

Research Article

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“And the House Burned Down”: HIV, Intimacy, and Memory in Danez Smith’s Poetry[#]

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Abstract: Danez Smith’s *[insert] boy* (2014) not only bears witness to the intricacy of the intersection between queerness and Blackness in the United States of the twenty-first century, but also illustrates an overcoming of multiple forms of oppression through poetry. In Smith’s second collection *Don’t Call Us Dead* (2017), this experience is further complicated when a positive HIV diagnosis enters the equation. This paper wonders about the possibility of reading the speaker’s account of HIV as following a narrative arc from anxiety to agency. With this idea in mind, and probing into issues such as intimacy, kinship, memory, and the notion of home, this paper presents a comparative analysis of Danez Smith’s poetry focusing on the metaphors used to explore the penetration of HIV into the body and the alterations this experience imposes on the perception of intimacy and memory.

Keywords: Danez Smith, US poetry, HIV and AIDS

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.

—Hayes, *American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin*

Spatializing Interembodiment

In *Pivotal Voices, Era of Transition*, González argues that the “narrative arc” in Smith’s first poetry collection *[insert] boy* “moves the black body from object of anxiety, to object of desire, to self-awareness, to agency” (80–1). Indeed, Smith’s *opera prima* not only bears witness to the intricacy of the intersection between

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queerness and Blackness in the United States of the twenty-first century, but also illustrates an overcoming of multiple forms of oppression through poetry. In Smith's second collection *Don't Call Us Dead*, this experience is further complicated when a positive HIV diagnosis enters the equation. Could we then argue, like González does about Blackness in *[insert] boy*, that the poet's response to HIV contagion also follows a narrative arc? Does the depiction of the virus change throughout the *Don't Call Us Dead*? In fact, does it change throughout the whole of Smith's work? To answer these questions, in this article, I propose a comparative analysis of Danez Smith's poetry focusing on the metaphors used to explore the penetration of HIV into the body and the alterations this experience imposes on the perception of intimacy and memory.

The speaker in Danez 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" (Button Poetry). As the song/poem moves forward, the speaker no longer self-describes as being *on* the battlefield but rather as being *on* the battlefield itself. As I argue in this article, Smith's work explores a spatialization of the body, carving out specific spaces which materialize the poet's conception of the queer Black American body in the twenty-first century.

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]lace 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 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 a 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 "worshipped 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 Manzanás Calvo and Sánchez 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 and Stacey argue, "through touch, the separation of self and other is undermined in the very intimacy or proximity of the encounter" (6). Drawing on Ahmed and Stacey, as well as on Manzanás and Benito, I suggest that Smith's spatialization of the body highlights the mutual constitution of I and Other in what Ahmed and 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 and 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. Further exploring 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 in the spatial metaphors used in Smith’s work. In the poems I comment below, HIV not only becomes the source of what 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*, 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 article, 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 *[insert] boy* to *Don’t Call Us Dead*, 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 that imagine contagion pre-diagnosis and those that 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 article looks at poems written from a post-diagnosis perspective to contend that the viral kinship that is initially discarded can then be recovered and, in time, incorporated. Reflecting upon the impact of dominant narratives on the way we conceive of our social interactions, 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 latest post-diagnosis 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 toward the end of *Don’t* and in Smith’s third collection *Homie*, two poems 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 a home expressed in this line responds to a confrontation with the politics of “degenerational un-remembering” (Castiglia and 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 with 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, i want & barely know how
to do much else. don’t speak to me

about raids you could loose on me
the clan of rebel cells who thirst

to watch their home burn. love
let me burn if it means you

& i have one night with no barrier
but skin. this isn’t about danger

but about faith,
[...]

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 Coulson’s words, of “forcible resistance to an enemy” (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 Esposito recounts in *Immunitas*, 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).¹ This new medical perspective expanded onto political science, but it also

¹ 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)

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 that 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 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 the 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 Wald's remark in *Contagious* that “Disease 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 to it.

Often understood simply as unprotected anal penetration, “barebacking” is also seen by some queer scholars as much more. As scholars such as Dean or 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, Bartlett explains, “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). For these scholars, 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 (“Breeding Culture”) 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 Smith's “bare” showcases, rather than disconnected cases of sexual behavior, barebacking can be a unique

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 and Bimbi's “Intentional Unprotected Anal Intercourse Among Men Who Have Sex with Men: Barebacking—from Behavior to Identity.”

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 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 outweighed 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, “Breeding Culture”). Smith’s poem thus illustrates the “resignification of HIV,” in 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 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 article could join the conversation between Dean and Bailey and delve into the psychosocial motivations behind barebacking.⁴ It could also expand Gonzalez’s criticism of both mainstream media and scientific

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

discourses for perpetuating a demonization of non-normative sexual activity by turning those who engage in it into social “panic icons.”⁵ But my intention is not to categorize Smith's poetry according to certain behavioral motivations, 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.

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 that 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

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, the boundaries, and the 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” and updates the discussion in “Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), The Truvada Whore, and the New Gay Sexual Revolution.”

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 judgment. 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 indicates 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 that 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 h 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 a lack of accurate, up-to-date information and 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)

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. Rueb’s “He Emerged from Prison a Potent Symbol of H.I.V. Criminalization,” as well as Thrasher’s “A Black Body on Trial: The Conviction of HIV-Positive ‘Tiger Mandingo’” and “How College Wrestling Star ‘Tiger Mandingo’ Became an HIV Scapegoat” provide the most detailed information about this scarcely covered case.

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 "A Black Body on Trial"). At court, only one member of the jury was non-white – an African-American woman, one of the 51 potential jurors. The rest 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 era, the popular imagination 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, Alexander posits in *The New Jim Crow*, "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. If, in "litany with blood all over," the speaker recalls contagion as the moment when "i touched the stove & the house burned down" (50), that is because 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. In his account of becoming poz in the twenty-first century, 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.

⁸ Thrasher, "How College Wrestling Star..." and "A Black Body on Trial."

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

Re-Membering the Body

And still, as I argue in the rest of this article, Smith's poetry illustrates how HIV need no longer be perceived in exclusively harmful terms. Progressively, from *Don't* to *Homie*, the virus is not only accepted but eventually embraced, becoming, 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 the 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 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 Swan explains in *Practical English Usage*, in the "emotional attachment" attributed to the former (252). In their succinctly titled work *Home*, Blunt and 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 and Dowling, the notion of a 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 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 helps 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 and 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.

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:

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 Bailey puts it in *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, "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). 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*, 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 family. Such a 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 are supposed to 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. In Smith's verse, kin labor takes the shape of recognizing the dead as family, but also of memorializing them. 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 gay 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 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 twenty-first 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, toward remembering.¹⁰ 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."¹¹ The poem is presented as an apology for having misspelled 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 misspelled 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 spelled correctly – Smith's poem not 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.¹² 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).

¹⁰ 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 of 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 and 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."

¹¹ 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*.

¹² Speech included in Elizabeth Alexander's posthumous edition of Dixon's *Love's Instruments*.

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 remembering: 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 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 “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, 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 queerness in the aftermath of the first decades of the pandemic, Castiglia and 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 and Reed call “de-generational unremembering,” and 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 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 and 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)

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 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 Lakoff calls the "Nation-as-Family metaphor." Lakoff describes this semiotic model in *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 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 and 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)¹³

Published during Trump's presidency, Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead* not only shows disappointment at the election of a man with "no words/& hair beyond simile" (76), but also fiercely embraces alternative models of family and, by extension, alternative models for nation-making. 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 counter-theorizations 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 non-normative 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 domesticity. Along with other poems, "it began right here" proves that, as Blunt and 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, belong, and live on in, for those who have died from AIDS – over 32 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 establish 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 become associated with 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*, 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

¹³ Kaplan's *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* 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.

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, Cvetkovicz, Muñoz, and 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 “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 and 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. “Degenerational 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, it is an active engagement 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 choice of “sweet unc” over “sweet uncle,” besides building rapport in informal terms, adds a feeling of unexpected interruption to the grief over these family members, also working as a truncated vocative. Smith's poem thus underscores the wreckage of AIDS, particularly in queer (and) Black communities, in terms of role models. Discussing their impact in an interview with Kate Kellaway, Smith declared, “I think about them all the time. They were gay, black and passed away in the 90 s. 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 was the absence of family. For many, queer family plays a crucial role in development, growth, learning, and 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?

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