficient later response meant that thousands would continue to die in the country for years, as they in fact continue to die as I write these lines.

This context soon found its expression in critical thought offering new insight into the epidemic. Susan Sontag's expansion of *Illness as Metaphor* (1977) in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989) shed light on the social perception of AIDS and the potentially harmful effects of public discourse. Simon Watney's *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (1987) revealed how the media's depiction of AIDS often misinformed and further perpetuated discriminatory views, on both AIDS and homosexuality, with nefarious consequences. A notable joint publication was the winter 1987 special issue of *October* journal titled "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism." This included now-canonical critical approaches to AIDS, such as Douglas Crimp's "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," where Crimp criticized the increasingly moralist approach to gay sex since the start of the pandemic; Paula A. Treichler's "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical

[3] Schmid, Sonja. "The Discovery of HIV-1." *Nature.*
[4] Again, the delay in establishing rigorous terminology had tremendous repercussions. In this case, the high mortality rates after years of a pandemic for which there was no effective treatment added to the impact of media, making the distinction between virus and syndrome blurry for the general population. As we see throughout Danez Smith's poetry, the consequences of this lack of distinction can still be felt today.
[5] "HIV Timeline." timeline.avert.org.

Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," where Treichler warned against the pitfalls of the language used by medical professionals in the context of AIDS; and Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?," where Bersani linked the political blind eye on AIDS to the widespread of homophobia and questioned the "death drive" often attributed to homosexuality through psychoanalysis. Equally important was Crimp's publication of "Mourning and Militancy" (1989), where he defended the need to turn grief into political action. Further connections between AIDS rhetoric and homophobia were highlighted in Lee Edelman's deconstructivist reading of the epidemic in "The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and 'AIDS'" (1994), and "The Mirror and the Tank: 'AIDS,' Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism" (1993), where Edelman responded to Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" by presenting his own criticism of the psychoanalytic interpretation of homosexuality as narcissistic.

Non-academic, creative responses to the epidemic include well known works such as Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize novel *The Hours* (1988) or Tony Kushner's Tony Award-winning play *Angels in America* (1991-2), also a Pulitzer. Edmund White's *The Farewell Symphony* (1997), Joseph Olshan's *Nightswimmer* (1994), Michael Kearns's *T-Cells and Sympathy* (1995), David Feinberg's *Spontaneous Combustion* (1991), and Tom Spanbauer's *In the City of Shy Hunters* (2001) and *I Loved You More* (2014), are all notable works of prose testifying to the ravaging of AIDS. Randy Shilt's *And the Band Played On* (1987) provides one of the most rigorous early journalistic investigations into AIDS and the Reagan Administration's inaction in the face of the epidemic.[6] Larry Kramer's *Reports from the Holocaust* (1989) and Andrew Holleran's *Ground Zero* (1988) both are collections of essays about the authors' personal experience of the crisis as gay men in the 1980s.

[6] While it has also been the target of harsh criticism due to its stigmatizing use of the "patient zero" theory, Shilt's work was crucial in providing trustworthy information at a time when non-sensationalist publications about the epidemic were scarce, and it continues to be a referent in critical AIDS reporting.

The importance of AIDS literature as a subcategory on its own and as a field of study is proved by the scholarly attention given to it in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis* (1993), edited by Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier, Rafael Campo's "AIDS and the Poetry of Healing" (1993), or Monica B. Pearl's *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss* (2013). The irrevocable death sentence that AIDS meant for about two decades is also documented in verse, notably in collections such as Paul Monette's eighteen heartbreaking elegies for his lover Roger Horwitz in *Love Alone* (1988), Thom Gunn's Forward Prize-winning collection of grief and disease *The Man with the Night Sweats* (1992), or Marie Howe's poetic documentation of her brother's health decay in *What the Living Do* (1997). Each one of these works is a unique combination of grief, love, rage, desire, fear, and hope.

Significantly, none of the writers mentioned above are Black. However, a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report from 1986 already established that Black Americans were three times more likely to have AIDS, and a 1988 report stated that "AIDS patients were disproportionately black (26%) and Hispanic (13%), compared with the proportions of blacks (12%) and Hispanics (6%) in the U.S. population" (n.p.).[7] Essex Hemphill's collected writing in *Ceremonies* (1992), Melvin Dixon's posthumous poems in *Love's Instruments* (1995), or Assotto Saints's plays, poems, and experimental writing collected, also posthumously, in *Spells of a Voodoo Doll* (1996) all give voice to the complex specificities of living with—and dying from—AIDS as gay Black men in the first decades of the epidemic. These authors were often trapped between homophobia in Black communities and racism in gay communities in their lifetimes, and later obscured by what Jih-Fei Cheng et al. refer to in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises* (2020) as "the

[7] CDC. "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) Among Blacks and Hispanics--United States" and "Distribution of AIDS Cases, by Racial/Ethnic Group and Exposure Category, United States, Jun. 1, 1981-July 4, 1988," *MMWR*.

whitewashing of AIDS history."[8] Their names were rarely mentioned in early scholarly studies of AIDS literature, an invisibility which testifies, once again, to the power dynamics further perpetuating oppression behind AIDS.

In response to this absence, there has been a recent effort within cultural studies to visibilize the intersectional and racialized experiences of the epidemic. The flourishing fields of queer of color and queer Black critique have given voice to the archival rediscovery of works about the specific experience of AIDS for gay Black men, notably Dagwami Woubshet's *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (2000), Darius Bost's *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance* (2018), or Jean-Paul Rocchi's *The Desiring Modes of Being Black: Literature and Critical Theory* (2018), all of which take gay Black authors who wrote about and died from AIDS as their main focus. The interest in the intersection between race and the HIV and AIDS crisis more broadly is made evident, too, in works like Jacob Levenson's *The Secret Epidemic: The Story of AIDS and Black America* (2004), Sonja Mackenzie's *Structural Intimacies: Sexual Stories in the Black AIDS Epidemic* (2013), or Adam M. Geary's *Antiblack Racism and the AIDS Epidemic: State Intimacies* (2014). The existence of social and medical institutions working to tackle the epidemic among Black communities, such as the Black AIDS Institute, the African American AIDS History Project, or HIV Racial Justice Now!, also showcases the need for such intersectional perspective. As I argue in chapter 3, for contemporary authors like Danez Smith, recovering the work done by their predecessors and making it

[8] The silence around the specificities of being both Black and gay is testified to by the frenzy with which these authors worked to give voice to other gay Black men. Besides his prolific work during his short lifetime, Saint founded the publishing house Galiens Press, edited the anthologies *The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets* (1991), for which he got the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry, and *Here to Dare: A Collection of 10 Gay Black Poets* (1993). Saint participated in the gay Black writers' collective Other Countries and coedited the spearheading journal *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices*. For his part, Hemphill co-founded Cinque, a poetry ensemble group with Larry Duckette in 1983, performed in Marlon Riggs's documentary about gay Black men, *Tongues Untied*, and finished the work of Joseph Beam by editing and publishing *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991) after Beam died from AIDS-related health complications.

visible as proof that they not only were there but also made sure to leave their own imprint has become a political duty.

While the tone in the many literary responses to AIDS varies from despair to hopefulness, from anger to irony, they all share the somber backdrop of death and its inevitability. Over forty million people have died from AIDS-related health complications since the first diagnoses in 1981, and to this day up to one million people continue to die every year due to lack of access to medication.[9] However, the advent of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) in 1996 made it possible for a growing number of people to lead healthy lives with HIV within what Octavio Gonzalez has called "the privileged cordon sanitaire of the global north" (2012, 128). Thanks to HAART, HIV is now a chronic condition. HIV's rapid spread and inevitable development into AIDS in the pre-HAART era was radical. Proof of this is the fact that 28.7 million people currently living with HIV and accessing antiretroviral medication are now able to lead healthy lives. Moreover, HAART suppresses the level of viral molecules to the extent of it becoming undetectable in blood tests, which in turn means it is also untransmissible to others through any form of contact.[10]

People living with HIV and regularly accessing treatment have few symptoms, if any. The body's vulnerability, under AIDS, to all forms of infections, rare cancers, blindness, acute dementia, or Kaposi's sarcoma—with its stigmatizing lesions on the skin—can now be completely avoided thanks to the latest antiretroviral drug combinations. Today, the one persisting physical effect of the virus on HIV positive people is a slightly lower life expectancy than HIV negative individuals, and even this effect is debated. The exact impact of HIV on aging is difficult to specify. Most of the

[9] UNAIDS, *Fact Sheet 2022*.
[10] Eisinger et al. "HIV Viral Load and Transmissibility of HIV Infection: Undetectable Equals Untransmittable," *JAMA*.

HIV positive aging population today became positive when treatment was not yet as developed as it is now, and we cannot yet know how people in younger segments of the population with access to the latest, most improved drugs will experience aging. As Edward J. Wing states in "HIV and Aging," "there is controversy about whether HIV itself accelerates the aging process" (61). We do know, however, that seropositive people tend to experience higher rates of inflammation, which in turn is associated to greater rates of cardiovascular, renal, neurocognitive, oncological, and osteoporotic diseases, conditions which increase in elderly patients (Wing 61). Besides, to the issue of aging with HIV, we must add the potential side effects of antiretrovirals, which can include metabolic effects such as weight gain, gastrointestinal symptoms, skin reactions, and headaches.[11] While the experience of medicalized HIV today is far from the devastation of its development into AIDS, the virus continues to have an impact on the lives of those living with it. But are the effects of HIV limited to the physical? And can we truthfully say that HIV and AIDS can now be seen as separate realities, or does AIDS somehow continue to haunt those living with HIV, in spite of HAART's success in stopping HIV from reproducing?

The answer to these questions can be found in the work of present-day authors whose writing explores the experience of living with HIV in the HAART era. Tory Dent, for example, explores the painful memories of her hospitalization after her diagnosis in her James Laughlin Award-winning poetry collection *HIV, Mon Amour* (1999), while Brontez Purnell uses humor to confront the "slut-shaming" persisting among medical staff in *Johnny Would You Love Me If My Dick Were Bigger?* (2017). Other works exploring stigma and serophobia are Jericho Brown's *The Tradition* (2020), winner of the Pulitzer

[11] Montessori et al. "Adverse Effects of Antiretroviral Therapy for HIV Infection." *CMAJ*. 2004 Jan 20; 170 (2): 229-38.

Prize for Poetry, and Justin Phillip Reed's *Indecency* (2018), winner of the National Book Award and the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry, as well as Justin Chin's *Harmless Medicine* (2001), L. Lamar Wilson's *Sacrilegion* (2013), or Miguel Murphy's *Detainee* (2016). It is Danez Smith's work, however, that I focus on in this dissertation. Other poets, like Brown, Reed, or Wilson, also explore the imbrication of HIV and Blackness; like Smith, Chin tackles the specific experience of being undetectable thanks to antiretrovirals; and Purnell, too, revisits the pain and the shame of the specific moment of receiving the positive diagnosis. Yet, as we have seen in "litany with blood all over," and as the rest of the poet's work shows, Smith's verse is unique in daring to explore the experience of HIV as certainly tainted but also potentially constructive.

Smith, who uses they/them pronouns, rose to fame in the early 2010s as an outstanding, young orator and performer at poetry slams and spoken word contests. They are a two-time Rustbelt Individual Champion and a 2011 Individual World Poetry Slam finalist. Smith's delivery of "dear white America" at the 2014 Rustbelt Poetry Slam in Detroit has reached over 433k viewings on Youtube, and "dinosaurs in the hood," as performed at a 2016 Soap Boxing Poetry Slam in the poet's hometown Saint Paul, Minnesota, has over 156k viewings. Whereas these are vague indicators, they still are notable feats if compared to the number of viewings on the same platform of other more established, living poets such as Nobel Prize-winner Louise Glück, whose most-viewed reading, at the 2016 Lannan Foundation Literary Event, has 71k viewings, or Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith, whose recorded reading from *Life on Mars* for PBS Newshour has 29k viewings.

Smith has been praised for their "onstage charisma and passion" (Parmar) and for their "colossal gift for performance" (Kellaway). But the poet's skills are not limited to the stage. Smith's first full-length collection *[insert] boy* (2014) merited the Lambda

Literary Award for Gay Poetry and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. Next came *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017), winner of the Forward Prize for Best Collection and a finalist for the National Book Award for Poetry. Smith's third volume, *Homie* (2020), received the Minnesota Book Award for Poetry and the Heartland Bookseller Award for Poetry, and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry, the NAACP Image Award for Poetry, and the Publishing Triangle's Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry. Smith's work also includes the chapbooks *Hands on Ya Knees* (2013) and *Black Movie* (2015), and it has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, and *The New Yorker*, among other media. Additionally, Smith is a former co-host of the Webby-nominated Poetry Foundation podcast *VS.* and the festival director for the Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam.

It was *Don't Call Us Dead*, without a shadow of a doubt, that settled Smith's prominence in contemporary US poetry. Forward Prize chair of judges Bidisha Mamata described the collection as displaying "an astonishing formal and emotional range and a mastery of metrical, musical language," and praised it for its "bravery and defiance" as well as for its fusion of "yearning and anger, […] desire and vulnerability" (Bidisha quoted in Flood, n.p.). With freshness and candor, *Don't* bears testimony to the intricate social position of queer (and) Black folks as the target of unrelenting anti-Black violence and hostility toward sexual anti-normativity. The volume, which borrows its title from the first section of the opening poem "summer, somewhere" ("please, don't call / us dead. call us alive someplace better" 3), points to the social position of Black Americans as victimized by anti-Black violence. Smith's phrase echoes Sylvia Wynter's 1992 anti-racist classic *Do Not Call Us Negros*, where Wynter warns against the severe impact of derogative race-related language, especially when deployed in official rhetoric. But Smith's volume not only updates Wynter's message—it also seamlessly intertwines the complexity of the

Black American experience with that of queer people. Indeed, Smith's work is in direct dialogue with and pays heartfelt homage to the legacy of prominent voices in both queer and Black American literature: Audre Lorde's poetic meditations on sexual empowerment, accounts of intersectionality *avant la lettre*, and political struggle permeate Smith's creative production, as do James Baldwin's insightful explorations of the Black, queer body's development in the religious contexts of Black Pentecostalism.

Smith has the radical, critical, and musical voice of a young Amiri Baraka and conveys the simultaneous ordinariness and exceptionality of Black life the way few, other than Gwendolyn Brooks and Sonia Sanchez, have. And yet, it is to Essex Hemphill, Melvin Dixon, and Assotto Saint, that Smith's collection shows a most earnest, explicit indebtment. Smith's lyric testimony of living with HIV inevitably looks back at the three queer, Black poets who died from AIDS in the 90s. "Dear Essex," "gay cancer," and "my deepest and most ashamed apologies to Assotto Saint," all express explicit admiration for them and highlight the centrality of HIV in the identity position explored in Smith's work.[12] Regrettably, the creative production by the late poets was, as that of many others, both fueled and extinguished by the AIDS crisis. Smith's verse, on the other hand, stems from the contemporary privilege of having access to antiretroviral treatment. To begin with, none of the medical symptoms and side effects currently attributed to HIV are ever mentioned in any of Smith's collections. The mere title of "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects," a poem about living with HIV included in *Homie*, is a straight-forward declaration of the lack of any perceived physical impact of the virus. Smith's approach to the virus is inevitably connected to the history of AIDS, yet, at the same time, it differs greatly from it. Presenting the perspective of a young, recently-diagnosed person with

[12] Respectively in Smith's "Reimagining Ourselves in an Increasingly Queer World," *Homie*, and *The American Poetry Review*.

access to antiretrovirals, Smith's poems do not provide an account of the corporeal effects of the virus. And still, as we have seen in "litany with blood all over," contagion does trigger important alterations for the speaker. But what are these non-tangible effects? Does the virus change one's notion of the self? How does it affect one's sex life? Does the diagnosis have an impact on the approach to life? How does Smith's poetry reflect these changes? If it is true that, as Gavan Lennon argues, "[w]ith the advent of successful treatments for HIV and AIDS, HIV positive poets are increasingly able to speak for themselves and to express their own processes of managing grief and living with the disease" (2020, 202), then, what does Smith's work say about this new era?

State of the Question

The critical reception of Smith's verse has focused mainly on the poet's contribution to the visibility of anti-Blackness in the Black Lives Matter era. Rigoberto González, for instance, contends that Smith is "invested in presenting the full range of complex experiences for black youth, avoiding the simplistic dichotomies of innocence or guilt, good or bad—which is how the black youth narrative ends up being presented by the media and assessed by the authorities and the law" (76). Others have described Smith's work as expanding the legacy of Black American literature. Leila Kamali argues that Smith's poetry not only follows the steps of the Black Arts Movement, but in fact "does work to decouple" the potentiality of "a sublime Blackness […] inherited from the BAM from the rampant homophobia which had been seen in that context" (260). McKinley E. Melton, for his part, equates Smith's writing to that of James Baldwin, as "confirming the reality of their communities, in all of their nuanced complexity, with their trials and triumphs, beauty and flaws" (23). For Melton, "Smith, like Baldwin, advances [a Black sexual] discourse of resistance through the use of testimony, similarly addressing a

restrictive view of religion and sexuality, which persists into the contemporary moment" (11).

Approaches like Melton's highlight the value of Smith's work as testimony, that is, as witness or proof of the persisting discrimination against queer (and) Black folks in the US of the 21st century. Pia Deas reads Smith's poems as creative documents of police brutality to claim that they "serve as a recording device to return the surveillance present in the contemporary landscape that controls minorities through the panopticon's presence" (109). Be it as religious testimony or as recording, both Melton and Deas defend the importance of witness through which Smith's work contributes to denounce inequality. But can poetry serve as more than mere witness? In his analysis of Smith, Christian P. Haines suggests that "Smith wants their poetry to be more than a collection of remains" (103). As Haines puts it, "Smith wants a lyricism that exceeds, even as it harbors, remembrance, mourning, and grief" (103). But does Smith succeed in such attempt? If so, how can memory and grief be *both* preserved *and* exceeded? And what role may HIV play in this equation?

At times, Smith's account of the Black experience is considered by critics and scholars at its intersection with gender or with HIV, but the specific experience of becoming seropositive—or poz, as the poet self-describes—has been mostly neglected. Gavan Lennon's "Formal Violence: The Black Lives Matter Movement and Contemporary Elegy" (2020), for instance, reads Smith's work as proof that the experience of HIV adds to the violence suffered by Black Americans, arguing that "Early practitioners of the HIV elegy, in the 1980s and 1990s, tended to be white and this brief tradition forms the backdrop against which queer poets of color develop a more immediate and personal response to the pandemic" (201). While Lennon reflects about the literary evolution and racial dynamics of HIV poetry publishing, his focus is on

Blackness. Sam Huber's "How to Continue: The Poetry of HIV/AIDS Four Decades On" (2021), too, notes that "Smith is achingly attentive to HIV's interaction with other forms of harm" (229) but fails to specify how these interactions manifest exactly. Indeed, what does the intersection between Blackness and HIV in the 21st century look like, and what does it result in? As I have noted and will be arguing, in Smith's work, HIV is not always exclusively presented in negative terms. Is Huber's description of HIV as a "form of harm" accurate, then? Further, in his reading of Smith's work alongside that of Mark Bibbins and Pamela Sneed, Huber contends that all three poets "chart how the experience of HIV/AIDS varies diachronically as well as synchronically, depending on where one is located both socially and in history" (217). Huber's use of "HIV/AIDS" to categorize Smith's work goes against the *UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines*, which recommend avoiding the compound acronym so as not to contribute to the stigmatizing association of the experience of HIV to that of AIDS.[13] What's more, and maybe most significantly, in line with his use of this misleadingly ambiguous terminology, Huber fails to clarify that, while Bibbins and Sneed's volumes revolve around the ravages of AIDS at the end of the 20th century, Smith's collections stem from and testify to the experience of HIV in the 21st century.[14] Reading all three poets under the same lens not only is

[13] *UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines*. 2015.

[14] Both Bibbin's and Sneed's writings could in fact be categorized as examples of what Thedore (Ted) Kerr and Alexandra Juhasz have called the "AIDS crisis revisitation" (Kerr and Juhasz in Cheng et al.'s *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises* (2020), 188). Based on the recent and ongoing proliferation of films about the early decades of the epidemic, such as David Weissman's *We Were Here* (2011), Jeffrey Schwarz's *Vito* (2011), Jim Hubbard's *United In Anger: A History of ACT UP* (2012), David Frances's *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), or Ryan Murphy's *The Normal Heart* (2014), Dion Kagan, too, has argued in *Positive Images: Gay Men and HIV/AIDS in the Culture of "Post-Crisis"* (2018) that "post-crisis popular culture" has seen a "nostalgic turn in AIDS cultural production," an "AIDS memory boom" responding to the previous "constitutive amnesia" of mainstream film production after HAART (225-227). However, as Jim Hubbard and Dredge Byung'chu Kang-Nguyen have claimed (also in Cheng et al., 195-197 and 197-199, respectively), labels such as "AIDS memory boom" or "nostalgic turn" are highly problematic in that they suggest a framing of the crisis as ended, as if as many as one million people did not continue to die from AIDS every year, as if HIV had no effects whatsoever in the nearly 30 million people living with HIV today, or if, as I argue in chapter 4, AIDS had not left an indelible imprint on the experience of sexuality for millions of gay men since the 1980s. What's more, the notion of "revisitation" implies the idea that before this wave, AIDS was forgotten, or that no cultural production was made about the epidemic in the year in between. What do these labels then say about the assimilation of culture into the mainstream as a condition for their visibility and, therefore, our idea that there is a trend?

inaccurate, but also perpetuates the detrimental perception of HIV and AIDS as indistinguishable, thus contributing to the persistence of social as well as internalized serophobia as we see it in Smith's work. And still, Huber's paper helps raise an important question: should the work of authors living with HIV in the HAART era be read alongside that of those dying from AIDS in the 80s and 90s, or even today? To what extent are the experiences of HIV and AIDS separable in the 21st century? And how does Smith's verse illuminate these issues?

Topic of Interest, Methodology and Approach

This dissertation responds to the existing gap in the scholarly attention paid to HIV in Danez Smith's verse, as well as to the more general need to develop a better, more profound understanding of the experience of HIV in the pharmacological era of HAART. Based on the poet's multiple lyric approaches to the virus, I focus on the contemporary experience of HIV in the widely—if not completely—medicalized context of the global North to establish a phenomenology of HIV contagion after 1996. Amongst other ideas, I am interested in the virus's imprint on self-perception, social interaction, and sexual intimacy, as well as in the radical difference, but also indelible connection, between HIV and AIDS, particularly, but not exclusively, for gay (and) Black people in the United States. Can we talk about a "post-crisis," even a "post-AIDS" era? Is it true, as the speaker in Smith's "recklessly" states repeatedly, that HIV "is not a death sentence anymore" (45)? If it is not, then what is it? In other words, how is HIV experienced in the 21st century when it is medically suppressed?

In "The Plague of Discourse," Lee Edelman argues that "HIV is subverting the capacity of the immune system to read the difference between what is proper to the body, what is 'literally' its own, and what is figural or extrinsic" (311). For Edelman, HIV

triggers a whole ontological reconsideration. But can Edelman's affirmation in the late 1980s be applied to the experience of HIV in the HAART era or has the pharmaceutical threshold altered the impact of HIV on the limits of the self as Edelman described it? Transposing Edelman's claim to AIDS, and taking it a step further, Ann Cvetkovich's states, in *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003), that

> AIDS ravages […] subjectivity because the disease destroys the very idea of an identity-making border: the difference between self and other, internal and external, inside and outside. [...] AIDS is the exact opposite of the immune system: not the internalization of the outside, but the externalization of the inside. It is the inside projected outside itself. (181)

Again, does the "ravaging of subjectivity" which Cvetkovich finds in the perceptual experience of AIDS also apply to HIV? Does the virus provoke an "externalization" of the self? How do these ideas translate to our times? Is the body of those living with HIV in the present perceived as open, even when under treatment, even when the virus has become undetectable? To what extent does the internalization of a network of kin as expressed by the speaker in "litany" differ from the openness of HIV or the externalization of AIDS as described respectively by Edelman and Cvetkovich?

Without thinking specifically about HIV, or AIDS, Sara Ahmed, too, pays attention to the perception of the body as open in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004). More specifically, Ahmed delves into the possibility of describing different emotional reactions to that very openness. For her, there are two opposed emotional reactions to the openness of the body: fear and hope; and these affect the distinct perception we develop of our open bodies. In her words,

> emotions involve readings of the openness of bodies to being affected. Fear reads that openness as the possibility of danger or pain; hope reads that openness as the possibility of desire or joy. These readings reshape bodies. Whilst fear may shrink the body in anticipation of injury, hope may expand the contours of bodies, as they reach towards what is possible. (185)

As I argue throughout this dissertation, Smith's poetry explores a wide range of emotions associated to the experience of HIV, with fear and hope as the two referential poles between which the speaker's mood oscillates. The fear that the virus might turn into AIDS, that it might kill. The hope that it might be the source of a kind of deeper connections, that it may make us feel more alive.

In *Cruising Utopias* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz argues that "hope along with its other, fear, are affective structures that can be described as anticipatory" and which "can be characterized as the process of identifying certain properties that can be detected in representational practise helping us to see the not-yet-conscious" (3). As Muñoz contends, both hope and fear are deeply connected to the experience of a future which is not yet known. How do these emotions, then, condition the introduction of HIV into the speaker's body in Smith's verse as a not-yet-known experience? Indeed, how does the virus alter temporality as it is perceived? Saidiya Hartman asks a similar question in relation to the intricate connection between Blackness and the expectation of death. As she puts it in "Dead Book Remains" (2020), "How does time unfold in the confines of expected death? And does this negate or destabilize the very idea of the ordinary?" (120). What answer does Smith's poetry offer to these questions, from the intersection of HIV and Blackness?

Focusing more specifically on HIV, Ambar Basu expands the question of the virus's impact on temporality. In Basu's own words in *Post-AIDS Discourse in Health Communication: Sociocultural Interpretations* (2022), "What are the multiple intersections of meaning and materiality […] associated with a 'post-AIDS' temporality, a context that is marked by public health experts discussing functional cures of HIV and claiming that HIV virologic suppression reduces the possibility of disease transmission to zero?" (3). Basu's reference to the "intersections of meaning and materiality," moreover, points to another duality profoundly imbricated in the experience of the crisis and central to this dissertation, i.e. the division between the physical impact of HIV and its cultural and symbolic impact. Indeed, Smith's verse is deeply rooted in a soil not only marked by the continuing, if inconclusive, development of medicine, but also by the persistence of laws which continue to this day to criminalize HIV, and by the Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name movements, as well as by the presidency of Donald Trump, who fired all the members of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV and AIDS, cut down the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) by $1.35 million, attempted to repeal the Affordable Care Act, and explicitly defended anti-Blackness and queerphobia in public speeches. Bearing in mind both the material and the symbolic, in this dissertation I carry out a close reading of Smith's work to reflect about the contemporary imprint of the virus in its multiple forms.

My analysis takes as its primary corpus the poems where HIV is referred to explicitly in Smith's three full-length collections. While I treat each poem as a singular, self-contained unit, I rarely analyze poems individually, but rather comparatively and focusing on a specific idea, the use of certain imagery or tropes, etc., with an interest in describing patterns, connections, similarities, and divergences from poem to poem. Therefore, over the different chapters of this dissertation, I sometimes analyze the same

poem more than once, each time focusing on a different idea. As the volume where Smith explores the experiences of contagion, diagnosis, and seroconversion in most depth, *Don't Call Us Dead* has a central role in my analysis, but I also analyze poems from *[insert] boy* and *Homie*, often, if not always, with a comparative interest. Focusing on the perceptive experience of HIV and how it might evolve over time, I read Smith's poems in chronological contrast, bearing in mind the year of publication and the position of each piece within the volume, but giving most importance to whether the speaker's perspective in each poem is pre- or postdiagnosis. In other words, I contrast how different poems approach the virus based on the speaker's position in reference to the event of contagion—as seronegative, as recently diagnosed, or as having been seropositive for some time.

Throughout, I pay attention to the varying emotions the poems convey in association to the virus in these different stages—from denial to acceptance and resignation, to wonder, thankfulness, and even love—and often consider whether or not they illustrate a perceptual evolution with respect to the virus. In his criticism of Smith's *opera prima*, Rigoberto González argues that the "narrative arc" of *[insert] boy* "moves the black body from object of anxiety, to object of desire, to self-awareness, to agency" (80-81). With this idea in mind, I ask, is there a narrative arc for HIV in *Don't Call Us Dead*? And is there one spanning Smith's work as a whole? That is, does Danez Smith's poetry showcase a progression in how the speaker perceives and describes the experiences of diagnosis, of contagion, and of HIV itself from *[insert] boy* to *Homie*? If so, how does this happen, and what does it say about our understanding of the virus today?

Paying attention to the way the speaker's serostatus, sexuality, and racialization intertwine, I consider the multiple ways in which HIV can alter one's life. As I have pointed out above, however, Danez Smith's poetry does more than testify to certain

forms of violence, of community-making, of resilience, or resistance. I will thus be arguing that Smith's work, rather than simply function as bare witness, actively contributes to the construction of fairer futures. With this idea in mind, I engage in the model of critical analysis that Sylvia Wynter calls "deciphering." As Wynter argues in "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice" (1995), deciphering diverges from conventional cultural interpretation in that "it seeks to identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to *mean* but what they can be deciphered to *do*" (266, emphasis Wynter's). For Wynter, a truly critical practice should "reveal the rules of functioning" behind cultural imaginaries "rather than merely replicate and perpetuate these rules" (261). That is, merely stating what texts show, even when these texts show harrowing violence, fails to truly engage in the dismantling of the oppressive structures behind such forms of oppression. With the intention of reading Smith's work through a decipherment practice, I follow Wynter's approach, as well as Rita Felski's statement in *The Limits of Critique* (2015) that we should approach literature not as a passive product of human agency, but "as something that makes a difference, that helps make things happen" (12). Drawing upon Wynter and Felski, I attempt to decipher Danez Smith's poetry as an active agent of change, thus exploring not just what it shows, but also, and most crucially, what it does.

My approach to Smith's collections is an interdisciplinary combination of several theoretical sources. While there are a few works of literary theory which deal with issues that are central to Smith's verse, none of them covers the complexity of the experience expressed in the poet's work. Monica B. Pearl's *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, for instance, is an important—and, to date, the only—monograph analysing the literary

response to the epidemic, covering a wide selection of works from a queer perspective.[15] Her analysis, however, does not include verse, and often focuses on narrative strategies, ignoring poetic devices and the particularities of the genre. What's more, Pearl does not include writings by any Black American authors in her study. While this might at first appear as unproblematic, there are certain experiential and cultural particularities to Black American writing that complicate the possibility of making it fit into certain patterns based on non-Black literature.[16] A crucial example of this referential divide is the specificity of the Black American relationship to death. As I argue in chapters 1 and 2, the history of anti-Black violence which has marked the United States since long before its foundation has a strong influence on the experience of Black people, who even today often perceive themselves, in Abdul R. JanMohammed's (2005) words, as "death-bound subjects." Other critical thinkers go further, arguing that Black life, as Hortence J. Spillers (1978) puts it, is always already reduced to ontological "flesh" after the dehumanizing and "total objectification" of the Black body during and after enslavement (68). What's more, the perpetual experience of oppression and exclusion relegate Black people to what Orlando Paterson (1982) calls "social death," which in the case of the descendants of Black Africans enslaved in the US leads to an impossibility of Black subjectivity, or, as Afropessimist theorists Frank B. Wilderson III and Patrice Douglas (2013) claim, to a "meta-aporia" of Black metaphysics in traditional Western philosophical terms. If we accept these ideas as marking the experience of Black people, then we must agree that the position from which Black Americans face AIDS and its death sentence, as well as

[15] Pearl argues that these works can be divided into a "gay AIDS literature" characterized by realism and mourning, and a "queer AIDS literature" characterized by genre hybridity and melancholia. According to Pearl, gay AIDS literature attempts to establish order amidst the debris of the crisis, and uses narrative linearity and cataloguing, among other resources, to cope with and eventually work through loss. Queer AIDS literature, on the other hand, would invest in grief, disrupting not only temporal linearity, but also fixed notions of identity.
[16] Of course, I do not mean to limit Black literature to a defined number of themes of forms. Rather, I intend to highlight that certain situations trigger different responses according to different backgrounds, particularly in the case of the strongly charged past of anti-Black violence.

HIV, differs from that of non-Black Americans, so that the emotional responses to a diagnosis as analysed by Pearl cannot always coincide with those in the work of Black authors.

Another significant reason why Pearl's otherwise ambitious work would fail to apply to writing by some Black authors is the symbolism attributed to certain elements. To give an example, Pearl interprets scenes in AIDS literature where characters are swimming in a river or sea as moments in which the limits of the self are reconstituted. Based on her analysis of the water scenes in Michael Cunningham's *At Home at the End of the World* (1992) and *Flesh and Blood* (1995), as well as Joseph Olshan's *Nightswimmer* (1994), Pearl argues that water is a catalyst of aliveness: by surrounding their skin in cold water, HIV+ characters can re-establish the divide between self and other made porous and questioned by the virus. In Smith's work, however, water is most frequently tainted with the afterlife of anti-Blackness. In poems like "summer, somewhere," "crown," or "dream where every black person is standing by the ocean," water is associated to drowning, the murder of Emmett Till, or the Middle Passage. Like in Langston Hughes's "The Bitter River," where the speaker mourns the murder of Charlie Lang and Ernest Green, two fourteen-year-old boys lynched by the Chicasawhay River in Mississippi in 1942, water in Smith's collections is not a place to leisurely swim in, but to drown.

If Pearl's study obviates the work of gay Black writers during the first decades of the AIDS epidemic, Dagmawi Woubshet's *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (2000) responds to this absence. In his work, Woubshet also analyses AIDS writing before the advent of effective antiretrovirals but gives the work of Melvin Dixon and Assotto Saint a central position. For Woubshet, these authors' experiences of AIDS as gay Black men, while sharing a common denominator of loss with their white counterparts, must be studied under the lens not only of queer theory,

but of Black American ontology, too. Thus, Woubshet bases his reading of these authors' texts on writing by queer theorists Judith Butler, Heather Love, and José Esteban Muñoz, as well as by thinkers who tackle the specific experience of Blackness, such as Abdul JanMohamed, Saidiya Hartman, or Fred Moten. The focus of Woubshet's study, however, is not the representation of HIV as it can be experienced in the 21st century, but of AIDS as it was before the HAART era.

Adding to the difficulty in finding a suitable framework to carry out an analysis of Smith's poetry, the few critical works which tackle the response to the epidemic in verse exclude the potentially differing experience of HIV in relation to AIDS. That is the case of pre-HAART studies like Rafael Campo's "AIDS and the Poetry of Healing" (1993), but also of post-1996 analyses such as Sheryl Stevenson's "'World War I All Over': Writing and Fighting the War in AIDS Poetry" (1997), Tyler B. Hoffman's "Representing AIDS: Thom Gunn and the Modalities of Verse" (2000), Kevin Killian's "Activism, Gay Poetry, AIDS in the 1980s" (2014), and Aaron Bradly Gorelik's *The AIDS Poets, 1985-1995: From Anti-Elegy to Lyric Queerness* (2014). Whereas all these deal with the expression of the AIDS crisis in US verse, none of them focus on the poetry describing the experiences of HIV after 1996.

Certainly, these critical texts all deal with ideas that also appear in Danez Smith's work, but they do not explore the specifics of lyric writing about living with HIV in the present. Bearing this in mind, I here attempt to build a new scholarly prism through which the experience of HIV can be explored in its full complexity. With the ambition to approach such a specific issue, this dissertation thinks variously in terms of, and is greatly indebted to, literary criticism, cultural studies, and phenomenology, but also queer and feminist theory, Black American thought and queer of color theory, crip theory, new materialism, and memory studies. The apparent lack of interest in—or at least void in the

cultural and literary study of—HIV contagion as an experience distinguishable from AIDS is also reflected in the themes discussed. Scholarly attention to AIDS has mostly revolved around the experiences of loss, grief, pain, stigma, trauma, and death. In my analysis I am also interested in the negative affects triggered by the specific experience of the diagnosis as it appears in Smith's work, but I do not want to let negativity obscure the silver linings nor, in case there might be any, the few rays of sun. While negative experiences and emotions are often alluded to in Smith's verse, and I duly consider them, I also pay attention to positive affect. To continue to universalize negativity in our reading of HIV literature would fail to include a much wider range of experiences, such as those of people who can now lead healthy lives with HIV, and who enjoy both sexual and affective relationships knowing that undetectable equals untransmissible. While the devastating impact of the pandemic must continue to be acknowledged and explored, it is also necessary to consider how in the 21st century HIV may, hopefully, also offer multiple other possibilities.

AIDS critics have often based their work on psychoanalytic paradigms such as trauma, stigma, and the Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia. We see these approaches in Pearl's *AIDS Literature*, Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*, and Gorelik's *The AIDS Poets*, as well as in José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1991), Melanie Zeiger's *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (1997), and Aimee Pozorski's *AIDS-Trauma and Politics: American Literature and the Search for a Witness* (2019). While psychoanalysis has been fundamental for the development of an important part of queer theory as well as literary theory, I agree with Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed when they argue that this approach can be "antisocial" and "dehistoricizing" (*If Memory Serves* 8). In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant offers their own criticism of trauma as we know it when

they note that the issue with this concept is the frequent focus on the individual rather than the systemic. Attempting to recover the social aspect of traumatic experiences, Berlant redirects our attention towards a critical practice based on "tracking the work of affect as it shapes new ordinaries to the logic of exception that necessarily accompanies the work of trauma" (54). With this idea in mind, Berlant contends that the goal should be

> to construct a mode of analysis of the historical present that moves us away from the dialectic of structure (what is systemic in the reproduction of the world), agency (what people do in everyday life), and the traumatic event of their disruption, and toward explaining crisis-shaped subjectivity amid the ongoingness of adjudication, adaptation, and improvisation. (54)

Without altogether ignoring psychoanalytic perspectives, I prefer to study the crisis of HIV, following Berlant, as a phenomenon deeply rooted in cultural conditioning and systemic forms of violence and oppression, where structure, agency, and "the traumatic event of their disruption" are considered as a whole.

From this perspective, in order to develop a comprehensive approach to seroconversion, and to detach it from the seemingly compulsory—if understandable—interest in negative affect, I approach Smith's 21st-century account of HIV from queer optimism. In *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (2009), Michael Snediker shows regret that most analyses of queer literature associate queerness to negativity: "[m]elancholy, self-shattering, shame, the death drive: these, within queer theory, are categories to conjure with" (4). Against this pessimistic tendency, which he finds "less than practicable (or survivable) in lived experience" (13), Snediker chooses to

work through the lens of optimism. In his close reading of poetry by Hart Crane, Emily Dickinson, Jack Spicer, or Sylvia Plath, Snediker insists on finding room for hope and constructiveness, refusing to allow these writers' somber fame to limit the reception of their work. In line with Ahmed and with Snediker, my optimist reading is interested in finding hope among the wreckage of the AIDS epidemic and the present state of HIV as a chronic condition.

My optimist approach to HIV inevitably intertwines with, and draws from, optimist Black American thought, too. Whereas, as I have already stated, a big part of my discussion engages with the leading voices in Afropessimist theory, notably Frank B. Wilderson, but also Jared Sexton, Christina Sharpe, and Calvin Warren, among others, I want to detach my reflections on Blackness from the negativity which often hovers over this field. As Jennifer C. Nash argues in her Black feminist archival study *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (2014), the theoretical interest in representation from Black epistemologies "has become oriented toward the twin logics of injury and recovery which make theorizing black female pleasures from within the parameters of the archive a kind of impossibility" (25). As a reaction to such limitation, Nash advocates for "organizing around the paradoxes of pleasure rather than woundedness or the elisions of shared injury, around possibilities rather than pain" (3). "What would it mean to consider black aliveness," asks Kevin Quashie in *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (2021), "especially given how readily—and literally—blackness is indexed to death?" (1). This dissertation finds inspiration in such questions.

Importantly, my optimist approach does not altogether ignore the undeniability of Black pain. My suggestion here is thus not so much to focus on aliveness, pleasure, and joy by turning our attention away from pain, oppression, and death. Rather, I am interested in pointing to negativity without accepting it as an immutable given or, at least,

not assuming negativity as the only possible outcome of Blackness. As Darieck B. Scott asks in *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (2010),

> If we are racialized (in part) through domination and abjection and humiliation, is there anything of value to be learned from the experience of being defeated, humiliated, abjected? […] What can the historical, inherited experience of that enslavement and what it might have taught, conscious and unconscious, provide for us by way of useful lessons or templates? […] What is the potential for useful political, personal, psychological resource in racialization-through-abjection as historical legacy, as ancestral experience? How do we work with that legacy now, how do we *use* it to fit our own exigencies? (6)

In line with Scott, Nash, and Quashie, I engage with Danez Smith's queer, Black experience of HIV with optimistic intentions.

As I have already hinted at by quoting José Esteban Muñoz's reflections on fear and hope as future-oriented affective structures, part of this dissertation also engages with an interest in temporality. While optimism is, as Muñoz reminds us, a future-oriented emotion, the optimism to which I express a tendency in my study does not in the least diminish the importance of the past. Indeed, the social improvement toward which a phenomenology of HIV in the present inevitably aims must involve a relationship to loss, to damage, and to negativity as they are experienced. Joseph R. Winters puts it clearly in *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (2016) when he claims that "the possibility of a better world involves a heightened capacity to remember, register, and contemplate the damages, losses, and erasures of the past and present" (7). Darieck

Scott makes a similar claim in *Extravagant Abjection* when he states that "the past is not necessarily fully transcended, but the past is not a prison, either; it is rather the record and example of its own revision" (47), and Heather Love synthesizes it in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007) when she argues that "we cannot do justice to the difficulties of queer experience unless we develop a politics of the past" (21). Finally, in their criticism of the dominant narrative imbuing sexual intimacy with compulsory hetero(re)productivity, *Intimacy* (2000), Lauren Berlant wonders about the potential of non-normative forms of intimacy in its temporal outstretching both into the past and the future. Although long, their question is worth quoting in its entirety:

> What kinds of (collective, personal) authority, expertise, entailment, and memory can be supposed, and what kind of (collective, personal) future can be imagined if, for example, sexuality is no longer bound to its narrative, does not lead to stabilizing something, something institutional (like patriarchal families or other kinds of reproduction that prop up the future of persons and nations); if citizens and workers are no longer created by families and the institutions of loco parentis, namely, schools and religions; if (because of AIDS, globally high mortality rates among national minorities, environmental toxins, virulent transnational exploitation, ongoing military and starvation genocides, and other ongoing sources of destruction) a generation is no longer defined by procreational chronology, but marked by trauma and death? (7)

It is questions like Berlant's that inspire my work. In its careful attention to the past, this dissertation considers the possibility to build fairer futures without for that reason veering away from the inevitable imperative of the here and now.

Summary of Contents

The first section in the body of this dissertation, "On Thresholds," is not a chapter. At least not a conventional one. It is, rather, a preliminary thought, a precursory respite, an opening. "On Thresholds" does not fully engage in literary or cultural analysis but briefly touches on them to wonder, instead, about an essential question which I then tackle in depth throughout the four chapters that follow—What changes when HIV enters the body? Rather than attempt to provide a comprehensive answer, it proposes a brief introductory meditation on the phenomenology of HIV contagion. "On Thresholds" thus invokes issues which overlap with the experience of HIV, such as subjectivity, death, and disease, but also space, time, and memory. Building a threshold into my enquiry of HIV, this text momentarily ponders the current experience of contagion before giving way to the four chapters that pay closer attention to the questions raised.

Chapter 1, "An Elegy for the Death-Bound: Meditations on Grief and Genre," starts my analysis by establishing a formal framework from which to read Danez Smith's work. Based on the elegiac tone pervading the poet's production, particularly *Don't Call Us Dead*, where the connection between HIV and Blackness triggers an in-depth exploration of grief, I engage in a close reading of Smith's verse to situate it in the ongoing debate about the genre and its different modes. This contextualization within elegy studies develops in parallel to a layout of the experiential background to the perception of HIV in Smith's work from a queer, Black perspective. Thus, in Chapter 1, I pay attention to how *Don't* not only responds to the political scene from which it emerges, but also actively engages in it by laying the foundations of potential change.

The disproportionate impact of loss on racialized communities has made the elegy a frequently recurred-to genre among Black American poets. As the first published Black

American poet, Phillis Wheatley's name appears often in scholarly writing about Black poetry in general and about the elegy in the United States more specifically.[17] But the expression of grief and loss in artistic and cultural practices among Black Americans was certainly widespread long before Wheatley's poetic production in the 18th century. As Alice Walker argues in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), both before and after Wheatley's time, there were "millions of Black women who were not Phillis Wheatley" (238), artists whose work has not reached our day simply because they were not given a voice or were not listened to. "How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive," wonders Walker, "year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write?" (234). Drawing upon Walker, we can positively claim that, beyond the formalities of genre, the elegy as a mode has always been essential in Black American culture. As responses to the prohibition of funereal practices among the enslaved, the Blues and Spirituals, too, testify to the long creative tradition stemming from Black mourning,[18] as do Elizabeth Alexander's and Ta-Nehisi Coates's journalistic writing, or the academic incursions into enslavement and its legacy by Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman.

Jahan Ramazani notes, in *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994), that the very phrase "African-American Elegy" might in fact seem like "a redundancy because African-American poems have often been characterized as what W.E.B. Du Bois called 'Sorrow Songs,' inevitably elegizing a long history of racial oppression and murder" (135). In antebellum America, Black poets such as Daniel

[17] Notable examples of this are Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994), Max Cavitch's *American Elegy: Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (2007), or Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983).
[18] Ramazani considers these issues in "African-American Elegy and the Blues" in *Poetry of Mourning*, 135-175; as did Amiri Baraka (publishing under his birth name, Leroy Jones) in *Blues People.*

Alexander Payne or Joshua McCarter Simpson wrote elegies for the victims of enslavement, which, according to Max Cavitch's *American Elegy: Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (2007), acted as "mediation between the worlds of the free and the unfree and the living and the dead" (198). Despite their stylistic differences, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes both evoked Black grief in the Harlem Renaissance, as Gwendolyn Brooks or Richard Wright continued to do in the second half of the century. Emily Ruth Rutter explains in *Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era* (2020) that in the Jim Crow era, poems about lynching "function[ed] less in the service of consolation and more as a vehicle for exposing the violent white scapegoating of black citizens in the wake of World War I, as the nation underwent rapid technological, demographic, and economic transformations" (12). In the 1960s, the deaths of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and John Coltrane similarly gave rise to numerous elegies by Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Welton Smith, among many others.[19] And to this day, the names of victims of white supremacist violence continue to populate the pages of contemporary Black authors in the Black Lives Matter era such as Patricia Smith, Claudia Rankine, Ross Gay, or, indeed, Danez Smith.

Chapter 1 thus looks at how the multiple forms of anti-Blackness persisting well into the 21st century take shape in the corpus. In Smith's work, the elegiac mode is frequently deployed for others, but at times also for the self. Throughout Smith's verse, HIV is alluded to as a possible materialization of anti-Black violence. Considering the expectation of the speaker's own death as a result of this context, I read Smith's verse in light of Abdul R. JanMohamed theory of the "death-bound subject." The expectation of death is also explored in Chapter 4, but whereas there I consider it in its specific

[19] Howard Rambsy II studies these elegies in *The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry* (2011).

connection to HIV and the cultural legacy of AIDS, here I focus on the projection of one's own death in its connection to Blackness.

Theoretical approaches to the elegiac genre, such as Peter Sacks's or Jahan Ramazani's, have traditionally divided it into "consolatory elegies" and "anti-consolatory elegies" (also known as "anti-elegies"). While the former allegedly succeed in working through loss, the latter are seen as unable, or unwilling, to do so. Most scholarly work on the Black elegy has privileged anti-consolatory elegies for their radically critical political stance. As I argue, however, Smith's work proves that not only can consolatory elegies be politically engaged, too, but they can also foster the social progress demanded in anti-consolatory work. Grounding my analysis on Ramazani's work as well as on Diana Fuss's, and R. Clifton Spargo's, I focus on Smith's use of spatial and temporal deictics to spark change.

Chapter 2, "Monstrous Metaphysics: Of HIV and the Black Self," further pursues the reflections about Blackness and ontology started in Chapter 1, here focusing specifically on the way Black ontology might be altered by HIV. Approaching the speaker's self-perception as always already dead, I engage, via Orlando Patterson's ideas on social death as well as Calvin Warren and Frank B. Wilderson III's thought on Afropessimism, in an enquiry about HIV's specific impact on such notions in the HAART era. While the incorporation of the virus into the body might, as Lee Edelman suggests, threaten the division between what is proper and what is alien to the body, such blurring of the self in Smith's work results, maybe unexpectedly, in a reification of the queer Black speaker's aliveness.

Since viruses need a living host to survive, the presence of HIV in the speaker's body indicates that the Afropessimist description of the Black being as "always already dead" must point not to literal death but rather to social death as initially proposed by

Orlando Patterson and to an ulterior fault in a system which continues, to this day, to sanction anti-Blackness. From this vantagepoint, the speaker in Smith's work would not only be alive, but such aliveness would be triggered by the experience of HIV itself. Beyond its potential to develop into AIDS and therefore to kill its host, then, the virus can turn out to be more than a nonliving molecule, indeed an agent in what Nancy Tuana has called "the dance of agency between human and nonhuman agents" ("Viscous Porosity" 198). In other words, as opposed to the Afropessimist claim that Black Americans cannot be considered as subjects, or even as philosophical beings, as a result of the history of social death and the persisting institutional neglect and active erasure of Black people, the penetration of this potentially lethal virus into the Black body serves, paradoxically, to reify that body's aliveness.

In Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus*, the author's disease is progressively accepted as a constitutive part of the current self. Despite the initial reaction against it, the author finally embraces illness and its submission of the body to its own "infinite exposition" (170). In Nancy's words, "[t]he intruder exposes me to excess. It extrudes me, exports me, expropriates me. I am the illness and the medicine, I am the cancerous cell and the grafted organ, I am these immuno-depressive agents and their palliatives" (170). Roberto Esposito expresses the same idea in ontological terms when he claims that "[w]ithout being able to call the body that belongs to me 'mine' and without 'belonging' to my body anymore, I am deprived of what has always been thought of as the truth of the subject" (*Immunitas* 170).

In Danez Smith's poetry, speaker and virus become, I argue, not only indivisible, as Nancy and Esposito suggest, but also interdependent. In light of Judith Butler's thought about intersubjectivity and of Bruno Latour's definition of Actor-Network Theory, I contend that Smith's descriptions of the connection between the self and the

virus express a form of interdependency. In Smith's work, these ideas are further illustrated by the multiple references to HIV as a monster, and by the way this idea evolves throughout the poet's collections. Based on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's meditation on monstrosity and on Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection, I show how the equation between virus and monster initially has negative connotations but eventually proves constructive. Further, I probe into the experience of HIV through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of "the flesh" and juxtapose it to Hortense J. Spiller's use of the same term in the context of anti-Blackness. But might the virus somehow work as a link between the thought of both thinkers?

In Chapter 3, "Burning Down the House: The Body as Space of Intimacy and Memory," I pay attention to how the diagnosis alters the experience of sexual intimacy. To do so, I analyze the spatial imagery deployed throughout Smith's verse in poems which evoke intercourse. More specifically, I focus on the change between the images used before the diagnosis—denoting the body's openness in sexual activity as positively constitutive for the speaker—and those used after the diagnosis—in which the same openness is associated to danger and is therefore avoided. My interest in chapter 3 is how these alterations in the speaker's self-description convey an evolution in the perception of HIV. Further exploring this progression, I examine the references to the "blood brotherhood" of HIV based on Tim Dean and Marlon M. Bailey's writings about barebacking. While in those poems written from a seronegative perspective, the speaker's willing exposure in sex and the resulting possibility of a viral type of kinship are expressed as a longed-for form of intimacy, the diagnosis promptly turns this longing into rejection.

In the course of the speaker's assimilation and acceptance of HIV's presence in their body, however, the idea of a blood brotherhood reappears as homage to those people who died from AIDS. Progressively, the union which the virus had provided and

which had been refused is reconceived, and the kinship developed through contagion becomes not only accepted, but embraced as a necessary exercise in memory-making. Basing my reading on the various writings on queer memory by Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, Ann Cvetkovich, and Heather Love, I explore the defense of a queer family carried in the speaker's veins. These reflections are then further expanded in light of Marlon M. Bailey and Rosemary Marangoly George's thought on the role of houses in Ballroom culture. I conclude this chapter by reflecting on what such assumption of viral kinship as seen in Smith's poems does to the dominant discourse about families, but also about the nation as a wider form of kinship.

Chapter 4, "Still Life: Postmemory and Pleasure in the Wake of AIDS," expands the reflections on sexual intimacy and memory dealt with in Chapter 3; it explores the lived implications of the ontological reconfiguration developed in Chapter 2; and it completes the analysis of the speaker's expectation of death as started in Chapter 1. Adding to the speaker's limited approach to life as a "death-bound subject," I here use Marianne Hirsch's notion of "Postmemory" to reflect about the way AIDS continues to curtail the lives of queer people in general, and of gay men more specifically, even in the pharmacological context of HAART. Faced by the circumscribing heritage which I call the "haunting of AIDS," the queer Black speaker feels doubly led to their upcoming death. Conditioned by the cultural association of AIDS to gay men and to Black people, the lyric I in Smith's work struggles to dissociate their experience of HIV from the pervasive history of HIV's fatal development into AIDS.

Yet, again, Danez Smith's verse does not merely work as witness. Rather, it fosters a whole reconsideration of HIV in the present based on the physical reclaiming of the body sparked by experiences of pleasure. Drawing upon Judith's Butler's critical thought on laugher, as well as Elizabeth Alexander and Calvin Warren's reflections on Black

dance, I approach these situations of pleasure in Smith's work as crucial experiences toward a recovery of a lost sense of power. After indulging in the lost pleasures of laughter and dance, the speaker in Smith's verse eventually recovers sexual intimacy, too. Whereas Smith's earlier poems about HIV show a lyric I who is deprived of the constitutive joy and power of sex, the later poems explore a recovery of this pleasure. The speaker thus closes a metaphorical circle, from a constructive experience of sex to its prohibition, and back to its enjoyment. Rooted in an aesthetics of vanitas, which I explore through Luis Vives-Fernándiz's writing, Smith's work comes face to face with the idea of death to then rediscover, from a new perspective, the wonder of being alive.

Stemming from the reflections unfurled in these four chapters, and mirroring the opening of "On Thresholds," before moving onto the conclusions I offer a brief meditation titled "On Crises." In this section, I consider the adequacy of referring to the HAART era, like Dion Kagan does, as a "post-crisis." In light of Jih-Fei Cheng et al.'s claim that AIDS is a "network of crises," I argue that HIV, too, continues to constitute multiple crises, if not always medical, then certainly perceptual, ontological, phenomenological, and systemic. Finally, before plunging into my conclusions, where I consider the way HIV and AIDS prevention should be tackled if we hope to put an end to the epidemic, I contend, in line with Reinhart Koselleck, that we must continue to refer to HIV as a crisis if we are ever to fully eradicate not only AIDS and the virus, but also the cultural legacy left by AIDS.

Notes on Language and Terminology

In this dissertation, I argue that the experiences of AIDS and of HIV in the HAART era are tightly connected, but also radically different from each other. To better and more accurately describe the complexity of living with HIV, I do not use the widespread

compound acronym "HIV/AIDS." To this day, scholars in a broad range of fields continue to use "HIV/AIDS" in lieu of the appropriate term for each context. To give an example, a Google Scholar search for works including the exact term "HIV/AIDS" and limited to papers published only in 2022 brings up 26,800 results. As I have noted above, however, the UNAIDS *Terminology Guidelines* recommend avoiding "HIV/AIDS," explaining that "it can cause confusion" between the virus and the syndrome, a confusion which, as Smith's work amply showcases, can have profound effects. In line with this and other explicit recommendations against stigmatizing language both by the UNAIDS and by the People First Charter, throughout this work I use either "HIV" or "AIDS" according to the context, or "HIV and AIDS" when I refer to both phenomena together.[20]

Another important terminological decision is my use of "Black American"—often, simply, "Black"—instead of "African American." I do this out of respect for the "open umbrella" of people, to quote Gwendolyn Brooks in "I Am a Black (Kojo)," who claim to be "other than Hyphenation" (253). "African American" started to be widely used in the 1980s as a politically correct alternative to "negro," "colored," or other frequently derogatory terms, and in an effort to include Black people, at least in public discourse, alongside "Irish Americans" or "Italo-Americans" into the melting pot of the US. "Black," however, denotes a subjectivity both more culturally specific and geographically wider than "African American." As Eva Puyuelo claims, Black "works toward inclusivity, diversity, and plurality in a way that 'African American' does not" (37). I use "Black," capital B, because it constitutes a cultural identity and a label which exceeds the borders of nation-states. I capitalize "Black" like we capitalize Catalan, Amazigh, or

[20] *UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines* (2015). "People First Charter – HIV Language, Person First Language," *Peoplefirstcharter.org* (n.d.).

Ohlone. In the words of Kimberlé Crenshaw, "I capitalize 'Black' because Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other 'minorities', constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun" ("Mapping the Margins" 1244). For the same reason, I do not capitalize "white," since it does not constitute a specific cultural group nor is it claimed as distinct identity. Of course, I preserve the use of "African American" or of lower-case "black" in the quotes and titles of works by other authors, just as I do not correct the use of "HIV/AIDS," or other terminology, in writings other than mine.

On a more technical note, in my analysis, I use "the speaker" and "the lyric I"—generally interchangeably—to refer to the "voice" or the speaking "I" in Smith's poems. Like we would refer to "the narrator" as opposed to "the author" to discuss a work of prose, my use of "speaker" implies an a priori distinction from the poet. While the ideas and emotions conveyed by the speaker may at times coincide with those of Smith themself, my reading does not follow a biographical approach. That is, I am not so much interested in the personal experience of Danez Smith as in what their poems have to say about HIV in general, or about living with HIV as a queer Black person more specifically. In this sense, I must highlight that I do not wish to suggest that any of my interpretations correspond, in unambiguous or restrictive terms, to the poet's stated intention when writing these texts. Neither do I intend to speak for a whole generation or for Black folks, as much as I could not speak for all gay men, even if I attempted to restrict my observations to a very specific segment. Mine is merely one of the many readings that Smith's work makes possible. My aim is to explore Smith's verse in search of such possibilities.

That being said, just as I assume the speaker's social position as Black and as queer, I also interpret, and refer to, the speaker using the gender-neutral pronouns "they," "them," "their," and "themself." While in some of Smith's early poems, the lyric I refers

to himself as a "boy" or a "man," in the vast majority, the lyric I's gender is not specified. Out of respect for the poet's identification, but also for the potentiality of English as a non-gendered language, I refer to the lyric I in Smith's poems using these pronouns unless otherwise gendered.

My use of "queer" follows a similar pattern. In line with Smith's identification as queer rather than gay, I read the speaker in Smith's work as a queer person, rather than gay. While the two terms sometimes overlap, queer is a wider, more politically-charged term including other forms of non-normative identity, expression, behaviour and social experience around gender, sex, and sexuality. Stemming from my understanding of gender and sexual identity as porous and sometimes changing, as well as in line with my political stance, I generally use "queer" instead of "gay." I prioritize "gay" as a more accurate label, however, in certain specific contexts, such as in Chapter 4, where I discuss the impact of AIDS as postmemory on gay men and our identity rather than on "queer people," or even "queer men," since these more inclusive labels would be inaccurately broad. To refer to the speaker and to people living with HIV, I use "seropositive," "HIV+," or "poz" interchangeably.

Finally, while most of the sources I use in this dissertation were originally written in English, I have also drawn from authors writing in other languages. In these cases, I generally use existing translations when available, and acknowledge the translator's work accordingly in the Works Cited section. Where translations were unavailable, the translations I use are my own.

On Thresholds

To cross the threshold is to enter another world – whether the one on the inside or the one on the outside – and we can never be really sure what is on the other side of the door until we open it.

–Jeannette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

–Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*

© Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Detail of *"Untitled" (Blood)*, 1992 by Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Installed in "Roni Horn – Felix Gonzalez-Torres" exhibition, 6 April – 22 September 2022. Pinault Collection - Bourse de Commerce, Paris, France. Cur. Caroline Bourgeois with Roni Horn. Courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Photo credit: Toni R. Juncosa.

To enter the room, visitors must walk through a blood-red curtain. Long strands of translucid beads hang in line from the door frame, separating one space from the other. Going through the curtain inevitably means touching it, coming into physical contact with it. The strands quietly allow the trespassing, then sway back in place with a rumor. Created in 1992 by AIDS-activist and artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Blood)* welcomes us into a transition ritual, a crossing, a breaking-into of sorts, a traversing, as it were, of the artist's blood. Up close, visitors notice a few strands of clear, white beads interspersed among the ruby strands—a weakened immune system, the few white cells holding on in the blood yet unable to protect it. *"Untitled" (Blood)* is a meditative, interactive experience evoking the fatal moment of becoming HIV+ in the midst of the AIDS crisis, before effective anti-retroviral treatment was available. How does it feel, Gonzalez-Torres's work asks us, to enter someone's blood? How does it alter our perception of reality? What was life like before the crossing? What will it be like after?

Twenty-five years later, and immersed in the safety of what Dion Kagan calls the "post-crisis era," Danez Smith's "crown" takes us right back to Gonzalez-Torres's symbolic division of space when HIV is referred to as a "phantom hiding behind a red curtain" (57). Indeed, in spite of the medical advances reached and developed since the 90s, the years spanning between one work and the other do not here seem to greatly alter the perception of HIV transmission as a threshold. As well as a curtain, the turning point of contagion is expressed, in Smith's "1 in 2," as the crossing of a door:

> he, who smelled coffee sweet & cigarillo blue
>
> entered me, who knew better but _____.
>
> he, who in his wake left shredded tarot,
>
> threw back his head & spewed light from every opening

& in me, light fell on a door, & in the door

a me i didn't know & knew, the now me

whose blood blacks & curls back like paper

near an open flame. i walked towards the door

as i walked away from the door. when i met me

in the middle, nothing grand happened.

a rumor made its way around my body. (62)

Like Gonzalez-Torres's curtain, Smith's door equates the transcendent event of contact with the virus to movement between two separate physical spaces.[1] The metaphor indicates the entering by a body inside another, the momentary encounter of two different realities within the very self, the transition from a before to an after. But where exactly does Smith's door lead? Which new areas does it reveal, which unknown dimensions? In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard wonders, "is he who opens a door and he who closes it the same being?" (224). Indeed, what does the door tell us about the subject's alleged transformation after becoming HIV+? How can a door alter our perception not only of space but of subjecthood?

The selected fragment from Smith's poem evokes the exact moment of serotransmission, when the speaker's sex partner climaxes and ejaculates, introducing the virus into the speaker's body. The whiteness of semen metonymically turns the liquid into "light" which flows out of the partner into the speaker's body. Light falls on a "door" behind which "a me i didn't know & knew" seems to await. HIV infection is thus understood not as an unexpected fact but as the confirmation of something already known. The virus is

[1] While this interpretation of *"Untitled" (Blood)*, one based on the artist's life and his personal experience of contagion, is probably the most frequent, Gonzalez-Torres believed and in fact was hopeful that over time his art—in fact, all art—should also acquire new meanings according to the new perspectives through which they are seen. My approach to *"Untitled" (Blood)* as potentially expressing the experience of HIV contagion in the medicalized context of HAART and PrEP in the United States of the 21st century, rather than AIDS in the late 1980s and 90s, follows such "death of the author."

perceived as the speaker's fate, a fate hinted at by the "shredded tarot" left in the lover's "wake," and barely hidden before the shedding of light makes it visible. Therefore, the poem attests to the devastatingly persistent connection between queerness, Blackness, and HIV in the United States. But beyond this, "1 in 2" explores the subjective perception of the transition from a negative to a positive serostatus, a transition charged with the implications of its metaphoric materialization into a door. Importantly, this transition is expressed as established by an architectural division, since the speaker becomes seropositive upon entering a space. As Beatriz Colomina explains in "Interior," "[a]rchitecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant" (255). Architectural elements not only have a direct impact on those who use, navigate, or inhabit them, Colomina argues, but in fact "produce" such subjectivities. Following Colomina, I consider the door in Smith's "1 in 2" as an architectural element—and a symbol—which plays a crucial role in determining the subject's perception of the self before and after contagion.

Doors are, in effect, material realities. They are *things*. And things, as Bill Brown argues, are actively involved in our acquaintance with life. According to Brown's new materialist approach, things tend to be seen as objects in their relation to human subjects, but that does not mean they are necessarily passive or that they have no direct impact on the life of subjects. As Brown explains, "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily" (4). Our abilities, skills, development, and even survival are constantly conditioned by the presence or lack of knives, socks, helmets, laptops, tables, drugs, and a relatively wide-ranging scope of other things, including of course doors. Things may not actively seek to engage in our endeavors, but they inevitably influence their outcome. The success in my attempts to open a bottle of wine and share it with my

friends, for example, will greatly depend on whether I have the right tool, the right *thing*, to perform the uncorking with. Likewise, doors manifest as things by either facilitating or preventing circulation, allowing or blocking movement from a space to another. Brown goes on to suggest that "[t]he story of objects asserting themselves as things is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). In this sense, we should see the door in Smith's verse not as a passive object but as an active link which will inevitably determine the speaker's experience of the encounter with HIV. As an architectural element *and* a thing, the door in "1 in 2" acts, quite literally, as a hinge between two previously separate realities and thus determines its user's experience of reality as a whole.

In the poem, such differentiated realities are expressed as two separate spaces, but also as two versions of the same lyric I: as seronegative and as seropositive. The initial self is faced with the "now me," seen at the time of the passage as a future version of itself. HIV transmission is thus both a meeting and a fusion of the two in time and space. Importantly, the distinction between one and the other, between the spaces at each side of the door, is marked by the decay and destruction attributed to the future HIV positive self. More specifically, in the time-space of HIV, the self's blood burns, it "blacks"—again, a hint to the strongly racialized perception of the virus—and "curls back like paper / near an open flame." The seropositive self is depicted as consuming from the inside, as performing the expected self-sabotaging of an irreparably altered immune system which no longer protects the body's integrity. Similarly, the "wake" the lover leaves behind indicates a trajectory, but also, and most ominously, a death ceremony. The transition which the door embodies in this section of the poem is thus one where the speaker is led away from a healthy territory and into a threatening atmosphere. The subjecthood toward which the speaker navigates through the door is one tainted with death.

However, the door in Smith's "1 in 2" does not entirely fulfil its promise of radical transition. Despite the fatalistic expectations generated around the moment of contagion, when the seronegative speaker meets its future, seropositive self, "nothing grand happen[s]." Indeed, the crossing of the threshold proves surprisingly calm. As opposed to the spectacularism here expected of such a determining moment, serotransmission is perceptually uneventful, almost disappointing. The only reported result of the penetration of HIV into the self is "a rumor ma[king] its way around [the speaker's] body." The consequence of serotransmission is not disease, nor pain, nor death, but "a rumor." The reality introduced by the door both does and does not differ from the reality known in the previous time-space. The only perceivable change induced by HIV, the poem suggests, is perceptual. Rumors, gossip, stigma, guilt, and shame. Not disease. Smith's description of the effects of contagion as rumor suggests, I argue, that a positive HIV diagnosis is frequently not something experienced on a solely individual level, but mostly as an element within a wider social context.

As Eli Clare argues in *Brilliant Imperfection*, a diagnosis "unleashes political and cultural forces" (41) since it "not only describes those of us deemed defective, deficient, or disordered in a million different ways but also helps shape how the world treats us" (42). From this viewpoint, Clare contends that a diagnosis is "a source of knowledge, sometimes trustworthy and other times suspect. As a tool and a weapon shaped by particular belief systems," it is "useful and dangerous by turns" (41). Smith's poem testifies to this idea when the positive HIV diagnosis fails to produce more than a mere "rumor." That is not to say, of course, that HIV is medically innocuous. If untreated, HIV continues to have a devastating impact on the immune system, leading to the development of AIDS and, finally, to death. In the pharmacological era of HAART, however, the possibility to keep the virus under control has enormous implications. And still, even when contagion does not affect one's health, it triggers, as Smith's poem suggests, a set of ideas and beliefs with a no less considerable impact.

Becoming HIV positive in the era of HAART might still have tremendous consequences, but in Smith's account these are psychical rather than physical.

In "The Bridge and the Door," Georg Simmel points out how the door "demonstrates that the acts of separating and relating are but two sides of the same act" (409). Doors are radically ambivalent insofar as they can only separate if they also unite, they can close because they also open. Doors embody the limit, the physical boundary between allegedly separate worlds, and still, they always indicate the ineludible connectedness of those worlds, too. From this perspective, Simmel continues, the door "cancels the separation of the inside from the outside because it constitutes a link between the space of the human and everything which is outside of it" (409).

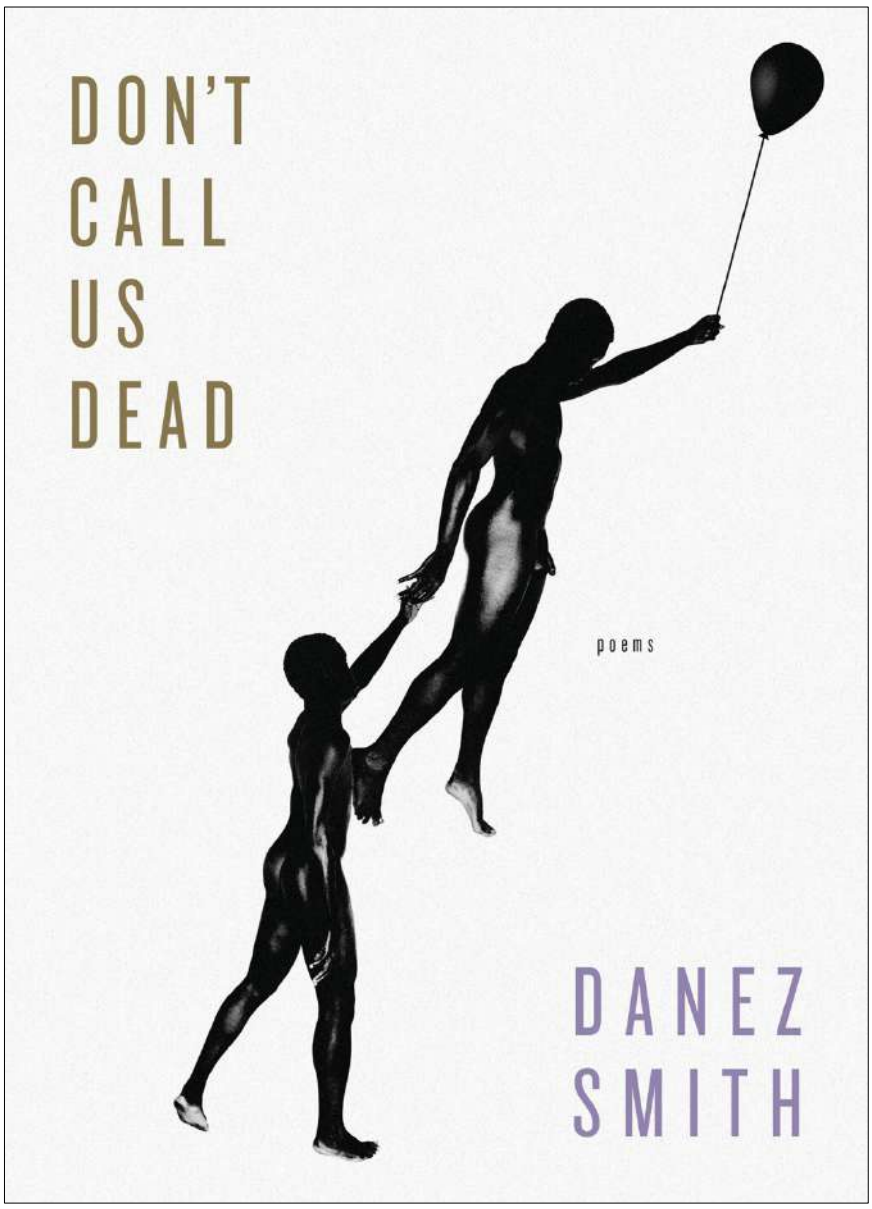
Reading it through the prism of Simmel's deconstruction of the binary division established by boundaries, and through Clare's problematization of diagnosis as an individual experience, what does Smith's use of threshold metaphors indicate exactly? If antiretroviral treatment can stop the virus from affecting one's body, how does the experience of living with HIV differ from living without it? What type of connection exists between HIV and AIDS in the pharmacological context of the global North? How does one's social position as queer and Black in the US of the 21st century affect such difference? And how to account for the disproportionate and supposedly outdated expectation of death as a consequence of HIV seen in Smith's poetry?

1. An Elegy for the Death-Bound: Meditations on Grief and Genre

> How does art save us? By attuning us to a time not existentially our own, by allowing us to participate if only imaginatively in that which is greater than and beyond us and thereby to cultivate a sensibility contrasted to our suffering mutability.
>
> —R. Clifton Spargo, "The Contemporary Anti-Elegy"

> Remembrance is potent; once its force is unleashed and the status quo named fetid and stagnant, the rememberer is implicitly charged to move forward in that bright light that says, responsibility is yours now. Move.
>
> —Elizabeth Alexander, *Power and Possibility*

> To behold such aliveness, we have to imagine a black world... we have to imagine a black world so as to surpass the everywhere and everyway of black death, of blackness that is understood only through such a vocabulary.
>
> —Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness*



Cover of Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017). Cover design by Kapo Ng. Art by Shikeith. Courtesy of Graywolf Press.

Mourning in Verse

Against a white backdrop, the silhouettes of two Black boys. As if by magic, one of them rises in the air, holding a balloon too small to be the only cause of such defiance of gravity. The other boy tries to hold his hand to keep him from soaring out of reach, almost pulled up by the ascending force. The parting seems inevitable, but the will to prevent it is there. *Don't Call Us Dead,* pleads the title. On the cover of Danez Smith's 2017 Forward Prize-winning volume, Shikeith's artwork[1] has the power to invoke the eerie inertia of death among Black boys, both its apparent inevitability and, at the same time, the obstinate liveliness of its negation.

Life and death battle, intertwine, and are suffused with each other in an inseparable amalgam. "The condition of black life is one of mourning," quotes Claudia Rankine as she remembers a conversation with a friend (n.p.). Generation after generation, loss has been intrinsically connected to the experience of the racialized in the United States. For Black Americans, to live is to lose, to grieve, to mourn. And it is this mourning that Smith gives—or, rather, adds—voice to:

> i am sick of writing this poem
> but bring the boy. his new name
>
> his same old body. ordinary, black
> dead thing. bring him & we will mourn
> until we forget what we are mourning
>
> & isn't that what being black is about? (67)

[1] Shikeith, *The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease forever to be able to do it.*

Throughout, death and the dead pervade Smith's collection along the struggle to stay alive, to continue to sing life in spite of—maybe *because* of?—death. That may be why the nineteen-page-long opening poem "summer, somewhere" evokes a parallel world, "not earth / not heaven," where mourning has the capacity to retrieve the dead. In the new time-space of "summer, somewhere," Black bodies are literally pulled from their graves to be given "a second chance"—"we dig / a new one from the ground, take / him out his treebox, shake worms / from his braids" (4). The names of Trayvon Martin and Sean Bell point to 21st-century cases of police brutality at the root of Smith's poem. Further, the added images of bodies entering the scene "pulled behind / a truck," or in an "old forest / heavy with fruits i'd call uncle // bursting red pulp & set afire" establish a connection between recent murders and the victims of lynching in the Jim Crow era. Some of them may have been spectacularized by the media, some made to remain anonymous. No matter the case, by juxtaposing these deaths, Smith's poem suggests they are all the result of the same violence. For Smith, history constantly points to the common source in these cases of institutionally sanctioned anti-Blackness, dating back to the arrival of the first slave vessel to North America in 1619 as part of the triangular trade. If the world we live in continually proves to be what Saidiya Hartman calls the "afterlife of slavery" (*Lose Your Mother*), Smith's "summer, somewhere" constructs a parallel, alternative afterlife, one where "we say our own names when we pray. / we go out for sweets & come back" (3).

Significantly, Smith's lamentation positions the speaker, too, in the new "here" where Black bodies are resurrected by including the I in the communitarian "we" populating this new world. Throughout the collection, mourning emerges not only from the tangible deaths of countless others, but also from the loss of the very self: "dead is

the safest i've ever been. / i've never been so alive" (16). Many of the deaths grieved in "summer, somewhere" are actual deaths, but these become inseparable, we begin to grasp, from the social deaths and metaphysical deaths persistently victimizing Black Americans.

Adding to this, as the collection advances, the death in and around the self becomes potentially substantiated by a positive HIV diagnosis. In "it won't be a bullet," the threat of the virus haunts the speaker's life. Initially, it is hinted at as another possible cause of death, one particularly virulent among African Americans:

> […] the doctor will explain death
> & i'll go practice.
>
> in the catalogue of ways to kill a black boy, find me
> buried between the pages stuck together
> with red stick. ironic, predictable. look at me. (28)

As the poem unfolds, however, the speaker is adamant that it will be HIV's development into AIDS that will bring death: "i'm not the kind of man who dies on the news. / i'm the one who grows thinner & thinner & thinner" (28). In "summer, somewhere," too, contact with the virus leaves the speaker "to become a hum in a choir of bug mouths" (9), and in "every day is a funeral & a miracle" the potential, progressive impact of HIV on the speaker's body is juxtaposed to the already mourned killing of Black and brown youths at the hands of police officers:

> today, Tamir Rice
> tomorrow, my liver

today, Rekia Boyd

tomorrow, the kidneys

today, John Crawford

tomorrow, my lungs

some of us are killed

in pieces, some of us all at once (65)

The newly discovered positive serostatus therefore adds to the experience of loss, so that Smith's verse "simultaneously interrogates the slow violence of black susceptibility to HIV and the immediate violence of police shootings" (Lennon 194).[2]

The abundance of such references to death in relation to HIV could be interpreted, in Tim Dean's words, as "the social death caused by HIV's intense stigma," a form of death which "antedates organic death" (94). As I argue in chapter 4, however, the connection between HIV and death established in the collection does not respond to stigma as much as to postmemory. While Smith's poetry does not testify to the experience of AIDS but to that of HIV as a treatable, no longer necessarily fatal virus, the diagnosis still triggers the speaker's identification, as a queer, Black person, with those affected by the devastation of AIDS. Based on this identification, images of death pervade the

[2] Regarding the issues of HIV and Blackness as explicitly approached in *Don't Call Us Dead*, one could attempt to establish a division between those poems specifically concerning racialization and those expressing the experience of HIV. In fact, on September 14, 2017, Smith explained that the collection was originally conceived as two separate books: "one that held a lot of poems written in the year following my positive HIV diagnosis and another written around the continuing narrative of state-sanctioned and home-grown violence against Black people in the USA" (Williams). To the editor's suggestion, however, the poet decided to merge both collections into a larger project, one dealing with "many different thoughts on mortality and living" (Williams). The poems are thus not organized into chapters but instead resemble a rather chaotic amalgam of interconnected writing, a three-dimensional constellation of words that flow across images and motifs. Although some of the poems contain a majority of references to police brutality and others engage more in contagion and seroconversion, it would be completely impossible to separate *Don't Call Us Dead* into two distinct, individual volumes. Indeed, the issues of racial discrimination and serophobia overlap constantly in the volume, and they often appear as inseparable from each other.

collection, not only as metaphors for anti-Black violence but also as a potential cause of death awaiting the speaker. The connection between HIV and death is in fact inseparable from the experience of Blackness. *Don't Call Us Dead* thus showcases the "imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" which permeates and marks Black Americans' experience, in Abdul R. JanMohamed's words, as "death-bound subjects" (*The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death*). The threatening closeness of death positions the Black subject, JanMohamed explains, in a "politically and existentially aporetic" space (26), "between the (im)possibilities of life and the (im)possibilities of death" (10). As evidenced by Smith's work, the disposability of the Black subject haunts the subject's experience as the perpetual menace of a "negative latency" (JanMohamed 10), of a dizzying disruption of the boundaries between life and death.

The ominous presence of actual death, the experience of social death, or death-boundness, and the haunting of Postmemory as a projection of the self's own death in the wake of the AIDS crisis, all converge in Smith's volume. Adding to this mournful character, poems such as "last summer of innocence" or "you're dead, america" respectively grieve the loss of childhood joy and of the American dream. So how to live in the midst of so much loss, so much mourning, so much pain?

In this chapter, I consider the way Smith's work responds to the grief overwhelmingly pervading HIV+, queer, (and) Black lives. To do so, I focus on *Don't Call Us Dead*—as the most explicitly loss-invested collection by Smith—and situate it within the field of elegiac writing. In dialogue with the main and most recent scholarly approaches to the elegy, I start by analyzing the imagery and stylistic resources deployed in the collection according to their adherence to conventions in the genre. Based on the examined classification, I then divide the poems in Smith's volume into consolatory elegies and anti-consolatory elegies. Further, I explain how each one of these literary

forms can offer a contribution beyond the literary. In line with most academic work on the topic, I contend that Smith's anti-consolatory elegies render grief political not only by bearing witness to struggle and challenging oppressive hegemonic narratives, but also by calling for responsibility and action in the face of those very situations of oppression. Against most contemporary studies in the genre, however, my analysis of anti-consolatory writing does not disregard consolatory elegies as disengaged and bearing no political potential. On the contrary, I argue that through the use of deictics, Smith's consolatory verse succeeds in situating readers in a constructive and engaged here-and-now from which change can be sparked. It is *through* consolatory elegiac writing, in fact, that Smith's poetry gets closest to substantiating the demands made in their anti-consolatory elegies. Finally, I conclude this chapter by discussing how Smith's elegiac exploration of grief offers unique proof of the creative, ethical, and political power of poetry.

On Consolation

The imagery and stylistic resources deployed in the poet's expression of loss and grief have led critics to read *Don't Call Us Dead* as elegiac work. Gavan Lennon, for instance, situates Smith alongside Claudia Rankine and Jericho Brown as "contemporary African American practitioners of the elegy" ("Formal Violence: The Black Lives Matter Movement and Contemporary Elegy" 193). Rutter et al., too, see Smith's volume as engaging with the elegiac mode, but focus on Smith's poem "not an elegy" to claim that it "invokes the genre of elegy even while casting aside its utility for addressing the routine extinguishing of black life" (*Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era* 15). The difference in these affirmations responds to Lennon and Rutter et al.'s diverging perceptions of the role of the elegiac mode in Smith's work. For Lennon, Smith is one

of the poets who "develop the traditional elegiac balm of personal consolation" while, for Rutter et al., Smith's work "decidedly resist[s] the turn toward consolation that often characterizes the poetic form" (14).

Consolation is a key word in elegiac studies, and in the last decades scholars of the genre have positioned their work according to their perspective on the role of this central aspect. Peter M. Sacks's well known *The English Elegy* establishes the "search for consolation" as a defining element of the genre (1). As R. Clifton Spargo explains, "in the movement toward consolation that mourning as an act of either religious or secular culture seems to require, the poet turns away from—even while professing loyalty, devotion, or attention to—the dead person" ("The Contemporary Anti-Elegy" 413). Conversely, more contemporary elegy theorists have focused on 20th-century writing—Sacks's study leaves off with Yeats—to argue in favor of a pattern of anti-consolatory responses to loss, sometimes referred to as "anti-elegy." "The modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation," Jahan Ramazani observes, "not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (*Poetry of Mourning* xi). As Diana Fuss explains, "at a time when death has become ever more dehumanized in its technological ferocity, bureaucratic anonymity, and mass ubiquity, compensations like nature, religion, and even art inevitably come up short. Any act of poetic consolation appears highly suspect in an era that no longer knows how to mourn or manage its escalating losses" (*Dying Modern* 4).[3] Finding that the scope of contemporary elegy exceeds the limits of consolatory writing, anti-elegy is proposed as a subcategory within

[3] Fuss, alongside Jahan Ramazani and Melissa F. Zeiger, sees a proliferation in elegiac writing starting roughly one hundred years ago and links it to close contact with death during the 20th century through global conflict from World War I to the AIDS crisis, from ongoing anti-colonial movements to climate change. In connection to such heightened ubiquity of death, the difficulty or unwillingness to achieve consolation is necessarily related, as Fuss explains, to death's substitution of sex as a social taboo in Western societies toward the end of the 19th century and, subsequently, to what Spargo describes as the "anti-commemorative turn" in the 20th century (415).

the genre. Mainly characterized by "skepticism" about consolation (Spargo 416), anti-elegy "designates not so much a new form of poetry or a break with the tradition of elegy, as a tendency within elegiac poetry to resist consolation by setting a contemporary mourner against past cultural and poetical conventions" (Spargo 415). In Ramazani's words, "the elegy flourishes in the modern period by becoming anti-elegiac (in generic terms), and melancholic (in psychological terms)" (xi). Whereas Sacks's approach sees elegy as necessarily defined by its conveying a "successful" overcoming of loss and a detachment from the departed (6), then, more contemporary scholars suggest that non-consolatory texts can still be considered elegiac, even if under the specific category of anti-elegy.[4]

The apparently diverging readings of Smith's verse as consolatory or anti-consolatory carried out, respectively, by Lennon and by Rutter et al. need actually not be seen as contradictory. Different poems, and even different sections within these, convey, of course, different perspectives on, as well as different approaches to, loss through *Don't Call Us Dead*. While at times these poems are obstinately anti-elegiac in their refusal of solace, in other occasions they are implicitly consolatory. For instance, "tonight, in Oakland" is a decidedly consolatory invitation to dance, to celebrate the self, and to find self-acceptance in the midst of death, thus countering the overwhelming grief that loss

[4] It is worth noting how the very notion of elegy has a history of escaping any fixed definition. The term comes from Ancient Greek, attesting to the word *elegos* (ἔλεγος), meaning "song of lament", but its derivative adjective *elegeion* (ἐλεγεῖον) can refer both to any mournful song—often accompanied by the Greek double pipe, the aulos—or to the specific metric form known as elegiac couplet, consisting of a dactylic hexameter followed by a dactylic pentameter. Its plural form *elegeia* (ἐλεγεία) can therefore refer either to mournful poetry regardless of its form or to any combination of elegiac couplets regardless of their content. Through historical periods and languages, the term and its equivalents have been used to indicate a number of cultural products, often dealing with loss, but also with love, politics, or war, provided that they were written in the specified metric. "Initially characterized exclusively by the use of a metric form," the *Dictionnaire des genres et notions littéraires* notes, the elegy came to be, in Latin literature, a genre exploring "most of the poet's personal emotions," be these mournful or not (233). Hence, Ramazani describes the genre as "evolving, hybridizing, self-subverting" (24), Fuss defends it as "not a moribund genre in historical decline but a vital form in aesthetic transformation" (3), and Karen Weisman sees it as "inhabit[ing] a world of contradiction," insofar as the "narrative of its historical development is tortuous at best, and the unraveling of its salient preoccupations betrays a persistent entanglement with its generic and formalist relatives" (1).

generates in the preceding poems. The poem builds on a call to be, if only for a moment, other than the expected mourning of (HIV+) Black people: "tonight, we bury nothing, we serve a God / with no need for shovels" (79). Instead of mourning, the speaker decides to "ride my bike to a boy, when i get there / what we make will not be beautiful // or love at all, but it will be deserved" (79). Eros is thus used to counterbalance Thanatos; joy and pleasure are chosen in spite of the overwhelming weight of grief.[5]

Reading it in light of Sack's account of consolatory conventions, "tonight, in Oakland" uses regenerative sexuality to balance the pain that pervades the collection. Natural elements such as "marigolds" and "yellow plums" in the poem also evoke "the immortality suggested by nature's self-regenerative power" resting on a "principle of recurrent fertility" (Sacks 27). In a couplet strongly reminiscent of Whitman's famous elegy for President Lincoln *When Lilacs Last in the Doorway Bloomed*, Smith's "little prayer," too, suggests compensation for loss through floral imagery while also implying the expectability of violence among Black people: "let him enter the lion's cage / & find a field of lilacs" (81). The regenerative power Sacks attributes to the "vegetation God" is also present in "summer, somewhere," where the rain turns the mountain "into a boy with brown eyes & wet naps" (13), where "years ago / we plucked brothers from branches / peeled their naps from bark" (5), and

> the forest is a flock of boys
> who never got to grow up
>
> blooming into forever

[5] I recover the intertwining of life and death, pleasure and decay, in chapter 4.

afros like maple crowns

reaching sap-slow toward sky. (13)

Interspersed with the sections describing the coveted summer somewhere, four pairs of italicized corpse poems enact a momentary recovery of communication between the living and the dead. A mother and her child, a pair of friends, a couple, and a police officer and his murdered victim, all are offered a chance to speak to each other once again. In one of these sections a mother makes a promise to her lost son: "*i'll plant a garden on top / where your hurt stopped*" (6). In a typically consolatory manner, bodies are given a new life after their own death, either literally through resurrection, or symbolically through nature's cyclical course. With a similar recourse, the speaker in "tonight, in Oakland" invites readers to "waste the moon's marble glow / shouting our names to the stars until we are // the stars" (80). As Sacks argues, the fire conveyed by stars is used in elegies to "create a pure image of regenerative or unconsumed force" insofar as, being "[a]ssociated with light and heat, and with the sun and stars, fire has served most elegists as a figure for the physical or spiritual powers that exist within and beyond individual men" (292). From blossoming flowers to shining stars, Smith's verse succeeds, indeed, in evoking consolation for loss.

At the same time, as Rutters et al. argue, poems such as the explicitly titled "not an elegy" disavow any possibility of poetic consolation. In this piece, solace is deemed impossible. The disparity between the social value of white lives and Black lives is too much to ignore: "think: once, a white girl / was kidnapped & that was the Trojan War. // later, up the block, Troy got shot / & that was Tuesday" (68). Injustice after injustice, death after death, "not an elegy" grieves the seemingly never-ending experience of loss

as the everyday of Black Americans. The intensity of such grief is overwhelming, the speaker has "no more / room" for it (70) so that, as the end of the poem approaches, the speaker concludes: "i have no words to bring him back, i am / not magic enough" (71). Clearly expressing the "anxieties about the efficacy of poetry in culture" that Spargo sees as indicative of the anti-elegiac mode (416), "not an elegy" is a crystal-clear example of Smith's anti-consolatory writing.

The poem titled "elegy with pixels & cum," too, is deeply anti-elegiac in its questioning the possibility of finding consolation. Written in memory of Cuban poet and porn actor Javier "Kid Chocolate" Bravo, Smith's (anti-)elegy mourns for the fact that Bravo's films symbolically prevent his rest: "they won't let you stay dead, kid / […] men gather in front of screens to jerk & mourn, kid" (48). Here, the epiphoric "kid" ends each but the last line in *anáklasis*, a mentioning of the name of the deceased. For Sacks, *anáklasis* may work as a form of consolation, it may "take on, by dint of repetition, a kind of substantiality, allowing it not only to refer to but almost to replace the dead" (26). However, the fact that the last seven lines are unanswered questions points to the impossibility of the dead's response. Despite insistently interpellating the deceased, no answer is ever suggested. Even the poetic space surrounding each question is broken when, in the last line, two consecutive questions prevent any form of response: "were you a fish swimming in his grief, kid? did you float?" Finally, the last question interrupts the epiphora and does not sum Bravo as "kid," for the speaker knows the dead will not come back, and the only possible answer will be silence.

Another anti-consolatory poem is the sonnet corona in free verse "crown," where the speaker mourns "all the children i'll never have, dead in me" (56). The eight sonnets constituting the poem intertwine issues of queer parenting and HIV's—now evitable—threat of transmission from mother to child while giving birth, as well as include Black

parents' recurrent loss of their offspring to anti-Black violence. Children in the poem are "just like" the lyric I: "black, chubby, beaming, dying" (59), they are "cherubs drowning" (58) in the lyric I's body, "their little feathers / clogging the drain." Throughout, there is no reference to possible regeneration. No compensation can be found for the inevitability of death. Even the "black / flowers blooming where my tears fall" turn bees into stone (57), denying any interpretative reference to fertility or resurrection. And the river in the poem—a typical elegiac symbol which, as Sacks notes, tends to evoke the river of death, and thus continuation onto a larger world—is here reduced to a well of death where the speaker's "river-bottom heirs" are gathered after drowning (58).

Perhaps most significantly anti-elegiac is the closure in the poem. In the tradition of a crown of sonnets, "crown" repeats the last line in each sonnet with slight alterations to begin the next one. Thus, the first sonnet's questioning last line, "what did he pull / from me? a robin? a wagon? our red child?" (56) becomes an affirmation in the first line of the second sonnet: "pulled from me: a robin, a wagon, our red child," and so on. The ending of Smith's own sonnet corona, however, breaks the conventional pattern. Whereas formal crowns of sonnets normally unite all the last lines in each sonnet into a final sonnet, in Smith's own crown there is no final, gathering unit—the last line in the last sonnet simply continues the preceding self-referentiality by repeating the very first line in the poem verbatim: "i don't know how, but surely & then again" (56/59). Rather than collect each last line in a concluding sonnet, Smith's final sonnet dovetails with the first in a Moebius-loop effect where death is in perpetual continuation, offering no visible escape. The speaker appears doomed to go through the devastation of grief again and again.

If some of the poems in *Don't Call Us Dead* suggest the possibility of finding solace in regeneration, others pose an outright refusal to see an end to the pain of death. An

analysis of Smith's usage of specific imagery, tone, and formal resources can help catalogue the poet's work according to the established distinction between elegiac and anti-elegiac modes. Bearing the genre's historical fluidity in mind, however, and immersed as we are in the wake of postmodernism's dissolution of rigid conventions, attempting to define Smith's work based on formal parameters appears as a rather profitless task. Limiting our understanding of the elegy to strictly classificatory terms would certainly hinder our effort, so I draw from Rita Felski's proposal that we should "place ourselves in front of the text," to reflect on "what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible" (12). My interest is not in determining whether Smith's work fits neatly into specific literary genres, or if it can be adequately categorized as consolatory or not, but instead in exploring what consolation, or its refusal, make possible in different contexts. Rutter et al., too, follow this approach to literary criticism when they wonder: "In what ways does the elegiac mode facilitate healing, helping us to cope with, meditate on, and work to build healthy sustainable futures informed by this systemic pattern of loss?" (9). In what follows, I will be reading Danez Smith's elegiac verse with this question in mind to explore whether and how the poet's work achieves the transformation of loss into healing, endurance or, indeed, into a healthy sustainable future. What does Smith's use of consolatory writing do to the dead? What do the poet's anti-elegies do to the living? And how do the consolatory and anti-consolatory modes contradict, connect, or affect each other in *Don't Call Us Dead*?

The Uses of Grief

The assessment of elegiac achievement has been largely articulated in psychoanalytic terms. Sacks's distinction between elegies which find compensation for loss and those which fail to do so draws on Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," where mourning is

described as a process in which the subject comes to understand and acknowledge loss, thus opposed to melancholia's refusal to accept it.[6] Melancholia is portrayed in Freud's canonical text as the lack of effective mourning, as the inability to eventually come to terms with loss and, consequently, as harmful and even pathological for the subject.[7] Following Freud, Sacks attributes elegiac "success" to the completion of "the work of mourning"—as we have seen in our reading of consolation in Smith's work—that certain literary resources and motifs attest to. For Sacks, successful elegies show mourning's overcoming of death through the detachment from the lost object-cathexis, while elegies in which the speaker remains melancholically bound to the dead—those we have come to call anti-elegies—are "failed" or "unsuccessful". The expressive function of any elegy should be, from this perspective, to help the bereaved overcome death by coming to terms with it and successfully creating a "saving distance between the dead and the survivors" (Sacks, 165). Symbols of fertility, regeneration, and of nature's cyclical continuation would therefore testify to the separation from the world of the dead which survival requires. Through consolation, we could say, conventional elegies illustrate the ability to safely and effectively remain on the side of the living.

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[6] The reason for this difference Freud attributes to the diverging ways in which the subject deals with the object-cathexis. Seeing that the object is no longer available after loss, the grieving subject is faced with the demand to withdraw their bond from it. In Freud's own words, "[r]eality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object" (244). Such demand of separation forced upon the subject, Freud explains, "arouses understandable opposition" (244), but while the mournful subject succeeds in letting go, the melancholic does not. In mourning, the libido is slowly displaced onto another object, whereas in melancholia, it is automatically "incorporated" within the body so as to attempt to maintain the bond (249). "The loss of the other whom one desires and loves," Judith Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*, "is overcome through a specific act of identification that seeks to harbor that other within the very structure of the self" (78). Therefore, while the displacement of the object-cathexis is completed in mourning "bit by bit" until "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (245), Freud specifies, in the case of melancholia the opposition to let go is so intense that the subject turns away from the reality of loss, "clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (244).

[7] While both reactions, Freud argues, can be characterized by "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity," melancholia presents an additional "lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings" (244). In other words, while in mourning the world becomes "poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" that is seen as poor and empty (246).

Sacks's study was undoubtedly groundbreaking in leading scholarly attention from formal description to symbolic interpretation, and its "theoretical sophistication and explanatory scope," Melissa Zeiger rightly notes, "elevated the criticism of elegy to a new level" (4). His strict perspective on the work of mourning, however, has also been widely questioned. What about those deaths surrounded or even caused by injustice? How to let go when no peace can be made, when letting go means forgetting, and forgetting means disrespecting the dead? For those victimized by lack of institutional protection—when not by outright attacks—such as Black Americans and those affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic, melancholia may turn out to be preferable.[8] The continuous insistence to maintain George Floyd's memory alive would undoubtedly classify as melancholic, yet it has served to induce reflection and to attain a limitation of police tactics in over 30 states.[9] Following this vindication of melancholia, literary comparative analyses have championed anti-elegy's consolatory abnegation, favoring the "clinging to the object" that Freud saw in it (244) as bearing potential for political change. Monica B. Pearl's analysis of literary responses to the AIDS crisis in *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, for instance, advocates those melancholic texts because, as she observes, they create a hope for "recovery that allows us to carry our lost ones with us, and not relegate them to oblivion for the sake of cohesion and acceptance" (163).[10]

[8] It is in this sense that, as Tettenborn states, melancholia's deployment of a politics of dissent turns grief into a "source of political empowerment" (102).

[9] Lynch & Allen, "Outpouring of Rage over George Floyd Killing Tests Limits of U.S. Police Tactics," *Reuter*, 3 Jun. 2020.

[10] For more in-depth discussions and problematizations of the mourning-melancholia binary within psychoanalysis, see, for example, Freud's own *The Ego and the Id*, Abraham & Torok's *The Shell and The Kernel,* or Simpson's "Beyond Mourning and Melancholia". In cultural studies, see Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*, Anidjar's "Bleeding and Melancholia", Cavedon's *Cultural Melancholia*, Eng & Han's *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia*, or Muñoz's *Disidentifications*. For specifically literary applications of these concepts, see Bahun's *Modernism and Melancholia*, Enterline's *The Tears of Narcissus*, Middeke & Wald's *The Literature of Melancholia*, Pearl's *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity*, Schiesari's *The Gendering of Melancholia*, Tettenborn's "Melancholia as Resistance", or Zeiger's *Beyond Consolation.*

As I have discussed above, an (arguably melancholic) rejection to settle into forgetfulness is evident in Smith's anti-elegiac verse. Through lines as sharp as knives, "not an elegy" confronts the reader with yet another instance of Black loss and its routineness. The effect of such commitment to memory is the activation of an exercise in historical recovery fostering awareness of anti-Black violence:

> reader, it's morning again
> & somewhere, a mother
>
> is pulling her hands
> across her seed's cold shoulders
>
> kissing what's left of his face. (69)

Here, a mention of the victim's disfigurement implicitly takes us back to the brutal murder of Emmett Till. The lynching of this teenager in 1955 was crucial in making anti-Black violence explicitly and widely visible, and his murder has been revisited by Black authors from Gwendolyn Brooks, through Audre Lorde, to Toni Morrison or Kevin Young. Till was a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who went to Money, Mississippi on a family visit. Whilst he was buying at a store, Carolyn Bryant, the white proprietor of the store, accused Till of offending her. That night, Bryant's husband found Till in the boy's uncle's house where he was staying, abducted him, beat, pistol-whipped and mutilated him, shot him in the head and threw him into the Tallahatchie river. Bryant claimed Till had whistled at her. Till had a stutter. He used whistling to help him articulate his speech. Three days later, when his body was retrieved from the water, his face was

bloated, completely unrecognizable. A cotton gin had been tied around his neck with barbed wire to keep the boy's body from floating. After a trial, nobody was convicted of Till's murder. Smith's poem is a perfect illustration of the fact that, as Howard Rambsy notes in *The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry*, "contemporary situations involving racial violence against innocent black boys provoke us so much in part because of our strong communal cultural memories and historical knowledge about the brutality and lack of justice involving Till" (150).

When Till's body was found, it was sent back to Chicago, where his mother famously held a four-day open-casket funeral attended by ten thousand people. A photograph of Till's corpse appeared in several media, which fostered his becoming an icon for the Civil Rights movement. "We remember Till because of all that his story embodies," states Elizabeth Alexander, "and because of the horror burned into our nightmares and imaginations with the photograph. Till's body was disfigured but still a body that can be imagined as kin to, but nonetheless distinct, from our own" ("Memory, Community, Voice" 90). In line with Alexander's remark, Smith's depiction of the brutalized boy contextualizes it by presenting it through his mother's reactions. The victim is more than an anonymous body. He is, before anything else, a son. The dead boy in "not an elegy," too, appears not as an isolated individual but connected in kinship. Smith's poem therefore not only commits melancholically to memory but also helps develop a strong sense of community, proving how, as Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, grief ties us to each other and displays "the thrall in which our relations with others hold us" (23).[11] Moreover, comparing the exceptionality of death for white people to its

[11] Butler's quote confirms that, indeed, not all reflections on elegiac poetry—or more generally on loss—need to be approached through the psychoanalytic binary of mourning and melancholia. Elegy scholars such as Fuss, Spargo or Zeiger have pored over the genre, instead, with interest in a possible ethics of mourning. The shared experience of loss can certainly be a source of intersubjective bonding. But beyond the constitution of

daily ordinariness for Blacks, the speaker in Smith's "not an elegy" urges: "are we not worthy / of a city of ash? of 1,000 ships / launched because we are missed?" (68).[12] Smith's poem thus highlights the disparities between grievable and non-grievable lives as differentiated by Judith Butler in "Grief and Grievance:"

> On the one hand, there are the monumental losses that claim the media and unite the nation, in which the lives are considered exemplary and the loss is thus a tragedy. On the other hand, there are the nameless lives lost, whose chance of being marked and grieved within the dominant media is very slim; on occasion they become a number, or a flickering image. (11)

The fact of a life not being seen as grievable, Butler explains, involves the question of it being seen as livable at all. "Grief becomes a grievance," Butler develops in her essay, "when the task of grief is to assert the value of that lost life, to break apart the scheme of valuation that would see it any other way" (12). From this perspective, Smith's anti-elegies engage with grief as well as with grievance, preserving the memory of life lest it

community ties, by referencing Till in poems like "not an elegy," "crown," "dear white America," or "dream where every black person is standing by the ocean," Smith's verse also adds to the work of those who, as Lennon explains, not only bear witness to anti-Black violence and Black grief, but also "contribute to and actively foment political engagement and activism in memory of victims of white supremacist violence" (193). "In continuously saying Till's name," Rutter et al. explain, "generations of poets have reminded readers that the white-supremacist ideologies that structured American life during the 1950s have neither been fully redressed nor eradicated" (13). Moreover, "publicly mourning the twenty-first-century victims of white supremacist violence," Laura Vrana adds, "Black Lives Matter elegists expand the ethical paradigm of the traditional elegy by positioning it in relation to national and global, community-level movements of remembrance and justice" (193). In opposition to consolatory writing's arguably forgetful acceptance of loss and its hasty moving on, Smith's poetry proves that "the ethical posture of anti-elegy unfolds," in Spargo's words, "a politics of mourning to be associated with the politics of dissent" (417). The elegiac mode is undeniably "an especially politicized literary genre," as Max Cavitch argues, "in the double sense of being 'on the spot' for history: not only present to witness (elegy may be the originary 'occasional' form) but also implicated in ongoing social struggles over memory and meaning" (32).

[12] Not surprisingly, these lines coincide with the core message of the Black Lives Matter: "that the goal of liberty and justice for all, that the perfecting of the union striven for during the civil rights movement, will not happen," as Naomi Beckwith explains in "My Soul Looks Back in Wonder," "until the nation values those it historically denigrates" (180).

should become a mere number, a flickering image. Claiming the grievability of Black life, Smith's poetry is also claiming its worth in life. In line with Butler's ethical, rather than psychoanalytical, approach to loss and grief, Spargo's reflections on anti-elegy confirm that

> anti-elegy arises a species of ethical complaint, turning against the history of consolation precisely so as to find fault with the strategies of commemoration the poet-mourner inherits as normative in her society, accusing successful acts of mourning and the mourners who achieve them of happy complicity with the status quo. Mourning pertains to ethics, then, by suggesting that the other's value does not correspond merely to utilitarian or rationalized uses of the other. The loss in anti-elegy, maintained in a space of irresolution, may even come to signify the value of the other. (417)

By asserting the value of Black life, the poet's paradigmatic "not an elegy" turns grief into grievance. Importantly, in so doing, it calls for political responsibility, it weaves an ethics of grief. In Smith's anti-elegiac verse, loss is not simply stated but rather becomes a call to action. In "1 in 2," too, responsibility is demanded over the grievance caused by the disproportionate impact of HIV and AIDS among Black Americans when the speaker succinctly states: "*plague* & *genocide* meet on a line in my body" (63). With the same idea in mind, "every day is a funeral & a miracle" explicitly links the AIDS pandemic to institutional inaction. Considering the possibility that AIDS was created intentionally, the speaker accusatorily states

> […] I don't doubt that

anything is possible in a place

where you can burn a body

with less outrage than a flag

[…]

America might kill me before i get the chance.

my blood is in cahoots with the law. (65-66)

In its movement against consolation, Smith's anti-elegiac mode proves that, as Lennon highlights in his reading of Black Lives Matter elegies, "memory of the dead is not enough in itself: it must be accompanied by an ethical critique of the systems that thrive on racial violence" (207-8).[13]

[13] Linking this idea back to the connection between Black grief and melancholia, Éva Tettenborn notes about contemporary African American literature that melancholia serves writers to hold "a white racist system responsible for the emergence of this condition of emotional difference" (102). Importantly, Tettenborn's attribution of responsibility to people other than the melancholic subjects fosters a questioning of the traditional pathologization of this condition. While the initial use of the Freudian binary could imply pathologizing any response to loss not fitting what the clinical perspective deemed a "healthy" acceptance of and detachment from death, at the turn of the century, cultural studies have suggested, instead, that melancholia's rejection of consolation may also be "productive" (Muñoz, 74). Seeing the conventional work of mourning as a potential form of depoliticization, José Esteban Muñoz proposes understanding melancholia "as a 'structure of feeling' that is necessary and not always counterproductive and negative." As Muñoz argues, "melancholia, for blacks, queers, or any queers of color, is not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives. […] It is this melancholia that is part of our process of dealing with all the catastrophes that occur in the lives of people of color, lesbians, and gay men. […] It is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names" (74). As a spearheading figure in the defense of melancholic attitudes in contemporary society, David L. Eng, too, proposes that melancholic attachments to a lost object may require more attention as indicative of a situation of inequality. In "Melancholia in the Late 20th Century," Eng asks: "Can the melancholic's psychic ambivalence toward the lost object—an ambivalence turned against the ego as self-reproaches that undermine and destabilize the ego's coherence—be thought of as a direct effect of social conflict between the melancholic's desire to preserve a lost object that dominant society refuses to support or to recognize?" (1278). For Eng, melancholia may be indicative not of an individual's personal pathology but rather of the social conditions surrounding that person, hence the fact that, as Eng notes, this particular reaction to loss is more frequent among minoritized sections of the population. Melancholia should be understood, thus, as an indicator of injustice, and therefore as a necessary step toward awareness and, ultimately, social change.

Yet, responsibility not always falls on others. If ingroup losses strengthen preexisting community ties, they also help generate a wider community united under a responsible "we:" "what cure maker did *we* just kill? / what legend did *we* deny // their legend?" (70, emphasis mine). Smith's use of the first-person plural pronoun makes us all—including the very speaker in the poem—involved in anti-Black violence; it makes us all responsible, whether we are affected by it as a community or not, whether we think we are directly implicated in it or not. In her study on modern elegy, Fuss warns us that "while the refusal of consolation may offer the greatest possible gesture of respect to the dead, it also may constitute the greatest possible abdication of responsibility to the living" (5). If this may be true, it is certainly not the case in Smith's work. The poet fiercely confronts those acts of injustice which have undermined the value of Black life and, in so doing, ensures that remembrance and responsibility go hand in hand.

Inhabiting Fairer Not-Yets

This shared responsibility, however, does not contemplate past actions only—it also hints at our power to become accountable for altering the present and, consequently, the future. Responsibility is here not about regret and penance, but proactivity and hope. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed describes hope as an emotion "that guides every moment of refusal and that structures the desire for change with the trembling that comes from an opening up of the future, as an opening up of what is possible" (171). Political improvement requires that we are critical with the past, Ahmed notes, but it also calls for hope, for a disposition toward the future in the present, which is precisely what Smith's anti-elegiac mode accomplishes. As Spargo argues, "anti-elegy may imply finally that the memory of injustice, posed as a rift within our ordinary useful or productive notions of the past, is necessary to the act of imagining the not-yet-realized just social

order" (417). By remembering the lives of those who no longer can share their own account of history, by challenging the hegemony of a single version of the past, Smith's poems open up the possibility of futures other than the one we have been prescribed.

And that is where the consolatory mode in Smith's work comes in. While I agree that in some cases Smith's work testifies to the productivity of anti-elegiac work, I want to argue that the consolatory elegiac mode, too, has the power to foster progress and, for that matter, political engagement with constructive repercussions for the not-yet-realized just social order. Anti-elegies have the potential to reclaim the value of certain lives, strengthen community bonds, and foment responsibility through political engagement, but if the politics of the genre remains stuck in the past, its actual impact is reduced to mere speculation, if not eradicated altogether.

Instead, the preservation of memories of our past is, in Smith's poetry, intricately intertwined with the hopeful construction of our future.[14] As we will see, the not-yets imagined in Smith's anti-consolatory elegies are made specific and, thus, materializable precisely through the consolatory mode. The consolation achieved in Smith's consolatory elegies does not stem from an apolitical acceptance of death, but in fact from the productive creation that follows it. As we have seen in "summer, somewhere," most of Smith's consolatory poems imagine parallel realities where Black life is no longer subject to violence and death. The opening poem in the collection elicits a new time-space where "there's no language / for *officer* or *law*" (3), it invokes a "paradise" free of racism and queerphobia, a "land who loves you back" (8), where "we are // in peace whole all summer" (22). Black life is duly valued and institutional violence does not exist,

[14] I focus on the importance of memory and the past in deeper connection to HIV and AIDS in chapter 3.

it is the inverse reflection of the queerphobia and anti-Blackness persisting in the United States, a space left behind in the poem as "the old world" (12).

In the poet's acclaimed "dear white america," too, historical instances of the making of the New World and the exploitation of enslaved Black people serve as the blueprint of how not to build a new society—"we did not build your boats (though we did leave a trail of kin to guide us home). we did not build your prisons (though we did and we fill them too)" (25). Here, the speaker leaves "Earth in search of darker planets" to begin a new life. The Book of Exodus is ironically recovered, in purely afrofuturist style, on a mission to begin again in outer space. This new beginning is conceived in opposition to the seemingly inescapable fate of the death-bound subject: "i'm sick of calling your recklessness the law. each night, i count my brothers. & in the morning, when some do not survive to be counted, i count the holes they leave." The speaker thus escapes "to find a place where my kin can be safe." The promised land—or space—is imagined in opposition to the permanent threat of death looming over Black Americans. Once this place is found, "America" is warned: "this life, this new story & history you cannot steal or sell or cast overboard or hand or beat or drown or own or redline or shackle or silence or cheat or choke or cover up or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or ruin // this, if only this one, is ours."

An alternative world is also imagined in "dinosaurs in the hood," where the speaker fantasizes with making an action movie where the main characters are Black, but a movie which "can't be a metaphor for black people & extinction" (26). The poem envisages it starting with a "little black boy […] playing / with a toy dinosaur on the bus" who then "looks out the window / & sees the *T. rex*". This image leads to a series of creative conditions for the movie, including the prohibition of racist stereotypes and slurs, racial determinism, and the death of Black people. After enumerating the conditions,

however, the speaker confesses: "the only reason" for this movie is "the first scene anyway: little black boy on the bus with his toy dinosaur, his eyes wide & endless // his dreams possible, pulsing, & right there" (27).

Each in its own specific way, these poems participate in the evocation of parallel futures and inhabitable time-spaces which José Esteban Muñoz calls "queer world-making" (*Cruising Utopias*). The fact that these situations are explicitly marked as fictional, as safe because taking place in "other planets" or even in the indefiniteness of "somewhere" could discourage any reading of them as "realistic." I concur with Darieck B. Scott, however, when he claims that "what occurs on the symbolic level and in discourse is highly relevant to, and often indistinguishable from, the material and the lived" (*Extravagant Abjection* 3). "Whereas symbolic action is categorically different than action in the world," Michael Dowdy explains in *American Political Poetry into the 21st Century*, "to bracket symbolic action as a consolation prize or wishful thinking denies the power of symbolic action in politics" (22). Understanding that linguistic expression is indeed a form of action, Dowdy adds that "[t]he notion of action as creative and productive rather than referential opens up political poetry to a more expansive paradigm than the opposition between imagination and reality, wherein a poem represents either the product of imagination or the witness to actual events" (23). "The force of events in the world on the writing process does not prevent poets' political imaginations from being preemptive, transformative forces of discovery," he concludes, since "poetic agency […] is first a response to living conditions, but it can also transform perceptions of those conditions" (37). By imagining alternative time-spaces, Smith's verse may not be materializing them as physical, tangible realities, but it certainly is making it possible for us to think them, to share in this act of imagination.

For Rita Felski, who sees "reading as a coproduction between actors rather than an unraveling of manifest meaning, a form of making rather than unmaking," such defense of the power of language "is not idealism, aestheticism, or magical thinking but a recognition—long overdue—of the text's status as co-actor: as something that makes a difference, that helps make things happen" (*The Limits of Critique* 12). Poems "make conceivable in language what is difficult to achieve in the 'real' world;" Dowdy posits, "they show us not what *is*, but what could be or might have been, through images of justice, peace, community, and progressive change" (21-22). Not until we imagine a reality, can we strive for it. If we remain fixated on what is, we are not making space for what may be. Only once our minds have conceived of something, can we attempt to materialize it. Again, I refer to Butler's reflections on language and loss, here added to the performative potential of grievance:

> the appeal to be alleviated of the burden of loss is one way to think about a grievance: Take away the crushing weight of this loss, this loss that makes me a beast of burden struggling for release and reparation! But who or where is the 'you' who might effectively respond to this call? To whom is the call directed? The call posits the powerful authority it requires, carrying the potential in itself. The demand, the appeal, carries some other power even as it calls for justice where there is no one to call upon and justice is not easy to find. It demands the entry of justice into the world; *it generates that ideal through its call.* ("Grief and Grievance" 14, my italics)

It is not so much a matter of generating physical realities, then, but of "generating that ideal," of making another world imaginable first so that it can then be aimed at through social projects and specific political demands.

The consolatory mode in *Don't Call Us Dead* names realities yet to be, and so engages in the creation of inhabitable time-spaces, making it possible for them to be developed and achieved. As Christian P. Haines notes, "Smith's poetry is an exercise for the political imagination, […] a training ground for expanding what we expect from the social" (109). Smith's work illustrates the fact that Black Lives Matter elegies, in Lennon's words, "explore how both grief and consolation can be productive in a wider, social sphere" (193). Against the perceived conformism or apoliticism attributed to the consolatory mode by defenders of melancholia and anti-elegy, *Don't Call Us Dead* deploys consolatory elegies for social change.

But the uniqueness of Smith's poetic act of expansion of our social hopes lies in a writing both temporally and spatially stemming from a deictic center. The consolatory mode in "summer, somewhere," "dear white america," "tonight, in Oakland," and "little prayer" envisions and claims not a "there" and "then," but a "here" and "now." Indeed, the speaker does not describe far-removed lands or distant places. Speech arises, rather, from the very center of the scenarios envisaged in the poems. Remembering the "old world" of violence, the speaker in "summer, somewhere" remembers how

> there, i drowned, back before, once.
> there, i knew how to swim but couldn't.
>
> there, men stood by shore & watched me blue.
> there, i was a dead fish, the river's prince.

there, i had a face & then i didn't.

there, my mother cried over me

but I wasn't *there*. i was *here* (21, emphasis mine)

The anaphoric "there" opening the first lines reiterates the establishment of rhetorical distance from the "old world" as radically opposed to the safe haven centered in the "here."

In his reflections on "summer, somewhere," Lennon notes that "[b]y privileging the term 'somewhere' in their utopian corpse poem, Smith implicitly suggests the poetic dimensions of the term 'elsewhere' while undermining 'utopia's' etymological roots in 'no place'" (206). To the extent that Smith situates their work in the deictic center, it redresses the assumed impossibility of utopia. Smith's conception of a time-space is not a nowhere but a somewhere. We may yet need to find it, but it exists. In this sense, Smith's verse calls for the notion of potentiality. In *Potentialities*, Giorgio Agamben recovers Aristotle's division between actuality and potentiality—only the former being available in the present, but both being forms of existence—, to focus on the unique nature of potentiality's "own ontology" (259). As Daniel Heller-Roazen explains, "potentialities or capacities present themselves above all as things that exist but that, at the same time, do not exist as actual things; they are present, yet they do not appear in the form of present things" (14). A potentiality is an unmanifested actuality, a reality which has not materialized, and thus it necessarily involves a negativity. In Agamben's words, "potentiality is not simply non-Being, simple privation, but rather *the existence of non-Being*, the presence of an absence" (179, emphasis Agamben's). Potentiality is,

therefore, like the queer world-making of Smith's consolatory elegies, that which both is and is not, a reality yet to be materialized, a not-yet. Standing out from the vague illusion of potentiality, however, Smith's poetry deploys deictic invocation to advance inexorably toward actuality.

What's more, in Smith's work deixis is not only spatial. A few lines further down in the poem, the speaker continues this comparison adding temporal deictics to the spatial ones, turning the "here" into a "now":

> now, everywhere i am is
>
> the center of everything. i must
> be the lord of something.
>
> what was i before? a boy? a son?
> a warning? a myth? i whistled
>
> now i'm the God of whistling.
> i built my Olympia downstream. (21)

The inhabitability of a new world is thus claimed both in space and in time. Situating the speaking I in the midst of the here-and-now of a new time-space, consolatory poems such as "summer, somewhere," "tonight, in Oakland," or "little prayer" highlight the proximity of its promise. Yet, perhaps most significant is the use of verb tenses. At times, the envisaged haven is demanded through imperatives: "tonight, let everyone be their own lord" (79), "let ruin end here," "let this be healing" (81), "please, don't call / us dead,

call us alive someplace better" (3); but in other occasions, it is simply described: "here, not earth / not heaven, we can't recall our white shirts // turned ruby gowns. here, there's no language / for officer or law, no color to call white" (3), "tonight // guns don't exist. […] tonight, we bury nothing" (79). What is remarkable about these elegies, then, is that the new time-space they claim is not subjected to conditional tenses, nor even to future forms. Smith could have written "in our new world, we would…" or "we will…" but instead chooses to write "we do." These lines create a reality from its very core, rooted in the present. In his study on American elegy, Cavitch argues that

> Because the practice of elegy is fundamentally devoted to the enshrinement of compensatory memory, and thus to a complaint or grievance against the present, elegists frequently seek to project a future that would transcend elegiac salvos of resentment—a future, in other words, that would amount to more than a grievance against the conditions of its arrival. (143)

Against Cavitch's definition, Smith's consolatory elegies do not so much project a future as claim a present. They involve, that is, not a wish for a new world but an active engagement in its construction. Projecting a future may entail an element of waiting, but Smith's elegies refuse to wait. They choose, instead, to create, to build a present where a life away from the constant menace of death exists. In this sense, Smith's work is reminiscent of Amiri Baraka's self-affirming "We do not want a Nation, we are a Nation" ("The legacy of Malcolm X"). Just as Baraka's defense of Black Nationalism refused to accept the temporal delay implied by "want" and chooses the already existing "we are" for the claiming of a nation, Smith's poetry takes root in its own new, inhabitable space at the same time as it envisages it.

If it is true that "Black grief […] is of another temporal order, saturating the span of life" ("Grief and Grievance" 14), Smith's work immerses in such temporal order, but also strives tirelessly to find new ways out of its saturation and into the potentialities of a new world. The present announces the possibility of the time-spaces it conceives, for "there is nowhere else for us to exist or for the dead to be given value" than the "present tense of being" (Spargo 428). Importantly, such claim of the present is, for Spargo, an element in fact indicative of anti-elegies in that, as he explains, these insist "on the relentless present tense of grief, referring us to the ongoing contingency of our decision to remember the dead or forget them as describing the faculty of remembrance in its daily rhythm as set against mystified, stultifying institutionalized forms" (417). Anti-consolatory elegies refuse, for Spargo, any "reverence for the past tense of being, for a time before loss in which the world was still replete with meaning" (428). Based on my reading of Smith, however, I argue that in the specific context of world-making consolatory elegies, the present tense can allow for a necessary reification of hope. Consolation here is not sought in a better past but, rather, in a better present which, *hopefully*, will make way for a better future. Hope may well be, José Esteban Muñoz contends, "the emotional modality that permits us to access futurity, par excellence" (98), but we cannot forget, as Sara Ahmed states, that

> hope involves a relationship to the present, and to the present as affected by its imperfect translation of the past. It is in the present that the bodies of subjects shudder with an expectation of what is otherwise; it is in the unfolding of the past in the present. The moment of hope is when the "not yet" impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future. (184)

In line with Ahmed and Muñoz, Smith engages in the temporal inbetweenness of hope as the "anticipatory affective structure" which links present and future (Muñoz 3). The consolatory mode in Smith indicates a tendency toward what we could call temporal openness. As speech arising in the midst of the present tense, not only does it demand justice but also enacts it. Such absolute presentness, undisturbed by what teleological accounts of time insist on projecting, is a stern defense of the promising possibilities of now. If the temporal closure we have seen in "crown"'s deployment of the begin-again convention denotes powerless resignation in the face of death, the temporal openness of Smith's consolatory elegies suggests the possibility of an alternative experience. Again, Ahmed's words are illuminating in her reflections about hope when she defines it as an "opening up of the future, as an opening up of what is possible" (171). From the open hope of the open present, the future can be filled with the promise of freedom. It seems relevant, then, that "the root of freedom," as Agamben states, "is to be found in the abyss of potentiality" (183).

The Open Spaces of Now

As the presence of both consolatory and anti-consolatory elements in Smith's poetry showcases, far from being incompatible, the elegiac and the anti-elegiac mode can combine in mutually enriching synergy. If anti-consolatory elegies in *Don't Call Us Dead* underscore the necessity of inhabitable time-spaces, of fairer not-yets, consolatory elegies engage in the creation of such worlds. If anti-elegies convey the powerlessness of experiencing death-ridden time as closed, consolatory elegies take root in the here and now to open time up to the promise of potential worlds. Consolation and its rejection thus appear as two sides of the same coin which is grief, for it is *through* the work of consolatory elegies that the demands of anti-consolatory elegies can begin to materialize.

Anti-elegy has often been claimed as the only possible reaction to unjust deaths, and its political potential has been extolled for strengthening community bonds, for revaluing lives previously deemed worthless and for demanding responsibility. By contrast, consolatory elegies have been presumed apolitical when not complicit with a discriminatory status quo. It would seem that elegiac writing is only able to either comfort the survivors or respect the deceased. Against this idea, a reading of the genre from an ethical viewpoint illuminates grief as multifaceted. As *Don't Call Us Dead* testifies, consolatory elegies can bear great political potential. Conventional, consolatory elegy merges with anti-consolatory anti-elegy in Smith's collection to explore the limits of the genre in the most productive of ways. Lennon's description of *Don't Call Us Dead* as deploying the "traditional elegiac balm of personal consolation" is therefore not in opposition to Rutter et al.'s categorizing of it as anti-consolatory. While one mode is invested in the recovery of memory and generating political awareness, the other engages in the design of a world where Blackness can simply be. The collection thus strives to move from the ethereal promise of the future to the material construction of the present. It is in this sense that the elegiac mode in Smith's work, indeed, "facilitate[s] healing" and "work[s] to build healthy sustainable futures informed by this systemic pattern of loss" (Rutter et al., 9).

Finally, *Don't Call Us Dead* shows that, as Fuss proposes, rather than implying respect either for those gone or for those still here, "elegies speak to both audiences, forced to negotiate the impossible ethical demands of a genre that strives neither to disrespect the memory of the dead nor to ignore the needs of the living" (5). As she further reflects,

> Consolation poems are not always naïve, just as anti-consolation poems are not always bitter. In the final analysis, elegies cannot be so easily partitioned into the unethical or the ethical, in part because elegy articulates a fundamental paradox about ethics, the doleful yet hopeful refusal to give up on the other or, for that matter, the self. Even anti-elegies are, of course, elegies. Both typically share a concern for the departed, as well as for the survivor, though they may articulate these concerns differently. Stripped down to their most basic impulse, both the traditional consolation elegy and the modern anti-consolatory elegy are answers to a call – responses to those beyond our reach, yet responses all the same. (Fuss 108-9)

In Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead*, the paradox of consolation does not only appear intermittently —it shapes the whole collection. The poet's approaches to the everyday experience of being death-bound are structured so that the reading of the poems takes us on a specifically conceived journey through the depths of grief. First, the three first poems in the collection, "summer, somewhere," "dinosaurs in the hood," and "dear white america," introduce the devastation of loss in consolatory, constructive terms. Slowly, the anti-Black attitudes explored in "& even the black guy's profile reads *sorry, no black guys*," "O nigga O" or "…nigga," accumulate and merge with the devastating experience of contracting HIV. The virus appears as an umpteenth form of violence against the body, as the straw that breaks the camel's back, and poems such as "recklessly," "litany with blood all over," "everyday is a funeral & a miracle," "crown," or "not an elegy" dive into a radically inconsolable and anti-consolatory mood. As the collection draws to an end, however, hope re-emerges from the debris with "strange dowry," "tonight, in Oakland," and "little prayer," which progressively recover the potentiality

born by the consolatory mode initiating the collection. In other words, consolation frames anti-consolation in *Don't Call Us Dead*, ensuring that there is a before and an after to the harrowing pain of grief.

That being said, the last poem in the collection, "dream where every black person is standing by the ocean," is not easily categorized according to a consolatory or anti-consolatory perspective:

> & we say to her
>
> *what have you done with our kin you swallowed?*
>
> & she says
>
> *that was ages ago, you've drunk them by now*
>
> & we don't understand
>
> & then one woman, skin dark as all of us
>
> walks to the water's lip, shouts *Emmett*, spits
>
> &, surely, a boy begins
>
> crawling his way to shore (82)

In the poem, the ocean is personified and asked about "our kin you swallowed," to which "she" responds evasively that it has been too long to do anything about it: "*you've drunk them by now*". Faced by the undeniability of loss, "one woman" invokes Emmett Till and, after spitting into the water, "a boy begins / crawling his way to shore." Anti-consolatory

in its insistence on remembering Emmett Till, but consolatory in its magical resurrection of the boy, this poem concludes the collection ambivalently. Till's retrieval from the sea is clearly regenerative in its symbolism, yet the meditative tone pervading this piece does not make room for celebration as many other poems by Smith do. In this sense, "dream" is representative of *Don't Call Us Dead* in that it acknowledges that there are compensations which simply cannot be, but which still must be attempted, at least in language, in hope that one day language may make way for that which it calls forth. The lack of a full stop to conclude the collection and the vast endlessness of the sea express, in lieu of poetic closure, a myriad of unknown possibilities and a future yet to be made.

Initially, my reading of Smith might appear as passively accepting the harrowing conditions of Black life, as finding comfort in literature and thus deactivating engagement in activism. Again, I recur to Rita Felski's understanding of texts as social co-actors: it is not that texts have the magical ability to change society by the mere fact of existing; writing cannot alter our reality on its own, but it can in fact leave a mark on its surroundings. In Felski's own words, "Texts cannot influence the world by themselves, but only via the intercession of those who read them, digest them, reflect on them, rail against them, use them as points of orientation, and pass them on" (172). Smith's verse does not have the power to achieve political change. We do. Our reading of it can prompt us into action, if only we have hope that, as Smith envisages, "there are other heres" (22), if only we engage in turning them into an actuality in the present tense. Now.

2. Monstrous Metaphysics: Of HIV and the Black Self

The eternally loading screen that is blackness waiting

to be called other than absence of.

—Justin Phillip Reed, "|P|L|E|A|S|"

There is a potency and intensity to two animate or inanimate bodies passing one another, bodies that have an exchange—a potentially queer exchange—that effectively risks the implantation of injury.

—Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies*

We are not all claimed by life in the same way.

—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*

© Ellen Gallagher. *An Experiment of Unusual Opportunity*, 2008. Ink, graphite, oil, varnish and cut paper on canvas. 79 1/2 x 74 inches. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

"The Monster Waiting": HIV in *[insert] boy* and *Don't Call Us Dead*

While the specific experience of coming into contact with HIV is most explicitly and profoundly explored in *Don't Call Us Dead*, several mentions of the virus already feature in *[insert] boy*. One of the most direct references to HIV in Smith's opera prima appears in "raw," where the idea of having unprotected sex triggers a series of images associated to the virus:

> […] I know
> the bones I could become, I know the story
> & the other one too, how people disappeared
> mid-sentence in the '80s, how NYC became
> a haunted bowl of dust. I know the monster
> waiting to pounce my blood (84)

On an individual level, contagion threatens to reduce the speaker's body to mere "bones." On a collective, cultural level, the explicit reference to New York City as a "bowl of dust" suggests a parallelism between the AIDS crisis in the 1980s to the Dust Bowl crisis in the 1930s and 1940s, thus claiming its disputed recognition as a large-scale disaster. The general tone pervading this section is fear, an emotion most clearly evoked by the description of HIV as a "monster / waiting to pounce [the speaker's] blood."

While monsters are widely recognized as frightful creatures, I interpret the progression from the poet's account of the initial fear of contagion to that of a developed experience of living with HIV as showcasing that the monstrosity associated to the virus in Smith's work need not always lead to pessimism. Whereas it is true, as I have shown in chapter 1 and I further explore throughout this dissertation, that HIV is perceived as

inevitably linked to an experience of loss, must HIV continue to be lived as a traumatic, destructive element for the self, or could it somehow be lived as constructive? Increasingly removed from the devastating losses at the end of the 20th century, can 21st-century *poz* youths come to perceive their status as other than loss? These questions are further complicated when we approach them from a Black American perspective. Throughout his work on Afropessimism, Frank B. Wilderson III posits that any ontological study of the Black subject through Western thought can only lead to the epistemological aporia of being not only death-bound, but also always already dead. From this perspective, how may HIV, in its dependence on a living being as a host, modify self-perception for Black Americans? May Queer Optimism illuminate, interact with, or defy our understanding of HIV in this equation? Indeed, what would an intersectional reading of Blackness and HIV look like through the double prism of Queer Optimism and Afropessimism? And what role may monstrosity play in this conundrum?

In what follows, I tackle these issues based on my reading of Smith's different depictions of HIV from *[insert] boy*, through *Don't Call Us Dead*, to *Homie*. I argue that there is a shift in the speaker's depiction of the virus from a collection to the other, most radically opposed between *[insert] boy*, where HIV is mentioned from a seronegative perspective, and *Homie*, where the grief induced by the diagnosis in *Don't* has progressively given way to acceptance, even embrace. Whereas the virus is recurrently expressed by means of monstrous imagery throughout Smith's work, the connotations of such monstrosity differ from one collection to another. With this idea in mind, I consider the introduction of HIV into the queer, Black American body initially as a monstrous experience, but progressively giving way to a perceptual challenge to the Afropessimist description of the self as nonbeing or as socially dead. Paying particular attention to "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" I show how Smith's work fosters

an optimistic reinterpretation of the virus through the development of a sense of mutual constructiveness between virus and the self. Thus, the poem illustrates how the virus can alter the speaker's ontological status from dead to living. After these reflections, I engage with the notion of "flesh" as developed by Hortense Spillers in relation to the Black body, but also by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his phenomenology of perception. Comparing the two different meanings given to this term, I argue that the experience of HIV as conveyed in Smith's work offers a potential point of connection between the two. Finally, after studying the disparities and uniformities in the perception of the virus throughout the poet's verse, I revisit the notion of monstrosity to suggest possible points of semiotic convergence between the earlier HIV poems and the more recent ones.

"A River Named Medusa": HIV as a Source of Fear and Power

In his study "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffery Jerome Cohen notes among the defining characteristics of monsters that they are "disturbing hybrids" and thus "resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" (40). For Cohen, that is one of the main reasons why monsters induce fear. It is our inability to define, to label, to properly categorize monsters, that we find so frightening. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed notes that "fear works by establishing others as fearsome insofar as they threaten to take the self in. Such fantasies construct the other as a danger not only to one's self as self, but to one's life, to one's very existence as a separate being with a life of one's own" (64). If HIV appears as a "monster," then, it is because of its hybrid nature. Once it has entered the body, it is impossible to distinguish the virus from the immune system. HIV becomes not quite other, not quite me. It poses a threat on the self's integrity, on its individual autonomy. What is relevant about the "ontological liminality" Cohen sees in monsters (40), then, is the threat they pose on our own self-perception. "In its

function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement," Cohen explains, "the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond" (41), an incorporation which "threatens," Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues in *The Monster Theory Reader*, our "understanding" not only of "the self" but also of "the relations between the two" (3).

Recovering Lee Edelman's reflections on HIV's challenge to the boundaries of human ontology in "The Plague of Discourse," Monica B. Pearl's *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity* likens the intrusion of the virus into the body to a monstrous experience when she states that HIV is at "the onset of a perplexity about self and not self, about inside and outside: that is, about subjectivity" (48). "By permeating the body's boundaries and becoming the body," Pearl explains, the virus "puts into question and illuminates the issue of what is self and what is not self." In its blurring of pre-existing boundaries, and its consequent threat on a unitary perception of the self, HIV can appear, indeed, as a monstrous presence. In this sense, we can positively argue, as Cohen, Barbara Creed, or Jack Halberstam, among others, have claimed, that monstrosity is closely connected to abjection.[1] In her description of the abject, Julia Kristeva defines it as something which "beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire," but "which nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (1). The abject—and the monster as one of its materializations par excellence—attracts yet at the same time generates rejection; its presence "disturbs identity, system, order," it does "not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). It is from this perspective that "the monstrous offers an escape," Cohen argues, from any "hermetic path," it is "an invitation to explore

[1] Relevant studies of monstrosity in relation to abjection are Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, and Halberstam's "Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity" in Mittman & Hensel's *Demonstrare: Classic Readings on Monster Theory*, as well as Elizabeth Grosz's "Intolerable Ambiguity: Monsters as/at the Limit," Margrit Shildrick's "The Self's Clean and Proper Body," and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's "Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror and Contemporary Culture" in Weinstock's *The Monster Theory Reader*.

new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world. In the face of the monsters, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble. […] The monster's very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure" (40). The depiction of HIV as monstrously abject therefore lies in its dissolution of the borders dividing inside from outside, self from non-self, thus fostering new domains in the field of reality perception.

But whereas in *[insert] boy* HIV's monstrous dissolution of borders is only briefly imagined, in *Don't Call Us Dead* the positive diagnosis triggers a full, in-depth exploration of contagion as a reality. In "it began right here," the speaker remembers a moment of intercourse suspected of having been the origin of HIV transmission: "a humbling at my knees. i let him record me, he wanted to / watch me be monster" (55). As I will argue in chapter 3, sex is generally conveyed throughout Smith's work as having a constructive effect on the speaker. In close contact with the virus, however, intercourse is described as a "humbling" experience. Rather than a source of joy and connection, sexual intimacy becomes, through contact with the virus, tainted with negative affect. HIV is once more equated to monstrosity. Yet, while in "raw" the monster is a metaphor for the virus, here the dissolution of borders enacted by HIV is taken to the extreme of it being the very I who can now "be monster."

Such monstrous dissolution of the self as a consequence of contact with the virus is also expressed in "crown," where the lyric I "is barely / me by now" (56) after contagion. Further on, HIV is once again equated to monstrosity when, trying to make sense of a positive diagnosis, the speaker is conflicted with the available information about the alleged moment of HIV transmission: "but he / told me he was negative. but he wasn't / aware of the red witch spinning / in his blood" (59). The reference to a witch in the speaker's sex partner's blood skillfully introduces what could perfectly be a creature in contemporary folk culture. If Boogeyman is used to frighten children into good

behavior, the "red witch" could serve a similar function in relation to sexual behavior and HIV. While the witch's color illustrates its relation to blood, its spinning motion is somewhat more ambivalent. On one hand, this character can be pictured as an evil microbe-like intruder in the blood flying on a broom; on the other, this description can also be read in light of classical iconography as depicting an old woman spinning a wheel. The red witch in "crown" may well embody a union of the three Fates in classical mythology: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. She is all three, spinning, allotting and inflexibly cutting the thread of life, planning death for those marked with the persistent stigma of HIV. As the evil mistress of decay, the red witch is a solitary Fate, the doom of a foretold destiny.

Further exploring HIV's description through monstrosity, the lyric I's blood becomes, towards the end of the poem, "a river named medusa" (57). The monster's well-known myth works as a particularly vivid illustration of the speaker's struggle with a positive HIV diagnosis in the 21st century. The only mortal of the three Gorgon sisters, Medusa is described in ancient mythology as having once been a beautiful woman. As a priestess devoted to Athena, she is expected to remain a virgin, but her fairness draws the attention of Poseidon, who emerges from the waters and rapes her in Athena's shrine. As a punishment—directed, significantly, at the victim rather than the perpetrator of rape—Medusa is turned into a frightful monster with snakes instead of hair, isolated, and doomed to turn into stone any person daring to look at her. Perseus, son of Zeus and Danae, is later tasked to slay Medusa, which he accomplishes with the help of the gods. Using a shield given to him by Athena, the hero approaches the Gorgon by looking at her reflection, thus avoiding her petrifying gaze and succeeding in beheading her. The hero then keeps the monster's head, and uses it in several occasions to turn his enemies into stone before finally giving it to Athena. The connection between Medusa's forbidden

sexuality, punishment and potential harm to others is implicit in Smith's poem, where "every man / i touch turns into a monument. i put / flowers at their feet, their terrible stone feet. They grow wings, stone wings, & crumble" (57). Referring to the myth of Medusa, "crown" expresses sexuality as surrounded by guilt, remorse and, of course, fear.[2]

It is not entirely surprising, thus, that the same fear appears in Essex Hemphill's "Now We Think," where Medusa is hinted at to convey the threat of AIDS:

> Now we think
> as we fuck
> this nut
> might kill us.
> There might be
> a pin-sized hole
> in the condom.
> A lethal leak.
> […]
> Now we think
> as we fuck
> this nut might kill.
> This kiss could turn

[2] Interestingly, myth has it that the elegiac double-pipe aulos was invented by Athena to imitate the wails of the two other Gorgons over their sister's death. As Pindar recounts in his Pythian poems, "the tune of many heads" that "often passes through the thin bronze and the reeds" (381) was created by Pallas Athena "by weaving into music the fierce Gorgons' deathly dirge […] in their grievous toil" (379). We can imagine Stheno and Euryale's mournful cry over the injustice of their sister's rape and murder, and their voices becoming Athena's inspiration for the two different pipes in the instrument—the high-pitched chanter and the lower drone. It is the death of Medusa that originates the aulos and, with it, the elegiac mode—and mythical reference—which Smith recovers in *Don't Call Us Dead.*

to stone (155)

Echoing Hemphill's poem, the lyric I in Smith's poem petrifies "every man i touch." This ability adds a feeling of powerless guilt to fear. The speaker attempts to make up for such harm by making each "monument" an offering of flowers, but the petrified bodies unfailingly crumble.

The myth of Medusa is a story of excruciating loneliness with a terrible ending. The stark contrast between her innocence and her fate perfectly captures how painful the experience of becoming HIV+ can be even in the pharmaceutical context of the US in the 21st century. The speaker's self-identification with Medusa as a result of contact with HIV is not only tinged with fear, but also with grief. The sympathy denoted in Smith's verse makes the Gorgon a relatable figure, one we can understand, perhaps even admire. After all, even in classical times, not all accounts of the myth depict Medusa as evil, nor monstrous. In Palaephatus's "The Daughters of Porcys," Medusa is not a monster but a queen, and Perseus appears as a ruthless pirate. In Lucian's *The Hall* the Medusa is neither ugly nor scary, and the only physical descriptions of her focus on the dazzling beauty which causes her ill fate. The same perspective appears in perhaps the first feminist interpretation of the story, by Christine de Pizan, who explained that

> Medusa, according to the ancient stories, was of such striking beauty that not only did she surpass all other women—which was an amazing and supernatural thing—but she also attracted to herself, because of her pleasing appearance—her long and curly blond hair spun like gold, along with her beautiful face and body—every mortal creature upon whom she looked, so that she seemed to make people immovable. For this reason the fable claimed that they had turned to stone. (57)

Monstrous or not, Medusa is always an uncannily powerful female figure. Her severed head is used by Perseus after her slaughter as a protective amulet; in antiquity it became a recurrent apotropaic motif on shields and armors; and it has been claimed as a symbol of feminine strength by contemporary feminist writers and theorists from Teresa de Lauretis to Hélène Cixous, through Emily Erwin Culpepper.[3]

The Gorgon is, therefore, a monstrous yet powerful character who represents abjection's ambivalence, in Kristeva's words, as "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). In *Extravagant Abjection*, Darieck B. Scott notes that abjection is often considered in Black American thought "an affront to personhood, an experience of terrible suffering" (15).[4] And yet, without disregarding such connotations, Scott chooses to focus on the fact that, as a result of such abjection, "we may find that the zone of self or personhood extends into realms where we would not ordinarily perceive its presence; and that suffering seems, at some level or at some far-flung contact point, to merge into something like ability, like power […] without losing or denying what it is to suffer" (15). Following Scott's perspective, I read Smith's usage of monstrous and abject imagery as bearing potential for empowerment and self-esteem rather than stigma and shame. While Smith's references to HIV as Medusa, as a red witch, and more generally as a "monster" do not explicitly facilitate such optimistic interpretation, I argue that they are harbingers of a shift toward such perspective in Smith's following collection *Homie*.

[3] These various accounts of the myth are collected, among many others, in Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers's excellent anthology of myth, poetry, and theory about the mythical character in *The Medusa Reader*. The Gorgon's story is also problematized in Matt Kaplan's *Medusa's Gaze and Vampire's Bite: The Science of Monsters,* 135-165.

[4] Fred Moten's "The Case of Blackness," Jared Sexton's "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," and R.A. Judy's *Sentient Flesh* all explore the history and long-lasting impact of the largely established anti-Black connection between Blackness as pathology.

"An Old Fact": HIV in *Homie*

After an almost devout dedication to HIV and the monstrous burden of loss in *Don't Call Us Dead*, Smith's following volume *Homie* focuses mainly on the healing constructiveness of friendship. Progressively, the initial effort to come to terms with the virus's intrusion gives way to calm acceptance. HIV does occasionally feature in *Homie*, but when it is mentioned, the speaker does not approach it in exclusively "negative" terms. In "old confession & new," the speaker's traumatic reaction to the positive diagnosis in the past is contrasted with their serene acknowledgement of it in the present: "now that it's an old fact, can it be useful? / that which hasn't killed you yet can pay the rent / if you play it right" (59). While HIV has not stopped being perceived as a potential threat which "hasn't killed you yet," there is a chance that it might also be profitable in some way. Controversial as the reasons behind such shift may be, the lyric I's understanding of their diagnosis has taken a considerable turn. HIV no longer evokes almost exclusively images of monstrosity, loss, and death as it does in *[insert] boy* and *Don't Call Us Dead*, it is no longer exclusively associated to fear. Instead, loss proves not to be incompatible with gain because, rather than ineluctable devastation, HIV can also be a promise of constructiveness.

On a similar vein to "old confession & new," "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" shows acceptance for HIV, but most importantly this poem also claims it as a defining element of the self, and even professes love for it:

> […] you learn to love it. yes.
> i love my sweet virus. it is my proof
>
> of life, my toxic angel, wasted utopia

what makes my blood my blood. (33)

But how to interpret such "love"? How does HIV become a "sweet virus"? How can it come to be perceived so positively? What may the wish for side effects stated in the title be indicative of, if not a masochistic wish for a reification of stigma? Might the speaker's life be so unbearable as to find solace in the prospect of a death from untreated HIV giving way to AIDS? And have metaphors of monstrosity disappeared altogether?

Divided into three sections of eight couplets each, "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" explores a wide range of emotional responses to being HIV positive. If "old confession & new" showcases the contrast between an initially fearful reaction to the diagnosis and its currently fruitful possibilities, "sometimes" takes the reader on a more detailed journey through the fluctuations of self-perception in relation to HIV. The poem starts with a wish for a tangible manifestation of the virus in the asymptomatic speaker's body, an idea conveyed by both the title and the metaphor—already explored in *Don't Call Us Dead*—of HIV as pregnancy: "i wish i knew the nausea, its thick yell // in the morning, pregnant proof / that in you, life swells" (33). But maternal instinct suddenly turns to filicide: "i'm not a mother, but i know what it is / to nurse a thing you want to kill // & can't" (33).[5] After such brief hints at murder, the speaker drifts from the aforementioned "love" for their "sweet virus" to responsibility ("knew what could happen. needed / no snake. grew the fruit myself" (34)); from regret ("i braved the stupidest ocean. a man. / i waded in his stupid waters" (33)); to relief ("it felt like I got it / out the way, to finally know it up close" (33)). Finally, the shifting tone of this piece settles on the acceptance and appreciation running up to the final image:

[5] I discuss the metaphorical reference to HIV as pregnancy and other forms of kinship in Smith's work in chapter 3.

i want to live. think i mean it.

took the pill even on the days

i thought i wouldn't survive myself.

gave my body a shot. love myself

at least that much. thank you, me.

thank you, genvoya, my seafoam savior.

thank you, sick blood, my first husband, bff

dead river bright with salmon. (34)

While each of the speaker's affective reactions to HIV deserves careful attention, the troubling thankfulness here shown offers generous food for thought. As these lines clarify, the speaker's appreciation of HIV does not respond to anything like masochism or a "death drive." Reading the poem as suicidal would bump up against the explicit appreciation for Genvoya, the tablets taken as antiretroviral treatment, and even more specifically against the willingness to live on expressed in these lines.

As I am about to argue, the final couplet in this poem holds the key to the speaker's reconciliation, thankfulness, and love expressed for the virus. Yet, this metaphor of the speaker's blood as a "dead river bright with salmon" offers two possible, antithetical interpretations. A first reading could attribute the causality of death to the threatening presence of HIV. The salmon would therefore symbolize dead T cells, their brightness here suggesting a devastation to the immune system. Static, floating fish—

their scales reflecting sunlight on the surface of the river. Death clogging the speaker's veins, blood as a battlefield strewn with the casualties of massacred lymphocytes. From this perspective, the blood's sickness and the river's death are one and the same thing: the havoc wreaked by HIV's siege to self-preservation.

Against this idea, I prefer to suggest, controversially, that HIV is portrayed not as the causality of death but as a symbolic remedy to it. The final lines in the poem allow death to be perceived as a preexisting condition affecting the speaker before their HIV diagnosis. That is, in "sometimes," the river—the speaker's veins, their body—can be seen as always already "dead," yet this death is not *caused* by the "sick blood" inside it but in point of fact *challenged* by it. I am arguing that the blood is not "bright" with dead fish, but with thriving salmon sparkling as they swim upstream. The maritime imagery in the second section of the piece, where the speaker recounts how "i braved the stupidest ocean. a man. […] took his stupid // fish into my stupid hands and bit into it" (33-34), already represents HIV as fish taken into the I, adding to this interpretation. The fish at the end of the poem appear not as a metaphor for dead T cells, or for the speaker's immune system more generally, but as HIV itself. The closing image of salmon is thus not a synecdoche of the I as battling the virus but, rather, the virus within the I or, even further, the virus as enabling the I, as a part of the I which, paradoxically, reestablishes rather than threatens life.

The Meta-Aporia of (Social) Death

Before I continue my reading of this poem as representative of a life-enhancing experience of HIV, I need to clarify how it might possible for the speaker to perceive themself as dead even before the shadow of the AIDS crisis is cast by a positive HIV diagnosis. I have claimed that the speaker's blood—and, by extension, the speaker

themself—can be understood as already dead. Of course, my suggestion does not respond to an idea of *actual* or *physical* death but to Orlando Patterson's notion of *social* death. Although Patterson's coinage refers to one of the main defining characteristics of enslavement—alongside "natal alienation" and "dishonor"—, his spearheading contribution has been adopted by other contemporary thinkers as an accurate expression of the current social experience of Black Americans. In Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*, social death refers to the fact that, under enslavement, an individual has "no social existence outside of his master" (38). An enslaved person is "alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth," Patterson explains, so "he cease[s] to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order," thus becoming "a social nonperson" (5). By this, Patterson does not mean that enslaved people are not human, or can have no social relations, but that they are not acknowledged as such by society at large and that their bonds have no social recognition nor legal support. However, as the work of other Black thinkers such as R.A. Judy, Jared Sexton, Christina Sharpe, or Calvin Warren testifies, Patterson's use of social death exclusively around active enslavement limits its actual scope and representative potential.

Drawing on Patterson's concept, so-called Afropessimists propose that, at least for Black people in the United States, social death did not finish with the end of enslavement. Whereas Patterson's text regards manumission as concluding enslavement through the recovery of freedom, Afropessimists have questioned the effective impact of that moment, arguing that the notion of social death applies not only to enslaved people but can be extended to their descendants as well, even among current generations. Afropessimists coincide with Patterson on the idea that enslaved peoples *outside the Americas* might have been able to return to their native land after manumission, recovering social and geographical bonds blurred by years of forceful labor. Yet, for those

taken to America across the Atlantic—Afropessimists specify—the recovery of an "original" state of "freedom" in the long wake of the Middle Passage was and has always been impossible.[6] In America, the routes from pre-enslavement freedom to post-enslavement freedom are either untraceable or simply impossible to navigate due to generational, linguistic and cultural deracination. As Frank B. Wilderson III points out, there can never be "a prior meta-moment of plentitude" for Black Americans, "never a moment of equilibrium, never a moment of social life" (n.p.). Which is to say, Wilderson concludes, that "Blackness *is* social death" (n.p., emphasis Wilderson's).

Afropessimism's expansion of social death into what Saidiya Hartman has called "the afterlife of slavery" is founded upon the incompletion of the process of manumission or, to put it in Wilderson's terms, based on the "failure" of "redemption" (n.p). "I, as Black person (if *person*, *subject*, *being* are terms we can use)," Wilderson states, "am both barred from the denouement of redemption and, simultaneously, needed if redemption is to attain any form of coherence." The problematic of redemption stems from the catch-22 of its narrative arc: from (a) freedom or equilibrium to (b) enslavement or disequilibrium, back to (a) freedom/equilibrium/redemption. So how to *re*-gain something that has never been ours? How to go "back to" freedom when freedom is something we do not know? How to reach "plentitude" when there has never been a "meta-moment" of it? Wilderson clarifies:

> The narrative arc of the slave who is *Black* (unlike Orlando Patterson's generic slave who may be of any race) is *not an arc at all*, but […] a flat line that "moves"

[6]Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* proposes an exhaustive consideration of the long-lasting impact of the Middle Passage and of enslavement in US society. Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* adds to Hartman's work by engaging in a personal, in-depth exploration of Blackness and death, with particular interest in the term "wake" and its polysemy.

> from disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored and/or rearticulated. To put it differently, the violence which both elaborates and saturates Black "life" is totalizing, so much so as to make narrative inaccessible to Blacks. (emphasis Wilderson's) [7]

Significantly, Wilderson's bold claims are not a mere corroboration of social death. If Patterson blurs the line separating life and death, Afropessimists go a step further. In Wilderson's revision of Hegelian dialectics, "the dust up is not between the workers and the bosses, not between settler and the native, not between the queer and the straight, but between the living and the dead" (n.p.). Calling into question the "social" in Patterson's consideration of the enslaved person as a "social nonperson," Wilderson sees the dishonor and natal alienation that further constitute the status of the enslaved as characteristic of "abjection rather than […] degradation" (n.p.). Afropessimists thus problematize not only the "livability" of the racialized, to use Judith Butler's (2004) term, but also their very ontological status, which is reduced to the abject. Wilderson's aforementioned doubt that "*person*, *subject*" and even "*being*" might be categories applicable to Black people does confirm the failure of redemption—of Patterson's manumission—but it also implies the broader impossibility of a Black metaphysics.[8] It is from this

[7] Douglass & Wilderson's "The Violence of Presence: Metaphysics in a Blackened World" uses the same logical pattern in the authors' comparison of Black American social death to Elaine Scarry's account of torture. For Scarry, torture deprives the torture victim of all subjectivity, but such subjectivity can ideally be recovered in the process of healing—again, from equilibrium to disequilibrium, back to equilibrium. As Douglass & Wilderson state, this narrative arc does not apply to Blacks insofar as "the black arrives at the torture chamber in a psychic state too deracinated to be credited to a prior torture" (121). It is not that the authors equate Blackness to torture. Rather, they question the universal availability of equilibrium on which the idea of recovery is grounded.

[8] As I argue later in this chapter, and as my use of "Black subject" throughout this dissertation shows, I interpret Afropessimism not as a denial of Black subjecthood, but rather as a caustic and necessary criticism of the anti-Blackness structurally engrained in Western thought and in the many institutions—economic, political, educational—founded upon its epistemological principles.

position of distrust that Wilderson disputes Patterson, arguing that "there is no place like Europe to which Slaves can return *as Human beings*" (n.p., emphasis mine).[9]

"[W]hat is the nature of a human being," Jared Sexton wonders, "whose human being is put into question radically and by definition, a human being whose being human raises the question of being human at all?" (6). "[C]an blacks have life?," condenses Calvin Warren, "can black(ness) ground itself in the *being* of the human?" (1-2, emphasis Warren's). For Wilderson, answering these questions demands a confrontation of the "foundational belief" in the Humanities that "all sentient beings can be emplotted as narrative entities, that every sentient subject is imbued with historicity" (n.p.). Against this widespread assumption, he challenges "the idea that all beings can be redeemed" and accuses "historicity and redemption" of being "inherently anti-Black in that without the psychic and/or physical presence of a sentient being that is barred, *ab initio*, from narrative and, by extension, barred from redemption, the arc of redemption would lack any touchstones of cohesion" (n.p.). If Black people are deprived of access to narrative as a metaphysical form, their ontological essence is also jeopardized. For Wilderson, there is little room for hesitation—Blackness is marked by a "meta-aporia of narrative" which significantly portends an "absence of humanity" (n.p.).

The contemporary persistence of social death is proven by the fact that to this day Black and Brown people in the United States continue to be treated as nonbeings disproportionately by institutional powers. Perhaps its most jarring instance is, as a recent

[9] What Wilderson is referring to here is the impossibility of tracing slave trade routes from the American continent back to Africa. Intra-European enslavement might be somewhat—although not much—easier to follow, particularly bearing in mind how much better recorded commercial interactions, different cultural expressions and geographical shifting were within the old continent as opposed to the African continent, where the capturing and enslaving of entire populations took place in regions of West Africa at the time poorly—if at all—documented by the enslavers. This lack of traceability, added to the radically violent, perpetually enforced separation of those enslaved Africans who spoke the same language—and who could have maintained the specificities of their pre-enslavement origins through oral tradition—results in the virtual impossibility of finding the exact roots of the vast majority of African Americans.

analysis of data collected between 2013 and 2018 states, the fact that in the United States "young men of color face exceptionally high risk of being killed by police," the highest lifetime risk being that of Black men, "about 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police over the life course than white men" (Edwards et al. 16794). The study points out that Black women, too, are disproportionately exposed, and are "about 1.4 times more likely to be killed by police than are white women" (16794), but it does not mention the exceptional vulnerability of queer people, particularly of trans women of color, to violence from law enforcement. Highlighting the importance of an intersectional approach, a report by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs on hate violence against LGBTQ or HIV-affected communities shows that in 2013 "transgender people of color were 6 times more likely to experience physical violence from the police compared to White cisgender survivors and victims" (n.p.).[10] The murders of Tony McDade, Sandra Bland, or George Floyd are the mere tip of an enormous, transhistorical iceberg, only visible thanks to the relentless effort of those who have persistently refused to forget.[11] Their names testify to the political vulnerability of racialized Americans, just as the work of Danez Smith, Claudia Rankine, or Patricia Smith corroborates the phenomenology of social death through poetry. It is undoubtedly outrageous, but not for that reason less true, that to this day many continue to embody the status of the nonhuman.

In Danez Smith's poetry, the meta-aporia of Black metaphysics is ubiquitous. As early as in "black boy be," the first poem in *[insert] boy*, the life of Black youths is said to be "like a nothing at all" (15). Further on, the speaker in "for black boys" wonders "how

[10] See also Haritaworn, Kuntsman & Posocco's *Queer Necropolitics*; as well as Snorton & Haritaworn's "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife."
[11] For a detailed account of the impact of journalistic insistence on not allowing these cases to go into oblivion, see Rambsy, 2020.

do you describe a son set / course to casket from birth?" to then conclude, "you have always been a dying thing" (19-20). The poet's awareness of social death not only continues to be expressed throughout this collection, but also spills into the following volumes. As I argued in chapter 1, "summer, somewhere" states the contradiction of such life-in-death plainly: "dead is the safest i've ever been. / i've never been so alive" (16). Even more specifically meaningful to our reading here, HIV is once again presented as inseparable from the speaker's position as Black and queer. I refer again to "every day is a funeral & a miracle," where the lyric I—conscious of the disproportionate ratio of queer, Black Americans living with HIV in the present and dead from AIDS in previous decades—ponders:

> do i think someone created AIDS?
> maybe. i don't doubt that
> anything is possible in a place
> where you can burn a body
> with less outrage than a flag (65)

Smith's accusatory link between systemic racism and political inaction in face on the health crisis joins the words of Essex Hemphill in "When My Brother Fell," where Hemphill, in the midst of the deadly first years of the pandemic, bluntly asked: "who wants us dead, / what purpose does it serve?" (33). It nonetheless seems that the relevance of such questions continues. As the succinctly titled "1 in 2" states in its first prosaic lines, "*On February 23rd, 2016, the CDC released a study estimating 1 in 2 black men / who have sex with men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime*" (61). Hence the fact that, as I argued in chapter 1, HIV is continuously associated to the (social) death of Black people

in Smith's lyric work. It is this recurring connection that makes Smith's "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" stand out so vividly. The speaker in the poem self-depicts as dead, as a being whose very being is called into question. Importantly, though, death is here not a result of exposure to disease, but the effect of structural anti-Blackness.

The commented final line in "sometimes," where the speaker's blood is a "dead river," attests to such a conception of the Black body. Similarly, the speaker's effort to give themself an opportunity ("gave my body a shot") implies the hardship and the continuous obstacles posed on Black bodies' literal struggle for survival. The body is here given an opportunity *despite* itself, so that remaining alive is a conscious *decision*, expressed in contrast with its supposedly natural relegation to social death. The fact that this virus is metaphorically expressed as childbearing in the poem also confirms this reading. HIV becomes "pregnant proof / that in you, life swells" (33) because, as a virus, it can only survive when hosted by a living being. Able to host it and, therefore, to keep it alive, the speaker reconceptualizes HIV as "proof" of their ability to give life and, by extension, to live. While a virus's relationship with its host is usually described as a parasitic form of symbiosis, "sometimes" challenges this notion. In the poem, the I can conceive (of) themself not despite but thanks to the virus. From this perspective, the incorporation of HIV participates in the constitution not of a parasitic but a mutualistic symbiotic relationship, for the lyric I conceives the virus as much as the virus conceives the I. From this perspective, human and HIV become a holobiont—the symbiotic assemblage of a host and its symbiont into an "integrated commonality" (Gilbert et al.). HIV appears in "sometimes" as salmon shining in glorious grace because it is given a space to thrive—or at least survive—in. It is not just that sickness and death are not likened in the poem but, rather, that the possibility of sickness implied by the assimilation of HIV defies a preexisting state of (social) death.

Disease as Life: HIV's Reification of Ontology

At a historical moment when it is barely possible to talk about life as completely separate from external agents such as microbes, viruses, and other disease-causing agents, Smith's work testifies to a slow movement toward a perception of a death-bound subject who lives not against HIV, nor in spite of it, but *with*, even *through* HIV. The speaker's (co)existence with HIV illustrates a life which is "neither a healthy state nor a sick stasis: a coming-and-going, a jumpy or smooth palpitation of skins side to side, wounds, synthetic enzymes, synthetic images" (Jean-Luc Nancy, 107).

In its cultural association to the ravage of AIDS, HIV initially appears as a frightening monster. As Smith's work grows, however, the monster's abjection turns it into life-affirming experience. Kristeva does not fail to note that

> If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject. (5)

Upon reading Smith's "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects," the direct relationship between HIV and abjection is confirmed. At the same time, however, such abjection is felt towards an element "with whom I identify and incorporate, […] an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be" (Kristeva 10). Reading HIV as such "Other," the lyric I and the virus become interdependent insofar as the latter endows the former with life, it causes it to be. It is in this sense that the penetration of the virus into the body becomes a "possession" or, to borrow Butler's

Levinasian term in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, a "persecution." Such notion refers not to an aggressive kind of pursuit but rather to the "passive" experience of being externally acted upon. It alludes to the idea that "my formation implicates *the other in me*," as Butler explains (84, my italics), because "the 'I' first comes into being as a 'me' through being acted upon by an Other" (89). From this viewpoint, Butler reflects:

> It would seem that what persecutes me comes to substitute for the "I." That which persecutes me brings me into being, acts upon me, and so prompts me, animates me into ontology at the moment of persecution. This suggests not only that I am acted upon unilaterally from the outside but that this "acting upon" inaugurates a sense of me that is, from the outset, a sense of the Other. […] something places itself in my place, and an "I" emerges who can understand its place in no other way than as this place already occupied by another. In the beginning, then, I am not only persecuted but besieged, occupied. (89)[12]

Of course, Butler's use of the term "Other"—unlike Kristeva's use—indicates a *human being*, since Butler's ethics of intersubjectivity—as that of Levinas—considers human-to-human interaction. I want to suggest, however, that such Otherness need not be reduced in categorical terms and can in fact make space for a wider range of other Others.

Drawing on Actor-Network Theory (ANT), I am proposing that the being "acted upon" which sparks persecution in Butler's text can be expanded to include non-human "actors," too. In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour defines the actor in ANT as "*Any* thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (72, emphasis Latour's),

[12] Butler's reflections on persecution as the formation of subjectivity resulting from contact with otherness are here a response to Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*.

including non-human animals and objects. Latour thus problematizes the assumption that agency can solely be attributed to human beings, proposing that there are "many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence" (72). For Latour, the fact that some objects or nonhuman elements cannot in a traditional sense perform certain actions on their own does not mean that they do not play any role on the course of actions. As he puts it, "In addition to 'determining' and serving as a 'backdrop for human action', things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (72). From this perspective, HIV can be seen to account for an actor in its network of connections with human life. I am certainly not suggesting that HIV can or should be seen as a subject of its own but rather that, as a non-human actor with undeniable potential to alter the course of events in our surroundings, it does precisely "act upon" human experience as "Other." Like thing theory, ANT does not attempt to establish "some absurd symmetry between objects and subjects" (76), Latour explains, but to recognize the crucial role that non-human actors can and, in fact, do play in our lives, of acknowledging how intricately interconnected we are to those elements which surround us. Drawing from these ideas allows us to consider the current experience of seroconversion through the prism of wonder, making way for fresh epistemologies of the virus so that we may better understand the wide-ranging variety of 21st-century accounts of HIV.

Going back to Butler's study of persecution, I contend that if Smith's speaker in "sometimes" shows such insistent appreciation for HIV, it is because the virus, as an actor in a collective network, embodies the intersubjective—or inter*active*—Other able to "animate" the dead lyric I "into ontology." What's more, following Butler's examination of Levinas's "Substitution," we could even argue that such ontological inauguration becomes, indeed, a substitution of sorts. A substitution which "means neither that it [the

Other] comes to exist where I once was, nor that I no longer am, nor that I have been resolved into nothingness by virtue of being replaced in some way. Rather, substitution implies that an irreducible transitivity, substitution, which is no single act, is happening all the time" (Butler 90).

It is from this viewpoint that the virus appears in "sometimes" as a both intrusive and saving presence, as having the paradoxical potential to both threaten and recover the I's lost metaphysics. My suggestion at the beginning of this chapter that (exposure to) monstrosity could indicate an ambivalent or even positive experience stems from the double-edgedness seen in abjection as one of the central characteristics of monstrosity, but it is further evidenced by the connections between the etymology of the word "monster" and the figures evoked in Smith's poem. Through Old French *monstre*, the term stems from Latin *monstrum*, a divine omen, a portent or sign. In antiquity, monsters—that is, animals or humans with birth defects or malformations—were understood to carry messages sent by the gods. Although such divine role seems to have progressively become obscured behind popular culture's focus on monsters' superficial spectacularity, the original sense of the word is not entirely lost. Beyond their frightening appearance and their uncanny defiance of boundaries, monsters continue to generate fascination, and have often played a social role as admonition—fearsome creatures have traditionally been placed at the margins of society as warning signs of limits which must be respected, be it geographically or socially. In fact, *monstrum* is a derivative of *monere*, i.e. to reveal, warn, or advise, but also to remind, to bring to recollection. "Remember!" the monster announces. When HIV is depicted in Smith's poetry as a monstrous presence, it is being constructed as a revelation of a godly sign in the midst of death and overwhelming violence: "Remember you are alive."

Interestingly, "sometimes" conceives HIV as the speaker's "proof / of life," but also as a "toxic angel" (33). This ambivalent phrase reveals the close connections between the reification of Black metaphysics and monstrous abjection. Protective yet menacing, intangible yet real, the speaker's "toxic angel" functions as an oxymoronic epithet to the virus denoting the double-edged experience it induces in the speaker. HIV is an angel, a deadly but also heavenly creature. Smith thus invites us readers to reconsider the taxonomical categorization of angels. While angels are not the first image to come to mind when we think of monsters, to what extent do these differ? Angels are in-between creatures: not quite human nor gods, not male nor female; they are boundary-defying beings with hybrid physicality and supernatural might. Most relevantly, angels are the carriers of divine portents—from Ancient Greek ἄγγελος (*angelos*), messenger, envoy, one that announces. The monster's ultimate function as omen, as reminder, as revelation, is also the angel's.

Which takes us back to Medusa. The Gorgon is certainly not mentioned in "sometimes"—not explicitly, at least—, but her presence throbs under the lines of the poem. In ancient pottery, Medusa is often depicted as a winged creature, and in his *Library*, Apollodorus describes the Gorgon sisters as having "wings of gold which gave them the power of flight" (66). Moreover, numerous vases and cups preserved from antiquity depict Medusa's frightful face as bearded, adding to her angelic defiance of gender. But it is not the Gorgon's appearance that actually makes her relevant to our reading of "sometimes." It is her close association to medicine in its abject potentiality. Apollodorus recounts how Asclepios, Greek God of medicine, developed his curative skills under the supervision of Cheiron the Centaur, but was only able to master his craft because he "received from Athene blood that had flowed from the veins of the Gorgon" (119). After obtaining Medusa's severed head from slayer-hero Perseus, Pallas Athena kept "the

blood that had flowed from the veins," knowing that a single drop from "the left side" could "put people to death" while "that which had flowed from the right" could "save them—and it was by this means that [Asclepios] raised the dead" (119). Again, Medusa is ambivalently denoted; her power is unparalleled not only for evil purposes, but also as a healing force.

The destructive and restorative powers held within Medusa's blood, we could say, are those contained in *pharmakon*, the ambivalent product par excellence. Both "remedy and poison," the *pharmakon* is the source of health as well as the cause of disease (Derrida 170). The appearance of Medusa in "crown" as a personification of HIV thus lingers and extends into "sometimes," where her signification comes full circle. The monsters appearing in the two first volumes are much more negatively connoted than the "toxic angel" in this volume, but they all share an abject ambivalence. In this sense we can argue, borrowing Collin Craig's phrase, that Smith's verse is an exercise in "courting the abject as a meaning-making strategy" among queer Black people (635).

HIV's Shift in the Flesh

The perceptive transformation of the virus from menacing monster to saving angel showcased here is a phenomenological shift in the flesh—from Afropessimist to existentialist flesh. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortence J. Spillers's introduces her concept of "flesh," by which she refers to the Black body before it is given any agency, or rather once it has had its agency stolen by anti-Black violence. The denied subjectivity resulting from what Wilderson names the meta-aporia of narrative, Spillers calls flesh. In pure proto-Afropessimist style, Spillers argues that

> before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies […] we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh. […] If we think of the "flesh" as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard. (67)

The pervasiveness of death throughout Smith's verse as well as the speaker's recurrent self-description as dead testifies amply to the denial—or theft—of Black subjectivity signaled by Spillers's flesh. Beyond any will to expand the already wide-ranging variety of terminology around Afropessimism associated to Black existence, I refer to Spillers because of the divergence in meaning from her reflections on "the flesh" to those by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and because I am under the conviction that both uses of the term are connected in Smith's work under the experience of HIV.

The distant, other signification of "flesh" that I want to explore here is that developed by the French phenomenologist. In "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" Merleau-Ponty dives into the phenomenology of perception to focus on the "element of Being" (139) which connects the perceiver and the perceived, the subject and object of perception, to blur their separateness into an indivisible "coiling over" which he calls "the *flesh* of things" (133, emphasis in original). Merleau-Ponty's "flesh" does not refer to a specific ontological state of each individual, as we could say of Spillers's "flesh," but rather to an ontology in itself, different from the subject yet intrinsically bound to it. "To fully grasp the meaning of the flesh," Roberto Esposito explains about Merleau-Ponty's concept in *Immunitas*, "requires that we be capable of simultaneously conceiving the outside and the inside of the body: one in the other and one for the other. It is the internal

threshold that everts the inverted; and which therefore makes the individual body no longer such" (136-7). "The flesh is not my flesh or yours, but neither is it some third thing," Butler explains in "Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche" (196). The "flesh" is, rather,

> the name for a relation of proximity and of breaking up. If the flesh dominates, it does not dominate like a subject dominates. The flesh is most certainly not a subject. […] It dominates, in other words, by coming apart: the flesh is that which is always coming apart and then back upon itself [...] This means that neither the subject who touches nor the one who is touched remains discrete and intact at such a moment: we are not speaking of masses, but of passages, divisions, and proximities. (196-197)

Neither object nor subject, yet both at the same time, the "flesh" is, in a way, the very mesh in which the persecution of the Other and the I takes place, the "formative medium of the object and the subject" (Merleau-Ponty, 147). It is from this perspective that Merleau-Ponty argues: "between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship" (133). The "flesh" is, thus, a "relationship," a "kinship" of sorts. "[I]f the flesh is the expropriation of the proper," Esposito adds, "then it is also what makes the proper common […] The flesh is neither another body nor the body's other: it is simply the way of being in common of that which seeks to be immune" (136). It is from this perspective that the speaker's perception of HIV showcases an important transformation, a "way of being in common" or, in Édouard Glissant's words, a "poetics of relation" as opposed to an understanding of being as absolute and disconnected from its surroundings and

otherness. The virus indicates such a connection, I argue, through the connection of I and Other in the fulcrum of the "flesh."

In a similar vein to Latour's take on Actor-Network Theory, Mel Y. Chen has reflected on humans' intricate bonds with toxic matter to propose an ethics of vulnerability which puts into question the "stubborn binary systems of difference, including dynamism/stasis, life/death, subject/object, speech/nonspeech, human/animal, natural body/cyborg" to foster a reconsideration of "conditions of intimacy" capable of "engendering different communalisms" (*Animacies* 3). For Chen, otherwise toxic materials can also be beneficial for humans, and their allegedly immanent negativity can therefore be problematized:

> If we were to release toxicity from its own stalwart anti-ness, its ready definition as an unwelcome guest, it has the possibility to intervene into the binary between the segregated fields of "life" and "death," vitality and morbidity. Toxicity straddles boundaries of "life" and "nonlife," as well as the literal bounds of bodies […] in ways that introduce a certain complexity to the presumption of integrity of either lifely or deathly subjects. (218)

In line with Chen, we can positively argue that the "toxic angel" of HIV leaves an imprint in Smith's poetry leading to a reframing of "the terms of intimacy itself" (Chen 218). An intimacy which, to borrow Donna Haraway's reflections in "The Promises of Monsters," is conducive to "rethinking social relationality," and has the potential to lead us toward "another geometry and optics for considering the relations of difference among people and among humans, other organisms, and machines than hierarchical domination,

incorporation of parts into wholes, paternalistic and colonialist protection, symbiotic fusion, antagonistic opposition, or instrumental production from resource" (465).[13]

As I show in chapter 3, in the early stages of contact with HIV, Smith's poetry deploys defensive imagery denoting a conception of the I as necessarily separate from the virus. HIV initially engenders fear, reclusion, self-isolation; it is the root of personal instability and disorientation. In time, however, the speaker's perception of the virus grows increasingly optimistic and shifts from a destructive perspective to finally unveil its healing potential. Progressively, the "intruder" proves harmless. That is when HIV is resignified. After the initial exploration of seroconversion as frightfully monstrous in *Don't Call Us Dead*, the virus comes to be seen as an angelic monster capable of proving the speaker's aliveness.

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty's "flesh" does not cancel Spiller's own "flesh." Rather, these two concepts under the same term serve to reinforce each other. In Smith's work, the disproportionate exposition to HIV that the speaker's phenomenological "flesh" testifies to is proof of their vulnerability as meta-aporetic "flesh." At the same time, an understanding of the self as necessarily bound to Otherness through phenomenological "flesh" overlaps with a development of self-perception as Black "flesh." Participating in the constitution of the self, the virus is the harbinger of a new relationality. Flesh to flesh. In Smith's poem, HIV saves the speaker; it is, indeed, their "proof of life."

Rethinking Pessimism

In this chapter, I have probed into the possibilities and limitations of combining two schools of thought with such mutually excluding names as Queer Optimism and Afropessimism. The centrality of hope in the opposition between optimism and

[13] I further explore the issue of intimacy in relation to HIV in chapter 3.

pessimism—its presence in the former, the lack of it in the latter—should indeed suggest their incompatibility. As I am about to argue, however, there *can be* hope in Afropessimism, and my reading of Smith's poem shows, in fact, that these analytical approaches actually coincide and reinforce each other.

My reading of Afropessimism understands it not as an abandonment of Black subjectivity or agency, but rather as a form of criticism against those forms of power which deprive Black people of such qualities. It is not that Blacks "deserve" to be seen as essentially non-human *per se* but that Black existence problematizes the notion of human as it is generally conceived. Afropessimism highlights the faults in the ideological structures sustaining our understanding of what categorizes as human. It is a critical inquiry into those forms of power which systematically oppress entire sections of our population. As Sexton affirms,

> nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system. (28)

In short, Sexton claims, "blackness is not the pathogen in afro-pessimism, the world is" (28). The task of Afropessimism is thus to acknowledge both the harrowing meta-aporia of Black metaphysics and, at the same time, to highlight the external cause of such ontological deprivation. Afropessimism does not deny Black power. Instead, it points to those structures which restrict it. Were these structures to fall, Blackness would not equal

social death, nor negative metaphysics, nor life-in-death. Removed from its current context of systemic racism, police brutality, institutionalized anti-Blackness, and white supremacy, Blackness would be—in fact, *is*—nothing other than life.

At first, the "pessimism" accusatorily labeled onto Afropessimism can be misleading. Wilderson's "meta-aporia of narrative" and his resulting conclusion that redemption and historicity more generally are fallacies for Black people may certainly look like a hopeless denial of futurity. However, as I have advanced in chapter 1, hope need not be exclusively associated to the future, and, as I will argue here, such connection would render Afropessimists' critique altogether ineffectual. I am with Snediker when he points out that the idea "that hope definitionally exists futurally, […] is the sort of temporal donnée against which Queer Optimism speaks" (16). And that is, in fact, where Queer Optimism and Afropessimism meet—in their shared refusal to equate hope and future. For hope is not a passive, unengaged longing for the future. I have already referred to Ahmed when she notes that "hope involves a relationship to the present," endlessly opening up to the potentialities of the "not-yet" (184), and I want to briefly retake this notion here.

Afropessimism is pessimistic when it remains stuck in the distancing futurity of the possibility of any social life. In "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," Calvin L. Warren argues against the "devastating logic of political hope" (218), which he identifies as ineffectual and thus useless as long as it is rooted in "the illusion of a different order in a future tense" (223). "Because the temporality of hope is a time 'not-yet-realized,' a future tense unmoored from present-tense justification and pragmatist evidence," Warren suggests, "the politics of hope cleverly shields its 'solutions' from critiques of impossibility or repetition" (222). Yet, as Ahmed argues, and Smith's present-tense verse shows, hope is not "unmoored" from the present. Problematizing Warren's nihilist

criticism of political hope as intangible futurity, I argue that Afropessimism, rather than as denying the possibility of change, must be read as pointing toward the only perspective from which change can be achieved—the present.

By accentuating the current impossibility of a utopian, better future, Wilderson's narrative dilemma can indeed drive us into the cruelest pessimism, but it has also got the potential to lead our gaze back to the present where injustice is taking place so that we can make room for the "not yet" from which political action must stem. This exact temporal shift is perfectly illustrated in Smith's "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" when the speaker reflects "i only knew how to live / when i knew how i'll die. // i want to live" (34). In these lines, life is projected backward into the past: "knew how to live"; while the future is curtailed by the certainty of death: "knew how i'll die"; but tension resolves in a third line claiming the present: "i want to live." Temporality is initially explored both backward and forward, but in the end this dichotomy is solved in the present by the speaker's will.

Poring over Fanon's notion of temporality, Darieck Scott argues that "neither the absolute past as defeat nor the absolute future as liberation and victory are the areas of anything other than directional emphasis—it is instead the fact that there *can be* movement toward one or another that is truly to be grasped" (51). It is that directional emphasis that Smith's temporal readjustment showcases. That is the possibility of movement toward change that Afropessimism demands. Its apparent negation of the future is not a truncating denial of the possibility of change but an affirmation of and a call to an absolute presentness which we must seize if any livable future is to ever exist. In other words, by focusing on the impossibility of future recovery and underscoring the external sources of social death, Afropessimist thought indicates a need to act in what

Snediker calls "the beneficent crisis of the present, in which all such experiments must occur" (218).

Despite their ostensible irreconcilability, Queer Optimism and Afropessimism work toward the common goal of engaging in the destabilization of the rigid meliorism of future-oriented temporalities to indicate the distinctive potential of the present. Not so much ignoring the effects of the past on the present but actually inspired by the former's ability to condition the latter, both critical trends urge us to immerse in the performative promise of what Scott calls the "future anterior": the present's capacity to condition the future. Believing in the possibilities of the "will-have-done" tense, understanding that Afropessimism's bold questioning of Black metaphysics is nothing but the necessary creation of a critical awareness laying the foundations of change, we can only agree with Sexton when he claims that "afro-pessimism is 'not but nothing other than' black optimism" (37).

As "sometimes" optimistically illustrates, Black metaphysics can be reified not in spite of but thanks to HIV. After the challenging experience of coming to terms with a positive HIV diagnosis in *Don't Call Us Dead*, seroconversion is revisited and reconsidered in *Homie* from a new, more developed viewpoint. Throughout this volume, the virus continues at times to trigger images of mortality: "my blood brings me closer to death" (59); and antiretroviral treatment is embraced as "my miracle" (53). Death is not unfamiliar for the I, Smith's speaker insists, as being HIV+ implies being not "close" but "clos*er*" to death, a comparative form which proves the point of Afropessimism by showing death as already adjacent to the self. Moreover, medical treatment is a "miracle" in its power to defy the perceived impossibility of survival. Yet, at the same time, such closeness to mortality as generated by contact with HIV accentuates the fact that, in spite of the undeniability of social death and the possibility of physical death, the speaker is,

for now, alive. It may be that the wish for side effects stated in "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" responds, simply, to a wish for a more constant reminder of such aliveness. Toward the end of the volume, after considering suicide as a shortcut to the "greater world" where "the rivers flow milk & honey / & hennessey & koolaid," the lyric I in "my nig" chooses to remain alive: "none of that, just give me / the heaven of now" (68). As painful as life is, nothing is better than the "heaven" of the present.

Experience progressively turns the monstrous fear and abject threat initially associated to HIV into appreciation, thankfulness, and love. HIV brings the message of life. The virus thus serves, in Smith's verse, to highlight the radical exposure of Blackness to social death and other forms of violence—ontological and otherwise—as well as to prove the saving experience of relationality. The embrace of HIV explored in *Homie*'s "sometimes" challenges traditional (anti-Black) epistemologies, intertwines the different meanings of philosophical flesh, and redirects Afropessimism's attention to the politically charged present of the Black body's narrative arc.

Smith's latest verse is invaluable in that it bears witness not only to racism and institutionalized violence against Black and Brown people in the United States, or to the persistent serophobia and stigma pervading our everyday lives, but also to the possibility to inhabit a hopeful present where the intricate intersection between racialization and HIV status can bear fruit. Whereas, as I argue in chapter 3, the threat of HIV triggers in *Don't Call Us Dead* a wide range of self-defensive imagery expressing a perceived need to define the limits of the body, the experience of seropositivity in *Homie* is strongly connected to hope, and "hope," Ahmed reminds us, "may expand the contours of bodies, as they reach towards what is possible" (185). The experience of the virus thus leads the speaker from the constriction of an uncertain future to the material truth of now. HIV's continuous reminder of mortality corroborates the meta-aporia of Black metaphysics,

but this awareness situates the speaker in an almost absolute present where change can be sparked. Attesting to the importance of intersectionality for political strife, Smith's poetry shows that there is beauty to be found, but that beauty does not prevent nor hide inequality, and that our work against the tangible reality of social death must stem from the promise of the present. A present in which life needs no more proof than life itself.

3. Burning Down the House: The Body as Space of Intimacy and Memory

We have heard stories of people burning down the houses of those who tested positive for HIV.

—Jon Rappoport, *AIDS Inc.*

The fear of AIDS imposes on an act whose ideal is an experience of pure presentness (and creation of the future) a relation to the past to be ignored at one's peril. Sex no longer withdraws its partners, if only for a moment, from the social. It cannot be considered just coupling: it is a chain, a chain of transmission, from the past.

—Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*

Small worlds unwhirl in the corners of our homes
After death.

—Terrance Hayes, "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin"

© David Wojnarowicz. *Untitled (Burning House)*, 1982. Stencil on paper. 24 x 18 in. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

Spatializing Interembodiment

Beyond their ontological self-perception as flesh, the speaker in Smith's work frequently self-describes, metaphorically, as a space where different realities meet. This spatial understanding of the body materializes in specific imagery which assimilates it to locations or buildings. For instance, in the performance of an early version of "genesissy" at the 2013 Soap-Boxing Poetry Slam, Smith sings E. V. Banks and Sylvanna Bell's "I Am on the Battlefield for My Lord." Smith's rendition, however, progressively omits certain words so that the main line "I am on the battlefield for my lord" becomes "I am— the battlefield— my lord."[1] As the song/poem moves forward, the speaker no longer self-describes as being *on* the battlefield but rather as being the battlefield itself. As I argue in this chapter, Smith's work explores a spatialization of the body.

Smith's blackout-style erasure of the spiritual classic turns the body into a battlefield—a site where the I and others fight, where individuals gather and engage with each other violently. Therefore, the body is positioned at the center of the experience of struggle. Spatial materialization, however, need not always be the site of violent encounters. In fact, throughout *[insert] boy* as well as *Don't Call Us Dead*, spatialization is most frequently prompted not by death and violence but by sexual connection and intimacy. Such is the case of the explicitly titled "poem where i be a house, hence you live in me," where the speaker is "a house that swallows / anything that dares to blood and rise" (81) and the lover can "press paw into my varnished bark / & all my doors surrender" (81). In the poem, a moment of oral sex spatializes the speaker's body specifically as domestic space. "[P]ace in my rum-soaked carpet," the speaker begs, "tumble down my stairs made of gums & the space between / teeth" (81). In "dancing (in bed) with white men (with dreads)," too, the speaker remembers intercourse as their

[1] Button Poetry. "Danez Smith – Genesissy."

body becoming "floorboards" and "wing nuts" at the lover's feet (74). In both poems, the speaker's transfiguration into a house offers the lover a warm, hospitable welcome, a moment of shelter. Further exploring the blurring of boundaries between self and other, other spatial metaphors are deployed. In "the business of shadows," fellatio transforms the speaker's mouth into "a cave / a wet shelter, a soft temple" (55), and in "poem where i be a house, hence, you live in me" the speaker warns the lover: "I've never been a tidy chapel" (81). Here, sex materializes the body as sacred space. "[C]raigslist hook-ups," too, illustrates this idea when the speaker's mouth is described as god's "vestibule" (61), and the lover's body is also religiously transfigured when the speaker confesses having "worshiped at his denim altar" (61). Beyond providing shelter for and celebrating the Other, sacred space adds a special sense of communion to the spatial imagery deployed in Smith's collection.

Indeed, hospitality cannot be reduced to a merely material act of giving refuge; it necessarily entails more than physical proximity. Hospitality dissolves the boundaries between two heretofore separate worlds insofar as a distortion of binary opposites takes place when the "you" is granted protection by the "I." In other words, as Manzanas & Benito explain in *Hospitality in American Literature and Culture*, "Hospitality may activate or cancel the *there* as opposed to *here* since it administers protocols of opening and closing. In doing so, hospitality participates in the double nature of the border as a mechanism that welcomes or rejects the other, the newcomer or the stranger" (9). Following this idea, the spatialization of the speaker's body as a house in Danez Smith's poetry conveys an understanding of the self as necessarily connected with others.

As Ahmed & Stacey argue in *Thinking through the Skin*, "through touch, the separation of self and other is undermined in the very intimacy or proximity of the encounter" (6). Drawing on Ahmed & Stacey, as well as on Manzanas & Benito, I suggest

that Smith's spatialization of the body highlights the mutual constitution of I and Other in what Ahmed & Stacey call "interembodiment." As the utmost expression of touch, sex can offer the speaker pleasure, but above all, it provides a moment of connection which reflects a "mode of being-with and being-for where one touches and is touched by others" (Ahmed & Stacey 1). As the most intimate physical form of the "being-with and being-for" which interembodiment represents, sexual intimacy proves fundamental for the speaker in Smith's poetry not only as a source of connection but also as a means of self-constitution.

After the diagnosis, however, sexual intimacy becomes tainted. Exploring once again the domestic spatialization of the body, the HIV+ speaker in "litany with blood all over" remembers the intercourse leading to contagion as the moment when: "i touched the stove & the house burned down" (50). The presence (or threat) of the virus turns sex into a no longer safe space. The metaphoric shelter granted by interembodiment becomes uninhabitable. Moreover, beyond this resignification of domestic space, HIV triggers a shift in the forms of spatialization altogether so that houses and temples become prisons and fortifications. In what follows, I consider how HIV's threat to and, later on, presence in the body can modify the perception of sex as a source of intimacy and interembodiment, and how this change is reflected on the spatial metaphors used in Smith's work. In the poems I comment below, HIV not only becomes the source of what Tim Dean calls, in his homonymous work, "unlimited intimacy," but also foments a shift in the way we think about what constitutes intimacy altogether. In their introduction to *Intimacy*, Lauren Berlant claims that in dominant discourse, "intimacy reveals itself to be a relation associated with tacit fantasies, tacit rules and tacit obligations to remain unproblematic" (7). Indeed, mainstream narratives around sexuality and relationships have fought against the inclusion of non-normative forms of intimate interaction. While

we could argue that in recent decades, queerer intimacies have entered popular US culture to the extent of having been normalized—or normativized, or assimilated—Smith's verse offers a phenomenology of HIV which truly queers the traditional understanding of intimacy.

In the first part of this chapter, I focus on the shift in spatial metaphors used around sexual intimacy before and after contagion, from houses and temples—as spaces of hospitality—to fortifications and prisons—as spaces of isolation. Based on the changes in imagery from poem to poem, I think about the effects of the diagnosis on the transformation in the experience of sexual intimacy. Further, I pay attention to Smith's varying accounts of viral transmission to consider how the perception of HIV differs from poems which imagine contagion pre-diagnosis and those which report it post-diagnosis. At times, contagion is described as able to create alternative models of kinship. At times, it is seen as the source of their destruction.

The second part of this chapter looks at poems written from a post-diagnosis perspective to contend that the viral kinship which is initially discarded can eventually be recovered and reimagined. Reflecting upon the impact of dominant narratives on the way we conceive of our social interactions, Lauren Berlant points out that

> rethinking intimacy calls out not only for redescription but for transformative analyses of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects while, at the same time, attachments are developing that might redirect the different routes taken by history and biography. To rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living. (6)

Following Berlant, and based on this rethinking of intimacy, I contend that Smith's poems can be read as fostering alternative narratives about the bond between the first decades of the AIDS crisis and the experience of HIV in the present. My analysis of spatial metaphors in Smith's verse here moves to "it began right here" and "gay cancer," respectively at the end of *Don't Call Us Dead* and in *Homie*, both of which testify to an embrace of viral kinship as a necessary form of political memory. In "it began right here," the speaker declares "i am a house swollen with the dead, but still a home" (55). As I argue, the tension between death and the notion of home expressed in this line responds to a confrontation with the politics of "degenerational un-remembering" (Castiglia & Reed) which followed the AIDS crisis in the United States. This poem claims those lost to the pandemic as kin within the self, implicitly refusing to let go of their memory. Likewise, in "gay cancer," Assotto Saint, Melvin Dixon, and Essex Hemphill are referred to as family, therefore challenging the dominant historical discourse which would relegate them to oblivion. Reading these poems according to the notion of family as it is used in Ballroom culture, I conclude by suggesting that both works claim non-normative forms of kinship as acceptable models and thus foster a wider reconsideration of intimacy on both a personal and a national level.

The Body under Siege

While throughout *[insert] boy* sexual intimacy mostly evokes spaces of shelter, hospitality, and communion, the introduction of HIV as a core issue in *Don't Call Us Dead* brings a radical paradigm shift. Here, the spatial metaphors of the house and the temple are substituted, as a consequence of the diagnosis, by castles, fortifications, and prisons. The

welcoming openness previously embraced becomes a source of danger, and hospitality gives way to protective isolation.

The first instance of this alteration comes with "bare," a poem where sexual contact triggers images which associate the body to a medieval fortified town. Here, a seronegative speaker's desire for unbridled intimacy is so strong that it overpowers any fear of the possibility of being infected with HIV. As the speaker declares,

> for you i'd send my body to battle
> my body, let my blood sing of tearing
>
> itself apart, hollow cords
> of white knights' intravenous joust.
>
> […] love
> let me burn if it means you
>
> & i have one night with no barrier
> but skin.
> […]
> love, stay
>
> in me until our bodies forget
> what divides us, until your hands
>
> are my hands & your blood

is my blood & your name

is my name & his & his (37)

References to the Middle Ages—knights, joust, raids—evoke the physical context of fortified towns and castles, showing that as soon as HIV enters the equation, the perception of sex can be radically transformed. The embrace of infection turns the body into the site of "white knights' intravenous joust," a town "raided" by a "clan of rebel cells." As a potential threat to the speaker's immune system ("the white knights" versus the "rebel cells"), sex becomes a controversial source of intimacy. Like houses, fortifications symbolize privacy and shelter, but they are also the epitome, in Charles Coulson's words, of "forcible resistance to an enemy" (*Castles in Medieval Society* 2). Responding to this perceived vulnerability, the body is spatialized as a site of sieging, in need of protection from any "attack."

Smith's symbolic usage of fortifying imagery to illustrate the body's contact with other bodies is far from new. As Roberto Esposito recounts in *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "images of besieged cities, fortified castles, and territories surrounded by potential invaders […] filled the pages of English, French, and Italian political treatises" (138). The upsurge in this particular strand of metaphorical imagery, Esposito argues, was a response to a then recent shift in medical science, which debunked the prevailing idea that disease originated within the body. As he explains,

> In conjunction with the increasingly catastrophic spread of major epidemics—especially syphilis and the plague—between 1536 and 1546, Girolamo Fracastoro

> published his two treatises *Syphilis sive Marbus Gallicus* and *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis*. For the first time, the traditional Galenic humoral theory was flanked and then opposed by the theory that disease is communicated through contamination caused by the body's intake of tiny infectious agents (semina) of an exogenous nature, and therefore by means of a mechanism structurally different from the endogenous processes involved with the putrefaction of bodies. (138)

This new medical perspective expanded onto political science, but it also had a remarkable impact on the way the self was represented and thus conceived in religion, law and biopolitics, bringing about within these areas—and, by extension, within general life—the expression of a "need for immunitary barriers, protection and apparatuses aimed at reducing, if not eliminating, the porosity of external borders to contaminating toxic germs" (138). In Smith's poetry, the parallelism between the perception of the body as threatened by a foreign agent and the metaphorical raising of "immunitary barriers" as architectural space is clear. As "bare" showcases, with HIV, the intimacy which had previously fostered the embracing of the body's openness to others, under the lens of what Esposito calls the "Immunity Paradigm," becomes potentially destructive, and so calls forth defensive spatialization.

But in "bare," this dangerous exposure, rather than rejected, is utterly romanticized. Even before the end of the second line, self-sacrifice has already been established as the central theme in the poem. For the lover, the speaker would be willing to "send [their] body to battle," giving the conventional *topos* of romantic self-sacrifice a sudden twist when the enjambment between the first and second lines completes the statement with "my body." The speaker's body is thus doubled as both subject and object

of "battle," which in turn is transformed into a verb from its previous position as a noun. In little more than a line, Smith sets the tone and the subject matter: not even the prospect of HIV will make the speaker's desire for touch falter. The act of sacrifice in this idealized moment of intimacy takes place, precisely, through the sexual intercourse that grants the coveted connection. Intimacy is so vital to the speaker that sexual contact continues to be longed for even despite the threat it poses. In this sense, "bare" illustrates Priscilla Wald's remark in *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2007) that "[d]isease emergence dramatizes the dilemma that inspires the most basic human narratives: the necessity and danger of human contact" (2).

Further on in the collection, poems dealing with the penetration of the virus into the speaker's body continue to deploy defensive imagery. In "crown," for instance, the speaker's blood is reconceived as a "moat" within which a "castle" turns to "exquisite mush" (57), and in the fourth section of "seroconversion," too, the progressive spread of the virus in the blood is described as "a / prince demand[ing] the gates opened, for a fair / princess has come to see him," after which "an endless flood of soldiers bum-rush / the town, turning everything to fire" (39). The crucial difference between these poems and "bare" is that "bare," written from a pre-diagnosis perspective, not only longs for intimacy despite HIV, but in fact eroticizes the virus itself as a source of connection. Whereas post-diagnosis poems such as "crown" and "seroconversion" denote contagion as a traumatic experience, in "bare," the speaker shows willingness to engage in bare(back) sex and even romanticizes the body's exposure in it.

Often understood simply as unprotected anal penetration, "barebacking" is also seen by some queer scholars as much more. As Tim Dean and Marlon M. Bailey explain, bare sex is a specific practice embraced by gay men who eroticize the specific intimacy of intercourse without a condom. In Bailey's words, bareback sex is a "decisive and

deliberate practice that is sometimes associated with indifference toward or outright resistance to regimes of normative sexual regulation" (244). Recalling his own mixed feelings around unprotected sex in the aftermath of the US AIDS crisis, Chris Bartlett explains that "The 'risk reduction' we practiced often meant avoiding intimacy with the very people we needed in order to overcome generations of internalized shame" ("Levity and Gravity" 27). In the context of safe sex, "the condom symbolizes a barrier that inhibits physical and emotional connections; thus, there is pleasure in deliberately excluding condoms from the sex. Simply put, the higher the risk, the greater the pleasure" (Bailey 245). The controversial choice to engage in unprotected sex illustrated in Smith's poem could therefore indicate a need for the radical intensity of both pleasure and intimacy granted by bareback sex in the age of self-imposed prophylaxis.[2] Another explanation for barebacking is offered by Dean (2008) when he argues that "to simply pathologize bareback subculture as irresponsible, self-destructive, or crazy, would be to obscure its profound connections with the social reorganization of kinship" (82).[3] As Dean suggests in *Unlimited Intimacy*, and as I will show in my reading of "bare," rather than disconnected cases of sexual behavior, barebacking can be a unique alternative to the traditional establishment of bonds provided by lineage, marriage, and childbearing, "a strategy for taking sexuality beyond dyadic relations into the social" (80).

Drawing upon both Bailey and Dean, I suggest the intensity of desire embraced in "bare" responds to the continuation of a queer sexual quest for anti-normative pleasure and, most importantly, for the "unlimited intimacy" offered by a new sense of kinship. Whereas in Smith's poem there certainly is perceived danger in the blood "tearing / itself

[2] Frasca et al.'s "Inner Contradictions Among Men Who Bareback" offers a psychosocial study on barebackers' self-justification when faced with this contradiction.
[3] For discussions on the classification of barebacking either as a mere behavioral pattern or as a subcultural identity, see Parsons & Bimbi's "Intentional Unprotected Anal Intercourse Among Men Who Have Sex with Men: Barebacking—from Behavior to Identity."

apart" during the inner "battle" of the body's immune system against HIV, exposure to the virus can also be lived as a promise of ultimate communion. The threat that HIV has for decades impregnated sexual intimacy with is overweighed by its parallel promise of bonding. As the speaker boldly states, "this isn't about danger / but about faith," faith that sharing a moment of touch might unite lover and speaker "until your hands // are my hands & and your blood / is my blood & your name // is my name & his & his." The chain-like connection of lovers' names in the single final line stands out from the regular pattern of couplets to suggest an open, ever-expanding "blood brotherhood"—a sense of interembodied bonding which extends not only between two people but among a whole network of lovers across time and space (Dean, 2008). Smith's poem thus illustrates the "resignification of HIV," in Jaime García-Iglesias's words, "from a phobic object to a means of generating powerful vertical and horizontal forms of kinship that resemble both heterosexual reproduction and fraternity through viral transmission" ("Viral Breedings" 10). Drawing on this understanding of barebacking as a bonding practice, I read "bare" as an apology for interembodiment favoring "a discourse of kinship, based on the idea that the human immunodeficiency virus may be used to create blood ties, ostensibly permanent forms of bodily and communal affiliation" (Dean 82). That is how sex becomes, in "bare," not only a source of momentary intimacy between speaker and lover, but also a promise of life-long connection as kin. Against the dominant, persisting association between HIV and death, this poem gives voice to a radical perception of the virus as the origin of life-long bonds.

Yet, again, "bare" speaks from a seronegative perspective. The poem does not offer an account of the actual experience of being diagnosed, nor a reflection of the virus's penetration into the body in the process of seroconversion. Rather, it is an idealization of serodiscordant sexual contact. The speaker begs for contact ("let me burn;"

"stay in me") and promises to accept the potentially lethal development of HIV into AIDS if contagion ever happens ("for you, i'd send my body…"), but such promises and requests—hypothetical conditionals and future-oriented imperatives—indicate a speaker who does not have HIV at the moment of speaking, or at least is not aware of having it. The diagnosis changes everything. In retrospect, the penetration of the virus into the speaker's body continues to be perceived as dangerous, but the tone changes from lustful desire to abject dread. In "crown" and "seroconversion," the body is once more spatialized defensively, but no form of viral kinship can here compensate for the threat of HIV. Indeed, in poems after "bare," the speaker's lovers become "almost brothers, almost blood […] a kind of family" (59), but these bonds no longer offer the romantic fraternity briefly glimpsed in the threshold poem. On the contrary, kinship is, for the rest of the collection, mostly immersed in a sense of fatality which problematizes the utopian connectivity of serotransmission. In "litany with blood all over," for instance, the danger dismissed in "bare" is recovered and the very promise of having the same name implies a dreadful fate: "i touched the boy & now i have his name / our bloodwedding—our bloodfuneral / i'm his new wife at dusk & by morning i'm his widow" (50). Despite the momentary faith favored in "bare," thus, seropositive kinship appears in *Don't Call Us Dead* as destructive. The perceived threat to the self is such that even the symbolic pregnancy resulting from serotransmission is tainted with the carrying of stillborn babies: "my husband / he left me with child […] my veins—rivers of my drowned children / my blood thick with blue daughters" (51). Ultimately, the kinship envisaged in "bare" turns the speaker in "crown" into nothing but a "proud papa of pity, forever uncle, father / figure figured out of legacy, doomed daddy" (58).

This chapter could join the conversation between Dean and Bailey and delve into the psychosocial motivations behind barebacking.[4] It could also expand Octavio Gonzalez's criticism of both mainstream media and scientific discourses for perpetuating a demonization of nonnormative sexual activity by turning those who engage in it into social "panic icons."[5] But once again my intention is not to categorize Smith's poetry according to a behavioral analysis, nor of course to attempt to speak for the poet's personal reasons for romanticizing bare sex in this and other pieces. Rather, I am interested in better understanding how HIV can alter the experience of sex, in how Smith's poetry conveys this, and particularly in whether this change can be reversed or, at least, separated from the negativity usually surrounding the virus.

[4] In response to Dean, Bailey argues that for Black men specifically raw sex does not constitute a subculture, as Dean claims, but is merely a form of sexual engagement. Focusing on the experience of queer Black men, Bailey posits that attempting to address the issue of HIV by demonizing "high-risk" sexual practices among queer Black men—such as unprotected sex, having multiple partners, or using drugs while having sex—fails to bear in mind the specific contexts which surround the sex lives of queer Black people. These are frequently set in structural vulnerability including and often combining multiple factors such as joblessness, substance abuse, sex work, incarceration, and lack of access to education, all of which cause and in turn are caused by emotional instability. As Bailey contends, in this context, the definition, boundaries, and hierarchies of what constitutes a risk become slippery. People suffering from varying degrees of isolation and alienation might choose to engage in sexual practices even if these might pose a health threat, so long as they provide the comfort and general wellbeing of pleasure, connection, community-building, and a sense of belonging. The risk of contracting HIV and other STIs may in fact become an intensifier of these emotions and may thus foster rather than deter from these situations. "[I]n part through sex," Bailey contends in "Black Gay Men's Sexual Health and the Means of Pleasure in the Age of AIDS," "Black gay men create opportunities through which to not only experience sexual pleasure in the midst of an anti-erotic/antipleasurable sex HIV arena but also create ways to experience deep intimacy with other Black gay men" (227). For him, "sexual practices, spaces, and situations in which Black gay men are engaged allows them to claim and enact sexual autonomy during this HIV crisis that disproportionately impacts them" (218). To these factors we must add the spatial conditionings of sex: not just in terms of homelessness, imprisonment, living in shelters. Even for those who do have a home, this space is not always perceived as safe, which makes anonymous sex, sex in public, cruising, and sex parties alternative contexts for sex. Problematic as it may be, particularly in terms of public health and individual responsibility toward society, Bailey wonders, to what extent can we impose longevity over what is frequently seen as quality of life? To what extent are we free to follow certain guidelines of sexual safety when sex can only take place out of our comfort zone and under the complicated circumstances listed above?

[5] Gonzalez introduces this issue in "Tracking the Bugchaser: Giving the Gift of HIV/AIDS" (2010) and updates the discussion in "Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), The Truvada Whore, and the New Gay Sexual Revolution" (2019).

HIV as Incarceration

Before I move on to the slow acceptance of HIV as not necessarily an exclusively negative experience, I will be looking at yet another form of spatialization which further illustrates the burden that an HIV diagnosis can continue to be to this day. In "it began right here," after recalling the moment of contagion the speaker concludes, "i will die in this bloodcell. / i'm learning to become all the space i need" (55). If the equation of the seroconverting body to castles and fortifications suggests the need for protection, its metaphorical reconceptualization as a prison conveys an element of isolation and guilt. The prediction of the speaker's death "in this bloodcell" hints at the homonymy of "cell" as both a prison unit and a blood particle, thus suggesting a parallelism between the presence of the virus in the speaker's blood and the experience of incarceration. After the diagnosis, the body has become a space of seclusion, no longer to be shared in pleasurable communion, but to be accepted as "all the space i need."

References to the judicial and penitentiary systems are further explored in "recklessly," where the speaker attempts to find comfort in the progress of HIV treatment:

> it's not a death sentence anymore
> it's not death anymore
> it's more
> it's a sentence
> a sentence (45)

Repeating the same words like a saving mantra but gradually erasing them, the message in this section of the poem becomes ambiguous. Does "a sentence" mean that the

diagnosis is nothing but words or that it continues to be a form of punishment, even if one of a different type? The poem offers no clear answer. In the rest of the sections of the poem, however, the ubiquitous presence of prison imagery tips the scale towards the more pessimistic of the two approaches. The first lines in "recklessly" are a pristine example of this:

> the bloodprison leads to prison
>
> jail doubles as quarantine
>
> chest to chest, men are silent
>
> you're under arrest, under a spell
>
> are you on treatment? PrEP? (*wats dat?*)
>
> venom:sin:snake:cocksize
>
> i got the cellblock blues
>
> the diagnosis is judgment enough
>
> you got the suga? the clap? the mumps? (41)

Surrounded by religious discourse demonizing queer sex as the cause of disease ("…shall not lie (with mankind)…" and "venom:sin:snake:cocksize"), the quotes from pop and r&b songs ("i just wanna dance with somebody / it could all be so simple") showcase how the speaker's personal experience of sex is in direct contrast with interiorized social judgement. Adding to the overwhelming polyphony, the inquiring voice of medicalized biopolitics ("are you on treatment? PrEP?" and "you got the suga? the clap? the mumps?") merges with penitentiary discourse ("jail doubles as quarantine;" "you're under arrest") to suggest a Foucauldian reading of medical institutions as part of the machinery through which subjects are disciplined. Further, references to blues music ("i got the

cellblock blues" and "i got the cell count blues" (41)) explore the homonymic nature of "cell." The virus's arrest of white cells—its literal blocking of the immune system's internal communication—thus transforms the body into a "cellblock" where an imaginary jail officer counts prisoners just like the speaker counts their remaining T-cells—the number of which indicate the effects of HIV. The spatial logic of incarceration is therefore reverted: the speaker is not externally but internally locked. Having just received the news of the diagnosis and not being on treatment, the speaker in the poem is highly contagious. In this context, the sexual intimacy which had previously been celebrated becomes, after the diagnosis, a threat to others.[6]

But beyond the metaphorical, self-imposed seclusion within one's own body, Smith's incorporation of incarceration imagery indicates the possibility of actual incarceration. In the poem, the spatialized idea of the body as a prison is "double[d] as quarantine," materialized with real imprisonment—"bloodprison leads to prison." "[R]ecklessly" alludes to the persistence of laws which criminalize HIV. Both the title and the dedication ("for Michael Johnson") are significant. In 2015, Johnson, a college wrestler studying in Saint Charles, Missouri, was accused of "recklessly infecting another with H.I.V." (Rueb) and sentenced to thirty years in prison. Johnson then spent up to 23 hours a day in solitary confinement in a Missouri state prison (Thrasher).[7] Bearing in mind the high effectiveness of current anti-retrovirals, the fact that Johnson's sentence was longer than the state average for second-degree murder (Rueb) indicates an outdated legal framework mostly based on lack of accurate, up-to-date information and on

[6] Again, temporality matters. Here, the opposite temporal forces of guilt (focusing on past events) and responsibility (focusing on potential future events) locks the self in a duality which prevents a healthy inhabiting of the present moment.

[7] Thanks to a revision of his case which found the HIV criminalization laws in Missouri outdated, Johnson was released five years after his verdict, instead of thirty. Emily S. Rueb's "He Emerged from Prison a Potent Symbol of H.I.V. Criminalization" (2019), as well as Steven Thrasher's "A Black Body on Trial: The Conviction of HIV-Positive 'Tiger Mandingo'" (2015) and "How College Wrestling Star 'Tiger Mandingo' Became an HIV Scapegoat" (2014) provide the most detailed information about this scarcely covered case.

persisting stigma. As the Center for HIV Law and Policy explains in *HIV Criminalization in the United States*,

> The laws generally fail to consider the possibility that a complainant may already be living with HIV. Proof of HIV transmission is generally not an element of the crime in most cases, but it is often either implied or explicitly stated that the defendant is the source of a complainant's HIV infection, even when there is little, if any, information about how the defendant, as opposed to another sexual partner, has been established as the source of transmission. (1)

Indeed, in Johnson's case, there was no scientific evidence of him being the person who transmitted HIV to the complainant. Unsurprisingly, race and sexuality played a crucial role in Johnson's case. In Missouri, less than 12% of the population is Black, and in Saint Charles, where the trial was held, that figure plummets to less than 5% (Thrasher 2015). At court, only one member of the jury was non-white—an African American woman, one of the 51 potential jurors. The rest, besides being white, all identified as straight and HIV-negative. In his reports on this issue, Steven Thrasher has pointed out how the media repeatedly used sexually suggestive shirtless pictures from Johnson's profiles on social media and that the accusation included detailed descriptions as well as visual evidence of the size of Johnson's penis. The implication was that of a Black sexual predator abusing innocent white boys, which inevitably imbued Johnson's case with the shadow of anti-miscegenation laws and the historical lynching of Black men for having had intercourse with white women.[8] Just as happened frequently during the Jim Crow

[8] Thrasher (2014) and (2015).

era, the popular imaginary on race and sexuality contributed to animalizing Johnson as hypersexual and aggressive, and his sexual partners as victims without agency or responsibility in the case, therefore obscuring the fact that the intercourse was always consensual.[9]

The undeniable contribution of racialization and sexuality to the final verdict against Johnson is indicative of the discriminatory tendencies entrenched in the US legal and penitentiary systems. His case is yet another example of "a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control" through which Black Americans, Michelle Alexander posits in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, "are confined to the margins of mainstream society and denied access to the mainstream economy […] much as African Americans were once forced into a segregated, second-class citizenship in the Jim Crow era" (5). Johnson's case exemplifies the structural oppression of Black folks through mass incarceration. "In the era of colorblindness," Alexander explains, "it is no longer permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use the criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals' and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind" (2).

In Smith's poem, the threat of physical incarceration adds to the already internalized feelings of guilt and responsibility metaphorically imprisoning the recently diagnosed speaker, making the idea of interembodiment seem altogether impossible. All in all, the diagnosis radically alters the experience of sexual intimacy. The devastation of the diagnosis is such that even the spatialization of the body as a house, once the epitome of mutually-constituting touch and intimacy, becomes corrupted. If, in "litany with blood

[9] A scientific account of the disproportionate sentencing of Black people for HIV crimes is provided in Galletly & Lazzarini's "Charges for Criminal Exposure to HIV and Aggravated Prostitution Filed in the Nashville, Tennessee Prosecutorial Region 2000–2010" (2013).

all over," the speaker recalls contagion as the moment when "i touched the stove & the house burned down" (50), that is due to the violent extent to which HIV alters experience.

In his account of becoming poz in the 21st century, Abdul-Aliy A. Muhammad (too) explains that, after a positive HIV diagnosis,

> your sexual self becomes criminalized. When you have a date, your friends question: "Did you tell them?"; "Who gave it to you/how did you get it?"; "Are you using condoms?"; "Are you taking your meds?"; "How do you feel?"; "Are you healthy?"; "What's your CD4 count?"; "Are you undetectable?"; rather than "Do you like them?"; "How was the date?"; "Was sex great?" You've been exiled to the land of non-intimacy. (n.p.)

As Muhammad's succession of overwhelming questions denotes, and as the specific forms of bodily spatialization used in Smith's poems show, once HIV has entered and been detected in the speaker's blood, the self is no longer a space of hospitality but reclusion, no longer welcoming but rejecting. HIV can certainly generate a feeling of exile in "the land of non-intimacy." Both in the public sphere of lawful citizenship and in the private domain of intimacy, the seropositive body can no longer afford its previously embraced openness and must remain, instead, locked behind bars.

Re-Membering the Body

And still, as I argue throughout this dissertation, Smith's poetry illustrates how HIV need no longer be perceived in exclusively harmful terms. The virus might even become, in time, a unique source of optimism and constructive self-perception. While the burning down of the house as a result of HIV transmission as recounted in "litany" does seem to

turn the tables of the preceding cases of metaphorical spatialization, "it began right here" concludes with a somewhat obscurer, more ambiguous statement. In the last couplet of the poem, the speaker self-describes as "a house swollen with the dead, but still a home" (55). Like a wound or a body after infection, the lyric I is swollen. Here, the adversative "but" indicates the contradiction of being both "a house filled with the dead" and a home. And yet, this incompatibility is proven wrong precisely by the speaker's final self-affirmation as a home. What is it, then, that causes the notion of home and presence of the dead to be in apparent conflict? How does Smith's poetry solve this, and what does this tell us about our idea of home? In fact, who are "the dead" in the poem, and how is this all related to intimacy and HIV?

As a poetic allegory, the line "i am a house swollen with the dead, but still a home" in "it began right here" recovers the kinship longed for in "bare" and subsequently dismissed in "litany" and "crown." The difference here is that Smith's poem does not pay attention to the living network of people connected through HIV, but rather to those who died from AIDS, and whose presence is felt within the body as a form of memory. As Tim Dean explains,

> It is the fact that viruses are not biologically alive that facilitates their immortality and enables them to be imagined not only as the offspring of a human mating but also as the bearers of an imperishable connection. […] thus the virus may be considered a particular form of memory, one that offers an effective way of maintaining certain relations with the dead. (88)

Such presence is thus both physical and symbolic—the dead are minuscule particles carried in the speaker's blood and, at the same time, each of them constitutes a memorial to those who have died from AIDS-related diseases.

But be it literal or metaphoric, what about this presence is in conflict with the idea of home? The first entry for "home" in the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as "one's place of residence" or "domicile." Yet, a home is different from a house, as Michael Swan explains in *Practical English Usage*, in the "emotional attachment" attributed to the former (252). In their succinctly titled work *Home*, Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling add to this distinction when they define "home" as "a place/site, a set of feelings/cultural meanings, and the relations between the two" (2). According to Blunt & Dowling, the notion of home involves a certain emotional relation not necessarily found in the merely physical space of a house. From this perspective, a possible interpretation of the final lines in Smith's poem could be the impossibility of developing a sense of home in a place where memories of the dead haunt the present. Yet, as Jeannette Winterson reminds us, home is "a place where the order of things comes together — the living and dead — the spirits of the ancestors and the present inhabitants, and the gathering up and stilling of all the to-and-fro" (*Why Be Happy* 58). Without entering the realm of the occult, the dead do in a way inhabit most people's homes. We keep photographs to remind us of our lost ones; we hold on to that watch or ring handed down to us; we treasure revisiting the letters written by our parents in their youth. Memorabilia help us remember those no longer here, and that most definitely has the power to make us feel at home. But, if memories of the dead are not incompatible with home, in what way do the dead—or even just their memory—trouble the notion of home in Smith's poem?

The answer lies in the flexibility of "home" as a term. The second entry under "home" in the Merriam-Webster describes it as "a social unit formed by a family living together in one building, house, etc." Like Blunt & Dowling's definition, this entry goes beyond the spatial, but in this case does so explicitly by highlighting the bond of kinship. It is in light of this idea, I suggest, that we should read Smith's poem. If the notion of home suggests material space as well as social relations, "it began right here" embraces both meanings of the word—as an emotionally charged place of belonging and as family. As we know, however, not all forms of company constitute a family and, by extension, a home. Traditional understandings of the family describe it as a group of close relatives united by either marriage or lineage, and thus exclude non-normative forms of kinship. That is the conflict which Smith's poem both presents and challenges. In "crown," contagion is evocative not only of a feeling of kinship but also of home-making: "we made a kind of family—in my veins / my sons-brothers sleep, sisters-daughters / name each cell royal, home, untouchable" (59). Following this pattern, the speaker's self-description as "a house swollen with the dead, but still a home" in "it began right here," hints at a queer form of kinship united *in* and *as* a home. While in the early stages after the diagnosis the experience of blood brotherhood is problematized, later on it is reassessed and incorporated with a new meaning. If the speaker self-describes as a "house filled with the dead," it is because the notion of blood brotherhood has been accepted as establishing intimacy, across time and space, with the dead.[10]

This bond with the dead is further highlighted in *Homie*'s "gay cancer," where the speaker pays homage to Melvin Dixon, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint:

[10] Adding to this, the explicit reference to the victims of the pandemic as siblings evokes the Black American tradition of calling each other brother and sister which Geneva Smitherman's *Black Talk* attributes to the "Traditional Black Church pattern of referring to all male members of the Church 'family' as *Brotha*" (2). The exploration of kinship in the poem thus adds an extra layer of interconnection with the dead by pointing to the experience of (queer) Black Americans as one strongly marked by the HIV and AIDS crisis.

Melvin, Assanto, Essex, my Saint

Laurent, Xtravaganza House of

sissy & boosted silk dirt throned

with your too soon it grew

in me too blood's gossip

cum cussed gifted to us

from us

[…]

o mother o sweet unc

who we miss & never knew

is that you?

my wrist to my ear

you're here (60)

Just as "it began right here," "gay cancer" presents a speaker's body inhabited by the dead ("my wrist to my ear / you're here"), who become kin as mothers and uncles. Beyond the blood brotherhood we find in other poems, though, this poem references affiliation as structured in Ballroom culture, where "houses" construct alternative networks of kinship for its members. Often denominated after *haute couture* brands or after personal traits embraced by its components ("my Saint / Laurent, Xtravaganza House of / sissy"), these houses are, for some queer Black people, their only family. Ballroom houses are, as Marlon M. Bailey puts it in *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*, "family-like structures" (5) which attempt to "fulfill the needs, aspirations, and dreams of its members within the context of their lived experiences—

that of the creation of inhabitable spaces based on alternative kinship structures" (91). Sara Ahmed makes a similar claim in *The Promise of Happiness* when she notes that "If the queer family is promising, then what it promises is a dwelling space, where (at least some) signs of deviation are not excluded from what already resides at home" (114). More specifically referring to Ballroom culture, in *Burning Down the House*, Rosemary Marangoly George describes Ballroom houses "not as static objects found throughout historical time, but as contemporary sites of change and transformation, interfacing with home and community" (365). Houses in Ballroom culture therefore evoke the double meaning of "home": as both a material space and as family. Such notion of family certainly diverts from the dominant standard, and apologists of the traditional family criticize it as fictive. However, as Bailey explains, "for many Black LGBT people, the kin relations they forge and engage in are not viewed or experienced as fictive at all. […] Gay families and queer kin are often established out of necessity and on their own terms, while exposing the fallacy of dominant family ideologies by doing the kin labor that many biological families fail to do" (93). While sometimes taking shape as physical buildings where house members live together, too, the defining characteristic of a Ballroom house is, Bailey argues, "kin labor" or "kin-making practices." By these, Bailey refers to the various forms of support offered in houses—from preparation and training for Ballroom competitions to sexual health education, to emotional and financial support. Just as biological families should engage in acts of care, so are the "parents" and "children" in these queer spaces.

Drawing on Bailey's notion, I argue that Smith's work carries out a very specific form of kin labor—the labor of grief.[11] In Smith's verse, kin labor takes the shape of

[11] The use of the term "labor" is particularly significant in this context. In his work on the psychic reactions to loss, Freud repeatedly refers to "the work of mourning" [*Trauerarbeit*] to indicate that grief is a process which needs to be deeply invested in by the bereaved. Even outside psychoanalytic approaches, the equation of grief and work is ubiquitous. The etymology of the term "grief"—from the Latin "gravitas" (weight)—reveals the toilsome task of coping with loss. Grief is a burden one must both carry and carry out.

recognizing the dead as family, but also of memorializing. The explicit reference to Hemphill, Melvin, and Saint in "gay cancer" exemplifies the importance of visibilizing those people whose story is too frequently misrepresented—if not erased—by mainstream narratives. Smith's inclusion of the names of queer Black poets who died because of AIDS is a necessary step toward revealing a past which has remained largely obscured. Such exploration of history's recesses helps us develop the necessary frames to better understand those situations of inequality and oppression which persist in the present.

The #SayHerName campaign created by the African American Policy Forum in 2014 responds to a similar issue. As co-founder Kimberlé Crenshaw explains in "The Urgency of Intersectionality," the names of Black women like Tanisha Anderson, Aura Rosser, or Meagan Hockaday are rarely known even though, like their male counterparts Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, or Michael Brown, these women also died at the hands of police brutality in the first two decades of the 21st century. The reason for this, Crenshaw argues, is a generalized lack of access to intersectional viewpoints or "frames" to approach such situations:

> communications experts tell us that when facts do not fit with the available frames, people have a difficult time incorporating new facts into their way of thinking about a problem. These women's names have slipped through our consciousness because there are no frames for us to see them, no frames for us to remember them, no frames for us to hold them (n.p.)

Saying the names of the Black women killed by the police is a crucial step toward developing the necessary frames and toward underscoring how mainstream discourse

makes them invisible, but also, simply, towards remembering.[12] Likewise, the performativity of naming is made explicit in Smith's inclusion of Dixon, Hemphill, and Saint within "gay cancer," as well as of Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, and John Crawford in "every day is a funeral & a miracle," of Trayvon Martin and Sean Bell in "summer, somewhere," or of Emmett Till in "crown" and "dream where every black person is standing by the ocean."

The importance of including these names is highlighted in Smith's "my deepest and most ashamed apologies to Assotto Saint."[13] The poem is presented as an apology for having misspelt Saint's name as "Assanto" in "the rat / babble fuck of a poem ('gay cancer')" (13). Not spelling the late poet's name correctly is, almost like not including it, conveyed as failing to recognize that person's unique identity, and thus as failing to acknowledge the situation of discrimination which concludes with the invisibilization of the victims. Having misspelt Saint's name is experienced as particularly shameful in that it perpetuates the misrepresentation always already obscuring the lives (and deaths) of Black individuals: "i fucked up. i'm so sorry Assotto i did what they all do / i pronounced our names wrong i said we looked / like someone else." By offering a written apology and by including Saint's name in the title—this time spelt correctly—Smith's poem not

[12] On a similar note, the widespread attention received by the murder of Matthew Sheppard is a crystal-clear example of the type of subject which is widely seen as deserving of attention—in this case, a white, middle-class 21-year-old raised in a Christian environment. Queer people are victims of murder and violence daily. However, only certain profiles can be grieved universally. In the context of AIDS, the same goes for Ryan White. As a white, middle-class 13-year-old boy from Indiana who contracted HIV through blood treatment for his hemophilia, White became the perfect poster child for the discrimination suffered by those with HIV and AIDS after he was refused readmission to school. Of course, White's visibility had to do not only with a normative background seen as widely relatable, but also with an innocence which many would have failed to see in other people affected by the virus. Like Sheppard, White became an icon because of a number a characteristics which made him an idealizable model of purity. The fact that anti-discriminatory laws were named after both White and Sheppard, rather than other less normative figures preceding these cases, highlights the politics of invisibility which Crenshaw condemns. Snorton & Haritaworn offer a detailed analysis of the visibility of Sheppard's case compared to cases of violence against racialized trans people in "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife" (2013).

[13] Performed online at the Live Facebook Fundraising event "Constellations of Change: A Cabaret for the HIV Movement" on November 13, 2020, and later published in the January 2022 issue of *The American Review*.

only pays homage to Saint but implicitly also evokes the process of historical erasure around those whose names do not get mentioned. In "I'll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name," the keynote speech Melvin Dixon delivered at the Gay and Lesbian writer's conference OutWrite '92, he urged those who would outlive him to say his name after he died.[14] Aware of the impending threat of AIDS on his life, Dixon asked those in the audience (and us readers today) to be responsible for the preservation of his memory: "I may not be well enough or alive next year to attend the lesbian and gay writer's conference, but I'll be somewhere listening for my name" (78). Naming, for Dixon, is the only way to prevent "the erasure of our experience and our lives" (77). What better tribute to Dixon, as well as to Saint and Hemphill, than doing as Dixon asked and saying their names?

Smith's inclusion of Hemphill, Saint and Dixon's names is, I argue, a true act of re-membering: preventing their loss into oblivion and re-incorporating them as members of the family. Poems such as "gay cancer" and "it began right here" thus carry out important kin labor, and engage in what Heather Love has called "affective historiography." In *Feeling Backward*, Love uses this concept to discuss "the longing for community across time" and the resulting practice of reading for signs of a queer past in culture as "a crucial feature of queer historical experience" (37). Often deprived of role models in the present, queer people have found ourselves, as Smith's poems showcase, searching the archives for signs of other ways of living across time and space, and claiming those alternative lifestyles and viewpoints as worth recovering. This backward gaze tends to foster, as Smith's verse proves, a queer paradigm of kinship. In Love's own words, affective historiography is one of the multiple efforts within queer studies to

[14] Speech included in the posthumous publication of Dixon's *Love's Instruments*.

"describe or invent new models of queer community and coalitional politics: nonbiological inheritance, new forms of kinship, 'the friendship ethic,' queer families, stigma- and shame-based alliances, and so on" (37).

By presenting their memory as compatible with the notion of home, Smith's poem excavates the past to recognize those lost to AIDS as family. And in so doing, it sheds light on a history which dominant narratives continue to bulldoze. It is "bad enough if you want to tell the story of a conquering race," Love states, "but to remember history's losers is worse, for the loss that swallows the dead absorbs these others into an even more profound obscurity" (21). If only momentarily, poems like "it began right here" and "gay cancer" work against the relegation to oblivion. In her reflections on queer archival work and activism, Ann Cvetkovich, too, warns that "even the recent past" is "perilously close to being lost, […] especially when it includes not only traumatic experience but gay and lesbian and activist histories, which are constantly being erased by resistance and neglect" (*Archive of Feelings* 10). And, discussing the specific forgetfulness surrounding the mainstream discourse in the aftermath of the first decades of the pandemic, Castiglia & Reed, broaden on the imperative of remembering when they argue that

> the AIDS crisis became an occasion for a powerful concentration of cultural forces that made (and continue to make) the syndrome an agent of amnesia, wiping out memories not only of everything that came before but of the remarkably vibrant and imaginative ways that gay communities responded to the catastrophe of illness and death and sought to memorialize our losses. (3)

Against this process of erasure, which Castiglia & Reed call "de-generational unremembering," and Dion Kagan refers to as "constitutive amnesia," Smith's work not only remembers but also hosts. In "it began right here," HIV turns blood into a communal space for repose, into an interembodied archive of loss and belonging.

A True Home

Indeed, the home evoked and constructed in Smith's poem is both physical and metaphoric. If we read this poem in dialogue with the internal mechanisms of political discourse, we will see that it also has an impact on the public understanding of the nation as a space welcoming of queerness. Smith's investment in a larger notion of kinship fails to reproduce, or rather succeeds in destabilizing, the heteropatriarchal family model so insistently drilled as the only possible form of family in the United States. It broadens the space relegated to those who live, or survive, outside the norm. In *Home*, Blunt & Dowling explain that

> A central feature of imaginaries of home is their idealization: certain dwelling structures and social relations are imagined to be "better," more socially appropriate and an ideal to be aspired to. It is these dwelling structures and social relations that become "homely homes." Public discourse – in the media, in popular culture, in public policy – presents a dominant or ideal version of house-as-home, which typically portrays belonging and intimacy amongst members of a heterosexual nuclear family, living in a detached, owner-occupied dwelling, in a suburban location. (100-101)

By problematizing the ideal of the normative "homely home," Smith's poem not only gives visibility to alternative forms of kinship and affect, but it also shakes the discourse shaping the future of America. During his presidential campaign and throughout his mandate, Donald Trump called for the recovery of a lost American greatness. An important part of this discourse was the preservation of the traditional family. Especially coming from the head of State, the inclusion of a specific family model in Trump's nationalist speeches underscored the acceptability of only one form of social unit in the United States and made that the smaller-scale model for the political structuring of the whole country. In spite of the unorthodoxy of his own family life, the president's discourse insistently enthroned the white, Christian, heteropatriarchal family unit, thus politically appealing to those who identify with that specific form of social arrangement, but also overshadowing and overtly excluding alternative family models which could and do inhabit the United States.

The model insistently extolled by Trump inevitably reproduced what George Lakoff has described as the "Nation-as-Family metaphor." Lakoff describes this semiotic model in *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (1996), where he explains that the Nation-as-Family metaphor indicates "the use of an idealized, stereotypical model of the family [to] organize and prioritize common conceptual metaphors for morality" (159). This equation of the nation to a family takes the family—a very specific type of family, of course—as a model and a national ideal. In a similar line, Blunt & Dowling contend that

> There is a double movement between the domestic home and the nation and/or empire beyond: not only have the wider spatial imaginaries of nation and empire been reproduced and recast within the domestic sphere, but the material and

> imaginative geographies of home and family have also been central in underpinning and articulating the wider nation and/or empire. (188)[15]

Published during Trump's presidency, Smith's collection not only shows disappointment at the election of a man with "no words / & hair beyond simile" ("you're dead, America"76), but also fiercely embraces alternative models of family and, by extension, alternative models for nation-making. Rosemary Marangoly George's reflections on the impact of renewed discourses around domesticity are once again illuminating when she explains that

> narrative and practices that responsibly recycle domesticity perform two tasks: first, they effect transformations that are attentive to the materials and the debris of past domestic edifices. Second, in being attentive to the material and historical factors that have enabled domesticity to flourish, such recycling narratives make the domestic a site from which countertheorizations about seemingly "larger" and unrelated institutions and ideologies can be produced. (2-3)

Indeed, Smith's poem "recycles" the notion of home—while not completely detaching it from the traditional discourse of blood ties, it reformulates the idea of home, based on a nonnormative idea of family—and thus makes it possible to engage in and modify the institution and ideology of a nation, as larger products structured around the idea of

[15]Amy Kaplan's *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002) examines the mutual constitution of the imaginary of home and nation/empire, particularly in the chapter "Manifest Domesticity," where Kaplan analyses the gendered and racialized nature of such reciprocity in political and cultural discourse.

domesticity. Along other poems, "it began right here" proves that, as Blunt & Dowling contend, "The home is a site of both power and resistance" (142).

By gathering the dead in a house which is *also* a home, poems like "gay cancer" and "it began" build a place to rest, to belong, and to live on in, for those who have died from AIDS—over 40 million people globally, 675,000 in the United States—, while also highlighting the importance of public discourse in making a nation a welcoming home for the dead as well as the living. As Smith's work shows, remembering is a way of both paying homage to those gone and helping build a strong sense of the self through the establishment of one's roots. It is in this sense that we can truly argue, with Blunt and Dowling, that "Home as a place and as a spatial imaginary helps to constitute identity, whereby people's senses of themselves are related to and produced through lived and metaphorical experiences of home" (256).

Throughout Smith's verse, HIV goes from being feared to eroticized as a source of intimate interembodiment, to then becoming associated to loneliness and ostracism, to finally allow a network of connections, which not only follows political responsibility, but also helps define who the lyric I truly is. In her autobiographical collection of essays *Belonging*, bell hooks contends that "A true home is the place – any place – where growth is nurtured" (203). Smith's spatialization of the body as a home could not be a better example of this idea. By describing the self as a home, "it began" incorporates remembering as a form of growth, moving on from the past of the AIDS crisis while also carrying it with oneself.

If it is true that, in Berlant's words, "desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to classify and to cultivate them" (5), then Smith's poetry is a defiant cry for alternative plots, for other forms of intimacy, for rethinking kinship and

for restructuring the nation. In *Feeling Backward*, Love notes how "Early gay and lesbian criticism tended to ignore the difficulties of the past in order to construct a positive history" while queer criticism, on the other hand, "has focused on negative aspects of the past in order to use them for positive political purposes" (Love 19). As a reaction to the disdain for the past shown by early gay and lesbian criticism, queer theorists like Love, Ann Cvetkovicz, José Esteban Muñoz, and Elizabeth Freeman have dived into the archives to the rescue of a queer past in danger of being forgotten. In defense of this backward interest, Love claims that "Turning away from past degradation to a present or future affirmation means ignoring the past as past; it also makes it harder to see the persistence of the past in the present" (19). From this perspective, Smith's recovery of the generation of gay Black poets lost to AIDS should be seen, to borrow Love's words again, "not, as it is often presented, as a lifeline thrown to those figures drowning in the bad gay past, but rather as a means of securing a more stable and positive identity in the present" (34). Castiglia & Reed, too, see the huge impact of historical recovery not for the past itself but rather for how the past helps us understand and live the present. "De-generational unremembering," they argue, "is not simply an assault on the past or an attempt at prophylactic protection of the future, then; it is, above all, an aggressive assault on possibilities for the queer present" (9). By claiming the victims of the AIDS crisis as family and by hospitably embracing their presence at home, then, Smith's poetry is not simply tapping into the past, but actively engaging in the redefinition of the present.

In "gay cancer," the speaker mourns the mother and uncles "who we miss & never knew." Indeed, the speaker may have never met people like Dixon, Saint, or Hemphill, but that does not prevent them from being missed. Just as with missing parents, their absence does not necessarily disavow the bond. The bond may in fact be felt precisely through their absence. The vocative to a "sweet unc," besides rooting the poem

in slang register, adds a feeling of unexpected interruption to the grief over these family members. Smith's poem thus underscores the wreckage of AIDS, particularly on queer (and) Black communities, in terms of role models. Discussing the impact of these men in an interview with Kate Kellaway, Smith declared, "I think about them all the time. They were gay, black and passed away in the 90s. They had such a clear vision about what it meant to survive with this disease. I want to sit with them and ask what their perfect world would be. I want to know what they think of this current moment" (n.p.). The lives we lost to AIDS are lives which were leading the way. The emptiness left by them is a truncated project. Their absence is a lack of mature guidance and support, a lack of much-needed advice, encouragement, and love from our elders. They were friends, neighbors, lovers. Indeed, they were uncles and parents, and their absence is the absence of family. For many, queer family plays a crucial role in development, in growth, in learning, in mutual care. As we invoke them, we wonder, what would they have taught us? What moments would we have shared? How much more would we have endured by their side? As we say their names, we ask, what would they have achieved? How much better would our lives be together?

4. Still Life: Postmemory and Pleasure in the Wake of AIDS

Is "survival" not the prolongation of life beyond the limit of death? The only life that can last beyond its natural end is one that presupposes death.

—Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas*

Viruses can bring death, we have to admit, even if most viruses, almost all, do not. Born in the 1980s, I know this. I've only ever been in a threesome: me and her and the imagining of a virus; me and him and the thought and fear of a virus.

—Joseph Osmundson, *Virology*

laughers?
Yes, laughers... laughers... laughers—
Loud-mouthed laughers in the hands
of Fate

—Langston Hughes, "Laughers"

© Raúl Sangrador, *Sin título*, 2006. Graphite on paper. 60 x 90 cm. Courtesy of the author.

A New Generation

2009 was a landmark year in the history of HIV and AIDS. After receiving an HIV-resistant bone marrow transplant, Timothy Ray Brown—also known as the Berlin Patient—became the first person ever to be cured of HIV.[1] Many factors played a crucial role in the success of Brown's groundbreaking treatment, so it was not until ten years later that his cure was matched by that of Adam Castillejo—the London Patient.[2] In July 2022, as I was writing this chapter, a woman known as the Barcelona Patient became the fifth person to be effectively cured of HIV.[3] While each of the five cases is extremely rare and medically complex, they are all real models of viral suppression now available for study, and thus offer a glimmer of hope that a final cure for the human immunodeficiency virus might be found and become available in the not-so-distant future. In this context, and after more than 25 years of effective antiretroviral treatment, we could argue that HIV should not trigger images of death in recently-diagnosed people when they have access to medication. Can we truthfully say, however, that the experience of HIV is no longer linked to that of AIDS in any way? Or does the shadow of AIDS somehow continue to haunt us? What role might identity play in the experience of HIV? In short, what might the legacy of AIDS be for HIV+ people, and more generally for gay men, in the 21st century?

In *The Gentrification of the Mind* (2012), Sarah Schulman asks: "What have we internalized as a consequence of the AIDS crisis?" (155). To answer this, Schulman compares the impact of the health crisis to that of World War II. In both cases, a preceding period of growing acceptance of diversity, counterculture, and critical movements—respectively, the 1920s and 1930s, and the 1960s and 1970s—is truncated

[1] Cohen, Jon. "How Did the 'Berlin Patient' Rid Himself of HIV?" (2014).
[2] Mandavilli, Apoorva. "The 'London Patient,' Cured of H.I.V., Reveals His Identity" (2020).
[3] Highleyman, Liz. "Barcelona Woman Controls HIV for Over 15 Years Without Treatment" (2022).

by a traumatic experience—World War II and the AIDS crisis. In turn, this paves the way to the imposition of a conservative, homogenizing mentality presented as the only possible way toward the recovery of social stability. Thus, in the first of the two historical periods analyzed by Schulman, suffragism, New Deal policies, the Harlem Renaissance and Pan-Africanism were substituted after the war by a suburban, consumerist, family-centered lifestyle, persisting racial segregation through Jim Crow laws, and the red and violet scares. Similarly, in the 60s and 70s the spreading of New Left ideals, the sexual liberation, Second-Wave feminism, and the struggle for Civil Rights gave way, with the AIDS crisis, to a widespread and outspoken defense of conservative values, homophobia, racism, and classism in mainstream discourse. Even within queer activism, Schulman explains, there was a shift toward a generalized fight for gay marriage in lieu of the theretofore growing embrace of promiscuity, and later on for access to the military instead of the defense of non-violent, community-based politics. Indeed, AIDS triggered both an ideological and a behavioral transformation. "The trauma of AIDS," Schulman concludes, "has produced a gentrification of the mind for gay people. We have been streamlining into a highly gendered, privatized family/marriage structure en masse" (155).

Part of this process of "gentrification of the mind," by which Schulman alludes to the loss of diversity and radicalism in favor of uniform normativity within queer communities, is due to the unacknowledged process of historical erasure I have discussed in chapter 3. "As with most historical traumas of abuse," Schulman explains,

> the perpetrators—the state, our families, the media, private industry—have generally pretended that the murder and cultural destruction of AIDS, created by their neglect, never actually took place. They pretend that there was nothing they

> could have done, and that no survivors or witnesses are walking around today with anything to resolve. (155)

Such obliteration of the queer past, added to the extreme levels of ostracism, discrimination, stigma, and loss seen during and after the epidemic, leads Schulman to argue that "gay people are the new Jews. So traumatized by mass death and the indifference of others, we assimilate into the culture that allowed us to be destroyed. We access their values and use them to *replace* our own in a way that undermines our distinction and strength" (156, emphasis Schulman's). As a result of the mass trauma of AIDS as well as of the internalization of the normative discourse subsequently spread through mainstream media, a considerable segment of queer culture evolved by deradicalizing and becoming assimilative.

Schulman's use of the AIDS-as-Holocaust analogy[4] refers to this generalized process of deradicalization as a sociopolitical consequence of AIDS, but also to the emotional consequences of the crisis. For those in the US who experienced the "full-blown" epidemic firsthand and survived, the wake of AIDS has been filled with fear, shame, stigma, grief, loneliness, and often survivor's guilt.[5] The social and emotional effects of AIDS at its onset have been largely discussed, from Douglass Crimp's "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic" (1987), to Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), to Dagmawi Woubshet's *Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (2015). But what about those coming of age in the 21st century? What has

[4] The AIDS-as-Holocaust analogy is used also by other scholars and writers. Notably, it appears in Larry Kramer's *Reports from the Holocaust*, Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" and Lee Edelman's "The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and AIDS." For an analysis of the analogy itself, see Michael S. Sherry's "The Language of War in AIDS Discourse."

[5] On the experience and expression of "survivor's guilt" in relation to the AIDS crisis, see Castiglia & Reed's *If Memory Serves* (35), Crimp's "Mourning and Militancy" (7), and Pearl's *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity* (121).

the legacy of AIDS been for us? Might the AIDS-as-Holocaust analogy be extended so as to illuminate our understanding of the contemporary experience of HIV in relation to AIDS?

In "The Generation of Postmemory," Marianne Hirsch argues that the Holocaust was such an intense trauma that even generations of Jewish people who never lived it feel like they can also recall the event, at a generational remove, almost as if they had been there themselves. Such inheritance Hirsch calls "postmemory," describing it as an identity-based structure of "inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience" (106). Based on this idea, and following Ann Cvetkovich and Dion Kagan,[6] I argue that postmemory can apply to the experience of queer people—in particular, but not exclusively, of gay men—around AIDS after the implementation of antiretrovirals. Identifying with a social group disproportionately affected by AIDS, and having grown surrounded by accounts of its wreckage—be it via family or through the media and other means of cultural transmission—which reinforce the link between the two, gay men often think of the AIDS crisis as marking not only our community in the past but our own personal lives in the present, too. Joseph Osmundson makes this point clearly in *Virology: Essays for the Living, the Dead, and the Small Things in Between*, when he states his personal experience: "Our generation of gay men came after the plague but before the pill. I knew that 50,000 people died in the United States in 1995. I was 13. I knew that sex killed, that no pleasure is ever free of worry, of death. The first thing I learned about sex was Kaposi's sarcoma lesions, gaunt 32-year-olds on TV" (132).

[6] In *An Archive of Feeling* (2003), Cvetkovich uses the concept of postmemory to discuss the impact of the health crisis on the lesbian community. In *Positive Images: Gay Men & HIV/AIDS in the Culture of 'Post-Crisis'* (2018), Kagan focuses on white gay men in the global North to claim that gay identity and sex have been tainted with the ghost of postmemory.

It is important to specify that the "transmission of traumatic knowledge" described by Hirsch need not result in the next generation's experience of trauma as such—even if it can in extreme cases result in it. Rather, postmemory indicates the remnants of trauma once-removed, the legacy of trauma through the filter of generational distance. As Samuel O'Donoghue specifies in "Postmemory as Trauma? Some Theoretical Problems and Their Consequences for Contemporary Literary Criticism" (2018), this phenomenon should not be understood "as the result of a psychological wound whose aftereffects are still felt by later generations" (n.p.). In his clarification of what he sees as a common misreading of Hirsch's concept, O'Donoghue states that "postmemory is concerned with how subsequent generations relate to the trauma of their ancestors," not with a trauma of their own. Indeed, as the very term chosen by Hirsch denotes, postmemory is not so much about trauma as it is about memory. In this light, my reading of Smith's verse through the lens of postmemory does not assert that the poet's work testifies to trauma in the first person but rather that it shows the expansion of the memory of a past traumatic event onto a subsequent generation.[7]

In this chapter I consider the presence of death in Smith's work as analyzed in relation to Blackness in chapters 1 and 2, here exploring it in its specific connection to HIV. I argue that AIDS postmemory haunts the poet's work and manifests through the expression of two recurring expectations: in the poems written from a pre-diagnosis perspective, the expectation of contagion, and in the poems written from a post-diagnosis

[7] In his criticism of the "flawed equivalence of postmemory and trauma" (n.p.), O'Donoghue argues that those who never experienced the traumatic event in their own lifetime do not really have the authority to truthfully narrate it, and their witness should therefore not be equated to that of those who did. O'Donoghue finds this misconception faulty in that it "expands the authority of the witness to encompass those with no direct experience of the historical atrocities they narrate" (n.p.). In line with O'Donoghue, my reading of Smith's work as postmemorial does not seek to establish Smith's accuracy nor authority in regards to the AIDS crisis but to its wake in the contemporary experience of HIV. In other words, I am not at all interested in how "realistic" postmemorial work in Smith's verse may be as a representation of AIDS but in how it helps us better understand the legacy of AIDS in the experience of HIV in the mid 2010s.

perspective, the expectation of death as a result of HIV's development into AIDS. Beyond the experience of postmemory in itself, however, I am interested in how this haunting of AIDS is overcome, worked through, or filtered in Smith's work. For Hirsch, creative responses to postmemory—or postmemorial work—can offer a means through which not only to "reactivate" traumatic events, but also to "reembody" them (111) and thus to approach them through a new lens. By "reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression," postmemorial creators help us remember as well as reconsider. As I discuss here, Danez Smith's poetry is an example of postmemorial work responding to the HIV epidemic in the US in that it preserves the memory of AIDS but also fosters its reconsideration as different from it. While it showcases the infiltration of AIDS, as suffered in the 80s and 90s, into the 21st-century experience of HIV, Smith's work also explores the possibility—in fact the need—to rethink the virus as separate from its previously inevitable development into syndrome.

Therefore, I look at the evidence of postmemory in *Don't Call Us Dead* and *Homie* and reflect about the progressive reconfiguration of HIV as always inevitably both connected to and separate from the trauma of AIDS. In parallel to the poetic speaker's progressive coming to terms with their serostatus, the postmemorial expectation of death triggered by HIV gives way to more optimistic perspectives on the diagnosis and the experience of contagion. Again, I am interested in the multiple interpretations offered by a queer optimist reading of Smith's verse. However, in this chapter I focus not on a phenomenology of the self in relation to the virus but on the reconfiguration of the speaker's approach to their diagnosis. More specifically, I look at the way the pleasure experienced in laughter, dance, and, eventually, sex can have an active role in the dissolution of postmemory's obscuring of the lived experience of the virus. To illustrate this transition, I revisit "it began right here," where I consider Smith's description of HIV

contagion as "still life" (72). Engaged in a critical reading of this phrase, I affirm its optimistic potential when interpreted as a reference to the aesthetics of vanitas.

Diagnosis as Destiny

The postmemory of AIDS takes shape mainly in two ideas which appear frequently around HIV. The first is the recurrent belief by seronegative people that becoming seropositive is almost inevitable. Sexually active, HIV negative gay men live in worry over becoming positive, getting tested for HIV on a regular basis, even when we have had safe sex only. We know, for instance, that the risk of becoming infected through oral sex is "extremely low,"[8] but still worry that last night might have been *the* time, or that the condom we used on Wednesday might have torn even if it seemed intact.[9] Our identity as gay men, or as trans women, or as Black,[10] means that our expectations of becoming seropositive are disproportionate in comparison to those of straight, cis, white people in general. Again, Osmundson's personal account of coming of age as a gay man at the turn of the century speaks for a generation:

[8] National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention, "Oral Sex and HIV Risk Fact Sheet."

[9] It can of course be argued that with the increasingly widespread implementation of PrEP, such worry might disappear, but we cannot ignore that willingly starting a medical treatment which requires daily dosage as a form of prevention is in itself a behavior strongly conditioned by the AIDS crisis, if not postmemory.

[10] Of course, the intersectional character of identity increases the complexity of this issue. Whereas Black Americans are more likely to become HIV+ (accounting for a 42% of the new HIV diagnoses in 2020), the association of HIV and "gay" men, a label which some Black men who have sex with men (MSM) do not identify with, results in low testing in the community. The increasing use of the acronym MSM itself shows an attempt to tackle this issue on the part of the medical milieu by detaching social identities such as "gay" or "bisexual" from specific sex acts. The association between HIV and gay men also has a negative impact on cis Black women, who in general also fail to test regularly in spite of being three times more likely than their white counterparts to become HIV+. The problematic of using certain labels for signaling high-risk social groups in HIV prevention and discourse is also showcased by a growing sector of the population identifying as non-binary. Intersectionality is also crucial in the case of trans women, who often engage in sex work as a result of job discrimination, and thus further enhance their chances of contracting HIV. (Data from the CDC and Fitzgerald et al.'s report "Meaningful Work: Transgender Experiences in the Sex Trade.")

> Even after HIV became treatable as a chronic illness, I still viewed it with fatalism. Being positive would make it harder—I always felt—to find love and trust and sex. I had reservations about dating someone who was HIV-positive; I knew that if I were positive, others would have the same reservations about me. If there were a pill for my worry, I would take it, a cure not for an infection of the body but for the traumatized mind. I would take the pill now, and I would never stop. (133)

In conclusion, Osmundson contends that "Straight people don't carry the same burden of politics, the same history of HIV, into the bedroom" (136). Such triangular association between the queer self, HIV, and the expectation of death is, I argue, the expression of postmemory.

As I have pointed out throughout this dissertation, the speaker's queerness, Blackness, and HIV status are constantly presented as tightly interconnected. The strength of the intersection is such that "1 in 2" explores the possibility of an etymological explanation for the prevalence of the virus among queer Black folks:

> if you trace the word *diagnosis* back enough
> you'll find *destiny*
>
> trace it forward, find *diaspora*
>
> is there a word for the feeling prey
> feel when the teeth finally sink
> after years of waiting? (62-63)

The poem suggests an undeniable—if obscure—link between the speaker's social position as a queer Black person, and their serostatus. For the speaker, HIV is inescapable insofar as it is their "destiny," something on which they can have no influence, and which "finally" happens "after years of waiting."

In "The Generation of Postmemory," Marianne Hirsch argues that "descendants of survivors (of victims as well as of perpetrators) of massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they need to call that connection memory" (105-106). As she explains, however, the memory of traumatic events can be transmitted from a generation to the next, not necessarily through the structure of the family, but also through national, political, or group memory, in which case it is "no longer mediated through embodied practice but solely through symbolic systems" (110). Postmemory is "not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (107), and yet, whereas the traumatic "events happened in the past, [...] their effects continue into the present" (107).[11] Similar to the Holocaust, the trauma of AIDS is so inseparable from the experience of the social groups it has had a deepest impact on that it ripples into subsequent generations. Hence the affirmation by the speaker in Smith's "it won't be a bullet" that "i'm not the kind of Black man who dies on the news. / i'm the kind who grows thinner & thinner & thinner" (28). Having been exposed to so many accounts of the twofold connection of AIDS to both

[11] In "Probing the Boundaries of Irish Memory: from Postmemory to Prememory and Back" (2015), Guy Beiner problematizes the notion of postmemory based, precisely, on the idea that "investment, projection, and creation," which Hirsch attributes to postmemory only, are in fact also a part of memory itself. We can certainly ask ourselves, with Beiner, to what extent "direct" memory is not always conditioned and mediated by narratives, discourses, and cultural products for first-generation as well as second-generation rememberers. From this vantagepoint, his thesis is that all memory is always "postmemory." While Beiner's theory has important implications for historiography as well as phenomenology, it says more about the experience of "direct" memory and its role in the creation of history than about postmemory as such, and does therefore not really alter our reading of the legacy of AIDS as postmemory.

queerness and Blackness, the queer Black speaker in Smith's work has internalized a personal connection to the crisis.

In Smith's work, the diagnosis is not received as a surprise. The perception of HIV as one's fate is such that in "1 in 2" the speaker meditates, "you knew it would come to this, but then it actually came" (61). Even after the pervasive elegiac tone in *Don't Call Us Dead*, in Smith's *Homie*—a volume dedicated to friendship and to Blackness—the idea of HIV as destiny appears once again when, in "old confession & new," the speaker insists, years after it happened, that the diagnosis was expected:

> sounds crazy, but it feels like truth. i'll tell you again.
> maybe i practiced for it, auditioned even, applied.
> what the doctor told me was not news, was legend
> catching up to me, a blood whispering
> *you were born for this*. i tell you—i was not shocked
> but confirmed. enlisted? (59)

For the queer Black speaker in Smith's work, the diagnosis is merely a materialization of an inevitable reality, an essential part of the self, "not news" but a confirmation.

As I have noted above, the second manifestation of postmemory is the frequent assumption, by both seronegative and recently diagnosed gay men, that HIV will follow a similar course to that of AIDS, i.e. disease culminating in death. As opposed to the experience of Holocaust postmemory, the fact that HIV continues to exist and to be transmissible if untreated—and therefore, potentially, to actually develop into AIDS—complicates the ability to fully dissociate from the experience of the AIDS crisis, even in

geopolitical areas where HAART can be accessed easily and at no personal cost. The Holocaust stopped, but AIDS persists.

The specific expectations expressed in Smith's poems further highlight the impact of postmemory by revealing a struggle to disassociate chronic virus from deadly disease. As we have seen in chapter two, the seronegative speaker in "bare" imagines seroconversion as dancing in "a room of broken glass" until "my feet are memory" (37). Similarly linking HIV to physical harm, "seroconversion" uses different metaphors of violence, including gutting and burning, to depict the moment of contagion. The introduction of HIV into the body is always presented as the cause of disease, leading inevitably to death. "[I]t won't be a bullet," for instance, imagines the diagnosis as the moment when "the doctor will explain death / & i'll go practice" (28), and "litany with blood all over" mourns over "the test results" which "say i am the father / of my own end // & i am // a deadbeat" (49). In "recklessly," too, serotransmission is described as a "happy death / ritual" (44), and in "strange dowry," the HIV+ person met at a club is a "partner in death juke" (78). While these poems are about the diagnosis of HIV, not of AIDS, they all convey contagion as necessarily fatal.

Unhaunting the Body

In time, however, Smith's poems explore the possibilities of living with HIV beyond the burden of postmemory. "[I]t began right here" is a perfect example of this progression in that, while it starts with imagery clearly indicative of postmemory, it then slowly introduces ideas which veer away from it. In the poem, the penetration of the virus into the speaker's body initially generates images of animal decay: the speaker becomes a "dead lion who keeps / dying," and the sex partner becomes "vultures grazing my veins" and "flies who won't leave my blood alone" (55). After that, the expectation of HIV

appears again: "i knew before i knew // & can't tell you how. ghosts have always been real / & i apprentice them now." The following lines, however, suggest a remarkable change:

> [...] they say it's not a death sentence
>
> like it used to be. but it's still life. i will die in this bloodcell.
> i'm learning to become all the space i need. i laughed today.
>
> for a second I was unhaunted. i was the sun, not light
> from some dead star. i was before. i was negative. but i'm not.

Initially, the expectation of death is contrasted with the existence of HAART and its power to stop the development of HIV into AIDS. Nonetheless, not even the availability and effectivity of antiretrovirals can make up for the experience of "life." While no clear explanation is given here about such pessimistic statement, the ideas imbuing the rest of the collection should be enough: the history and persistence of institutionally sanctioned anti-Blackness and queerphobia, the death-boundness of the Black subject, and the metaphysical aporia of Blackness, all add to the speaker's postmemorial resignation to "die in this bloodcell." From this perspective, the possibility of medically keeping the virus under control is dismissed as inconsequential. Towards the end of the poem, however, the speaker recalls how an instant of laughter reverts the negativity of postmemory. Through laughter, the speaker becomes "the sun, not light / from some dead star." If only for a moment, laughing alters the lyric I's self-perception from dead to living. Laughing thus provokes a schism in the experience of postmemory which

shows that it is possible to live with HIV beyond the expectation of death. Based on this idea, I will now look at laughter in the poem as the catalyst of a fresh perspective of seropositivity and consider how this can be related to the affirmation in the poem that HIV is "still life."

In *Laughing and Crying*, Helmuth Plessner describes laughter as the sign of an untroubled experience of life: "The beaming countenance, the unfurrowed brow, the sparkling eyes, the open mouth with its corners drawn upward, the well-rounded cheeks, the play of light and the crinkles about the eyes and nose, the rippling volley of unmanageable sound: all are the reflection of a radiant, unburdened world" (48). While in this passage Plessner looks at the psycho-physical phenomenon of laughter as a "reflection," and thus an *effect*, of an untroubled state, he further argues that laughter can also be the *cause* of such wellbeing. Laughter does indeed have the power to momentarily lift, if not free us from, our burdens. As Plessner puts it, laugher is "always a kind of escape and elevation" (48). Thanks to laughter, the world in Smith's poem becomes inhabitable again. Even if only "for a second," the speaker is "unhaunted."[12] Laughter therefore interrupts the postmemorial dynamic of associating HIV to death and opens the possibility of escaping the distress produced by such a state.

Recovering Plessner's description of laughter as escape, Judith Butler specifies in "Out of Breath" that such escape is "largely uncontrolled, calling into question the identification of the first-person I with conscious control" (n.p.). The mention of laughter in Smith's poem is certainly journal-like, appearing as the note of an unexpected, uncontrolled event which surprises the speaker. In laughter, Butler continues, "one

[12] Not surprisingly, in *Positive Images*, Dion Kagan states that AIDS "haunts all of the examples of post-crisis cultural production," and specifies that "'Haunting' is a useful metaphor because it evokes a troubling, unresolved presence, something from the past that both persists in and disturbs the present" (7).

breaks away from the situation that one is in at the same time that one responds to that very situation. That both happen at the same time indicates a kind of survivable crisis of embodied existence." Laughter takes us close to the disembodiment of ecstasy without fully reaching it, for in laughter we are aware of the situation around us, and in fact respond to that situation, precisely, by laughing. And yet, in spite of that partial lack of control, laughter has political potential. In Butler's words, "If laughter is to some degree out of control, and yet there is power in laughter, it will not be the kind of power identified with control or discipline or mastery." As proven by its appearance in situations of oppression, even of physical captivity, laughter can be an act of resistance:

> Under political conditions in which life is threatened [...] why does there sometimes emerge a life-saving form of laughter? When people are confined and given no open pathway for action, where no competent or rational encounter can achieve a livable resolution, the body effectively takes leave and this transport in and through laughter establishes [...] the conditions of a living resistance, a resistance on the part of the living and in the name of the living. (Butler n.p.)

In situations of almost complete powerlessness, laughter arrives to show that the body, in its aliveness, continues to exist and to hold power, even if reduced, even if only a minimal portion of power. While Butler's defense of laughter is theorized around the oppressive structures of political regimes, Smith's poem showcases how laughter can also challenge other, non-material, constricting structures such as the burden of postmemory. The occupation here is not physical but psychical, yet the effects of laughter are the same. Moreover, Butler's explicit qualification of a "living" resistance, one "on the part of the living and in the name of the living," is particularly suited as a response to the expectation

of death generated by AIDS postmemory. Laughter appears in "it began right here" as a timely reminder that the speaker is, no matter what, as alive as the blazing sun.

Following Butler, I want to briefly recover Plessner's description of laughter as both "escape and elevation," this time to focus on the notion of "elevation." Elevation indicates an ascent, a physical distancing from a given place or situation in an upward movement. In elevation, we get the whole picture, we attain a new perspective. In Smith's poem, the momentary distance granted by laughter does indeed provide the necessary separation from the embodied experience of HIV and that new perspective reveals a new reality. Laughter has the power to elevate the speaker to a demystification of the virus. Indeed, it triggers a moment of wonder. Wonder is one of the possible reactions upon encountering something new or unknown. As Sara Ahmed contends in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, however, wonder can also be the willing experience of reconsidering reality afresh. Through wonder, we encounter an object for the first time, or *as if* for the first time. Wonder therefore has the potential to generate new insight, of working "to transform the ordinary, which is already recognized, into the extraordinary" (179). Wonder questions, inquires, asks why. "What is ordinary, familiar or usual," Ahmed explains, "often resists being perceived by consciousness. It becomes taken for granted, as the background that we do not even notice." In the numbness of familiarity, wonder works to unveil the constructedness of certain given realities. "Wonder is about learning," Ahmed continues, "to see the world as something that does not have to be, and as something that came to be, over time, and with work" (180). Hence Ahmed's defense of wonder as powerful and as political. Through the prism of wonder, we can rediscover.

It is wonder that takes place in "it began right here." Perceiving reality as if it were brand new, Smith's speaker refuses to accept the state of things out of habit and moves from unquestioning acceptance to inquiring curiosity. As Ahmed states, wonder "keeps

alive the possibility of freshness and vitality of a living that can live as if for the first time" (180). What would the experience of HIV be if it did not carry such heavy cultural and historical burden? What if people could engage with their diagnosis, and with the idea of the virus in general, away from the shadow of postmemory?

Still Life Revisited

It is this possibility of reconsidering HIV from a brand-new perspective that Smith's work articulates. This experience of wonder, in turn, takes us to the affirmation in "it began right here" that HIV, while it may not be "a death sentence," is "still life." Whereas in this line the "still" can function as an adverb, pointing to the questionable contrast between "life" and the "death sentence" of the diagnosis, it can also work as an adjective to "life," hinting at the possibility to see the experience of HIV through "still life," that is, through the lens of art. In his homonymous poem, Thom Gunn explores the multiple meanings of the same phrase. The speaker in Gunn's "Still Life" remembers the sight of a loved one dying in hospital because of AIDS. In Gunn's description, the loved one, whose skin is now "greyish-yellow" (66), shows "no tremor from within," and is barely kept alive by a respirator. The title suggests the literal stillness of the dying body as well as the impression that it is neither alive nor dead. At the same time, Gunn alludes to the possibility of interpreting the sight itself as a *nature morte*. In a similar vein, Smith's "it began right here" explores a body which is perceived as dying and links it to still life as an artistic topos. Conversely, whereas Gunn's poem, published in 1992, can barely be imagined ending in a situation other than death, Smith's exploration of still life need not end in such a way.

In *Sin Título* (*Untitled*) (2006) Mexican artist Raúl Sangrador explores still life in relation to HIV, too, through the specific theme of vanitas. At the base of the work, the

bust of a young man. His bare chest in frontal view but slightly turned sideways; his head bowed down in full profile. Eyes closed. A subtle frown. Mouth open in a quiet moan. The direction, focus, and tension in the man's face evoke the escalating pleasure of sex. In front of him, in the bottom left-hand corner, a hummingbird's still flight adds to the delicate eroticism of the scene with its long, slender tongue drawn out and curling at the tip. Above, a disembodied arm framed by two sensuous orchids points down at the crown of the man's head from the zenith, almost touching it with its index finger. The composition is completed in the background by a thin wreath of intertwining twigs visually encircling the hand and the face, around which two human skulls float. Adding to the circular motion entrancing face, hand, and skulls, the diagonal lines suggested by the two orchids in the two top corners as well as by the man's right shoulder and left arm at the bottom imbue the work with great, dynamic energy. Truly reminiscent of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, the arm in this work is captured, in its descent upon the central figure, on the verge of a life-inducing touch. The ominous circling of the skulls around the man's head, however, suggests death's haunting of the moment.

Vanitas emerged as a subgenre of still-life paintings in the 16th and 17th centuries in the Netherlands and Flanders, later spreading throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Until then, still lives usually depicted food or flowers to convey wealth, beauty, and pleasure. Vanitases reacted to the superficiality of these scenes—the Latin term "vanitas" denoting emptiness, void, nothingness—by tainting them with reminders of the ephemeral nature of pleasure and the brevity of existence. Vanitas paintings added flies on the fruit, included wilting or dead flowers in the vases, and juxtaposed the traditional elements of still life with hourglasses and clocks, candles burning low, smoke, and soap bubbles, all as reminders of the brevity of time, the fleeting nature of pleasure

and its illusory essence when opposed to the Christian afterlife.[13] The arts, scientific knowledge, and material possessions were also frequently dismissed as insubstantial by displaying musical and technical instruments, books, money and jewels alongside human bones and skulls.

Indeed, vanitas art has typically been the moralizing expression of the broader themes of *tempus fugit* and *memento mori*. Vanitas paintings in the 16th century were generally conceived to express the ultimate superiority of moral values over the pleasures of the flesh, although the theme has persisted into modern and contemporary art with other interpretations. Detached from the religious context of original vanitas art, contemporary expressions of this theme convey not necessarily a moral hierarchy but rather the simple, dualistic "tension," as John B. Ravenal puts it in *Vanitas: Meditations on Life and Death in Contemporary Art*, "between the enjoyment of earthly pleasures and accomplishments and the awareness of their inevitable loss" (13). Andy Warhol's various pop art *Skull* prints or Damien Hirst's diamond-incrusted skull *For the Love of God* are pristine examples of this shift. Vanitas art today can indeed explore how the experience of life is always inevitably bound to the experience of death, without necessarily conveying a specific moral code. But even if we distance it from formal creeds and morals, vanitas still illustrates more than mere tension between two different experiences.

In *Vanitas: Retórica Visual de la Mirada,* Luis Vives-Ferrándiz explains that at the core of vanitas art lies the experience of disabuse, a "kind of knowledge," in his words, "which allows man to look at things beyond their appearance, looking into their true

[13] In *Death and Resurrection in Art*, Enrico De Pascale attributes this moralist shift to the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent "collapse in the demand for sacred artworks, condemned as idolatrous by both Calvinists and Lutherans, which led to a migration of ethical and religious themes into secular art, such as still-life, portraiture, and genre paintings" (99). In this context, De Pascale contends, Protestantism called for "eternal salvation, not through the accumulation of goods or by indulging in worldly pleasures, but rather by following the principles of Christian morality" (99).

essence" (32).[14] Whereas this discovery, or uncovering, of truth does respond to a hierarchical understanding of the duality of existence, the position of the material and the non-material in such hierarchy need not always follow the same pattern. Indeed, in baroque vanitas paintings, the skull as reminder of death pops the bubble of earthly pleasures, telling us to live according to the moral values that will save us in the afterlife. As contemporary art shows, however, disabuse can operate in the opposite direction. Smith's "it began right here" illustrates this potential by exploring not death's interruption of earthly pleasures but pleasure's interruption of death in its postmemorial haunting of the present.

Through laughter, the expectation of death disappears in the undeniability of the speaker's experienced aliveness. For a moment, pleasure overpowers the menace of postmemory. In spite of being completely surrounded by the haunting presence of death, the speaker experiences a moment of wonder which reveals a new, free worldview. In Smith's poem, laughter does, indeed, trigger disabuse. As Butler notes, in laughter "the body breaks open and breaks into an involuntary heaving, catching its breath, becoming intimate with the threat of no longer being able to breathe" (n.p.). That is why, through laughter,

> I do not lose myself entirely, but I discover that I am in part a creature defined by that capacity for self-loss. [...] I am still the one who is laughing [...] but this I is becoming undone physically. One loses one's voice and ability to speak, one cannot catch one's breath, it keeps running away on its own, one comes right up against an edge: the physical limit to life itself.

[14] In the Spanish original, "especie de sabiduría que permite al hombre mirar las cosas al margen de su apariencia, indagando sobre su verdadera esencia."

If postmemory generates an expectation of approaching the limit of life posed by death from AIDS-related health complications, laughter interrupts such expectation precisely by taking the body to its limit, where, overseeing death, the self can gain consciousness of its full aliveness. Similarly, as Vives-Ferrándiz argues, in vanitas art "the perspective of disabuse grants the present moment qualitative value" because it is only in the present that the observer of a vanitas can act according to the moral conduct urged by the artwork's *memento mori* (71).[15] While it stresses the speaker's aliveness rather than mortality, and the value of pleasure rather than morals, the function of the disabuse enacted by still life in Smith's poem remains. It is a reminder of the undeniability of aliveness, a call to be alive and aware of it.

"your body still your body"

Throughout the month of March 1987, Manhattan often awoke to a short slogan echoed by hundreds of posters wheatpasted around the streets: "SILENCE = DEATH." Created by the art-activist collective Gran Fury, the poster's simplicity—the slogan in white font spelled under a pink triangle and on a black background—was key to its memorability and its success as propaganda. The triangle alluded to the badge forced to be worn by gay men and other queer people in Nazi concentration camps, giving the AIDS-as-Holocaust metaphor its first widespread visual representation. The slogan referred to the fatal consequences of the political inaction of the Reagan administration—more specifically, of the president's complete silence about the crisis until 1985 and his scarce declarations since then—as well as to the institutional responsibility of sharing information, and the individual power of being open about one's status to make the

[15] "El pensamiento del desengaño otorga un valor cualitativo al instante presente."

widespread impact of AIDS fully visible.[16] The message stuck, with activists sporting it not only on posters, but also on t-shirts and badges at subsequent demonstrations. The "SILENCE = DEATH" poster became emblematic of ACT UP, and different versions were created in different branches of the organization internationally. In France, besides the translation "SILENCE = MORT," a new slogan became popular in the 1990s: "DANSER = VIVRE" ("DANCING = LIVING"). In the face of a ravaging health crisis marking the lives of so many young people with early death as their only foreseeable future, French activists fostered a reclaiming of the life available in the present through dance.

Responding to the same idea, in Danez Smith's work, the poems following "it began right here" react to the speaker's aliveness by reclaiming the pleasure not only of laughter, but also of dance. As is the case with laughter, this engagement can at times be short-lived, but it still opens the door to an experience which veers away from the haunting of postmemory and into the pleasures of the present. In "a note on the body," for instance, the speaker tackles once more the double-edged experience of living: "you live oh, you live // everyday you wake you raise the dead // everything you do is a miracle" (72), but this comes only after the lyric I contrasts it with the material (and symbolic) persistence of the body: "your body still your body / your arms still wing / your mouth still a gun." Like Nina Simone's uplifting, political claim of one's own body in "I Ain't Got No, I Got Life," Smith's poem embraces the body's persistence. Further in the poem, the same three images (body, wing, and gun) are recovered and developed when the speaker suggests: "when prayer doesn't work: dance, fly, fire." While the

[16] Jack Lowery's *It Was Vulgar and It Was Beautiful: How Activists Used Art to Fight a Pandemic* (2022) offers a detailed account of the poster and of Gran Fury's crucial contribution to the creation of ACT UP. Lee Edelman's "The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and AIDS" is an insightful, critical analysis of the slogan. Sarah Schulman's *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993* (2021) completes the picture with an extensive history of the first years of ACT UP in New York City.

power of the mouth-gun and of the arms-wings is a metaphoric reference to flight and fight; the power of the body as a whole is literal: to dance. This power is also claimed in "strange dowry," where the speaker goes out to a club and, despite feeling observed by the rest of the patrons, decides to "dance with the ghost i came here with" (78). Similarly, in "tonight, in Oakland" the violence pervading queer and Black lives is momentarily interrupted through dance: "tonight, i declare we must move / instead of pray [...] God, tonight, let them dance!" (79)

In *Sentient Flesh*, R. A. Judy sees dance among Black folks as a practice which challenges the logics of non-Black, Western epistemologies. Dancing is, for Judy, one of the multiple "practices-of-living, poiēsis in black, which are not fully comprehensible by the semiosis of that economy, particularly its grammar of ontology" (19).[17] These practices, Judy contends, are continually "opening up infinities of other ways of being human in community becoming, ever becoming" (19). In line with Judy, Calvin Warren notes in "Black Care" that shared dancing and laughter, like shared crying, as responses to the "lacerations on the flesh" experienced by Black people as a result of anti-Blackness, are not quite translatable. In Warren's words,

[17] Judy's reflections draw on the work of previous Black intellectuals, notably Frederick Douglass and Franz Fanon. In the context of Black enslavement, Frederick Douglass presented dancing—among other festive, celebratory activities—as a form of letting go of steam by the enslaved and thus as crucial to the whole enterprise of enslavement. As he recounts in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, slaveholders' promotion of recreation and celebration during Christmas holidays would be a means of "keeping down the spirit of insurrection" in Southern plantations (79). The authorization of dance would thus have a function similar to that of carnival: to suppress rebellion by regularly allowing symbolically rebellious activity. Dance becomes, in Douglass's perspective, a sublimation of violence, a physical expression of the tension in the body of the enslaved. In *The Wretched of the Earth,* Franz Fanon notes that "any study of the colonial world should take into consideration the phenomena of the dance" (57). For him, the dance of "the native"—and arguably, I would add, of Black and other racialized peoples in Western societies today—"may be deciphered as in an open book the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself" (57). In a similar vein, Saidiya Hartman argues, in *Scenes of Subjection*, that pleasure "entails a protest or rejection of the anatomo-politics that produces the black body as aberrant. More importantly, it is a way of redressing the pained constitution and corporeal malediction that is blackness." (58)

> To communicate the laceration, to share the generational and individual components of it, enables endurance. […] Laughing, crying, and dancing provide form for an indecipherable violation. […] participants in the circle do not try to decipher each woman's cry, or decode each child's laugh, or translate the dancing into an apodictic narrative. Instead, the participants share the indecipherable sigh—they circulate it between themselves—and they remain open to receiving the affect. (46)

For Warren as for Judy, dancing gives voice to the ineffable. However, it is not the meaning of dancing that Warren seeks, but rather its effect. When shared, laughing and dancing become a form of Black care. They do not necessarily lead anywhere, but are a form of belonging, of being in common, of being there for each other.

Drawing on Judy and Warren, I do not intend to pursue what communal experiences of laughing, dancing, or crying, might indicate, but rather what they can create. For Elizabeth Alexander, such moments of sharing not only show care, but also produce joy and power. As she puts it in "The Trayvon Generation":

> I measure my success as a mother of black boys in part by the fact that I have sons who love to dance, who dance in community, who dance till their powerful bodies sweat, who dance and laugh, who dance and shout. Who are able—in the midst of their studying and organizing, their fear, their rage, their protesting, their vulnerability, their missteps and triumphs, their knowledge that they must fight the hydra-headed monster of racism and racial violence that we were not able to cauterize—to find the joy and the power of communal self-expression. (n.p.)

The shared experiences of joy and power are, for Alexander, not a consequence but rather an enactment of wellbeing. Dancing is thus not celebration but creation. It is not the result but the origin of joy. Through pleasure, Smith's poetry shows, the body can produce joy. The body can produce power. When Smith's poems call for dancing, they do not celebrate aliveness. They create it. A creation which needs only the body.

Finally, the pleasure sparked by laughing and dancing epitomizes a shared physicality which culminates in sex. Indeed, in both "strange dowry" and "tonight, in Oakland," dancing finds its climaxing expression in sexual intercourse. "[S]trange dowry" is the first post-diagnosis poem in the collection to invest in sex as an untroubled, pleasurable encounter. At a club, the speaker meets "a boy with three piercings & muddy eyes" (78). After dancing, speaker and lover share their serostatus and find out they are both poz, after which they "let the night blur into cum wonder & blood hallelujah" (78). For the first time in the collection since the diagnosis, sex appears in this poem as disconnected from the postmemorial imagery of death. Whereas in "strange dowry" the lover's serostatus is crucial to—and thus indicates a certain sense of restriction around—the recovery of lost physical intimacy, in "tonight, in Oakland" sex is fully embraced without conditions. Here, the speaker rides their bike through the streets of Oakland to have sex with a man. Importantly, the speaker specifies that "when i get there / what we make will not be beautiful // or love at all, but it will be deserved" (79). As a turning point in the perception of HIV in Smith's work, this statement indicates a closure—or at least the will to find it—around the idea that the HIV+ speaker is undeserving of physical intimacy.

As I have argued in chapter 3, at the beginning of *Don't Call Us Dead*, a positive HIV diagnosis troubles sexual intercourse as the source of generative interembodiment it had been in *[insert] boy*. Conversely, the last few poems in *Don't*, and the poems in *Homie*

which deal with sex, such as "all the good dick lives in Brooklyn Park" and "depression food," show that the joy of sex can be not only recovered but also completely detached form postmemory. From this perspective, laughter, dance, and sex, all appear as instances of "black pleasure," a pleasure which, as Ishmael Reed puts it in "Black Pleasure – An Oxymoron," "makes life easier, no matter how difficult the circumstances under which this pleasure is experienced" (169).

In his reflections about Samuel R. Delany's *The Mad Man*, where the narrator gives an account of multiple scenes of pleasurable intercourse in the midst of the AIDS crisis, Darieck Scott notes how Delany's claiming of pleasure in situations of pain fosters in his readers a development—if not strengthening—of the link between the sexual and the political. In Scott's words,

> The tensions and pleasures of reading Delany's *The Mad Man* […] are not necessarily touted as healing or as political *effective*. […] Nevertheless, it is clear that the *claim* to pleasure in such a context itself carries an identifiably political weight—if not as strategy, then as philosophy, for it explored our notion of the political in the sexual, the sexual in the political. (254, emphasis Scott's)

If, as Scott defends, a claim to pleasure may not be politically effective but still affect our notion of politics as readers, the power in Smith's poetry is undeniably political when the seropositive speaker, in spite of the fear, the stigma, and the postmemory, reclaims sex.

Scott's words are once more illuminating when he states that, paradoxical as it may be, "the power is to know what is being lost, that which can only be known by losing it (for having it, it has no palpable meaning, or its meaning is insubstantial), but to lose it and know you have lost it is truthfully to recognize that you always had it in the first place,

and, by turns, therefore to make it possible to see that you still possess 'it'" (270). From this viewpoint, the importance of the bed alluded to in title and in the last line of "it began right here" ("the bed where it happened is where i sleep" 72) is made evident. If the bed is initially a daily, painful reminder of the moment of contagion, it can also become a reminder of the possible combinations of pleasure and power in sexual intimacy, a reminder that life with HIV is still life.

In the Wake

In February 2019, Donald Trump announced a plan to end HIV, within the United States, by 2030.[18] Reactions to the then president's declaration ranged from a reactivation of the hopes that HIV might indeed be finally over with, to a cautious perception of the plan's perhaps overconfident ambition. If there is anything to be learned from postmemory and its haunting, it is that medication does not equal the end of AIDS.

Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) engages in the conversation about Blackness as the afterlife of enslavement. Following authors like Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, Sharpe formulates her take on the experience of Blackness in a society where anti-Black violence is pervasive as being "in the wake." Sharpe thus invests in "the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meaning (the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness)" (25). This exploration allows Sharpe to describe Black experience as inseparable from the trauma of chattel enslavement and as intimately connected with death and grief more generally, but also as producing a specific form of being. Without attempting to engage in a comparison between AIDS and enslavement, the wake as conceptualized by Sharpe is a useful tool

[18] Alonso-Zaldivar, "Trump administration launches campaign to end HIV-AIDS in the U.S. by 2030" (2022).

to talk about the experience of HIV and the postmemory of AIDS. In her text, Sharpe sees creative responses to living in the wake as "wake work" and suggests that such forms of expression can foster alternative narratives and mindsets. For Sharpe, wake work should be "a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives. With that analytic we might imagine otherwise from what we know *now*" (25, emphasis Sharpe's).

In the wake of AIDS, Danez Smith's poetry once again shows how the experience of becoming HIV+ in the 21st century is not in the least disconnected from AIDS. Not only does AIDS continue to be the cause of death for one million people each year. AIDS has marked the life experiences in the queer community in general, and of gay (Black) men in particular. Its effects go beyond the medical, and the expectation of death as a result of HIV's development if untreated haunts us in the present in the form of postmemory. If Smith's verse shows the power of pleasure reclaimed, it also testifies to the utter hardship surrounding—and often engulfing—such pleasure. The development and implementation of medical treatment and the ultimate search for a cure cannot be the sole response to AIDS nor HIV. In parallel to pharmaceutical advances, our cultural production—our discourse, our art, the images we share and make public—must also offer models of living with HIV which are not anchored in death and trauma. Stemming from the lack of such memories, Danez Smith's poetry not only highlights our absolute need for them but in fact creates them. Indeed, it shows that flowers, like laughter, can bloom even from a skull.

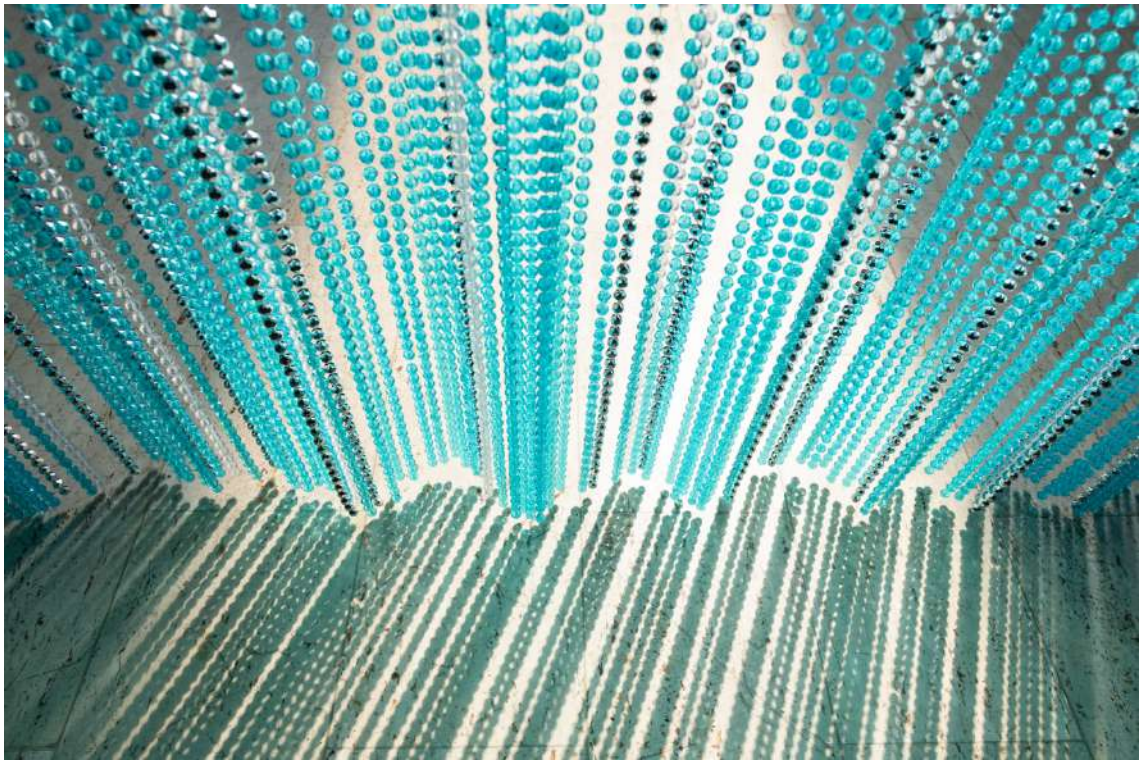
On Crises

In truth, laughter is a minor crisis of the body, an elation that lifts and renews those who are caught up in the exchange. It is a rehearsal for crisis and repair.

—Judith Butler, "Out of Breath"

I know, as many do, that I've been living a pandemic all my life; it is structural rather than viral, it is the global state of emergency of antiblackness.

—Dionne Brand, "On Narrative, Reckoning and the Calculus of Living and Dying"



© Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Detail of *"Untitled" (Water)*, 1995. Installed in "Queer Abstraction," Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA. 1 June – 8 September 2019. Curated by Jared Ledesma. Courtesy of Des Moines Art Center and the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Photo credit: Rich Sanders, Des Moines.

After struggling to accept a newly positive serostatus throughout *Don't Call Us Dead*, the diagnosis is eventually assimilated in *Homie*. Indeed, "undetectable" gives an accurate description of what it feels like to live with HIV when treatment succeeds in keeping the effects of the virus under absolute control:

> soundless, it crosses a line, quiets into a seed
> & then whatever makes a seed. almost like gone
> but not gone. the air kept its shape. not antimatter
> but the memory of matter. or of it mattering. (53)

HIV has become, for the speaker in the poem, unnoticeable, intangible. The virus is now undetectable. Thanks to HAART, it does not appear in blood tests. It can no longer be transmitted and has no reported effects on the body.

And yet, whereas it cannot be physically perceived, if left untreated it would eventually manifest again. In spite of all the latest medical advances, HIV remains. As the speaker in "undetectable" attests, in the HAART era HIV is "almost like gone / but not gone." The way Smith conveys this perceptual paradox is powerful because it describes the current medical state of HIV, but it also functions as a nuanced expression of the socio-emotional experience of contagion. On the one hand, antiretrovirals have the power to neutralize the virus; on the other, contagion continues to mark one's subjectivity irreparably. Adding to this, in describing HIV as "not antimatter / but the memory of matter," the speaker highlights the burden of memory. The poem thus points to the indelibility of the virus, but also to the legacy it carries. Even when the virus does not affect one's health anymore, there is something about it which remains. When "undetectable" presents the neutralized presence of HIV in the body as "the memory of matter," it does not only refer

to a near absence, or void, left by the virus in the body thanks to medication. It also points to the fact that HIV carries with it the heavy burden of postmemory. HIV is in fact not just the memory of matter, but *both* memory *and* matter.

In "gay cancer," too, the speaker evokes the persisting inseparability of memory and matter in the contemporary experience of HIV:

> Melvin, Assanto, Essex, my Saint
> Laurent, Xtravaganza House of
> sissy & boosted silk dirt throned
> with your too soon it grew
> in me too blood's gossip
> cum cussed gifted to us
> from us yes it grows by the day
> still i'm sorry we are still in the midst
> of ourselves here a pill for your grave
> a door to our later years
> you deservedo mother o sweet unc
> who we miss & never knew
> i hear you
> my wrist to my ear
> you're here
> (60)

"here a pill for your grave," sighs the speaker. In the poem, the address to Hemphill, Saint, and Dixon is a tribute and an offering. Whereas the medical benefits of having access to HAART are already praised in "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects," here the antiretroviral combination of elvitegravir, cobicistat, emtricitabine, and tenofovir alafenamide in single tablets becomes a libation of sorts. Merging memory and matter, "gay cancer" creates a site of mourning, a shared literary grave in front of which the speaker can mourn and pay homage.

By praising the pill for being "a door to our later years," the speaker's ritual gesture recovers the threshold as a metaphor of change. In this phrase, the use of "our" establishes the bond between the speaker and the eulogized poets, gathering the "I" and the "you" into a common "we," while the reference to "later years" conveys a future which was never available, a denied temporality. The phrase "our later years" therefore rings with the power of revealed injustice against a community. Although the deceased poets "deserved" access to a time frame now available to their community, the necessary "door" to access such time-space was not yet a reality for them. In the poem, the spatialization of HAART marks its implementation in 1996 as a turning point, as a historical moment which has been referred to as the "protease moment" (Dowsett et al.) or, more in line with Smith's use of the metaphor, as the "pharmaceutical threshold" (Pearl).

Effective antiretrovirals indubitably marked a milestone, making it possible to envision survival, recovery, and regained health after a positive HIV diagnosis, even AIDS. Yet, the establishment of such medical progress as a clear, well-defined boundary continues to be problematic. The positive impact of HAART is certainly undeniable. As a consequence of the testing of antiretroviral treatment in 1995 and its later implementation, the estimated number of AIDS-related deaths in the United States plummeted from 50,140 that year to 38,780 in 1996.[1] Figures continued to improve considerably after that, with the yearly average stabilizing around 20,000 in 1998 and progressively decreasing to the current yearly US average of 13,000 deaths.[2] In the global South, however, the development of the epidemic differed greatly. Due in great part to the difference in drug and healthcare availability, the global number of deaths from AIDS-related health complications continued to escalate after

[1] CDC, "Update: Trends in AIDS Incidence – United States, 1996," Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Sep. 19, 1997, 46(37); 861-867.
[2] CDC, "CDC Fact Sheet. Today's HIV/AIDS Epidemic," August 2016.

1996, nearly doubling from 1.06 million deaths that year to 2 million in 2004, at the global peak of the epidemic.[3]

However, in spite of the continuation of AIDS and the international spread of its ravaging, in the mid-nineties the United States witnessed "a steady decline in the frequency of HIV/AIDS reporting," and when the topic did appear in US media, it was most frequently in the form of a contrast between the progressive disappearance of the epidemic in the US and its seemingly unrelenting development abroad.[4] Such subjective depiction not only led to an inaccurate perception of the state of HIV and AIDS within the country, but also fostered a nationalist view of the US as medically—and morally—superior. Most importantly, as Stevens and Hull contend in "The Colour of AIDS: an Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of HIV/AIDS in the United States from 1992-2007," when media did cover the epidemic in the US, it highlighted the disproportionate morbidity on gay men and racialized people, but failed to account for the complexity of such disparity.

To quote Simon Watney's spearheading study *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media*, AIDS is not simply a "medical crisis on an unparalleled scale," but it in fact "involves a crisis of representation itself" (9). In the context of such dissolution of accurate representation, the term "post-AIDS" started being used by the media as well as by scientists.[5] Since then, the perception of AIDS as over has gained more and more territory. Yet, AIDS was and continues to be a crisis on multiple levels. The one million people who continue to die from AIDS each year are proof of the inherent fallacy of what Liz Walker

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[3] Our World in Data, "Prevalence, new cases and deaths from HIV/AIDS, World, 1990 to 2019," Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network. Global Burden of Disease Study 2019 (GBD 2019) Results. Seattle, United States: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), 2021. https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/deaths-and-new-cases-of-hiv

[4] Stevens, Robin C., and Shawnika J. Hull, "The Colour of AIDS: an Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of HIV/AIDS in the United States from 1992–2007," *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, 27:3, 25 Jun. 2013, 352-369.

[5] In "Revisiting 'Post-AIDS': Understanding Gay Community Responses to HIV Then and Now," Gary W. Dowsett claims to have coined the term "post-AIDS" in 1996 for the XI International AIDS Conference in Vancouver. Dowsett specifies that he used the term to refer to the drastic change introduced by antiretrovirals in the United States, not as a declaration of an "end of AIDS" which, at the time of the publication of "Revisiting 'Post-AIDS'" in 2022, Dowsett critically declared "nowhere in sight" (27).

has critically referred to as the "'post-AIDS' narrative."[6] As Ambar Basu argues in *Post-AIDS Discourse in Health Communication: Sociocultural Interpretations*, "[t]he prevailing discourse on 'post-AIDS' fantasizes a world that is free of HIV and AIDS, a world in which humans and their agents are in control of the prevention and spread of the disease" (245). Indeed, the "end of AIDS" is, for now, merely a fantasy.[7]

Aware of the thorniness of "post-AIDS" as a concept, in his writing about the depiction of HIV in mainstream anglophone television, Dion Kagan uses the term "post-crisis." In *Positive Images: Gay Men & HIV/AIDS in the Culture of 'Post-Crisis,'* Kagan explains that he borrows the term from AIDS social research, "where it was first used to describe the transformed conditions surrounding the epidemic among gay men in the developed world," as an alternative to "post-AIDS" (14). Kagan himself notes that the division between "crisis" and "post-crisis" "is not a neat, well-behaved temporal schema" but rather "a continuation from and a break with the past" (18), and even marks the term with inverted commas in his title to show his caution in using it. As he clarifies, his choice is meant to reflect the continuation of both HIV and AIDS in the present while at the same time drawing a line from the experience of AIDS pre-HAART for gay men in the global North. In this sense, Kagan's perspective coincides with that of Eric Rofes, who already in 1998 declared, in *Dry Bones Breathe*, that "the *communal* experience of AIDS-as-crisis has ended, even while

[6] Liz Walker, "Problematizing the Discourse of 'Post-AIDS'" in *Journal of Medical Humanities* 41 (2020), 95-105.
[7] In "Revisiting 'Post-AIDS'," Dowsett et al. argue that the "end of AIDS" narrative was conceived as a necessary stage in the historical strategy development in the face of HIV. The insistence on treatment in the global and national plans against HIV and AIDS in the early 2000s, Dowsett et al. contend, "stimulated the re-biomedicalization of the epidemic, convincing many scientists, public health professionals, and activists that a biomedical silver bullet would not only be effective but could also constitute the answer to HIV and AIDS" (21). By 2010, Dowsett et al. continue, "this re-biomedicalization, driven by treatments development and activisim, overtook prevention as the central strategy to slow and stop the epidemic." Prevention then "shifted from a broad-based public health approach to a narrower biomedical prevention framework" in which "high-risk" communities were targeted: on the one hand, HIV-positive people should take TasP ("treatment as prevention") so as to reduce transmission to their sex partners; on the other, HIV-negative should take PrEP ("pre-exposure prophylaxis") to protect themselves. This whole scheme could only work, however, if HIV was framed once again as a crisis. In Dowsett et al.'s words, "for this strategy to even be contemplated, a decisive shift had to occur in the longstanding framing of the epidemic as an ongoing emergency and crisis. This was to arrive in the 'end of AIDS' narrative, which soon came to dominate the fourth decade of the epidemic."

individual gay men may find themselves experiencing AIDS or HIV infection as a frightening, terrorizing experience" (41, emphasis Rofes's).

In their respective approaches to the experience of "AIDS-as-crisis," both Rofes and Kagan speak from a localocentric perspective—leaving aside the experience of AIDS in contexts other than the privileged global North and focusing on gay men as a community. Rofes, for instance, points out that "Certain individuals, particularly those recently infected with HIV or currently suffering illness, may experience AIDS as a personal crisis, but this is different from the communal crisis that once dominated gay life" (45). While they both are careful to specify *for whom* they claim the crisis to be over, their approach ignores race altogether as a crucial factor marking most of the 13,000 yearly AIDS-related deaths in the US I have already mentioned. Writing in the mid-90s, Rofes—whose book is explicitly critical of the privilege of white people over non-white people in the US—could not have known that AIDS would continue, in the second and third decades of the 21st century, to have such a disproportionate toll. Kagan's work, however, was published in 2020. The fact that he explicitly states that his focus is on "gay men in the developed world" shows not only a localocentric approach, but also one where intersectionality has no part. Whether we call it "post-AIDS" or "post-crisis," the issue with these terms is the same—who is AIDS truly over for? For whom has it stopped being a crisis?

When we talk about the "AIDS crisis" we are using the term "crisis," somewhat paradoxically, in a non-medical sense, referring to what the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines as "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending, especially one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome." The estimate 33.6 to 48.6 million people who have lost their lives as a consequence of the epidemic speaks to that "outcome." The continuing toll of the epidemic to this day proves that the AIDS crisis is far from over. Beyond its impact in deaths, AIDS has left an imprint on the global economy, not only destabilizing the workforce and putting more pressure on

countries' healthcare systems, but also fostering a shift in sociospatial distribution within cities as a result of those deaths.[8] AIDS has also radically altered the course of the public perception of homosexuality, drug use, and racialized groups, sparking what Watney has called "a crisis over the entire framing of knowledge" or, in Lee Edelman's words, an "epidemic of signification."[9] As Jih-Fei Cheng et al. argue in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises* (2022), AIDS "is not merely a crisis in epidemiological terms; rather, it is the uneven and varying spatialization and temporalization of crises" (1), it is "not *a* crisis" but "the global distribution of networked *crises*" (17, emphasis in original).

Reflecting about the notion of crisis in a wider sense, Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* states that "[c]risis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (10). For Berlant, the experience of crisis is intrinsic to the development of neoliberalism, a system in which only the privileged can escape the pervasiveness of precarity. While certain narratives reformulate the various forms of oppression taking place in this paradigm—anti-Blackness, sexism, violence against queer people, ablism, class inequality, postcolonial domination, capitalism, etcetera—as "traumatic events," Berlant argues that this situation is best described as a permanent systemic crisis or, even better, as "crisis ordinariness." Describing certain situations as traumatic risks veering our attention away from the structure which not only allows but, in some cases, fosters those same situations. As Berlant explains, "a logic of adjustment within the historical scene makes more sense than a claim that merges the intense with the exceptional and the extraordinary" (10). Since the Reagan years, the US has certainly seen an increase in "class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political, and social brittleness," an ever-intensifying process which, as Berlant notes, "reshapes

[8] Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*.
[9] See Watney's *Policing Desire* and Edelman's "The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and AIDS," respectively. Such changes have also left an indelible imprint on the scientific fields of epidemiology, anthropology, sociology, and general philosophy, with the birth of queer theory as we know it as one of its multiple aftereffects.

conventions of racial, gendered, sexual, economic, and nation-based subordination" and which "has also increased the possibility that structural contingency will create manifest crisis situations in ordinary existence for more kinds of people" (11). The process of "unremembering" described by Castiglia & Reed which progressively obscures the ravaging of AIDS testifies to the growing ordinariness of the epidemic. As opposed to this generalized tendency, reading AIDS as systemic crisis and thus as "embedded in the ordinary" (10) casts light on its concurrence within a network of crises.

But how does HIV enter this equation? Whereas describing AIDS as a crisis, a set of crises, or as one of the manifold elements generating a situation of crisis ordinariness seems perfectly fitting, would it be wrong to refer to the virus itself as a crisis, too? That is, if we can talk about the AIDS crisis, can we also talk about the HIV crisis? Globally, 38.4 million people were living with HIV in 2021, and even within the geopolitical confines of the United States, where "only" 13,000 die from AIDS-related health complications every year, a yearly average of 35,000 people become newly infected.[10] Then again, if adequately treated, the effects of the virus on the health of people living with HIV are minimal. Can the consequences of HIV in the medicalized context of 21st-century US be seen as a crisis, then?

Before the 1620s, in English as well as in the other languages borrowing it from ancient Greek *krisis* (κρίσις), "crisis" was almost exclusively used to denote a "turning point in a disease, that change which indicates recovery or death."[11] While this meaning of the term is preserved to this day, and in fact appears as the first definition in the Merriam-Webster, the more general, metaphorical sense of the term is evoked, as I have said, when referring to AIDS. In this context, and in spite of the need to differentiate between HIV and AIDS, I contend that HIV continues to be a crisis, even if only for some, even when treated. As I have been arguing, Danez Smith's verse illustrates how a positive HIV diagnosis can generate

[10] UNAIDS, "Global HIV & AIDS statistics — Fact sheet" (2022), and CDC, "HIV Incidence," https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/overview/in-us/incidence.html#print, 3 Sept. 2022. Web. 30 Dec. 2022.
[11] Online Etymology Dictionary, "crisis," etymonline.com. Web. 14 Oct. 2022.

a postmemorial expectation of death, showing that the diagnosis can indeed trigger a phenomenological crisis. At the same time, following the original sense of the term, the presence of the very virus can also lead to an ontological crisis by introducing an acute state of awareness about one's aliveness. Particularly for those marked as death-bound subjects, as socially dead or, simply, as non-beings, the introduction of the virus in the body can have the surprising effect of highlighting the undeniable fact that, in spite of it all, one is alive. If a crisis is a turning point leading to either "recovery or death," Smith's poetry showcases an experience of HIV as a clear crisis, a life-inducing crisis.

In his work, Eric Rofes argues that crisis discourse has negative effects and must therefore be avoided. For him, the impact of referring to a situation such as HIV and AIDS as a crisis is the cause of stigma and other negative effects, and thus poses "the single, most formidable barrier we have to effectively combatting" the epidemic (70). As he puts it, "By continuing to willfully misrepresent the epidemic in this way, the communal psyche is held hostage by a siege mentality that perpetuates many unfortunate aspects of the epidemic" (70). Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's reflections on the notion of crisis, however, I can here only disagree with Rofes. For Koselleck, we must label crucial situations as crises if we expect any form of political or collective action. In Koselleck's own words, a detrimental situation "can be overcome only by the historically legitimated acceptance of an absolute moral responsibility for action," which calling it a crisis generates, and on which "depends success—and salvation" (375). Only if we accept that a situation is critical, can we act toward salvation. Be it medical, social, systemic, or phenomenological, recognizing HIV as a crisis helps us better frame the context in which the virus develops and, most importantly, can offer the perspective needed for a call to action, for change.

So now that we have a deeper, more complex understanding of the effects that HIV can continue to have even under treatment, how should we position ourselves in front of it? In fact, are we approaching the epidemic correctly or is there room for improvement? Should

the search for a medical cure continue to be our primary focus? What about prevention strategies? Are they efficient enough? In short, what perpetuates the current, continuing spread of HIV in the specific context of the US among the communities it most disproportionately affects? In *AIDS Discourse in Health Communication,* Ambar Basu states that "the current use of the term 'HIV' and the reduction in the use of the term 'AIDS' ostensibly reflects scientific and medical understanding of the disease, but it also demands a change in personal, organizational, and discursive identities" (2). So, what are these changes? If it is true that, as Basu argues, HIV and AIDS are "a 'present' phenomenon that is likely to continue to be so unless the multiple spokes of the HIV and AIDS wheel, so to speak, are adequately addressed in every part of the globe" (245), which exactly are these spokes? What action must be taken to finally leave the threshold behind and be able to close the door? What does Danez Smith's poetry do in the face of the HIV crisis? Indeed, what role can poetry play in our struggle with HIV?

Conclusions

From the first references to HIV as a frightening monster in *[insert] boy* to the thankfulness for the proof of life which the virus constitutes in *Homie*, Danez Smith's verse offers a unique insight into the contemporary experience of a positive HIV diagnosis. Poem after poem, contagion is evoked in its intricate connection to both material conditions and cultural identity, as well as in its wide-ranging potential effects on the perception of the self as a separate individual and as an actor within a vast network of elements. The journey is long and full of fear, but it also holds space for laughter, intimacy, and, above all, hope.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the personal experience of as well as approach to HIV is, for queer Black Americans, conditioned from the start. The disproportionate persistence of HIV and AIDS on queer and Black people in the US inevitably determines the expectations not only of becoming seropositive, but also of developing AIDS and dying. In Chapters 1 and 4 I have shown how both the meta-aporia of Black metaphysics and the postmemory of AIDS haunt the queer Black speaker with their respective and joint horrors to the extent that the incorporation of HIV becomes engulfed with seemingly endless images of pain, decay, bones, and dust. In light of afropessimist thought, in Chapters 1 and 2 I have explained that the continuous references to the self as death-bound or as already dead testify to the experience of social death in the wake of enslavement, thus adding to the enormous body of work giving voice to the critical impossibility of a Black metaphysics in the state-sanctioned anti-Blackness of the United States of America.

As I argue in Chapter 4, however, the speaker in Smith's work can ultimately overcome the meta-aporia of Black (non)being as well as the haunting of postmemory by focusing on the pleasure of laughter, dance, and sex. Via a full engagement with these

sensorial acts, the lyric I succeeds in finding presence. Whereas, as I show in Chapter 3, the fear and guilt of the possibility of transmitting HIV to others after the diagnosis generate a period of self-imposed isolation, in Chapter 4 I have contended that, when these feelings are overcome, the recovery of sex allows the lyric I in Smith's work to tap once more into interembodiment as a fundamental state for the self. The intimacy provided by sexual intercourse is thus explored again, granting the speaker its constitutive powers. But beyond the specific connectedness of sex, it is the more general experience of power over one's body—be it through intercourse, laughter, or dance—that fosters an awareness of the speaker's aliveness. In literary terms, such claim to aliveness translates into the radical use of deictics of presence explained in Chapter 1: by writing from a here and now, the lyric I states that the impending change for a better, more inhabitable world must be started in the present.

At the same time, this presentness does not in the least prove incompatible with a preservation of the past. As the anti-elegiac mode in *Don't Call Us Dead* showcases, Smith is invested in the melancholic preservation of memory. In Chapters 1 and 3, I have contended that against the erasure of queer and Black lives, Smith's work joins a critical politics of dissent rooted in a stern rejection of the forgetfulness through which the dominant discourse makes these lives ungrievable and thus deems them unliveable, too. This exercise in affective historiography highlights the persistence of inequality in its multiple, overlapping expressions. What's more, as I have explored in Chapters 2 and 4, Smith's engagement against degenerational unremembering strengthens the bonds with the queer past by assuming new models of kinship based, precisely, on the blood brotherhood of HIV. Maybe most surprising of all, the sense of aliveness which Smith's speaker reaches through the physical immediacy of pleasure, and which crystallizes in the aesthetics of vanitas studied in Chapter 4, is also developed as a result of the embrace of

HIV's mutualistic symbiosis fleshed out in Chapter 2. Because a virus can only survive within a living host, HIV's potential threat, too, results in a confirmation that the speaker is, in spite of it all, undeniably alive.

Built on this constant tension between death and survival, between pessimism and optimism, between fear and hope, Smith's verse illustrates the intricate ambivalence of the contemporary experience of diagnosis. Rather than a result of the physical impact of the virus itself, the impact of contagion is psychosocially conditioned. Throughout, the speaker attempts to find comfort in the separation between HIV and AIDS. And yet, at the same time, the persistence of AIDS, its legacy, its wake, indeed its memory, not only are undeniable, but must necessarily be acknowledged.

Inevitably, in this dissertation I have privileged memory over matter. Following the physically uneventful crossing of the door in "1 in 2," and the subsequent exploration of HIV through the psychical rather than the physical, the mental rather than the material, I have focused on the metaphysical reexamination triggered by contagion. As part of this radical inquiry, I have delved greatly on ontology and temporality, with memory as a key component in the union of the two. And still, it remains true that while the imprint of medically controlled seropositivity is explored in Smith's work through mostly metaphysical terms, HIV continues to have material effects on those living with it. While Smith's poems do not provide an account of these effects, the virus affects the aging process of HIV positive people. On top of this, antiretrovirals, which continue to be essential for maintaining the virus under control, can have troubling side effects which might disappear once the body becomes accustomed to the medicine, but might also persist. We cannot forget either that, as "crown" states, for many people "the pills cost too much" (59). To give an example, Genvoya—the HAART brand mentioned in "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects"—has a monthly cost of $4,593. The fact that

the United States does not have a free, universal healthcare system means that access to HAART is inevitably conditioned by each person's financial status as well as by the state and region they live in. The location where treatment is sought for will determine whether or not, and to what extent, this is covered by general healthcare structures like Medicare or Medicaid, or by specific programs like the AIDS Drug Assistance Program or the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Assistance Program.

State legislatures also condition the material experience of HIV in a way which does appear in Smith's work. As I point out in Chapter 3, HIV continues to be widely criminalized in the United States, so that a person's serostatus can lead, in certain circumstances, to several forms of legal punishment. To date, 30 states have HIV-specific criminal laws and/or sentence enhancements applicable to people living with HIV, ranging from misdemeanor (punishable with a fine and/or under a year in prison) to class A felony (punishable with a year or longer in prison, or death sentence). Out of these states, 6 may require registration as a sex offender as part of the punishment under HIV-specific laws. In 25 states, a person's positive HIV status is relevant in establishing a non-HIV-specific element of an offence, and in 9 states, being HIV+ may result in sentence enhancements for sexual assault crimes. In accordance with some of these jurisdictions, the US Supreme Court has upheld indefinite detention of persons with HIV under "sexually violent predator" confinement statutes, and the bodily fluids of people living with HIV have been deemed "deadly weapons" or "dangerous instruments" in trial.[1] The material impact of contagion certainly exceeds viral and medical alterations of the body.

If, as I argued in "On Crises," the effects of HIV can be divided into the material and the metaphysical, the causes for the continuing spread of the virus can be divided

[1] 2022 publication by the Center for HIV Law and Policy *HIV Criminalization in the United States: A Sourcebook on Federal and State HIV Criminal Law and Practice*, and infographic report *HIV Criminalization in the United States: An Overview of the Variety and Prevalence of Laws Used to Prosecute and Punish People Living with HIV in the US*.

into the individual and the structural. It is true that in some cases people willingly expose themselves to the virus—or rather engage in unprotected intercourse despite the possibility of becoming infected. Media will often focus on such cases, perpetuating the scapegoating of people living with HIV and veering attention away from the responsibility of institutional powers in charge not only of treatment but also of prevention. In response to this tendency, Sonja Mackenzie contends that we must steer away from individual behaviorism in order to fully grasp the impact of structural conditioning. As she puts it in *Structural Intimacies: Sexual Stories in the Black AIDS Epidemic*, we need "a shift from individual-level narratives of personal responsibility and attribution currently held within popular and academic discourse to those more potent understandings of the self in the structural and the structural in the self" (15).

Yet, we need not focus on the media or political discourse to find problematic issues with the approach to the HIV epidemic. Even in HIV transmission reduction programs, the attention paid to risk reduction does not approach the spread of the virus wholistically, thus failing to address the social conditions which lead to it. As Jih-Fei Cheng et al. criticize, "the reduction of the pandemic to risk behaviors and transmission categories only obscures how race, gender, sexuality, economics, global policing, militarism, and incarceration are inextricably tied to the virus and its lived outcomes" (5). In 2014, the UNAIDS launched the "90-90-90" initiative, a set of strategies with the goal of ending HIV by 2030, defined by the triple target that, by 2020, 90% of people with HIV should know their serostatus, that 90% of them should receive antiretroviral treatment, and that 90% of those receiving treatment should have a fully suppressed viral load. In 2020, the goal was not met. But already in 2019, the primary results from the HPTN 071 study Population Effects of Antiretroviral Therapy to Reduce HIV

Transmission (often shortened as "PopART"),[2] the largest community-randomized trial of the universal HIV "test-and-treat" strategy carried out in a total of 1 million people in Zambia and South Africa, showed that even if the "90-90-90" goals were met, "treatment alone is unlikely to end the epidemic in the highest prevalence areas."[3]

Indeed, focusing on medical prevention fails to approach the issue as what it is: a network of crises. As Andrew Spieldenner et al. note in "Last People Standing: People Living with HIV after the 'End of the Epidemic'" (2022), in HIV prevention and treatment approaches "[t]he very vulnerabilities and structural barriers that inculcated and enabled the HIV epidemic to spread and remain centered amongst some groups in the United States go largely untouched in any meaningful way" (59). The social conditions at the root of the spread of HIV are, indeed, much larger. Marlon M. Bailey states it clearly in *Butch Queens Up In Pumps*: "[t]he rapid spread of HIV/AIDS within dispossessed communities is due in large part to the terms of dispossession" (203). "Housing, socioeconomics, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, as well as the rampant criminalization of HIV, drug use, and sex work," Spieldenner et al. specify, all "constitute parts of these larger structures" (60).

Discussing the imbrication between these issues and the health lives of Black Americans, Angelique Harris concludes a conversation with Marlon Bailey published in "Souls Forum: The Black AIDS Epidemic" by stating that "of course, discrimination and poverty lead to a lack of access to health care and health-based resources, housing, employment opportunities, etc." (221). These structural forms of dispossession become a catch-22. In great part due to racism, queerphobia, economic inequality, and lack of access to healthcare, education, and housing, people are more likely to become infected

[2] HIV Prevention Trials Network, "HPTN 071."
[3] Avert HIV Timeline, "PopART Study Primary Results."

with HIV, which, in turn, as a result of HIV criminalization laws contributing to the generalized stigma persisting around poz people, further perpetuates their situation of oppression.

Unsurprisingly, most of the structural conditioning elements listed by Harris and Spieldenner et al. are mentioned in Smith's poetry. But besides anti-Blackness, queerphobia, and the criminalization of HIV, all of which have been central to my analysis, drug use, sex work, and the socioeconomics of housing, too, all appear at some point in the poet's writing. In *[insert] boy*, for instance, the section titled "[rent]" includes six poems, written from the perspective of a "rentboy," in which the lyric I examines the pleasures of sex, but also the reasons for and the hardship of sex work. In "10 rentboy commandements or then the white guy calls you a nigger," a client verbally assaults the speaker, who then thinks, "so what? You still gonna get paid. / (respect or groceries? you still gonna answer / next time he call. (this is money.)" (56). In "dancing (in bed) with white men (with dreads)," too, the speaker is confronted with the racism of a lover and this triggers memories of "being four & playing with white barbies," of "frat parties in Wisconsin, the fake black bodies // made discoballs," of "rent & the men who paid it for a while," and of "Chicago & how she bleed" (75). In *Don't Call Us Dead*, alcohol and drug use are mentioned in the context of sex in "at the down low house party," "recklessly," "tonight, in Oakland," "strange dowry," and in "crown," where the speaker attempts to remember the moment of HIV contagion, wondering "was there coke that night?" (56). These issues persist in *Homie*, where several poems examine the connection between financial status, drug use, race, queerness, and HIV. The last lines in "all the good dick lives in Brooklyn Park" constitute a good example of this:

> buddy who rocks me best gets thinner by the day.

he can't afford the pills that keep me around & blood quiet.
i told him they got programs for prescription assistance

doctors, all kinds of help, but that would
mean to admit what we try so hard to forget.
my poor god. all kinds of broke a body can be.

i kiss him with the pill coming apart on my tongue.
i hope it's enough to fill both of us out. we split it
like gas, like the brown blunt's brown guts. (54)

In these poems, as throughout the whole of Smith's work, Blackness, queerness, sex, and money are inseparable from each other. Based on the solid witness they provide, we can indeed conclude that, as Cheng et al. argue, our attempts to organize an efficient response to the HIV and AIDS crises are destined to fail "[i]f we invest singular hope in a medical cure or in individuals' access and adherence to the once-a-day preventative pill preexposure prophylaxis (PrEP) instead of diagnosing a failing globalized system and, in turn, renewing strategies for collective survival" (10). As Smith's work showcases, we will only be able to truly stop HIV when we start seeing it as the hydra-headed creature it is. People may change their habits and medicine may advance, but as long as whole segments of our population continue to be ungrievable, to constitute social non-beings, to see death as their only future, the virus will continue to spread and, indeed, to kill.

Immersed in the specificities of the pharmacological global North, Smith's poetry is a fresh and eloquent illustration of the imbrication of each of these factors. Beyond its

value as testimony, however, this poet's work engages in an ethics where past and future are perfectly compatible. On one hand, Smith's poetry illustrates what Justine Augier argues in *Croire: Sur les pouvoirs de la littérature* [Believing: On the powers of literature]: that literature provides a "discrete and implacable weapon" against "forgetfulness, that great mechanism at work in dark-futured times" (18).[4] On the other hand, Smith's verse is imbued with the future-oriented strength of poetry in that, as Audre Lorde explains in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," "poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before" (38). Indeed, throughout all three volumes, Danez Smith activates a language of hope in its engagement in queer world-making, sparking the construction of bridges leading to fairer not-yets across the abysses of our fear. Smith's work not only invokes a different here and now but in fact lays the foundations for it. Through language, Smith's reparative imagination initiates change.

This creative engagement illustrates, moreover, what Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray, in *The New American Poetry of Engagement: A 21st Century Anthology*, describe as "Central to American poetry since Lowell": the fact that "poets are caught in the contradictory obligations of truth-telling, the need both to keep faith with what has occurred and to transform or transcend it" (2). As we have seen, Smith's verse is a verse of loyalty. Memory plays a central role throughout the poet's work. But again, this constant recovery of the past does not prevent evolution and, most importantly, it does not prevent hope. If it is true that, as Justine Augier puts it, "Literature gives time its texture back, it makes it thicker, it summons the ghosts, both those from before and

[4] In the French original, "l'oubli, grand mécanisme à l'œuvre dans une époque à l'avenir obscur, contre lequel la littérature fournit une arme discrète et implacable."

those to come, and the conversation to which it always makes us return remains full of hope" (23), then Smith's work is literature at its finest.[5]

In this thesis, I have offered the broadest and deepest study of Danez Smith's poetry to date. Focusing specifically on how HIV is presented in Smith's three full-length collections, I have delved into a topic central to the poet's work but rarely considered in scholars' analyses of it. Most scholarly writing about Smith's verse meditates on what the poems tell us about the experience of Blackness in the US. Sometimes Blackness is considered at its intersection with queerness, but rarely do these analyses focus on the experiences of contagion, diagnosis, seroconversion, medicalization, or undetectability. What's more, the few critics who do pay attention to HIV and its implications for the lived experience showcased in Smith's poetry fail to see it as separate from the AIDS literature which was being produced before the advent of HAART. In their work, these scholars treat HIV in its close connection to AIDS but then do not examine the differences between one condition and the other. As a result, Smith's verse is loosely and misleadingly categorized as "poetry of HIV/AIDS" and juxtaposed to that of poets writing about AIDS, with few, if any, distinctive considerations. Against this generalization, my reading of Smith's poetry explores the boundary between HIV writing and AIDS writing to insist on the specificities of living with HIV in the HAART era without for that reason ignoring the undeniable impact of AIDS in the past, its current persistence, or its continuing legacy.

Based on my interest in the potential of literature, I have not read Smith's work merely as a testimony, witness, or proof of a given situation, but also as a much-needed, productive contribution to society. Further, by approaching Smith's poetry through the

[5] "La littérature redonne au temps sa texture, l'épaissit, convoque les fantômes, ceux d'avant et ceux qui viennent, et cette conversation à laquelle toujours elle nous fait revenir demeure pleine d'espoir."

lens of queer optimism and choosing to focus on joy, pleasure, and aliveness as potential alternatives to the experience of postmemory, death-boundness, and the meta-aporia of a Black metaphysics, I have avoided falling into the general trend to focus on trauma and stigma which dominates the criticism of HIV and AIDS cultural production in general, and of Smith's verse more specifically. My optimist approach is thus also contribution not only to the philosophical study of HIV, but also to the fields of US poetry and elegy studies, to cultural and literary analysis, and to new materialisms.

With my work, I hope to guide future research away from the alleyways of AIDS-based determinism which often limit the study of the virus and of its artistic representations, and to lead it onto new avenues of wonder, hope, and optimism. While my analysis has centered around the poetry of Danez Smith, it can, and indeed should be expanded in comparative studies. Juxtaposing Smith's verse to that of contemporaries such as Tory Dent, Jericho Brown, Miguel Murphy, L. Lamar Wilson, or Justin Phillip Reed can expand our understanding of the virus and its multiple effects in the 21st century. Of course, comparative analyses will also greatly benefit from a non-anglocentric approach. Bearing in mind the presence of HIV and AIDS in countries other than the United States, mostly in the global South, intercultural and interlinguistic work would shed invaluable light on many of the issues I cover here and, I hope, on issues which we fail to see due to our limited corpus.

But we need not look for other authors; Smith's work itself offers much more than I considered here. Just as I carried out a comparative analysis of the perception and experience of HIV throughout the poet's collections, the notion of Blackness, its complexity and connotations vary greatly—from the eucharistic praise of the Black body in *[insert] boy*'s "on grace," to the exploration of the use of "nigga" in "O nigga O" and in "…nigga" within *Don't Call Us Dead*, to *Homie*'s embrace of the malleability of the same

term in poems like "shout out to my niggas in Mexico" or "white niggas." Blackness and the manyfold aspects of racialization deserve even closer attention in future research, as do the various representations of gender throughout the poet's collection. The recent translations of *Don't Call Us Dead* into Portuguese, Spanish, and Catalan—respectively, by André Calipé, Lawrence Schimel, and myself—raise the question of how to preserve the lack of linguistic gender markers in gendered languages. Analyses of these translations, as well as of the texts by other authors whose work is at times explicitly non-binary would be fantastic contributions. Finally, intra-authorial comparative work could also illuminate our understanding of Smith's poetry. Considering that Smith rose to fame as a spoken word and slam poet, much could be learnt from analyzing the way the poet's printed work reflects or diverges from their performance of certain poems. Approaching their work from sound and voice studies, as well as by focusing on the physicality of performance could offer tremendous insight into the skill and the power of the poetry of Danez Smith.

This doctoral thesis is my attempt at shedding some light on the complexity of HIV and its phenomenology in the early 21st century. As I am writing these lines, teams of medical researchers work towards finding a cure for HIV. If they find it, my work may soon become outdated. I really hope they do.

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