

DECONSTRUCTING THE REPRESENTATION
OF AIDS IN POETRY

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DECONSTRUCTING THE REPRESENTATION OF AIDS IN POETRY

by

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Abstract

In poetry written about AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), the contraction of the disease is continually divulged by explaining to which group the poet, as speaking subject, or the subject, as the individual about whom the poem is written, belongs. A homosexual, as subject or speaking subject in AIDS poetry, confesses the means of contraction of HIV to be gay sex. An intravenous drug abuser, as subject or speaking subject in AIDS poetry, confesses the sharing of syringes as the means of contraction. The subject or speaking subject's position within a socially-defined community or an identity group continually reaffirms the belief that AIDS only affects certain already-marginalized groups. Read individually, poems about AIDS continually marginalize the experience of those infected by failing to acknowledge the universality of AIDS from which, as Jacques Derrida explains, "no human is ever safe" (Derrida, 20). In my thesis, I will argue that the poetic representation of AIDS is informed by identity issues that resist universalizing the experience of AIDS.

For Debra, for being my everything.
For Mom and Dad, for making everything possible.
For Dr. Golfman, for helping me with everything.
For the Holy Spirit, for inspiring everything.

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All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

"Easter 1916"
W.B. Yeats

Chapter One

1.1) Introduction: How I Came to These Poems

My understanding of AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) has always been informed by the possibility that I could become infected if I were not careful. By the time I entered high school, my grade nine biology teacher explained how the virus decimates the immune system, exposing the defenseless individual to opportunistic infections that a healthy immune system would normally keep in check. By grade ten, speakers with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), the virus believed to cause AIDS, came to my school to warn us that we were all vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and that we should not remain indifferent to its possibility. After watching the film Philadelphia and reading the play Angels In America, I questioned the possible existence of equally poignant poetry about AIDS. I was convinced that there would be an abundance of two types of poems. One type would represent the way AIDS has altered the way we experience our sexuality by imbuing it with death, and the second would be written by or about the dying. Much to my surprise, there were very few of the former and a great many of the latter.

As I researched my thesis, I found myself able to empathize with the plight of those writing about AIDS; however, I could not identify with any of them, since in most cases, those I identified with were described by the poets as enemies to the cause. Continuously placed on the outside of the poems, I tried to find a way to enter them by questioning my own identity. To say I am best described as a product of the hegemonic culture would be accurate, even if I perceive myself as a scholastic gadfly flying just on

the fringe of the culture I critique. These poems made me accept that I am mainstream. Truth be told, while I could not identify with any of the poets writing about AIDS, the poems themselves forced me to confront all my liberal assumptions about AIDS and the marginalized groups represented in the poems, such as homosexuals and heroin addicts. In my thesis, I will argue that the poetic representation of AIDS is informed by identity issues that resist universalizing the experience of AIDS.

1.2) Presentation and Representation of AIDS

Before researching my thesis, I was not aware of any poems about AIDS, let alone any poems that were as critically or commercially successful as Philadelphia or Angels In America. Because I had not read any poems about AIDS, I thought that they would prove interesting inasmuch as one could analyze the evolution of the poetic representation of AIDS. The ongoing social, medical and political construction of AIDS makes it possible to interpret AIDS "as if it were a painting or a giant movie screen, [because] AIDS provides an available, daily, massive readability" (Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs" 20). While it struck me that even though poetry is not as popular an art form as film or theater, I thought that poetry could offer a variety of emotional and personal accounts of the experience of AIDS. When AIDS first emerged on the cultural landscape, it was securely inscribed as a homosexual disease. Over time, other identity groups, such as heroin addicts and hemophiliacs, began to be associated with AIDS. However, by late 1983 the etiology of the disease was discovered to be viral. The virus that causes AIDS would later be known as HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus).¹ With the knowledge

¹The first published accounts of the viral cause of AIDS appeared in the May 20, 1983 issue of *Science*. The virus was first isolated by Dr. Luc Montagnier's team at the Pasteur Institute in Paris. The virus discovered by Montagnier and his colleagues was dubbed LAV (Lymphadenopathy Associated Virus). American researchers at the National Health Institute (NHI) continued their own work on discovering the etiology of the

of the cause of AIDS as viral, it became necessary to universalize our understanding of AIDS because the identity associations that originally informed our responses to the disease proved to be prejudicial. As Thomas Yingling suggests,

Myths of identity *have framed* the interpretation of AIDS, and it remains a disease that attaches--rightly or wrongly--to identities: gay, IV-drug user, African, hemophiliac, infant, transfusion patient (the "guilty" and "innocent" "victims" are labeled through some category of identity that promises--falsely--to explain their contraction of the disease). (303)

Over time, new information has compelled a universalized understanding of AIDS, accepting the reality that, as Jacques Derrida explains, "no human being is ever safe from AIDS" (Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs" 20). Much of the writing about AIDS can be situated between the two conflicting extremes of the universal and the marginal. Universalizing the experience of AIDS erases the identity associations that "have framed the interpretation of AIDS," while representing the marginalized state of those infected re-inscribes those same "myths of identity" that have framed the interpretation of AIDS.

The first poems about AIDS emerged in 1985, roughly four years after the medical discovery of the disease. Michael Klein explains that the early "poems were grounded in a kind of shock that anything could be expressed at all" (Klein, "Here but

disease. "HTLV-III made its official debut on April 24, 1984, when Margaret Heckler, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, announced at a press conference in Washington that Robert Gallo and his colleagues (Mikulas Popovic, Zaki Salahuddin, Elizabeth Read, and others) had isolated a new virus, proved that it was the cause of AIDS, and were putting the finishing touches on a test that would be made available in November." (Grmek, 68-69) "The virus would be renamed HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) in 1986 by an international commission on virulological nomenclature." (Grmek, 70) Montagnier and Gallo had both 'discovered' the same virus, effectively meaning that one year was wasted on the etiology of AIDS. Regardless of the dates, what is important is that the viral cause of AIDS was internationally agreed upon by the spring of 1984.

Differently" xvii) since for many of the writers, "AIDS was ... first entering their consciousness as a literary subject" (xvii). It is difficult to describe the time when AIDS entered each person's consciousness since there is no shared singular moment to define it. In And The Band Played On, Randy Shilts describes time as either "before AIDS" or "after AIDS".² For many, the early 1980s was when it all changed because somebody they knew or somebody with whom they could identify became ill. For others, the reality of AIDS seeped into their lives when public figures like Rock Hudson, Arthur Ashe or Earvin Magic Johnson put a public face on a disease that many thought could only affect homosexuals or drug addicts. AIDS is, as Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox explain,

a particularly good example of the social construction of disease. In the process of defining both the disease and the persons infected, politics and social perceptions have been embedded in scientific and policy constructions of their reality and meaning. Human beings make disease in the context of biological and social conditions. (9)

The original presentation of AIDS describes the time when the pattern of illness was first noticed among homosexuals and the moment when this information became available to various communities throughout the United States by the Centers for Disease Control's bulletin, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR). As Mirko D. Grmek explains

The first official announcement [of AIDS] was published on June 5, 1981, by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the federal epidemiology

²Shilts' book *And The Band Played On* and Mirko D. Grmek's book *History of AIDS: Emergence and Origin of a Modern Pandemic* reconstruct the first years of the social and medical construction of AIDS. Shilts, a journalist, describes the historical accounts of the actions that were taken in the early 1980s to deal with AIDS. Grmek provides "the first international history of both the disease and the research that has tracked it around the globe." (Translator's preface, vii) Both books detail the actions of the few who tried to warn the many of the potentially devastating effects of the disease and the global repercussions of remaining indifferent to its spread.

agency in Atlanta. Its weekly bulletin, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), described the five severe pneumonia cases observed between October 1980 and May 1981 in three Los Angeles hospitals. The unusual facts justified their warning: all patients were young men (twenty-nine to thirty-six years old) whose sexual preference was homosexual, and all had pneumonia attributed to *Pneumocystis carinii*. (4)

The first article in the mainstream press about AIDS appeared in the New York Times, July 3, 1981. Entitled "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexual Men," the article explains that

Doctors in New York and California have diagnosed among homosexual men 41 cases of a rare and often fatal form of cancer.... [T]he doctors who have made the diagnoses, mostly in New York City and San Francisco Bay area, are alerting other physicians who treat large numbers of homosexual men, to the problem in an effort to identify more cases and to reduce the delay in offering chemotherapy treatment. The sudden appearance of the cancer, called Kaposi Sarcoma, has prompted a medical investigation that experts say could have as much scientific as public health importance because of what it may teach about determining the cause of more common forms of cancer.... [D]octors at nine medical centers in New York and seven hospitals in California have been diagnosing the condition among younger men, all of whom said in the course of diagnostic interviews that they were homosexual.... According to Dr. Friedman-Klein, the reporting doctors said that most cases involved homosexual men who had multiple and frequent sexual encounters with different partners, as many as 10 sexual encounters each night up to four times a week.... Cancer is not believed to be contagious, but conditions that might precipitate it, such as particular viruses or environmental factors, might account for an outbreak among single gays.... Dr. Curran [of the Federal Center for Disease Control] said that there was no apparent danger to nonhomosexuals from contagion. "The best evidence against contagion," he said, "is that no cases have been reported to date outside the homosexual community or in women." Dr. Friedman-Klein said he had tested nine of the victims and found severe defects in their immunological systems.... But Dr. Friedman-Klein emphasized that the researchers did not know whether the immunological defects were the underlying problem or had developed secondarily to the infection or drug use. (Higgins 263)

The time span between the two articles shows how rapidly the new disease was being diagnosed in gay patients. The three original cases reported on June 3, 1981, suddenly ballooned to forty-one by July 3, 1981. Both articles announced a new gay disease, first to the medical community and then to the rest of the world. In Illness as Metaphor, Susan Sontag contends that "nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning-- that meaning being invariably a moralistic one--" (58). The moral significance of AIDS was indelibly connected to the general public's perception and oppression of homosexuals. The original presentation of AIDS in the MMWR and in the article in the New York Times makes it clear that the new disease is of little concern to the general population because the disease has only been diagnosed in homosexuals. James W. Jones suggests that

AIDS has particular meaning within the United States because American culture needs to punish groups of persons who 'choose' to engage in culturally proscribed behaviors. AIDS acquires meaning because it still largely affects people who are socially marginalized, and thus it evokes questions of stereotyping, scapegoating, retribution for 'unnatural' lives, and the pathology of proscribed sex. (225)

Until the acronym AIDS was officially agreed upon in the summer of 1982, the disease was named "the gay plague," "the gay cancer," "gay pneumonia," "gay compromise syndrome" and GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency). Grmek suggests that "these names are interesting precisely to the extent that they reveal medical error and either national or moral prejudice" (33). While it would later prove to be an error, the authority of medicine undeniably presented AIDS as a gay disease.

Between 1981 and 1997, there has been much written about AIDS. Virtually all of the material written about AIDS can be divided into two categories: clinical commentary or critical commentary. Clinical commentary is understood as the language,

power, and authority of medical and scientific discourse. It was with the certainty of clinical discourse that AIDS was presented as a gay disease. In "La Parole Soufflée," Derrida explains that "the moment when criticism [or critical commentary] (be it aesthetic, literary, philosophical, etc.) allegedly protects the meaning of a thought or the value of a work against the psychomedical reductions, it comes to the same result ... through the opposite path: *it creates an example*" (170). Critical commentaries have confronted and engaged the clinical presentation and subsequent clinical commentary of AIDS and continue to interrogate the ongoing social and medical construction of AIDS. The authority of clinical discourse invested AIDS with an otherworldly social stigma. The early precedent for diagnosing the new disease only in homosexuals seemed to assure the homophobic general population's indifference to the disease.

1.3) Understanding AIDS as an Event and AIDS Poetry as Occasional

Poetry can do little to further the medical knowledge of the disease, but what it can do is provide individual perspectives that challenge and confront the way those affected, either directly or indirectly, are described in other representations of AIDS, such as in medical journals or the mainstream media. Poetry subversively provides a counter-literature to the power and authority of the clinical commentary that seeks to describe and medicalize the disease and those infected. Poetry about AIDS does not seek to represent the virus or the disease itself; rather it represents the experience of living in a world that has been changed by AIDS.

While many literary critics attempt to locate poetry about AIDS within a specific literary tradition, such as homosexual poetry or political poetry, it is probably more legitimate to describe it as occasional. What will be evidenced in many of the following examples is the attempt to locate AIDS poetry within a specific literary tradition that is overdetermined as homosexual. Just as the original

names associated with AIDS, "the gay plague" or "gay compromise syndrome," revealed moral and national prejudice, so many of the critics' exclusion of all but the homosexual reveals an indifference to the changing demographics of contagion. For instance, Richard McCann suggests that the poems about AIDS create a "necessarily hybridized literary tradition" (xxiii) and that if the poems about AIDS

assemble a new literary tradition ... they do so in part by forming what some might see as strange and even impossible imaginative alliances between a homosexual poetic tradition ... and a more expressly political poetic tradition ... and by serving as a crossroads on which these ... [traditions] meet. (xxiii)

McCann's assertion that the poems about AIDS are a hybrid of the homosexual and political poetic traditions fails to acknowledge various other poetic responses that have little or nothing to do with homosexual or political poetry. For instance, AIDS poetry about intravenous drug users is rarely overtly political and certainly has little in common with the homosexual poetic tradition.³ By asserting a likeness between homosexual poetry and AIDS poetry, McCann comes dangerously close to suggesting that virulent diseases have some historical precedent in homosexual poetry. AIDS, as disease and event, has little to do with changing homosexual love in itself, even if one understands that it changes homosexual practices, such as safer sex. Even during the AIDS crisis, homosexual and homoerotic poetry continues to be written. While McCann sees the root of AIDS poetry grounded in the homosexual and political poetic traditions, Emmanuel S. Nelson argues that one

is tempted, of course, to compare the literature of AIDS to other literatures of crisis: to literatures of genocide and holocausts, for example, or to prison writing. One is tempted to compare the memoirs of AIDS to the

³See discussion of AIDS poetry about intravenous drug abusers on pages forty-nine to fifty-two.

slave narratives of the nineteenth century--those sacred tests of African-American culture that defiantly testify to the humanity and dignity of an enslaved people in the face of brutal realities. But I wish to resist those comparisons--even though I recognize some formal similarities, ideological affinities, and spiritual connections among them--because *I wish to insist on the uniqueness of the literature of AIDS*. AIDS writing is produced in response to a puzzling and unmanageable medical catastrophe, primarily by individuals on the sexual margins who have been profoundly affected. It is a diverse body of literature that documents, disrupts, testifies, protests, even celebrates. Its quality may be uneven, especially when its creators are men whose lives are in peril and whose communities are under threat, can rarely be contested. And much of the literature of AIDS constitutes a feverish elegy, written collectively during the closing decades of the twentieth century, to a generation dying young. (2-3) (emphasis mine)

Nelson's assertion of the uniqueness of the literary response to AIDS privileges literature about AIDS written by gay men. He implies that the literature of AIDS forms its own literary tradition, based in part on the uniqueness of the subject itself. While Nelson groups all the literature of AIDS together--even if he privileges one response over another--other critics divide the literature of AIDS by type of poem or simply by the sexual preference of the poet. Gregory Woods "locates AIDS poetry in the larger context of the elegiac tradition in English poetry" (Nelson 8). Woods would "site all elegiac cultural productions that have emerged from the epidemic" that describe "a classical sequence of sentimental friendships, which some would call love affairs, cut short by loss" or "a second type of elegy, less numerous but no less important than the first. This is the elegy, not of an individual who has died, but on a way of life" (159-161). The two types of elegies Woods describes can be understood to encompass many of the poems about AIDS since it is reasonable to suggest that AIDS has changed everyone's "way of life" at least in some small measure. However, the elegies Woods discusses are all written by gay poets, and his implied reader is homosexual. While Woods sites two different types of elegies, he dismisses any poems that are not written by or about gay

men because he believes that elegies are written about male "love affairs, cut short by loss".

While critics such as McCann, Nelson, and Woods, all unapologetically privilege the homosexual poetic response over other responses, John M. Clum notices a fundamental difference between homosexual and heterosexual narratives. Clum writes that

Most mainstream narratives, aimed at the popular media's mythical, cohesive, all-heterosexual audience, have usually focussed on homosexual characters with AIDS but move the spotlight early in the story from the person with AIDS to his family's problems in coping with the news that he is homosexual, for homosexuality is usually equated with and presented as the cause of AIDS. However much such cultural productions claim tolerance, AIDS becomes a sign of past sexual transgressions. AIDS narratives written by gay writers have a far more complex, more troubled causality. They often focus not on coping with the disease itself, but on the character's changed relationship to their past sexual activity. (200)

Clum seems to reduce the difference between heterosexual and homosexual narratives about AIDS to the different perspectives towards the sexual past. Homosexual narratives seem able to analyze existentially the significance of the now-compromised sexual past while heterosexual narratives continue to propagate homophobic assumptions. The difference between homosexual and heterosexual writers is problematized even further by Suzanne Poirier who explains that "many novelists, journalists, and screenwriters may still see the writing of AIDS as more of an option than it seems to gay writers" (Poirier 7). The "option" Poirier describes is suspect because it assumes gay writers are compelled by some communal imperative to write about AIDS while writers who do not identify themselves as homosexual exercise an "option" by writing about it. Nelson goes as far as to write that

the reaction of gay artists to AIDS is bound to differ, even fundamentally so, from that of non-gay writers: AIDS, to gay men, is a gravely personal issue. It is too real to be easily metaphorized or elegantly aestheticized. Many of them do not have to imagine the horror, for they live in the midst of a holocaust. (1)

Some critics challenge all representations of AIDS that do not aim to improve the perception of the disease. As Douglas Crimp states, "anything said or done about AIDS that does not give precedence to the knowledge, the needs, and the demands of people living with AIDS must be condemned" (240). Crimp supports a strong activist aesthetic that improves the circumstances of those living with AIDS by whatever means possible. What Crimp is directly alluding to is a type of activist propaganda, didactic and polemic in nature, that has the power to alter the public's perception. Crimp's condemnation of any aesthetic project about AIDS creates an unfriendly atmosphere for all representations of AIDS.

The critical consensus is that gay representations of AIDS are rightly privileged over non-gay representations of AIDS since there is a political and moral obligation to recognize the disproportionate demographics of contagion. The logic seems to be that if more homosexuals have AIDS then homosexuals that are writing about AIDS have some special and communal insight into the meaning of AIDS that non-gays do not possess. Most critics do not include non-gay representations of AIDS in their work, and for the most part they are simply excluded for the same politically and morally problematic reasons. The problem with privileging gay representations over non-gay representations is a failure to recognize that viruses cannot be confined to any specific group.

1.4) AIDS Poetry is Occasional Poetry

AIDS poetry is occasional because the writing continually acknowledges that the disease is changing. The "daily, massive readability" of AIDS becomes the occasion

about which the poetry is written, and this readability makes it possible to understand AIDS as a mutable event. To privilege one type of representation over another is to be oblivious to the changing nature of the disease. If AIDS were a stable subject with a specific and controlled referent, then it would be possible to understand that the poetry is something other than occasional, but since it is influenced by any changes in our perception of the disease, it stands to reason that it is occasional. For example, the names of specific drugs, such as pentamidine and AZT, are appropriated in certain poems. This appropriation certifies the historicity of the disease by acknowledging the changes in drug therapy.

Derrida explains that AIDS is an event that is "absolutely unique to our time and ... has left an indelible mark on us" (19-20).⁴ Only if we understand AIDS poetry as

⁴The expanded quotation explains Derrida's understanding of AIDS as an event.

This is not just an event that will immeasurably affect humanity, both on the world's surface and within the experience of the social bond. The various forms of this deadly contagion, its spatial and temporal dimensions will from now on deprive us of everything that desire and a rapport to the other could invent to protect the integrity, and thus the inalienable identity of anything like a subject in its "body," of course, but also even in its entire symbolic organization, the ego and the unconscious, the *subject* in its separateness and its absolute secrecy. The virus (which belongs neither to life nor to death) may *always already* have broken into any "intersubjective" space. And considering its spatial and temporal dimensions, its structures of relays and delays, no human being is ever safe from AIDS. This possibility is thus installed at the heart of the social bond as intersubjectivity. And at the heart of that which would preserve itself as a dual intersubjectivity it inscribes the mortal and destructive trace of the third - not the third as condition for the symbolic or the law, but the third as destructuring structuration of the social bond, as social disconnection... and even as the disconnection of the interruption, of the "without rapport" that can constitute a rapport to the other in its alleged normality. The third is no longer a third, and the history of this normality more clearly displays its simulacra, almost as if AIDS painted a picture of

occasional poetry can we begin to validate all the representations as equal, as opposed to the prevailing critical opinion that AIDS poetry written by gay men is more important because AIDS is a more personal issue for homosexuals. The problem with privileging one type of discourse or representation over the other is the creation of equally oppressive power structures. If poetry about AIDS written by homosexuals provides a counter-literature to the clinical commentary and the mainstream media's representation of AIDS as a gay disease, the poetry about AIDS written by non-gays not only provides a counter-literature to the clinical commentary and mainstream media representations, but also provides a counter-literature to the prevailing critical position that gay representations are fundamentally different from non-gay representations. The problem is exemplified in Nelson's own privileging of gay representations since he believes

it is the artistic response of gay men to their individual and collective sorrow and terror, their anger and helplessness--for it is gay men, at least in western nations, who have been disproportionately traumatized by AIDS--that has resulted in the most poignant and enduring texts of the AIDS era. (1)

Richard McCann writes that the words used to describe the disease seem

antique and homely ... GRID: "exposed to the AIDS virus," or HTLV-III; "co-factors, such as nitrate, or 'poppers'"; "five to ten percent of those

its exposed anatomy. You may say this is how it's always been, and I believe it. But now, exactly as if it were a painting or a giant movie screen, AIDS provides an available, daily, massive readability to that which the canonical discourses... are designed to deny, founded as they are on this very denial. If I have spoken of an event and of indestructibility, it is because already, at the dawn of this very new and ever so ancient thing, we know that, even should humanity some day come to control the virus (it will take at least a generation), still, even in the most unconscious symbolic zones, the traumatism has irreversibly affected our experience of desire and of what we coolly call intersubjectivity.... (19-20)

infected will develop AIDS": the "miracle cure" of AL-721, an egg lipid, spread on toast. How antique and homely, already tinged with sepia, like one's youth.... (xx)

McCann rightfully asserts that much of the language used to discuss AIDS is already dated because our understanding of the disease is always changing. It is morally and politically specious to judge the value of the poems based solely on the sexual preference of those writing about AIDS. The representation of AIDS will begin to reflect the changing demographics of contagion as more non-gays become infected. That AIDS was first identified in homosexuals is an historical fact that cannot be denied; that non-gays are also increasingly becoming infected must be acknowledged without devaluing the historic origins of the disease. In short, what makes AIDS poetry occasional is that an event is represented.

1.5) Theorizing AIDS: Derrida and Representation

Most critics have interpreted the representation of AIDS in literature in relation to homosexuality. One such critic, James Morrison, suggests that "a cultural history of mainstream American representations of AIDS would surely reveal homosexuality as the absent force that actually shapes those documents" (169) while Lee Edelman believes that AIDS is "a subject whose content is suggested but not exhausted by reference to 'male homosexuality'" (10). Jacques Derrida's writings on representation prove useful as they position the poet's language within a larger cultural context:

[W]hat is called the speaking subject is no longer the person himself, or the person alone, who speaks. The speaking subject discovers his irreducible secondarity, his origin that is always already eluded; for the origin is always already eluded on the basis of an organized field of speech in which the speaking subject vainly seeks a place that is always missing. This organized field is not uniquely a field that could be described by certain theories of the psyche or of linguistic fact. It is first--but without meaning anything else--the cultural field from which I must

draw my words and my syntax, the historical field which I must read by writing on it. (Derrida, "La Parole Soufflée" 178)

By opening up AIDS to the reading Derrida proposes, one continuously observes the fact that the act of representing AIDS has always already begun. Even the acronym AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) does not become an event without signification since it is open to the same violence as any other word. As Mirko D. Grmek explains,

it was premature to make it (the naming of the disease as a syndrome) immutable. Both terms, AIDS and SIDA, pointed expressly to a *syndrome*, that is, a constellation of symptoms constituting a clinical entity but not an etiological unity. Applied to the disease in the strongest sense, the name is no longer pertinent.... The name thus suggested a clinical, not a pathologic, concept. It was chosen in order to prejudge neither the unity of the syndrome's cause nor the unity of its pathogenesis. It was for this reason, moreover, that it became necessary to invent other appellations to specify some clinical states in which the causal link with AIDS was suspected but the description did not correspond to the official clinical definition of AIDS. To these forms various names were given, including ARC (AIDS-Related Complex), LAS (Lymphadenopathy Syndrome), ... Pre-AIDS, and so forth. The situation changed radically once it was demonstrated that AIDS as a clinical condition resulted from the action of a specific virus. According to the new definition, AIDS is a pathologic state emanating from infection with the HIV virus, exactly like tuberculosis is a pathologic state resulting from infection by Koch's bacillus. AIDS thus becomes not so much a syndrome as a retroviral infectious disease. There are latent forms of tuberculosis but no one would think of calling them TRC (Tuberculosis-Related complex) or pre-tuberculosis. The former notion of AIDS is no more than a particular stage of an etiologically defined disease. HIV infection can manifest itself in a broad spectrum of clinical states, ranging from asymptomatic and minor forms all the way to overt AIDS. (33)

As Grmek has shown, the naming of AIDS left itself open to certain violence proving that "it is simultaneously true that things come into existence and lose existence by being named" (Derrida, "Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book" 70). As poets come to represent the effects of living in the world irrevocably changed by AIDS, the clinical

terms they appropriate elude any specific signification because the disease is continuously deconstructing its own limiting definition. The acronym AIDS itself lacks signification itself because "the absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (Derrida, Writing and Difference 280).

While Derrida provides useful strategies for discussing how AIDS' limitlessness eludes signification at the linguistic level, he also discusses

the fact that AIDS could not, as some had thought or hoped it would, be confined to the margins of society (delinquency, homosexuality, drug addiction), [because] we are facing something within the social bond that we might still want to consider as destructuring and depoliticizing poly-perversion: an historic (historical!) knot or denouement which is no doubt unique. In these circumstances the (restructuring and supposedly repoliticizing) reactions are largely unforeseeable and entirely capable of bringing forth the worst political violence. (Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs. An Interview" 20-21)

Derrida gestures towards a humanistic understanding of AIDS which reflects the changing demographics of contagion. At first, AIDS was poetically represented as a gay subject, then its borders were loosened to include other identities that have been associated with the disease (IV-drug abusers, hemophiliacs, Haitians, and others), until it finally was represented by poets who did not belong to any of the groups that have been popularly associated with the disease. In most of the poems about AIDS, the poets continually proclaim their marginalized status. Richard Dellamora warns that

With regards to AIDS, any response which takes dictation from the subjects of AIDS or which speaks in their name is liable to reduce the vernaculars of AIDS to a single one couched in the axioms of philosophic humanism. (Dellamora, "The Ends of Man: AIDS, Kant and Derrida" 132)

While Dellamora may wish that AIDS continue to be understood in relation to the groups historically associated with the disease, the representation of AIDS in poetry and the

demographics of contagion seem to be gesturing *towards* a more inclusive identity-driven understanding of AIDS and *away* from a gay-centered one. The poet becomes

the *subject* of the book, its substance and its master, its servant and its theme. And the book is indeed the subject of the poet, the speaking and knowing being who *in* the book writes *on* the book. This movement through which the book, *articulated* by the voice of the poet, is folded and bound to itself, the movement through which the book becomes a subject in itself and for itself, is not critical or speculative reflection, but is, first of all, poetry and history. For in its representation of itself the subject is shattered and opened. Writing is itself written, but also ruined, made into an abyss, in its own representation. Thus, within the book, which infinitely reflects itself and which develops as a painful questioning of its own possibility, the form of the book represents itself. (Derrida, "Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book" 65)

In short, Derrida's humanistic understanding of AIDS provides an oppositional position to the confining "myths of identity" that are represented in the poetry of AIDS. As Derrida suggests, "in both expression and indicative communication the difference between reality and representation, between the true and the imaginary, and between simple presence and repetition has always already begun to be effaced" (Kamuf 11).

The practice I propose to adopt is to attempt a "double reading" of these poems. M.H. Abrams explains that

[t]he result ... [in a deconstructive reading] ... , in Derrida's rendering, is that each text deconstructs itself, by undermining its own supposed grounds and dispersing itself into incoherent meanings in a way, he claims, that the deconstructive reader neither initiates nor produces: deconstruction is something that simply "happens" to a critical reading (228)

It is possible to understand that poetry about AIDS has already begun to deconstruct itself because the disease--the topic of the individual poems--is continuously deconstructing itself. As various identities graft their respective experiences on/within the collected

poems about AIDS, each alters the trace of the acronym AIDS. Essentially, my deconstructive practice will be to attempt a "double reading" of these poems in the hope that the texts will deconstruct themselves.⁵

1.6) Representing AIDS as gay

Taken individually, poems about AIDS begin to conform to a few patterns. Poetry written about AIDS from 1985 to 1989 was almost exclusively written by and about gay men. Because of its early associations with homosexuality, between 1981 until the viral discovery of the disease in 1983, AIDS has been the site of massive resistance by gay men involved in re-appropriating their representation. As far as poetry was concerned, until 1989, the representation of AIDS *was* a gay subject.⁶ Some critics contextualize or reduce the representation of AIDS to the link between identity and the disease. The link, for critics like Morrison and Edelman, reveals that homosexuality functions, on some level, as the subject in AIDS representations. As Morrison suggests

It is clear to most writers on the subject that representation of AIDS creates an implacable paradox: while the association of the disease with gay men--with the 'homosexual life-style' and with, in fact, certain facets of gay sensibility--has been certified as forcefully as any tenet of contemporary culture, the same culture that schematically certifies it simultaneously discourages any explicit identification of that association in popular representations of AIDS. Thus the association emerges subtextually, as a multiply-coded allusion, as the 'something other' toward which postmodern allegory gestures. A cultural history of mainstream

⁵It is my belief that the history of AIDS proves that deconstruction is always already happening. In the early 1980s, many believed that the disease could only affect homosexuals. Over time, this limiting medical construction of AIDS deconstructed itself when other people who did not identify themselves as homosexuals became infected. As these identities were grafted onto the medical and social construction of AIDS, the trace of the incorrect homosexualization of the disease continued to be present.

⁶AIDS comes to be understood as a gay subject because of the absence of any other claimants, not because there is something inherently homosexual about AIDS or its representation.

American representations of AIDS would surely reveal homosexuality as the absent force that actually shapes those documents. The off-screen bogey of the gay man's body, the site of the disease's fiercest emergence in this country and, ipso facto, its implicit cause, is negatively exploited as a source of narrative pathos.... The suffering children or untainted hemophiliacs ... are set against the (usually absent) gay man, and the sympathy elicited for the 'innocent' derives precisely from the encodement of *that which they are not*--a figure, that is, of insidious otherness whose voracious appetites and perverse rejection of the 'natural' social order have led to his logical fate. (169-170)

Morrison would see the act of representing AIDS in the mainstream as an act of negotiating, or attempting to circumvent, the homosexual past. Such an action, which in the larger context means a circumvention of any representation of AIDS, makes concrete the equation between homosexuality and AIDS. While Morrison sees homosexuality functioning at a subtextual level in representations of AIDS, Edelman notices that "'AIDS' itself cannot unproblematically function as the subject of our writing, because 'AIDS' is ideologically constructed as a form of writing itself: as an inscription of difference whose 'subject' is always the subject of ideology" (Edelman, "Mirror and the Tank" 9). Edelman believes that

'AIDS', then, resists our attempts to inscribe it as a manageable subject of writing--exceeding and eluding the medical, sociological, political, or literary discourses that variously attempt to confront or engage it--to the extent that as a historical phenomenon in the so-called Western democracies it has taken shape (has been given shape) as that which writes or articulates another subject altogether: a subject whose content is suggested but not exhausted by reference to 'male homosexuality'. (10)

Morrison and Edelman both conclude that the equation between homosexuality and AIDS functions in its representation, either as subtext or as 'deferred' subject (trace). Nelson, in his "Introduction" to AIDS- the literary response, explains that

the primary focus of ... [AIDS- the literary response] is on the creative response of gay male artists: several of the chapters that follow the introduction are concerned largely or exclusively with the works of gay writers. Such a focus is inevitable, since much of the literature of AIDS has been created by gay men; but it is also morally and politically necessary. Certainly quite a few heterosexual writers have explored AIDS thematically in their texts, sometimes with considerable sensitivity and imaginative strength. Yet it is the artistic response of gay men, at least in western nations, who have been disproportionately traumatized by AIDS that has resulted in the most poignant and enduring texts of the AIDS era. *After all, the reaction of gay artists to AIDS is bound to differ, even fundamentally so, from that of non-gay writers: AIDS, to gay men, is a gravely personal issue.* It is too real to be easily metaphorized or elegantly aestheticized. Many of them do not have to imagine the horror, for they live in the midst of a holocaust. (1) (emphasis mine)

While critics like Morrison and Edelman see the trace of homosexuality as the subject of AIDS even if written by or about a non-gay individual, as far as poetry was concerned, until 1989, homosexuality *was* part of the subject.⁷ Essentially, AIDS was represented by gay men as a gay subject. By 1989, AIDS poetry written by non-gays, to employ Nelson's distinction, challenged the homosexuality of AIDS as a subject for poetry. These poems -- which will be discussed in the ensuing chapters--written by non-gays resist, in almost the exact same way, the same systems of power that are at play in gay representations.

By the time the first poem about AIDS was published in 1985, AIDS had already been a medical issue for four years. AIDS has been a gay concern since the relationship between AIDS and homosexuality first was noticed. As Frederick Siegal suggested in 1983, it was in 'homosexual(s) ... [that]the syndrome was first identified" (13). The sexualization of AIDS as gay has, as Nelson argues,

⁷My distinction between gay and non-gay follows Emmanuel S. Nelson's example.

literally made the body of the gay male an object of massive public curiosity and relentless cultural inquiry. His body is now widely perceived as a site of mysterious and fatal infections--a perception that has prompted its radical (re)othering and (re)medicalizing. The body has emerged as a supertext, a territory over which a bewildering number of competing medical, political, and cultural fictions seek domination. Contemporary gay writers, then, have to reappropriate their bodies from the unprecedented ongoing textual abuse in order to give voice to the realities of their endangered lives. (2)

While the reappropriation Nelson describes has the power to "give voice to the realities of their endangered lives," it also continues to certify the equation that Homosexuality=AIDS.

AIDS is not a gay disease, yet it is possible to understand the representation of AIDS in poetry as gay because, from 1985 to 1989, poetry about AIDS was written exclusively by gay men.⁸ In this chapter I will investigate the implications of understanding the representation of AIDS in poetry as a gay subject.

AIDS poetry resists the way the disease has been constructed by medicine, science, the media and other sources. As Timothy F. Murphy suggests

such portraits put a face on the epidemic and offer a counter literature to the discourse both of medical journals, in which PWAs [Persons With AIDS] are described as patients or cases, and of the media, where PWAs are still described and represented as victims and predators. (310)

Of course, gay poets assumed the ownership of AIDS as a subject for poetry because they were the only ones writing about it. The binary opposition of homosexual and heterosexual, which did not truly apply to AIDS, found itself securely entrenched in poetry.

⁸See discussion on pages five and six regarding the original presentation of AIDS as a gay disease.

1.7) Early AIDS Poetry: 1985-1987. Greg Baysans and Robert Boucheron

Many of the early poetic representations of AIDS written between 1985 and 1987 depict the hysterical fear of AIDS. The poetry is about the potential of AIDS, instead of its reality. Ignorance of modes of transmission and means of protection is replaced with supposition, innuendo, and guessing. The obvious equation is that HOMOSEXUALITY = AIDS = DEATH.

Poets Greg Baysans and Robert Boucheron wrote about AIDS from a position of ignorance and fear, empowering the pervasive myths created by the medical community and the mainstream media. The poems by Baysans and Boucheron indicate the occasional nature of AIDS poetry as both poets come to represent AIDS as an event that has changed their lives. In his poem "All I Dare Say, or: Another AIDS poem," Baysans explains that AIDS has forced him to investigate his own body and lifestyle.

I got a rash on my leg.
Should I be Concerned?
Seven men will die this week
in San Francisco alone.
Should I be concerned? I don't
practice safe sex. Should I
be concerned? be in fear
for my very gay life? (10)

AIDS encroaches upon the speaker's ability to be gay, which seems explicitly to mean his ability to have gay sex. AIDS problematizes Baysans' own sexual practices. As Foucault explains, we have entered into a "Faustian pact, whose temptation has been instilled in us by the deployment of sexuality, (which) is now as follows: to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and the sovereignty of sex. Sex is worth dying for" (Foucault, History of Sexuality, vol. 1 156). Baysans relates the possibility of infection and death to the self, the gay individual, only to alter his position to include all homosexuals. He

explains that AIDS is "our [referring to gay men's] homophobia," "our heterophobia," "our murderer," "our creative cancer," "our answer to all this oppression," "our lover," and "our one-nighter." AIDS is metaphorized as conflicting elements. AIDS is "our murderer" and "our lover," "our homophobia" and "our answer to all this oppression." The most obvious and blatant aspect of the poem is that its implied audience is gay men. In the final lines Baysans explains that there has been

Incidence confirmed among
heterosexuals in the U.S.
and Paris where AIDS is
not a gay disease. (10)

Baysans notices that heterosexuals in Paris have been infected and that the French realize that AIDS is not a gay disease, while in the United States, AIDS is still a gay disease even though non-gays have become infected. What is interesting about Baysans' de-gayng of AIDS is that the entire poem represents the way AIDS affects the individual homosexual and the extended homosexual community while it concludes that AIDS is not a gay disease. Baysans explains in "All I Dare Say, or: Another AIDS Poem" that heterosexuals have been diagnosed with AIDS, even though many knew of heterosexual infection since 1981.⁹ The diagnosis in non-gays forced the renaming of the syndrome in medical journals and the media. From "gay cancer," "gay pneumonia," "gay plague," GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) or "gay compromise syndrome," the disease was named the non-associative AIDS to reflect its inclusivity. These earlier names are "interesting

⁹By late 1981 and early 1982, "some rapidly fatal cases of *Pneumocystis* pneumonia were found in heterosexuals. Almost all exhibited a particular feature: they were drug addicts. Among them a woman, until then the first officially recognized female case of acquired immune deficiency." (Grmek, 10) Bayans' poem was published in 1986.

precisely to the extent that they reveal medical error and either national or moral prejudice" (Grmek 32). Regardless, Baysans' treatment of AIDS relies heavily on fear of the unknown.

Robert Boucheron's collection of poems Epitaphs for the Plague Dead, published in 1985, elicits much the same response as Baysans' poem.¹⁰ Boucheron offers fifty-six fictional epitaphs of people who have died of AIDS. As with Baysans, Boucheron's subjects are homosexuals with one exception.¹¹ Boucheron's "Preface" becomes part of his narrative as he explains in prose form what many other poets represent in poetry. He explains in his "Preface" that

Because some Americans see this pattern as a divine judgment, the disease has become another test of our identity, of our collective spirit. In more than one sense, we are fighting for our lives. As part of our struggle for understanding, then, both among ourselves and in the world at large, I offer these fictional epitaphs, which focus on the problems and personalities of gay men. But within this focus, I have tried to draw subjects from all walks of life, with varying degrees of self-knowledge.

¹⁰Boucheron's trope for AIDS is plague, which suggests an outbreak of a bacterial infection and not a viral outbreak. Boucheron's representation of AIDS seems to be informed by the media reports that dubbed AIDS the "gay plague" in its early years.

¹¹"Epitaph for an Innocent" details Boucheron's representation of the 'innocent' victims of AIDS. The problem is that it suggests guilt on behalf of his other characters who are all gay. Three 'innocents' are presented as a baby, a hemophiliac, and the hemophiliac's wife. The poem is presented from the baby's point of view.

I got it from my mother's breast,
 unknowing, as an infant sips.
 She got it from my father's lips,
 conceiving in my interest.
 He got it lying still in bed,
 his arm connected to a sack
 that, as a hemophiliac,
 he needed any time he bled. (3)

and speaking in their own voices. In some cases, I have used the words we actually say, with all their latent confusion. Some of the subjects are based on real individuals, but none entirely so. Each attempts to depict a type of man or an aspect of the tragedy. (i)

Boucheron's achievement as a poet is ultimately historical. As one of the first poets to publish a collection of poetry about AIDS, his position in the AIDS canon is secure. There are many weaknesses with his collection: most notably its choice of form. As Shaun O'Connell explains

Robert Boucheron, in Epitaphs for the Plague Dead, invokes Tennyson's In Memoriam as his model. Boucheron draws his technique--testimonies from those killed by AIDS--from Edgar Lee Master's Spoon River Anthology, Thornton Wilder's Our Town, and A.E. Housman's A Shropshire Lad, works by writers who also composed epitaphs as dramatic monologues. Boucheron's volume, however, owes more in form than in achievement to those predecessors. Rather than devise a new form to fit this new threat to our health and consciousness, Boucheron has forced a contemporary horror into the rigidities of Victorian verse, all the better to instruct. (496)

While it could be argued that he is attempting to lend legitimacy to his subject by using such a time-honoured genre, his poems fall short, making the results seem more like the efforts of an unaccomplished poet in comparison to the dramatic monologues he emulates. He explains that he "used the words we actually say" (Boucheron i) to ground the disease within his own experience.¹²

Boucheron is one of the only poets to fictionalize AIDS illness and death. Nelson explains that

the intensely personal nature of the catastrophe that gay writers have to confront in their lives and in their literature is one of the central sources of

¹²The use of colloquial language regarding sex and AIDS creates a counter-literature through its refusal to employ poetic diction to aestheticize gay sexuality and AIDS.

tension that informs much of their AIDS-related writing. What is testimonial and what is fictive in their literary constructions, for example, collide--sometimes resulting in works of fierce authenticity and haunting eloquence. (2)

Boucheron's poems create an entirely fictive representation of AIDS that are void of testimony. Virtually all the other poems about AIDS are written either as testimony or witness poetry.

"Epitaphs for a Carrier" is an example of a type of gay men who has already died of AIDS. The poem highlights the naiveté of certain of Boucheron's characters. AIDS is a mysterious disease that could be nothing more than a hoax. The carrier changes his sexual practices by filling

the active slot.
My lesions were not visible,
but you could feel them up my hole.
I pulled out just before I shot.
Those tricks will never know how close
they came, but what the doctors said
might not be true, though I am dead.
What if a few more get the dose? (22)

He shows his ignorance of his disease by referring to it as the dose. AIDS is considerably different from the dose because it cannot be cured.¹³ "Epitaphs for a Carrier" shows that, as Gregory Woods explains, each of Boucheron's epitaphs

works as a discrete unit, a record of one life: unique in its idiosyncrasies, yet representative of others. Like fictional characters, each person is an individual and a type. But, taken together as a series, the poems acquire broader significance as records of an era. This strikes me as a somewhat embittered collection, with a strong undertow of retrospective moralizing. Suspicions on this score are confirmed when one encounters a poem about

¹³The dose is synonymous with sexually transmitted diseases that can be cured with antibiotics.

a baby that was infected before birth, by a mother who had been infected, in turn, by her hemophiliac husband. The poem is called "Epitaph for an Innocent"--an apparently unironic reflection on the other lives the book outlines. (161-2)

AIDS, in Baysans and Boucheron's representations, is removed from experience. They do not write about living with AIDS or knowing someone living with AIDS, but rather they seem more concerned with articulating a response to the hysteria of their extended gay community. Their poems are grounded in the fact that AIDS is killing gay men and as gay men they fear for their lives.

1.8) AIDS Poetry 1987-1989: Witness, Testimony and Political Poetry

Between 1987 and 1989, representations of AIDS in poetry began to incorporate the accounts of witnesses and the testimonials of those infected. AIDS poetry no longer represented the fictionalized effects of the disease upon the gay individual and the gay community, but rather it was actively involved in representing the actual effects of the disease on the gay individual and the gay community. Poets Paul Monette, Ron Schreiber, and Michael Lynch create the most aesthetically accomplished poetry about AIDS written between 1987 and 1989. Monette describes AIDS as a disease that has killed his lover, menaces his own life and threatens to tear apart his extended gay community. Ron Schreiber describes the witnessing of his lover's illness and death from AIDS as well as his own burgeoning awareness of AIDS as a political issue. Michael Lassell's description of AIDS deals primarily with how the disease affects the gay community. Each poet's perspective modifies the overall understanding of the disease to include, in varying degrees, elements of testimony, politics, and witness. While AIDS remains a gay subject for poetry, the poetry itself becomes more political, urgent, and informed. The poetry from this period (1987-1989) continues to reflect the overall

perception of the disease as gay. As Robert A. Padgug and Gerald M. Oppenheimer suggest,

it was the lack of other claimants to the ownership of AIDS--especially the scientists, physicians, and government officials who normally take control of disease, its meanings, and its treatment in our society--that allowed the gay community in large measure to make good its claim to own the disease and the manner in which it was dealt with. The gay community thus was able to use the power of medicine, medical science, the healing and social professions, and government without granting them nearly as much power over itself as would otherwise doubtless have been the case. In addition, the relative weakness of other so-called groups within the crisis meant that, when they did enter the struggle, they were in large measure forced to negotiate with the gay community over many aspects of the crisis and to rely on it for much of its resources (especially non-monetary resources) and skills that were necessary to deal with it. (257)

The ability to understand AIDS as a gay subject for poetry hinges on the fact that gays were the only group to represent themselves in poetry. "[I]t was the lack of other claimants to the ownership of [the representation of] AIDS" in poetry that makes it possible to understand that poetry about AIDS written between 1985-1989 is gay poetry. The representation of AIDS in poetry written between 1987 and 1989 is informed by the politicization of AIDS as a gay subject.

Paul Monette is described by John M. Clum as "the bard of AIDS," (210) becoming

the paradigmatic writer in this new barren land of displacement, pain, and loss ... whose ... volume of poems Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog ... defines both the sweetness and the horror of what AIDS means to a gay man touched tragically by the disease. (209)

Monette is able to capture many of the contradictory ways the disease has been constructed. Writing in 1988 as an HIV seropositive gay man who recently witnessed the death of his long-time lover from AIDS, Monette captures the pain of mourning and the

difficulty of living with AIDS. Monette explains that writing these poems "quite literally kept ... [him] alive" (Monette xii). He humbly asserts that he has not "written the anthem of my people," (xi) meaning homosexual men, but rather he has simply written

one man's passing and one man's cry, a warrior burying a warrior. May it fuel the fire of those on the front lines who mean to prevail and of their friends who stand in the fire with them. We will not be bowed down or erased by this. I learned too well what it means to be a people... (xiii)

Monette wants to "let them [his elegies] stand as raw as they came" (xii). He explains that he did not plan the form of the poems "to be impregnable, though I admit I want them to allow no escape, like a hospital room, or indeed a mortal illness" (xii). In both form and content, Monette's collection of poems, Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Roy, presents challenging and often contradictory perspectives on AIDS. His perspective shifts from an individual infected with HIV to that of a widower, to that of a gay male within the larger gay community.

Monette often employs military metaphors to describe what it is like to live with HIV infection. Susan Sontag explains them well by suggesting that the one metaphor she is

most eager to see retire--more than ever since the emergence of AIDS--is the military metaphor. Its converse, the medical model of the public weal, is probably more dangerous and far-reaching in its consequences, since it not only provides a persuasive justification for authoritarian rule but implicitly suggests violence (the equivalent of surgical removal or chemical control of the offending or "unhealthy" parts of the body politic). But the effect of the military imagery on thinking about sickness and health is far from inconsequential. It overmobilizes, it overdescribes, and it powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatizing of the ill. No, it is not desirable for medicine, any more than for war, to be "total". Neither is the crisis created by AIDS a "total" anything. We are not being invaded. The body is not a battlefield. The ill are neither avoidable casualties nor the enemy. We--medicine, society--are not authorized to fight back by any means whatever.... About that metaphor,

the military one. I would say, if I may paraphrase Lucretius: Give it back to the war-makers. (94-5)

In the poem "HERE," Monette explains that both he and his lover were "warriors" for whom "war is not all / death it turns out war is what little / thing you hold on to refugeeed and far from home" (3). Monette holds onto his love for Rog while acknowledging that he is still a 'warrior' actively engaged in a war.¹⁴

The war metaphor becomes an act of organized resistance in "MANIFESTO." Monette exclaims

When is enough enough I had a self myself
once but he died when do we leave the mirror
and lie down in front of tanks and let them
put two million of us away and see how quick
it looks like Belsen force out all their hate
the cool indifferent genocide that
locks up all the pills.... (41-42)

Monette pleads with the gay community to cease being narcissistic and to become involved, albeit passively, in the war. To "lie down in front of tanks" evokes the Tiananmen Square student protest in China whereby the students' passive resistance captured the attention of the media and the world. Every gay man with or without AIDS who is involved in anything other than *the war* is making it so that "one less bomb [is being] tossed in the red-taped labs / of the FDA" (40-41). Monette agrees with Douglas Crimp who stated that "anything said or done about AIDS that does not give precedence to the knowledge, the needs, and the demands of people living with AIDS must be condemned" (240). The enemy is anyone other than gay men and any gay men who are

¹⁴One weakness of the war metaphor is that it creates impossible binaries. Is AIDS a war against the disease? against inaction? against homophobia? is it heterosexual versus homosexual, AIDS versus man?

not actively involved in the fight against AIDS. However, "we--medicine, society," as Sontag explains, "are not authorized to fight back by any means..." (94). AIDS is described as a gay subject. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and government in general are committing an act of war through their inaction.¹⁵ Government inaction is, as Monette sees it, genocidal. Genocide, the systematic measure taken to exterminate a race, culture, society or radical group, assumes that all those who have died of AIDS are a singular cultural entity. Monette's dead are gay; therefore, genocidal inaction is an act of aggression against his 'people.' The comparison to the Holocaust--Belsen was a Jewish detention camp--evokes the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis. But Jews were not the only people killed during the Holocaust and homosexuals are not the only people dying of AIDS. Totalizing the majority, albeit an overwhelming one, effectively erases the 'others' from popular associations. Comparing AIDS to genocide or the Holocaust suggests that the American government is letting the extermination of gays continue through either inaction or active involvement.

AIDS has also forced the uneasy alliance between the medical establishment, the AIDS patient, and the homosexual male. The AIDS patient, whom Monette views as a gay male, is forced to rely on the medical establishment to cure the disease or to provide a system of management to prolong the life of the infected. In "CURRENT STATUS 1/22/87," Monette calls those people working in the labs performing the necessary tests to evaluate his health "nerdy white coats," (34) while the other medical professionals

¹⁵Foucault explains that citizens defer to the government power over issues such as health. He terms the deferral "bio-politics." (*History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 143) Power is exercised by the government's ability to keep illness at bay. AIDS problematizes the issue because it is associated with already marginalized sectors of society. Because government controls the systems that deal first-hand with health, the question becomes one of defining 'citizen.'

involved in his care are "bald numerologists and milligram chemists," a "tribe of shamans," and his "medical men." The relationship between patient and medical professional is one of the recurring themes in AIDS poetry. The medical community is often seen as being homophobic, uncaring, and dull in comparison to their gay patients. The medical community is in a position of power over many of the AIDS patients because they have the authority to prescribe the medicine that could extend the lives of AIDS patients. Moreover, the adversarial patient/medical professional relationship continues to be marked by poets writing about AIDS until 1997 when Rafael Campo, a gay physician, and Mary Jane Nealon and Belle Waring, nurses, re-write the patient/medical professional relationship from another perspective.

Monette, as an HIV seropositive person, must continually investigate and evaluate his body and his health. The daily routine of

counting
 begins at breakthrough how are my lymph nodes
 how are they not a mere three-quarters
 centimeter at the neck in the vampire spot
 cam and a half in the armpit not suggestive
 unless they harden or start to throb taking
 four hundred milligrams *ribavirin* b.i.d.
 the magic dose if results released 1/9
 prove the long-term course when you cry
 all day an afternoon can be frightfully
 long-term but we mustn't muss the curve with
 personal agendas equal dose *acyclovir*
 ditto twice a day this part purest guesswork
 doesn't attack HIV but seems to lower
 the general viral bullshit level and besides
 the cornflower-blue capsules go quite nicely
 with the royal-and-white of the *ribavirin* rather
 like the flag of an island nation which I am
 bowels normal though I peer at each specimen
 in the bowl like an oracle poking entrails.... (34)

AIDS has not only forced him into the submissive position within the doctor-patient relationship, but it has also made him subservient to his own failing health. Monette aestheticizes the act of taking medicine and re-appropriates the pharmaceutical names in such a way that they are appreciated for their colour rather than for their medical effectiveness. Moreover, the appropriation of the pharmaceutical names highlights the occasional nature of AIDS poetry as many of the drugs he describes are no longer the favoured method of treating HIV infection. Living with AIDS is living "in the vale of borrowed time" (10) where "every cough every bump would nothing be nothing again" (10). The past exists as an untroubled time where it was possible for nothing to be nothing. As Clum explains, "a major theme of gay AIDS literature is what to do with a lost past, which was both affluent and carefree" (201). Living with the knowledge of AIDS forces a reconsideration of the time before the disease when the association between sex and death was not so indelibly obvious. Monette is associated with "the 'Stonewall generation,' who once thought they had found paradise, and lost it through AIDS" (Clum 218). The "Stonewall generation" of gay men is separated from the younger generation of gay men who experience AIDS "without saving memories, present love, or dreams of a future" (218).

While the body, government, and the medical community are some of the forces that structure the opposition to gay men's health and AIDS, the Roman Catholic Church is perceived to be even worse because it believes AIDS to be the Wrath of God. The Roman Catholic Church's position denies the latent or possible homosexuality of members of its clergy. Their belief that AIDS is 'divine judgment' is dangerous, homophobic, and hypocritical. Monette hates the

first straight Pope since Syllabus of
Errors this Polack joke who fears his women
and men too full of laughter far brother

if you should pass beneath our cypresses
 you who are a praying man your god can
 go to hell but since you are so inclined
 pray that my friend and I will be still together
 just like this at the Mount of Olives blessed
 by the last of an ancient race who loved
 youth and laughter and beautiful things so much
 they couldn't stop singing and we were the song (Monette 64)

Monette not only opposes the Roman Catholic Church's public and vocal condemnation of homosexuality, but he goes even further by positioning homosexuals against non-homosexuals. Implicitly, Monette is discussing the power relationship between gays (we) and non gays (they). Monette explains that

soon the thing will ravish *their* women
their jock sons lie in rows in the empty infield
 the scream in the streets will rise to a siren din
 and *they* will beg us to teach *them* how to
 bear it *we* who are losing our reason (42) (emphasis mine)

Monette also evokes the personal loss he has suffered because of AIDS. He explains that "once I had it all" (17) and that AIDS has forced him to account for what he once had. Monette's poems flow between examining the personal implications of the disease as a gay man and the public implications of the disease as a gay man within a well-defined gay community. He urges a call to arms, initiates the shaming of those who do not act, and aestheticizes the self as a person with AIDS.

While Monette's Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog provides testimony to the effects of living with HIV infection, Ron Schreiber's collection of poems John, published in 1989, chronicles the passage of time from his lover's diagnosis of AIDS until his lover's death. The poems are often titled, like entries in a diary, according to date. The effect of dating the poems, a technique many poets writing about AIDS employ, grounds the poems in daily experience, justifying the raw and unpolished style. Schreiber's poems

capture the moment, much like Monette's elegies that he let "stand as raw as they came" (Monette xii).

Schreiber incorporates many forms in John. He provides a brief prose biography of John and then proceeds to provide what could be best termed as a *dramatis personae*. The intermingling of different styles, from prose to lists, from poetry to obituaries, persuasively captures John's sickness and death as experienced by his surviving lover.

In an attempt to assert some control over writing about John's illness and death, Schreiber provides context (such as biography, list of pertinent characters and obituary) in order to explain the personal nature of the dated poems. Schreiber provides enough context so that any reader can appreciate his experience of loss. John is introduced in a short biography while the names of all the other individuals identified in the poems are provided in a *dramatis personae*. The biography introduces John while the *dramatis personae* introduces everyone else who plays a part in the collection of poems. The gap between the public and the private, between a book of published poems and a private poetic diary, is erased. The public nature of the poems accentuates the very private response to a death from AIDS.

Schreiber's book seems to document two simultaneous activities. He describes the time from John's diagnosis to his death, and his own burgeoning ownership and understanding of AIDS as a gay subject. He comes to realize that AIDS is a gay subject and that a death caused by AIDS is politically charged.

Sickness from AIDS becomes political for a gay couple because the same rights accorded to family members and heterosexual couples are not granted to gay couples. Schreiber explains that "now that he's been / diagnosed, I can come / whenever I like" (Schreiber12). Ironically AIDS has made their relationship equal to heterosexual marriage. Sadly, the cost is high. Schreiber "joked / with John, 'it's like a fucking /

marriage: for better or for--- till death do us part" (13). Their marriage is a relationship that has been ongoing for nine years. They were seemingly not at risk of becoming infected with HIV because they were a committed couple. The diagnosis, in this sense, reveals John's illness and his infidelity.

" I knew," John said, " all the symptoms were there." I didn't *know*--unless the incubation period is 7 years, 10 years, it didn't seem either of us was at risk. except for "a bite in the bar" two years ago, & John is sure that was it. maybe. but I don't want to talk about it. we don't know how, we just know the fact of it. (15)

Impending death erases infidelity. Schreiber is going to concentrate on the fact that the means of infection are irrelevant; that he *is* infected is the only important thing.

John's illness suddenly makes him a terminal patient. Much like Monette, Schreiber incorporates a great deal of medical terminology in his poetry. Such technical language empowers Schreiber's own treatment of John's condition. At first John does not like the idea of being a "guinea pig" (20) in any of the drug protocols or control groups because he is afraid of "the possible / side effects, which he says, / could kill him" (20). Schreiber learns about the political nature of AIDS, as a health and gay issue, from a volunteer health-care worker named Lisa. She is described in the poem entitled "Lisa (6-8-86)" as

an amazing young
woman: competent, articulate,
gay (that's her middle name),
political, even one with a

wry or robust (alternating)
 sense of humor, capable of
 caring for persons she did
 not know a month earlier.
 & she'd worked with AIDS
 patients not in Boston,
 where we all defer to doctors,
 but in the Bay area, where
 a community has learned to
 take care of one another. (43)

Lisa's 'West Coast' brand of gay politics, especially the care of AIDS patients, adds political energy to Schreiber's poems. He becomes confident and refuses to defer to the authority of doctors. He calls "the doctors, who were not in, but talked to their backups about . changing your medication" (46). John's doctor withdraws from his case, explaining that she's "frustrated by . being able to do nothing" and is charged with being "maybe, maybe homophobic, but she's not helpful" (44).

By not deferring completely to the authority of doctors, John and Schreiber gain a measure of control over John's body, his life, and ultimately his death. In "7-22-86," the decision is made that

we're done with pentamidine
 now, probably forever. it's
 too strong. a "cure worse
 than the disease," though
 nothing is quite worse. (59)

The decision to stop taking pentamidine is made in order to improve the quality of the remainder of John's life. "[C]losing in (9-23-86)" seems to be the palinode of "7-22-86". As the dates suggest, a day over two months has passed and the main difference is that John is worse and AZT has been released. The hope of improving John's condition with

the new drug makes the statement that "the cure is worse than the disease" seem hasty.

He explains that

now they've released AZT
& I've been to Mass General
three days running. It will
be too late, or John will
have to go in for tests to
please the regulators, &
he can't. (70)

In "10-8-86," it is decided that John is "not to try AZT" (77).¹⁶ The medical decisions become personal, or perhaps shared, with the doctor's advice given just consideration, but not ultimate power. Schreiber reconfigures the patient/doctor binary to make it more equitable. Both he and John have been educated about the disease, and the former has become, out of necessity, an experienced home health-care provider for AIDS patients.

In "junkies, niggers, queers," Schreiber explains that those infected with HIV AIDS are left to suffer because those who control the way public money is spent do not consider themselves at risk. In "junkies, niggers, queers," Schreiber writes that

the men who run things
--who appropriate money or
preach from pulpits--don't
see themselves at risk.
If it's old white veterans,
the money pours in.
If it's women, it may be
dismissed as "all in the mind."
but this time it's the
official scum, & they just
don't care about junkies

¹⁶Writing a poem about the release of AZT accentuates the occasional nature of AIDS poetry. The poetry is continually informed by conflicting sources, such as AIDS activism or medical advances which continually alter the way AIDS is understood.

& niggers & queers. (47)

Schreiber politicizes the gap between those who perceive themselves to be at risk and those who feel safe. By positioning power with those who do not perceive themselves at risk, Schreiber is able to make their inaction through inadequate funding an act of bigotry.

The prose piece "10-29-86" explains John's decision to return home to die with his parents who kicked him out at fifteen for being gay. Schreiber explains that he feels like "the house queer; the house nigger. He's done his job--back to the family into which John was born" (84). The decision to return home to die results in John's renunciation of his gay life. In "how did it end," Schreiber explains that after being home for just a few days, John's mother "was less helpless, more in charge" (91) and his father was pleased to have John "(who was not a queer, who acknowledged / Jesus) home & smiling at him" (91).

The political implications of John's decision to return home to die result in his loss of power over his death. Schreiber presents two obituaries that outline John's different 'deaths.' The first obituary from The Boston Globe is interesting for what it fails to mention. The obituary states that John "died Wednesday in his home after a long illness" (93). The obituary also mentions that he is survived by family only, failing to mention his lover Ron Schreiber. These omissions are corrected in the Gay Community News in which his cause of death is written as AIDS and it is explained that he is "survived by his lover of nine years, Ron Schreiber" (93). The Gay Community News item notes that "an obituary appeared in The Boston Globe November 7, but mention of his lover was omitted, by order of John's father" (93).

Schreiber convincingly details both the physical ravages of AIDS on his lover's body and his own burgeoning awareness of AIDS as a subject of particular concern for

gay men. John is as much about the political implications of dying a 'gay' death as it is about witnessing the death of a lover. Schreiber is taught not to defer to medical professionals, a lesson that forever politicizes every future decision. Reading John as a unified whole creates the possibility of understanding Schreiber's overall representation of AIDS. His grasp of AIDS as an issue undergoes a variety of changes. The collection amounts to a public outing of his lover John. John's illness and his subsequent death become political because Schreiber's understanding of AIDS gestures towards the entirely political. Schreiber's writing of John's death reclaims his homosexual life by granting him an openly gay death. John is ultimately constructed as a subversion to the mainstreaming of John's death in The Boston Globe.

While Schreiber's collection of poems becomes politically aware as it progresses, Michael Lynch's poems engage the disease as it affects an already extremely political gay community. Lynch's collection of poems, These Waves of Dying Friends, poetically represents AIDS as an extension of activism. Lynch explains that he will "leave eloquence to those who haven't lost their first half-dozen friends" (Lynch 76). Poetically, his mission is not to use "analogies ... [which are] far too weak to cope with this hedging of our lives / but strong enough to weaken its uniqueness" (74). Lynch's poetry is politically charged and it aims at empowering homosexual men. AIDS is important because it is "hedging our [homosexual men's] lives".

Lynch attempts to bridge the gap between the disease, the self and the extended gay community to which he belongs. Poetry will, out of necessity, be raw, unrefined, and unpolished because AIDS should not be glamorous. Lynch knows that anonymous gay sex is a risk, stating that "every door leads to opportunity / which means these days to infectious / flights of steps down well beyond return" (72). He has personally been forced to confront the link between sex and death. He can respond with

Equanimity
 like an ungainly growth
 inside your chest absorbs
 the death of friends, of people you know only
 to see, of thousands you never saw,
 but when X is a man you often saw
 if seldom spoke with, one whose eyes
 threw sparks like a welding rod,
 equanimity caves in like a lung:
 if he, you say to
 the nearest chair, if he then I. (73-74)

Sex binds all the infected gay men together. Lynch's own sickness strengthens his resolve to represent AIDS. Poetry eulogizes those who have died because "our memory, our sepals, will not endure, these waves of dying friends/ without a cry" (82). Poetry serves as a cry that will outlast the imperfection of memory and the brevity of flowers. The power of poetry to immortalize the dead is a time-honoured theme that receives a completely conventional treatment in Lynch's poem.

Lynch creates specific oppositions. The line of division is drawn between homosexuals (gay community) and government. The very architecture of government reverberates with "power in its colonnades" (86). Lynch appropriates the setting as background that helps in "displaying / us [gay and lesbian activists] claiming our power" (86). Government and science are fused together. While protesting on the steps of the Supreme Court, he notices that

Blocks away, government and science
 direct their receptionists to order morning
 coffee and the day: the drugs untried, the less distasteful
 viruses, and who else can they test that fights back least?
 A family burnt from its home in Florida
 not their department, nor is
 the four-letter word no one likes pronouncing:
 unspeakable once, like us, now just unspoken. (87)

Government and science are partly responsible for AIDS because they did not act properly to protect the health of all its citizens. The protest is an act of disobedience to raise public attention to the government inaction. During the "face to helmet" (89) clash with police, the protesters "look for the three / who're holding *our* medicine and cash" (emphasis mine) (89). The three are the branches of the federal American government: the executive, the judiciary and the legislative. Lynch writes in "Yellow Kitchen Gloves" that AIDS has made it essential to become empowered because

If life moves fast in this infected world
 then trials delayed--of charges or of drugs--
 are trials denied. Mourning that treasures
 and elegies that hold convert this day
 to other arts: the pageantry of protest, televised. (91)

The poem appropriates certain images of AIDS. Some of the protesters write the names of loved ones who have died of AIDS on the kitchen gloves they are wearing. Lynch exclaims four times "I want him back," once in italics, to reaffirm the losses attributable to the disease. The yellow gloves are no longer worn by police officers afraid of contracting AIDS from gay protesters, but are now a symbol of defiance and mourning. "I want him back" becomes a cry for all those lost. "We want you back" (92) is repeated and combines individual suffering with the suffering of the entire community.

We want you all beside us on these steps,
 this other dancefloor, gloved fists in the air
 defying the empowered who deny
 our lives and deaths, our fucking, and our hate.
 We too can organize, and camp
 inside whatever colonnade. We should have known
 we're tough, our fists in the yellow kitchen glove
 transformed by the outer fingers in the air. (92)

They are protesting for AIDS funding, gay and lesbian issues, and civil rights. The protest politicizes AIDS as a gay concern.¹⁷ Lynch's poetry represents AIDS as the singular issue that has forced his community to become politically active. Lynch's poetry is best when chronicling this activism.

1.9) Conclusion

Poetry written between 1985 and 1989 represented AIDS as an exclusively gay subject. For gay poets "the urge," as Clum suggests,

to remember and affirm remains as a culture fights the threats from the virus and from its enemies outside. That almost obsessive focus on memory--memory of desire--is a central characteristic of gay literature as gay men fight the inroads of the virus and the oppressive constructions that could rob them of freedom and pride gained in that now-compromised past. (Clum 218-219)

¹⁷Lynch's footnote to "Yellow Kitchen Gloves" goes a long way in explaining the political urgency of the protest.

On October 13, 1987, a massive action of nonviolent civil disobedience took place on the steps of the United States Supreme court. At particular issue were two recent rulings in the court system: one denying Karen Thompson access to her paralyzed lover, Sharon Kowalski, and one upholding the criminalization of same-sex sodomy. Beyond its particulars, these two represented a broad complicity between the courts and other offices of American homophobia - a complicity which continues to increase the epidemic's toll. Several weeks earlier, Washington police donned yellow rubber gloves before arresting a smaller group protesting government indifference to the epidemic. The media - which would barely cover the Supreme Court action - widely propagated the image of police in rubber gloves. In the action on October 14th, protesters countered that image by wearing yellow kitchen gloves themselves. Many inscribed the gloves to friends or lovers who had died. (93)

AIDS poetry contextualized the disease as a gay subject even if AIDS was not finally recognized as a gay disease. Moreover, poetry about AIDS was written exclusively by gay men during this period (1985-1989), invaginating the representation of AIDS as a gay subject written by and about gay men. The possibility of understanding the representation of AIDS as a gay subject rests entirely on the absence of any other claimants to its representations. What is evidenced from the period up to 1989 is that many of those dubbed members of the "Four-H Club" (homosexuals, Haitians, heroin addicts, and hemophiliacs) or those involved in 'high risk activities' (most prominently sharing needles and unprotected (anal) sex), were not represented in AIDS poetry. Yet, as Murphy suggests in "Testimony", "[g]ay men, either as authors or subjects, dominate the written word in the literature of the epidemic. Their publications and booksellers are the epicenters of writing about AIDS" (Murphy 307). Economic reasons justify the singularity of the representation of AIDS. The implied audience for AIDS poetry is homosexual. Gay book stores and gay publishing houses were producing and marketing AIDS literature aimed at the gay community. However, just as soon as one is able to understand the poetic representation of AIDS as gay, one is confronted by the reality that representation has always already begun to efface itself.

Chapter Two

2.1) Introduction

Between 1989 and 1992, poetic representations of AIDS began to challenge the gayness of the poetry about AIDS written between 1985 and 1989. Poetry about AIDS was no longer simply about or by gay men, but rather it began to include other identities that have been popularly associated with AIDS. Intravenous drug users, bisexuals, black gays, and children, functioning either as subject or poet, challenged the homogeneity of the poetic representation of AIDS by white gay males.

The majority of poetry about AIDS continued to be written by or about gay men, and the few poems or poets that did challenge the gayness of AIDS poetry did little to change the public perception of AIDS as a disease associated with specific identity groups. Those from 'high risk groups' (the "Four-H Club": homosexuals, Haitians, heroin addicts, and hemophiliacs) or those involved in 'high risk activities' (most prominently sharing needles and unprotected (anal) sex) were the only ones being represented. While Carol Muske suggests that "there is an uncharacteristic (for contemporary poetry) lack of self-absorption--and thus, the poems [in Poets for Life] seem oddly, attractively, unfinished, in the sense of a literary finish" (Klein, Poets For Life 8), I contend that the self-absorption is evidenced in the poetry as the proclamation of the poet's identity. The poet proclaims his motive for writing poetry about AIDS. As Thomas Yingling suggests,

Myths of identity *have framed* the interpretation of AIDS, and it remains a disease that attaches--rightly or wrongly--to identities: gay, IV-drug user, African, hemophiliac, infant, transfusion patient (the "guilty" and "innocent" "victims" are labeled through some category of identity that promises--falsely--to explain their contraction of the disease). (303)

These same myths of identity frame the interpretation of AIDS by providing the existential justification for writing about AIDS. The poetry is written by a witness or as personal testimony. The poetry proclaims, in various ways, "I am writing about AIDS because I have AIDS or because I know someone who has AIDS." The self-absorption exists because "the image *supervenes* upon reality, the representation upon the present in presentation, the imitation upon the thing, the imitator upon the imitated" (Kamuf 177).

AIDS does not possess

the ideality of the object itself, which then assures the ideal transparency and perfect univocity of language: this is what happens in the exact sciences. But this ideality, which is but another name for permanence of the same and the possibility of its repetition, *does not exist* in the world, and it does not come from another world; it depends entirely on the possibility of the acts of repetition. (Kamuf 12)

Poetry represents the experience of living in a world altered by AIDS. The poetry that did challenge the homogeneity of the white gay male's perspective was still, between 1989 and 1992, rather sparse. The vast majority of poetry about AIDS was written by white gay men and continued to over-state the binary of gay and non-gay.

Two basic historical occurrences shape the period between 1989 and 1992. Poets For Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS (1989) is the first book to offer a variety of perspectives in one volume. Michael Klein, poet and editor of Poets For Life, explains that "if the book (Poets For Life) was going to be *as varied as it had to be*, then ... [he] was going to have to solicit poems from people who may not have written on the subject before" (Klein, Poets For Life 12). Klein's solicitation of poems and his editorial agenda to ensure that Poets For Life be "*as varied as it had to be*" problematizes his assertion that "poets have been responding to AIDS with the sense that they are providing a kind of historical text to this epidemic" (16). In 1997, Klein wrote that

Poets For Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS ... was published in 1989 at a time when AIDS was, for many of its contributors, first entering their consciousness as a literary subject. As writers, the fact of AIDS as an altering experience in the world (and one that was met with a stigma otherworldly in feeling) was the source that many of us drew from. We were sick, or knew people who were sick, and so a kind of elegy for the living and the dead was being constructed line by line. Many of those early poems were grounded in a kind of shock that anything could be expressed at all. (Klein, "Here, but Differently xvii)

The period ends prior to the publication of Art & Understanding (1992-), a periodical devoted solely to presenting artistic interpretations of AIDS, be it visual art, drama, poetry, short fiction, or essays. Art & Understanding improves our ability to interpret AIDS "as if it were a painting or a giant movie screen, [because] AIDS provides an available, daily, massive readability" (Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs" 20).

The period between 1989 and 1992 functions as a unified whole because the representation of AIDS in poetry is indelibly linked to identities, such as homosexual or heroin addict, that explain the contraction of the disease while remaining distanced from the general population. These perspectives solidify the perception of AIDS as a homosexual or intravenous drug abuser's disease because there remains no link to the general population. Myths of identity explaining the means of contraction continue to frame the representation of AIDS during this period (1989-1992).

Between 1989 and 1992, the perspective of the gay white male is repeatedly affronted by challenging perspectives. Poets Wendy Barker, Robin Behn, and Lynda Hull especially challenge the maleness of AIDS poetry. Poets David Warren Frechette and Essex Hemphill convey the effects of AIDS on black gay men, while Michael S. Montgomery discusses AIDS from the perspective of an HIV-seronegative bisexual. The position of the gay white male also evolves, as poets Allen Ginsberg, Robert Loutham

and Michael Lassell represent AIDS in ways that challenge and subvert earlier approaches to the subject between 1985 and 1989.

2.2) Women Representing AIDS: Wendy Barker, Robin Behn and Lynda Hull

AIDS has been perhaps understandably but falsely sexualized as homosexual and gendered as male. Since AIDS is falsely understood as a gay man's disease, women have been overlooked or simply overshadowed by the amount of material about AIDS that has been written by or about gay men. AIDS erases gender distinctions at the viral level because it can infect anyone. However, poetry about AIDS written by women falls prey to the same pitfalls as that written by men. AIDS is still understood through its association with specific identities. The poetry still confesses how the disease was contracted.

Wendy Barker's poem "Identifying Things" places AIDS outside her family network. AIDS is an insidious and dangerous possibility that validates the fear and ignorance of those not defined as belonging to a high risk group or practicing high risk activities. AIDS is understood as being safely kept at a distance from the general population. In "Identifying Things," AIDS enters the family circle by way of a needle, the only plausible means of transmission for AIDS (and other diseases) to infect her innocent child. The child, oblivious to the wider implications, wonders "is diabetes catching?" (23) after "that kid Jamie, jabbing a needle he had picked up / on the street, punctured far into the flesh of my son's palm" (23).¹⁸ The child is completely oblivious

¹⁸ And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that

to the risk of AIDS and is more concerned with the possibility of catching diabetes.

Death becomes a possibility because the needle *could be* contaminated with HIV. She begins to worry for her son who is

only eleven
years old and the doctor over the phone doesn't help,
his nurse says you bet, plenty to worry about,
and it's not just AIDS we'd want to run tests for,
there's hepatitis, three strains now--find the needle,
bring the needle, make sure those boys
find the needle. (23)

The unknown element of the needle introduces the possibility of all types of dangerous infections. The mother immediately thinks of the possibility of AIDS. Seemingly, nothing will never be nothing again. Everyone is relieved to discover that it is

just a little needle
the kind for pricking a finger for small
blood samples, adults always overreact.
The doctor and the nurses laugh out loud.... (24)

the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I took pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong. (II Corr. 12: 7-11)

HIV/AIDS seems an apt surrogate for thorn in this context because both involve the penetration of a foreign object in the body, be it through sexual penetration, a syringe, the introduction of contaminated blood products, or the penetration of the virus into the host cell. Read in this context, the above mentioned passage has the power to alter our perception of AIDS/HIV and those infected. Power, weakness, infirmities, subordination, persecution, reproaches and distresses are all very much part of the relationship between the individual and the virus/disease, and the individual and society at large.

Laughter replaces hysteria when it is discovered that the needle is not a syringe but a pricking needle. AIDS remains distant, removed, and othered. The needle is not a heroin addict's needle, but rather a needle to test for illness. The discovery of the pricking needle erases the link between AIDS and the poet's son. The link between needles and AIDS created the momentary possibility that her son could contract AIDS, yet the discovery of the needle reinscribes the fact that AIDS is part of the world of those who are involved in high risk activities, such as heroin addicts, and that their residual paraphernalia could place others at risk. Since the needle is not a syringe, AIDS is once again safely at a distance, and the mere possibility of AIDS becomes laughable. The explanation of the jabbing incident functions on two levels. It mobilizes the hysterical fear that public places are not safe, so that, by extension, we are all somehow at risk. It also explains the only means of contraction, as if to know *how* one became infected is more important than that one *is* infected. Barker elicits the proper amount of pity by playing upon the innocence of the child who would not willingly put himself at risk like those who are responsible or guilty for their own infection. Barker's poem has a great deal in common with Greg Baysans' "All I Dare Say, or: Another AIDS Poem." Just as Baysans' poem seems to be more about fear than the disease itself, Barker's representation of AIDS relies heavily on the possibility of being infected by a drug abuser's discarded syringe rather than the plausibility of such an incident taking place. Barker's representation of AIDS seems to be informed more by folklore than by the reality of the demographics of contagion. Just as Baysans asks if he should "be concerned? be in fear / for ... [his] very gay life?," (Baysans10) Barker suggests that we are all peripherally at risk. The entire poem relies on the various lexical meanings of the word needle which suggests something as benign as pricking needle or as dangerous as a drug abuser's syringe.

While Barker's poem represents the possibility of contracting AIDS from the handling of a tainted drug abuser's syringe, Robin Behn witnesses her HIV seropositive cousin's death. Behn's poem "Maybe the Jay" plays upon the ironic usage of certain words as they relate to the way we talk about AIDS.¹⁹ Behn plays with the various possible meanings of the term "positive" by contrasting the understanding of the word before and after AIDS as it relates to her cousin who is

positive, positive:
more than the zero she believed herself to be;
more than the plus of the cross hairs
through which, in terrible retrospect,
we see her crooked arm, the shared
needle of happiness.... (26)

Poetry about intravenous drug abusers and AIDS is almost always written by a witness to the illness. Behn, as the witness, confesses the means of contraction by divulging the past history of drug abuse. As with all AIDS poetry, the past *as* present is a central theme. Her cousin's present physical condition is a result of her past drug abuse. By dying, she gains the dignity she did not enjoy in life. She becomes the site where all associations between negative, zero, and positive vie for space. In the end, that all three equally and accurately describe her cousin's existence in one way or another is important.

It's as if her anorectic frame that always looked
like a negative has suddenly gathered flesh, and now
she's walking out, backlit, into 3-D
to borrow our futures. (26)

Behn makes it possible to view her cousin at once as a positive, a negative, and a zero. AIDS alters the significance of all three words, in much the same way that the

¹⁹See quotation from Mirko D. Grmek in the first chapter of my thesis, page five.

words would be understood in terms of her cousin's past, present, and future. Behn reinscribes the term positive, with all its negative connotations of AIDS, instead of leaving the power wholly with medical terminology. She is HIV positive, but that is not the only positive thing that makes her who she is.

While Behn's poem "Maybe the Jay" is about witnessing her cousin's death from AIDS, Lynda Hull's "Hospice" is written from the perspective of a former intravenous drug abuser witnessing a friend, Loretta, dying of AIDS. Loretta taught her "to curse / in Italian, who taught me to find the good vein / in the blue and yellow hours of our sixteenth year" (111). AIDS has forced a re-evaluation of their former lives when they "must / have felt above all damage" (111). Loretta, unlike the speaker, continued to do drugs and became infected with HIV. AIDS provides

no miraculous escape, though how many times
I watched you rise again and again from the dead:
that night at the dealer's on Orange Street, stripping
you down, overdosed and blanched against the linoleum,
ice and saline. I slapped you and slapped you until
the faint flower of your breath clouded the mirror.... (111)

AIDS, unlike drugs, does not provide for the possibility of "miraculous escape." The distinction between the past and the present is a recurring theme in "Hospice." Hull explains that "Newark's empty asylum wings opened again this year / for the terminal cases" (110). The asylum becomes doubly powerful because it evokes the notion of segregation while at the same time it introduces elements of past medical crises. The closed asylum wings are reopened for AIDS patients because there is no other place to house them and keep them separate from the other patients. The reopening of the asylum also reinforces the stigmas associated with both mental illness and AIDS. The patients in the newly opened wings of the hospital are "strung-out welfare mothers" and "the

streetcorner romeos : we used to think so glamorous, all jacked-up : on two buck shots" (110). Those that fill the asylum are again that invisible segment of the population. The hospital is able to contain the AIDS patients by placing them all in the same wings of the asylum. Homosexual, drug addict, and prostitute inhabit a common space, important in that it separates all AIDS patients from all other patients in the hospital.

Loretta's drug "habit stole : the luster from ... [her] movie starlet hair" (111) and now AIDS has made her such that even "the orderlies were afraid to : touch" her (111). The poetry about AIDS written about intravenous drug abusers differs from gay poetry in that, as Clum explains, "a major theme of gay AIDS literature is what to do with a lost past, which was both affluent and carefree" (Clum 201). In the poems by Behn and Hull, the past is not carefree and affluent but rather imbued with delinquency and near death experiences.

2.3) AIDS and Race: Gay Black Poets David Warren Frechette and Essex Hemphill

Gay poets of colour joined female poets to resist the representation of AIDS as a disease of gay white men.²⁰ Poets David Warren Frechette and Essex Hemphill represent AIDS from the perspective of gay black men. Frechette and Hemphill challenge the whiteness of gay representation, effectively rupturing the privileging of the gay white man within the gay community. The operation becomes twofold. First, Frechette and Hemphill give a voice to the silent black men within the gay community, and second, they empower their own voices as gays within the predominately heterosexual black community. Their poetry fuses the disparate and often disjointed subjects of race, sexuality, and AIDS.

²⁰See Section 3.5, "AIDS and Race II: Marvin K. White," for another example of a poem about AIDS written by a Black poet. Written in 1996, White's poem presents the conflicting images of celebrities who have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS with the image of an HIV-seropositive Black inner-city homosexual.

Frechette in his "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien" is asked to "return to Jesus" (127) to which he replies that he has "never left him" (127). By fusing his homosexuality with his religious beliefs, he shows that his life is not something that should be forgiven or accepted, but merely something that simply *is*. Someone asks if he wishes he had "chosen a *normal* lifestyle"(127) to which he responds "Sister, for *me*, I'm *sure* I did" (127). Frechette normalizes homosexuality, before God and family, refusing to allow AIDS to force a renunciation of *who* he is simply because of *what* with which he is infected. He has no sins to confess because his life is not sinful. To admit to sinning would be to renounce his own existence.

Though my body be racked by
Capricious pains and fevers,
I'm not even *about* to yield to
Fashionable gay Black temptation. (127)

He identifies himself with communities that share a common history of oppression. Blacks have been oppressed by the hegemonic culture of whites while gays have been oppressed by heterosexuals. The problem is that black gays have been historically oppressed by black heterosexuals. Frechette effectively represents the doubling effect of his conflicting identities. He explains that he is going to

regret nothing
Of the gay life I've led
There's no way in Heaven or Hell
I'll let anyone make me. (128)

He does regret dying alone with "no boyfriend / to pray over me" and that he will "never see Europe / Or my African homeland except / In photos in a book or magazine" (128). He does not regret being gay, only dying alone. He does not regret that he has AIDS and is now dying in a hospital room, only that he has not been everywhere he had wanted to

go. His assertion of the correctness of his life is confirmed in his own poetic epitaph. He would like to

Engrave on my tombstone:
 "Here sleeps a *happy* Black faggot
 Who lived to love and died
 With no guilt." (128)

The tombstone confesses two things that would be otherwise invisible in the tomb: race and sexual orientation. Stating that he is a "Black faggot" is both an act of defiance and a forced realization that the normalcy of his gay lifestyle continues to function problematically, even in death. The epitaph confesses his happiness, his race, and his sexuality to those who will mourn him or read his tombstone. Paul Monette's poetic epitaph in "READINESS," published in 1988, four years earlier than Frechette's poem, echoes the same political necessity of stating, even in death, that the tombstone marks the grave of a homosexual:

epitaph name no middle initial then
 FOR 12 YEARS ALL THE LOVE IN THE WORLD WAS HIS
 OTHERWISE HE WAS A WRITER HERE I AM ROG
 not Yeats exactly but there won't be horsemen
 passing only if we're lucky some far-off
 men of our sort of generations hence a pair
 of dreamy types strolling among the hill graves
 for curiosity's sake this well may be
 in a time when dying is not all day and every
 house riven and they'll laugh *Here's 2 like us* (Monette 14)

AIDS is confessed, or inscribed, on these openly gay epitaphs. Monette's epitaph circumscribes the notion that HOMOSEXUALITY=AIDS by emphasizing the length and depth of their twelve year relationship.

While Frechette provides testimony regarding the implications of dying of AIDS as a "Black faggot," Essex Hemphill writes about being a gay black man witnessing the effects of AIDS, gay politics, black politics and AIDS activism. In "Heavy Breathing," Hemphill describes himself as

an oversexed
well-hung
Black Queen
influenced
by phrases like
"Silence=Death." (Hemphill 11)

By capitalizing both Black and Queen, Hemphill creates the possibility of viewing each as socially and culturally equal. He identifies himself as a "Black Queen," fusing both sexuality and race in a single site: himself. He erases the taboo of being a black homosexual while effectively voicing his own association with the homosexual community that continually makes him a spectacle of difference. The AIDS slogan influences him, politicizing his sexuality while making him aware of the fact that

Some of us are still here,
breathing heavy,
navigating this deadly
sexual turbulence;
perhaps we are
the unlucky ones.... (13)

Living in the shadow of AIDS as a "Black Queen," Hemphill faces his identity and navigates the "sexual turbulence" made deadly by AIDS. He is HIV seronegative, but is still very much influenced by the political and social reactions to AIDS. AIDS has forced a change in sexual practice, making safer sex not simply a choice, but a political and social necessity.

In "When My Brother Fell," Hemphill interrogates the value of representing AIDS while there are more pressing issues at stake. He suggests that

It is too soon
to make monuments
for all we are losing,
for the lack of truth
as to how we are dying,
who wants us dead,
what purpose does it serve? (33)

The representation of AIDS, be it through monument or poetry, is a waste of time since there are more pressing concerns. Again, the HIV virus or government inaction amount to a conspiracy. Hemphill, like many other gay poets writing about AIDS, traces the conspiracy, but fails to explain it. All that is known is that there *is* a conspiracy. What becomes necessary is to search for the cause, not merely represent the effects.

2.4) Representing the Bisexual: Michael S. Montgomery

Michael S. Montgomery's book of poems Telling The Beads is written from the perspective of an HIV seronegative white bisexual male. Telling The Beads is written in sonnet form, which, though controlled and tidy, occasionally confines and limits the effect of his poetry.²¹ Montgomery's sonnets seem rigid, predictable, and contrived compared to the raw emotional nature of Monette's free verse with its absence of punctuation or capitalizations. Montgomery's sonnets seem to have more in common with Robert Boucheron's epitaphs than with any of the other poetry written about AIDS. While it is certain that he is by far a more formally accomplished poet than Boucheron, it

²¹ While it is possible to understand his decision to write in sonnet form as an attempt to lend legitimate authority to his subject matter, the result is to force trite rhymes to complete the formal necessities of the genre. The poems are more of an exercise in sonnet writing than an achieved poetic vision.

cannot be overlooked that his need to confine his subject matter to the rigidities of a specific form weakens Telling The Beads.

Regardless of the formal problems with Montgomery's verse, his poetry is important within the context of AIDS poetry because it provides a poetic voice, thereby ending the silence of bisexual men who have been affected by the AIDS crisis. Bisexual men are at risk of contracting AIDS because they have gay sex, one of the high-risk activities. AIDS has forced Montgomery to deal with his bisexuality in a public manner. He must inform his wife that she is at risk of contracting AIDS before the possible physical signs of the disease force an unwanted confession. What emerges is that he must openly deal with his closet homosexual desires and his sexual history.

In "The Crucifixion," Montgomery calls his former homosexual partners "friends of Satan and his ways" for using him "for their own selfish ends" while they "pretended to be healthy, but were not" (Montgomery 10). The possibility that he could bring AIDS into the confines of the family circle imbues the entire situation with feelings of guilt. He must redefine and re-think his own relationship with his past in order to achieve the semblance of a present or future.

At least my daughter lives. At least my son
was spared a second year of misery.
At least Miss never knew what things were done
(though now I guess she does). And at last we
will find a final place for shame to hide
when soon they dump my ashes at their side. (10)

In "Abominations," Montgomery writes about his experience as a bisexual man within the church community. He notices that the church has "an angry pope, and--our cathedral's glory--/ the window with the Sodomites in flames" (21). His church's position on homosexuality forces him to see that

These dudes are serious--
 They'd want to see me burn, if I should die.
 denied protection from mysterious
 disease, just meed of lust: He loved a guy."
 I saw at once, my most egregious sin
 would be to serve that hateful Church again. (21)

"Plea Bargain" and "Abominations" detail the difference between faith and religion. The former is written as a prayer to God and does not blame God's church for its oppressive position on homosexuality and AIDS. In "Plea Bargain," Montgomery explains that if he is not HIV seropositive then he will "never fuck again, ' except in love, and then just by the book" (56). He bargains his sexuality to a certain point, without completely turning his back on his homosexual desires. He will, if HIV seronegative, no longer have anonymous and promiscuous sex. He will express his homosexuality as the end result of love, and this expression will be made in a safe and protected fashion. If he is HIV seronegative, he will

tithe GMHC; I'll buddy men
 who've got it: take them videos and cook
 their meals and bathe them chastely in their tub;
 I'll wear the button, "SILENCE=DEATH";
 I'll do their wills *pro bono*, Lord: a hub
 of activism with each waking breath. (56)

He never offers to stop having homosexual sex altogether, but rather suggests that he will police himself if he is negative, becoming an active, vocal, and open homosexual helping those who have tested HIV seropositive.

He marvels "humbly at ... [his] random luck / to owe ... [his] life to those ... [he] chose to fuck" (69). His luck is translated as "horror and survivor's guilt"(69) when he considers how the Viet Nam War and AIDS have commemorated his "martyred friends" with "The War Memorial and the Quilt" (69). Being a middle-aged HIV seronegative

white male who has navigated both Viet Nam and AIDS unscathed fills him with guilt and rage because his life owes more to random chance than to any conscious decisions he has made. Viet Nam affected a generation of young men, regardless of sexuality, and AIDS has placed him in the crossfires of another situation that could end his life. Both events are political and historical in Montgomery's context, making the dead and the affected the martyrs of his generation of gay American men. AIDS is legitimized as another ideological war propagated by the government.

In "Negative," Montgomery explains that he has been to "ten [funerals] - so far, each one a friend, not just a trick" (57). The encroachment of AIDS into his own personal circle of friends leaves him with "survivor's guilt." The sheer number of dying friends creates a "grim arithmetic - a microcosm of catastrophe, [that] lends necrophillic pallor to my sex" (57). He has been fortunate to escape "the germs ... for all... [his] anxious yearly truth serum checks have been okay" (57). AIDS has consciously affected his life. That he feels the need for yearly "AIDS tests" reveals that he is justly cautious of pronouncing himself healthy. His anxiety and restlessness are well founded as he is forced to question his own mortality after watching many of those with whom he identifies himself die. AIDS clouds and affects his subconscious when he dreams "at night of skulls with gaping jaws / that close on ... [his] erection" (57).

Montgomery touches upon one of the recurrent themes in AIDS poetry written by gay men. The poet questions how AIDS has affected his sexual practices. Oral sex is imbued with death, inviting images that are at once sexual and morbid.

The relationship between homosexuality and the representation of AIDS is at issue in Montgomery's poem "The Golden Age of Gay Literature." Here he makes AIDS the cause for the proliferation of gay literature. Montgomery deliberately separates readers from writers according to sickness. "We" "sick ones" and "you" "well ones" are

opposite parts of the same equation. Both "we" and "you" are gay men. AIDS has "chased us addicts from the bar" and "kicked our pretty asses from a sling / into a seat before an escritoire" (58). AIDS alters the lives of all gay men, and creates a new and receptive audience for gay literature. Montgomery explains that AIDS has forced many gay men to write about their lives because

We sick ones have our swansongs to compose:
 how wonderful life was: that it should end,
 how too unfair; how, still, the one we chose
 we leave with no regrets. and you, my friend,
 you well ones, have a lot of time to kill:
 you write as much and, in the long run, more--
 whatever else to do, my dear, to fill
 your lonely nights, home with a loving bore,
 except, of course--the other side--to read,
 to be our audience, to watch us bleed? (58)

Montgomery includes himself with the "we," assuming the position of an HIV seropositive gay man. He praises and exalts a self-actualizing past so wonderful that it is simply unfair "that it should end." The well ones will write much more "in the long run," but they are the ones who suffer in a different way because now their nights are "lonely," spent with a "loving bore" instead of living the life they enjoyed in the falsely romanticized past where sex was not associated with death.

2.5) Restructuring and Repoliticizing the Gay Perspective: Allen Ginsberg, Robert Loutham and Michael Lassell

Of the poems by or about gay men in Poets For Life, the most substantial are written by Allen Ginsberg and Robert Loutham. Michael Lassell's book of poetry Decade Dance also aestheticizes the necessity for political urgency in poetry about AIDS.

Allen Ginsberg, America's dark conscience, long a figure of shock and a celebrant of unleashed desire, lends legitimacy to AIDS as a subject for poetry. Ginsberg's

"Sphincter" provides the personal history of his anus. His "good old asshole" has "been mostly ok" for sixty years (79). His anus has had a fissure and the occasional "small hemorrhoid" yet it remains

active, eager, receptive to phallus
 coke bottle, candle, carrot
 banana & fingers. (79)

His faith in his anus, as a site for sexual pleasure, is altered, even if only slightly, by AIDS. He explains that "Now AIDS makes it [his anus] shy, but still eager to serve" (79). The knowledge of AIDS modifies the pleasure he enjoys from his anus. AIDS affects him. He realizes it exists, and is not entirely oblivious to it, but yet his anus is "still eager to serve." His anus is still receptive, essentially breaking the association between gay sex and death. His anus will continue to provide him with joy. His anus will continue to "out with the dumps, in with the / orgasmic friend" (79). Even in the time of AIDS his anus is still "unashamed wide opened for joy" (79). Old age seems a more tangible concern than AIDS. Ginsberg believes that his anus is

Still rubbery muscular ...
 But another 20 years who knows,
 old folks got trouble everywhere
 necks, prostates, stomachs, joints--
 Hope the old hole stays young
 till death, relax (79)

While it is possible to appreciate Ginsberg's "Sphincter" for its shock value and its use of the profane, Robert Loutham's "Syndrome" describes, in an even more shocking and provocative manner, the assisted suicide of a man dying of AIDS. Loutham's anger is active and compassionate as he writes about putting his lover out of his misery. He brings a gun with them into bed in order to shoot his lover in the head. He explains that

When we're done with this embrace,
 which is final and encumbered with the gun
 I've brought to bed *because our loving was diseased*
 and you're dazzled now daily by pain
 when I lift my leg off your emaciated waist,
 which I promise not to do before you're no longer living
 and I'm no longer living to the beat of your heart... (*emphasis mine*) (147)

It is clear that the reason why their loving is 'diseased' is that one of them is infected, not that homosexual sex is inherently wrong.²² He is going to end his lover's suffering. His clench, a caring and forceful hug, holds his lover in place while he shoots him. The only thing that he asks is that when

I've blasted the spot that I'm kissing on your temple,
 go up and tell God I want you rocked in his lap,
 and when he does it fuck his brains out. (147)

His dying lover should "fuck" God's "brains out" and infect him with the same disease God has inflicted upon them. Loutham suggests that if God were to be "fucked" by a man then he might understand the beauty of homosexual relations and stop all of the suffering experienced by gays.

Religion and God become at once the salvation and the problem. Monette's poem "BROTHER OF THE MOUNT OF OLIVES" denounces Pope John Paul II and Roman Catholicism for proclaiming that homosexuals deserve AIDS. Montgomery decides in "Abominations" that his "most egregious sin / would be to serve that hateful Church again" (Montgomery 21) while in "Plea Bargain" he prays to God. The distinction between God and Pope John Paul II (as the figurehead of organized religion) is made abundantly clear. Michael Lassell's poem "How to prepare for the death of a friend"

²²Homosexuality was considered a treatable disease by the American Psychiatric Association until 1977.

details the sudden impact of the death of a friend by explaining the long and difficult waiting period between diagnosis and the resulting death. The death, both unexpected and emotionally deferred, causes uncontrollable weeping for a man who "was nothing at all - but ... [his] next of skin" (Lassell 75). The death forces him to question

When
at last
will this *God* of theirs
grow bored
with tears? (75)

Strategically, Lassell makes God something that belongs to the other, or the non-gay world. Lassell effectively shifts the blame onto the non-gay community because he makes *their* God responsible for the suffering of gay men. God functions as the justified reason why their inaction is acceptable because AIDS is somehow their God's punishment for homosexuality.

Lassell concedes to the presence of God in "a modest proposal, overtly political."

He wishes

God (more reclusive than Marlon Brando even)
would make a rare exception and
grant a single interview to the alternative press
to say that he's PISSED OFF that people are
DUMPING SHIT on his GAY CHILDREN. Then he'd
raise all the AIDS dead from their graves and
unscatter their ashes.... (110)

He strategically describes the AIDS dead as gay. Lassell fails to allow for any integration of all AIDS patients in the same group. AIDS, in a sense, functions as the catalyst to divide gays and non-gays since his agenda is more actively involved with representing the gay experience than it is in presenting the difficult aspects of understanding AIDS as a disease from which no human is ever safe. His "modest proposal" is to blow up

Washington, to kill ten innocent "people who haven't done a thing to 'deserve dying'" (110) for every gay man who dies of the "plague."²³ By blowing up Washington he hopes to kill

all the politicians in the country
in one historic bang:
all the lying schemers
who make laws against us over three-martini lunches
at taxpayers' expense.... (108-9)

The oppositional binary is made explicit. "They," the politicians, "make laws against us," the homosexuals. Again, the power of religion becomes an important differentiating point between "us" and "them." He blames

all those crypto-fascist Christ-money mongers,
including that dickless Polack pope in his white
sheet--
don't tell me not to buy into their hatred!
I've been hating them since before they knew
who or what I am
(my anger is the legacy of their cruelty,
my rage is the birthright of the outcast).... (109)

Political and religious figures function on an equal plane as oppressors of homosexuals. Lassell makes AIDS the excuse for bracketing people into one of two categories. You are either doing something productive about AIDS, or you are involved in propagating ignorance and death. Individuals are divided along sexual lines; therefore all

²³Plague, genocide, and holocaust, are often tropes for AIDS. Each one is fraught with associations, but the most important one rests the assumption that AIDS is somehow being allowed to happen, as if the spread of the disease is a deliberate political act instead of being an epidemic or pandemic viral outbreak. How AIDS is contextualized weighs almost as heavily as what is being understood about the disease. AIDS is not sexually identifiable or associative, yet genocide, holocaust and plague suggest the opposite.

homosexuals are part of the solution, while all heterosexuals are part of the problem. Lassell deploys generalizing categories strategically to emphasize the political necessity of recognizing AIDS' indelible link to homosexuality. By accentuating this link he effectively shames non-gays and exalts gays for living in this oppressive environment.

The conceit is that if they, homosexuals, were to exact the kind of terror described in "a modest proposal, overtly political"

The cure would be found by the end of the week,
and it would only cost us
2.7 stealth bombers and a dozen nuclear missiles,
and the robber barons of pharmaceutical
companies,
caught off guard by grief, would let their greed down
for a minute and give away the medication that
would make
all the infections evaporate like
campaign promises after elections. (110)

The final goal of his "modest proposal" would be to force a confrontation between

the hate-hoarding heterosexuals who
beat us
cut us and
strung us up and
burned us down and
ripped our brain cells and
poured hot mercury into our open veins,
and who taught us to do all these things to ourselves,
would see the joy of a hundred thousand men
reunited with a hundred thousand men and their
twenty million friends. .. (110)

God would resurrect all those who have died of AIDS. And in a sort of "gay only" Judgment Day, God would show society at large its collective guilt for allowing AIDS to continue. Lassell assumes that money and science could at the present time cure AIDS. Of course, he lends authority to science by blaming it. Science and government,

strategically understood as homophobic systems, are the only means of ending the tragedy, while being part of the tragedy.

The power of poetry is slightly exaggerated in "Piss Jesse, or Silence=Death." He writes

Uh-oh,
I haven't
Offended anyone,
have I?
I haven't made anyone *uncomfortable*?
That *would* be a caterwauling shame.
An offensive poem could
bring down the U.S. Constitution
faster than a racist Republican--
not naming any names, mind you, so
take your pick (it's easy). (106)

Lassell grants poetry a great deal of power which in a sense explains his polemical style. By deploying generalizing categories, Lassell attempts to describe either shared yet incongruent common ground or irreconcilable differences. "Pieta" illustrates his ability to describe the common ground experienced by both gays and the elderly. He writes about a sick man who

visits his mother
in her nursing home.
You don't look well, she says.
My friends are dying, too.
I'm afraid that when I die
there will be no one left to
say prayers at my grave, she says.
It's my fear, too, he replies. (69)

In the context of the above passage, gay men and the elderly have a great deal in common. They are both witnessing death as part of their daily lives. By describing death

as a shared experience for both the elderly and homosexuals, Lassell makes the experience part of the present life cycle. The elderly and homosexuals are dying of diseases that affect only their groups. A man and his mother can understand and share each others' preoccupation with death because death is a palpable reality. The man lives knowing that death can strike at any time because he has presumably witnessed the deaths of many around him. The elderly mother in the nursing home experiences death as a logical continuation of the life-cycle. Lassell describes the shared tragedy of witnessing the death of one's entire generation

The poem "How to watch your brother die" attempts to reconstruct the politically charged tensions that problematize any death from AIDS. Here, the speaker entreats the heterosexual brother to understand the various implications of his gay brother's life and death from AIDS. The speaker continually suggests that homosexual love and relationships are somehow deeper and better than those enjoyed by heterosexuals. The poem reads like a "how-to" manual for heterosexuals forced at once to confront homosexuality, AIDS, and death. As Carol Muske suggests,

Perhaps the single positive contribution of AIDS to our culture is a politics of death. That is to say, AIDS (like the Right to Die movement) has made dying itself--in bed, away from the battlefield--a political act. Death remains as personal as ever, but now everyone must bear witness to the rapid, brutal, sweeping disappearances of human beings. Everyone must hear (because we have a government that refuses to listen) what the dying have to say about how they will die, where they will die, what their right to treatment encompasses, how they wish the living to care for them, how they wish to be let go. (Klein, Poets for Life 6)

The brother *should* tell his homosexual brother's lover that he is "an extremely good-looking / young man" (Lassell 80). The heterosexual brother must make apologies for not knowing "what it means to be / the lover of another man" (80). The speaker thinks that to be the lover of another man one has to be

just like a wife, only the commitment is
deeper because the odds against you are so much
greater. (80)

The emotional journey the heterosexual brother must take will also involve driving to Mexico to try and secure drugs that could prolong his brother's life. He must go to Mexico because the American government will not approve the drugs in the United States.

Drive to Mexico for unproven drugs that might
help him live longer.
Explain what they are to the border guard.
Fill with rage when he informs you,
"You can't bring those across."
Begin to grow loud.
Feel the lover's hand on your arm
restraining you. See in the guard's eye
how much a man can hate another man.
Say to the lover, "How can you stand it?"
Hear him say, "You get used to it." (80)

The experience with the border guard will teach the heterosexual brother a lesson he would never have experienced. He will learn that AIDS patients and homosexuals are oppressed, and that they possess a great deal of restraint. The inevitable death of the gay brother forces the heterosexual brother to deal with an openly gay funeral. It is suggested that the heterosexual brother

Stand beside a casket covered in flowers,
white flowers. Say,
"Thank you for coming," to each of several hundred
men
who file past in tears, some of them
holding hands. Know that your brother's life
was not what you imagined. Overhear two
mourners say, "I wonder who'll be next".... (81-2)

Lassell links homosexuality, AIDS, and death. His didactic method of privileging the plight of homosexuals in the AIDS crisis is made at the utter disregard for all those who are dying "non-gay" deaths from AIDS.

2.6) Conclusion

Gay poets have dominated how AIDS is represented poetically. Yet, as Murphy suggests in "Testimony,"

it is not, of course, only gay men who have written about their experiences and losses in the epidemic. Other people close to the devastations of AIDS and its antecedents in HIV infection have also set out their encounters with illness, dying, loss, and fear. Yet there are few precious encomiums penned to poor, drug-using men and women who have died with AIDS. Gay men, either as authors or subjects, dominate the written word in the literature of the epidemic. Their publications and booksellers are the epicenters of writing about AIDS. (307)

While Poets for Life is purposefully constructed to be "*as varied as it had to be*," (12) it fails to provide any universalized understanding of the disease, instead offering a variety of perspectives. This variety includes the perspectives of those witnessing the deaths of two IV drug abusing females from AIDS in the poems by Behn and Hull, while Barker's poem attempts to introduce the plausibility of HIV infecting a child because of a careless act. Both Frechette and Hemphill describe the effects of AIDS in relation to sexuality and race as they give voice to the disparate and often conflicting identities of black gay men. What occurs between 1989 and 1992 is a deliberate re-writing or a purposeful attempt at self-correction. AIDS can no longer be considered a gay poetic subject. The poems by Barker, Behn, and Hull challenge the equation that makes HOMOSEXUALITY = AIDS. When it became evident that AIDS affected the non-gay world, those identity groups newly associated with the disease began to represent their

experience in an equally authentic and emotionally-charged manner as those gay writers who wrote about AIDS between 1985 and 1989.

AIDS has been repoliticized and restructured by the addition of race, gender, and drug abuse to the formerly singular understanding of AIDS as a gay disease. Poetry about AIDS came to include the perspectives of gays of colour and intravenous drug abusers. The period between 1989 and 1992 also provides a re-evaluation of the poetry about AIDS written by gays between 1985 and 1989. Ginsberg reaffirms his ability to experience sexual pleasure in the AIDS era, essentially refuting the equation that HOMOSEXUALITY=AIDS. Robert Loutham introduces the theme of assisted suicide as a personal choice to end the suffering of those dying of AIDS. Lassell's polemical and didactic style heralds a more fervent political message than did that of Michael Lynch in These Waves of Dying Friends. I have attempted to prove from the outset that the poetic representation of AIDS is informed by identity issues that resist universalizing or totalizing the experience of AIDS. By 1992, well into the second decade of AIDS, poetry continually reaffirms its own marginalized status by representing AIDS in its relation to the identities of those infected. Barker writes that her cousin enjoyed the "shared . needle of happiness ..." (26) and Hull continually makes reference to Loretta's drug habit. Both poems confess the means of contraction as shared heroin needles just as all the poems written between 1985 and 1989 proclaimed their homosexual status. While the poetry about AIDS written between 1989-1992 challenged the homogeneity of the representation of AIDS as gay, it did little to challenge the perception that AIDS is a disease that only attaches itself to specific identities, particularly homosexuals and intravenous drug abusers. Identity associations continue to inform the poetic representation of AIDS.

Chapter Three

3.1) Introduction

While the poetry about AIDS written between 1985 and 1992 did little to challenge the perception that AIDS only affects homosexuals and heroin addicts, the poetry about AIDS written between 1992 and 1997 begins to represent the fact that, as Derrida explains, "no human being is ever safe from AIDS." Various identities that had been peripherally affected by AIDS began to represent their experience. Morrison suggests that mainstream representations of AIDS are implacably paradoxical because they represent the 'innocent' victims of the disease, such as "suffering children and hemophiliacs," rather than representing mainstream culture's unspoken tenet that associates homosexuality with AIDS (169-170). Morrison believes "[a] cultural history of mainstream American representations of AIDS would surely reveal homosexuality as the absent force that actually shapes those documents" (169). While Morrison notices an "implacable paradox" in mainstream representations of AIDS, he fails to notice that an equally "implacable paradox" exists in the marginalized representations of AIDS. If mainstream representations of AIDS circumvent homosexuality in their representations, then marginalized representations circumvent the universalized understanding of AIDS by continually framing their representations in relation to the identity of the person infected.

A change begins to occur between 1992 and 1997 in how AIDS was poetically represented. While the poetry is still driven in part by identity issues, the identity of the poet is not always confined to those demographic groups deemed at risk. While poetry about AIDS has become more socially inclusive, the critical reception continually

reaffirms the privileged position of homosexual poets. Richard McCann suggests that poetry about AIDS comes from a

hybridized literary tradition ... by forming what some might see as strange and even impossible imaginative alliances between a homosexual poetic tradition ... and a more expressly political poetic tradition... and by serving as the crossroads on which these ... [traditions] meet. (xxiii)

McCann's assertion that poetry about AIDS stems from a hybrid of the homosexual and political poetic traditions privileges the majority of poems written by gay men. What McCann fails to mention is that the small amount of poetry about AIDS written by non-gays is rarely political and this poetry owes nothing to the homosexual poetic tradition. AIDS has evolved into a mainstream concern. As David Waggoner, editor of Art & Understanding, suggests

AIDS is now a commercial success. See Philadelphia and you will see your next-door neighbour in the audience.... AIDS is now a market force.... From the bordello to the boardroom, AIDS has finally crossed into mainstream America. It has generated hundreds if not thousands of important works of literature, poetry, art, fiction and nonfiction ... and billions of dollars along the way. (Art & Understanding 3:1, April 1994, 3)

The spatial and temporal dimension of the ongoing construction of AIDS has problematized the poetic representation of AIDS. Poetry about AIDS must continually respond to new information. For example, the disease has changed from a completely fatal disease to a chronic one. As Lee Edelman suggests

'AIDS' itself cannot unproblematically function as the subject of our writing, because 'AIDS' is ideologically constructed as a form of writing itself: as an inscription of difference whose 'subject' is always the subject of ideology. (Edelman, "The Mirror and the Tank" 9)

"The subject of ideology" in AIDS poetry is usually informed by gay rights, AIDS activism and identity politics, not racism or homophobia. The poetry resists the ways that AIDS has been constructed by the mainstream media, the medical establishment, and the scientific community. While Edelman seems to be leaning towards an explanation of the "subject of ideology" as an entirely negative reality, the inscription of AIDS in poetry demonstrates that the reverse is perhaps more precise. Poetry about AIDS resists the negative forms of ideology perpetuated by more popular media, such as television and film.

1992 to 1997 functions as a specific period in the history of AIDS poetry because it marks the beginning of the publication of the periodical Art & Understanding (1992-) and the publication of Things Shaped in Passing: More "Poets for Life" Writing From the AIDS Pandemic in 1997. Art & Understanding is important to the history of AIDS poetry because it makes it possible to read the poetic representations of AIDS on a monthly basis, creating the impression that one could read the disease as a continuous and evolving subject. Things Shaped in Passing is described by Michael Klein as the "companion anthology" (xvii) to 1989's Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS. Viewing both as companion texts makes it possible to investigate the changes that eight years have made to AIDS as a subject for poetry. Art & Understanding is important because of its potential to present AIDS as an ongoing cultural event, while the poetry in Things Shaped in Passing is a more pertinent source simply because it purposefully attempts to show a variety of perspectives.

Poetry about AIDS continues to be confessional in many ways. Identity issues continue to play an important role in AIDS poetry. That the poets confess or proclaim their identification with specific groups continually emerges as one of the most pressing themes in the poetry. How does AIDS affect the individual as a member of a specific

community is the recurring question. Poets Rafael Campo, Mary Jane Nealon, and Belle Waring represent AIDS from the perspective of medical professionals. Tom Andrews writes from the perspective of an HIV seronegative hemophiliac, giving a voice to the otherwise absent yet greatly stigmatized hemophiliac community. Richard Taysan compares the experience of being tested for HIV with the sexual act. Marvin K. White offers a competing voice to the poems about AIDS written by Black poets David Warren Frechette and Essex Hemphill, while Beatrix Gates represents AIDS from a lesbian's perspective. Marilyn Hacker represents AIDS from a feminist perspective.

3.2) The Medical Community and AIDS: Rafael Campo, Mary Jane Nealon and Belle Waring

Poet and physician Rafael Campo voices the perspective of the medical community during the AIDS crisis. The unfeeling medical establishment that makes the life of any HIV seropositive person difficult is gone in favor of a more empathetic community that is trying its best to provide care for those who are suffering. His poem "The Distant Moon II" aestheticizes the act of "taking blood" from an AIDS patient. By "taking blood," Campo becomes the patient's "girlfriend," "Blood brother" and "Vampire-slut." The patient cries "You'll make me live forever" (Campo, "Distant Moon II" 16). The physician, unable to verbalize any response, can only gesture with "wrinkled brows ... in reply" (16). The physician's professional detachment necessitates his silent withdrawal. He explains that he is

sad
Because he doesn't see my face. Because
I can't identify with him. I hate
The fact that he's my age, and that across
My skin he's there, my blood-brother, my mate. (16)

Skin shields, separates, and protects the integrity of the distance between the same blood that would make them "blood-brothers." The vial that seals the drawn blood, like a glass skin, also serves to distance the doctor from the patient, the HIV seropositive man from the HIV seronegative man, and to erect the barrier between speech and silence. Campo explains in "AIDS and the Poetry of Healing" that he has to "try desperately not to desire them [his AIDS patients], because it is unprofessional, and because it is too human and scary and powerful" (100). His relationship with his patients, his "blood-brothers," problematizes his conflicting identities. He must remain professionally detached, yet empathetic, while as a homosexual man he has to "try not to desire them."

While Campo's perspective of AIDS is in part unique because he is both a physician and a homosexual, poet and nurse Mary Jane Nealon writes about how the medical community detaches itself from the reality and the totality of AIDS. She recalls an HIV seropositive man as both individual and patient. She tries

to hold onto the idea
of your body: pierced nipples permanently erect,
a dangling half-moon in silver; your well-loved rectum,
your soft testicle sac. (154-155)

Her ability to conceive of the man as a whole is challenged by the fact that her profession forces her to look at him as separate pieces, as a series of blood tests and biopsies.

Even when he focusses and zooms
the slide, nothing in this clump of tissue
is evocative of you. (155)

The slides fail to represent the patient's individuality and personality. Her colleagues are so distant and removed that they cannot come to terms with the totality of an AIDS

patient. She cannot easily perceive of the person as just a patient or specimen because her perception is contaminated by his character. She explains that

we [medical professionals] take the smallest part of you: slice and split,
stain, enlarge. We muse over you.
No one will say AIDS, they imagine your cancer
as a separate and pure aberration. (155)

Nealon, unlike the "others," will not disassociate the individual from the slide. She places herself with the "we," because she is part of the medical establishment that takes "the smallest part of you" and muses over it. She is both inside and outside the system that fails to see the individual in the slide. She knows that "*they* imagine your cancer as a separate and pure aberration" (emphasis mine) (155). She makes the connection between the tissue sample and the patient, AIDS and the cancer.

While Nealon condemns her colleagues for dehumanizing the specimens they are analyzing, her description of the individual over-compensates by over-sexualizing. Recalled in her description are nipples, rectum, and scrotum, not eyes, hair or smile. She muses, as it were, over his 'homosexual body' the same way she charges the others muse over the slide. She cannot see anything other than the sexualized parts of the gay man. The cancer is a "separate and pure aberration" as much as his sexuality is a portion of who he is. The parts she sees are those she distinguishes as gay. She effectively dehumanizes the person in her attempt to show that the medical perspective dehumanizes AIDS.

While both Campo and Nealon write about treating openly gay AIDS patients, nurse and poet Belle Waring offers a different perspective. Her poem "Baby Random" discusses the hardships, for nurses, of dealing with prematurely born babies, specifically babies with AIDS. The nurse saves the Baby Random when he

tries a nosedive, kamikaze,
 when the intern flings open the isolette.
 The kid almost hits the floor. I can see the headline:
 DOC DUMPS AIDS TOT. Nice save, nurse,
 Why thanks. Young physician: We have to change
 his tube." His voice trembles, six weeks
 out of school. (182)

The doctor's inexperience is juxtaposed with the nurse's calm trained hands. The nurse, much more than a subordinate, saves the baby in a small way. The poem, much more about being a nurse than AIDS, discusses the difficulty of dealing with "preemies" with AIDS. Her ability to catch the baby saves the doctor from public headlines. Even how she envisages the headlines' curt accuracy is newsworthy *only because* the baby has AIDS, not because the baby is a "preemie."

Waring explains that

Our team resuscitates
 this Baby Random, birth weight
 one pound, eyelids still fused. Mother's
 a junkie with HIV. Never named him.
 Where I work we bring back terminal preemies.
No Fetus Can Beat Us. That's our motto. (182)

The use of the demonstrative pronoun "this" suggests that Baby Random, the unnamed "preemie", is a relatively common occurrence. In an act of overt disclosure, Waring divulges that the "mother's . . . a junkie with HIV" (182). She confesses the means of transmission, from mother to child, from drug addict to drug addict. The mother is made to be doubly guilty. First, she is a drug addict who passed on a disease that comes from her lifestyle to an unprotected child, and second, she fails even to have named the child. Ironically enough, "Baby Random" serves only as a means of showing how AIDS adds to the already difficult job of following the motto "*No Fetus Can Beat Us.*" The inheritance of AIDS is tragic for

the baby, creating an obvious separation between an innocent victim and his mother, a willing and complicit party in her own disease. In "Baby Random," AIDS exists peripherally as an added problem to the already impossible task of keeping all the "preemies" alive. The added complications of dealing with the opportunistic infections particular to AIDS patients complicates their ability to nurse the child to health. Also, it must be assumed that there would be a great deal of frustration involved in trying to keep a newborn alive that is doomed to an early death.

The poem itself is more about nursing than AIDS. AIDS functions as the subtext, as a new complication to her professional duties. She remains personally removed from the disease while she is continually placed in a professional position that demands that she assess and care for those infected. While she is distanced from the world of junkies and AIDS, the HIV seropositive baby is introduced into her life. The child personifies the difficulties a nurse must deal with as part of her duties. She confesses through her professional judgment a condemnation that looms over both child and mother. The child deserves pity and love while the mother is less deserving, understandable from a nurse's point of view.

3.3) Hemophiliacs and AIDS: Tom Andrews

Hemophiliacs have long been popularly associated as being at risk of contracting AIDS.²⁴ As Grmek explains

In January 1982 the first case of an opportunistic infection in a hemophiliac was reported at the Atlanta surveillance center.... The CDC [Center for Disease Control] hence reported in July 1982 three cases of

²⁴Robert Boucheron's poem "Epitaph of an Innocent" was written in 1985 and it details the knowledge that hemophiliacs get AIDS through tainted blood products. Not until Andrews' poem published twelve years later do we get a personal poetic account of the tragedy of AIDS as it affects hemophiliacs.

AIDS in heterosexual hemophiliacs who had received massive amounts of concentrated blood factor VIII. (36)

While estimates vary, it is reported that as many as sixty-five percent of hemophiliacs in the United States contracted HIV (Grmek 164). Hemophiliacs were also designated part of the Four H Club: homosexuals, heroin addicts, hemophiliacs and Haitians.

No poet has voiced the hemophiliac's perspective until Tom Andrews.

Andrews writes that

As a hemophiliac, I should carry HIV. Statistically, I should. I received many transfusions of Factor VIII during the years when the blood supply was infected. Every adult hemophiliac I had ever met or heard of was infected with HIV. How had I eluded it? When I was convinced I carried HIV, the future narrowed to a point, the past expanded and contracted in waves. Only the present was stable. And the present felt like a continent yet to be explored. I resolved to set out across it, in my work, in my life--to spend my days riotously, wonderingly, intimately, with irrational desire. (12)

Tom Andrews' poem "A Language of Hemophilia" positions the poet, an HIV seronegative hemophiliac, as someone who has been affected by AIDS.²⁵ While today the blood is screened for HIV infection, for a period during the 1980s, this was not the case. Many hemophiliacs contracted HIV from the very transfusions that were meant to prolong or save their lives. Factor VIII, which was once considered the closest thing to a cure for hemophilia, became the cause of new and mysterious infections. It would appear that the cure became worse than the disease. The hemophiliac's body, as a site of

²⁵Factor VIII serves as an excellent example of how to explain the intersubjective space. The platelets are collected from multiple blood donors and are processed in such a way to make it possible for a hemophiliac's blood to clot. During a lifetime of Factor VIII transfusions, a hemophiliac could potentially carry traces of the blood of millions of individual donors.

continuous appraisal and investigation for possible bleeding, is doubly bombarded by the necessity to watch for symptoms of a different disease.

"we read most of these words and numbers
Uncomprehensibly,
As if they were hieroglyphics"

A day, a day

Recurrences by which
'I' assume
'You'

Thistle, keyhole, spittle, crow

Glide, sample, knot, cheek

In four years, 84 hemophiliacs have contracted AIDS and 56 have died. A new test to screen donated blood for AIDS virus lowers risk, but genetically engineered factor VIII should carry no such risk at all and also be much less expensive. Alan Brownstein, the head of the National Hemophilia Foundation, sees the race to produce it as "capitalism at its finest."

Blood pools in a joint

Hear a language force

Firm, cyme, mere, hydrant (12)

Andrews' appropriation of journalistic writing within his poem serves as a concise and effective political tool. AIDS affects his community. However, in an interesting turn, by presenting "Alan Brownstein's" statements about "genetically engineered Factor VIII," he effectively states that hemophiliacs will eventually sever their association or link with AIDS. The cure for hemophiliacs will be discovered through capitalism, not politics or medicine. The distinction between innocent and guilty victims of the disease is emphasized by the fact that once the tainted blood that caused the disease in

hemophiliacs is eliminated, then the association between hemophiliacs and AIDS will be gone. Andrews voices the absence of hemophiliacs within AIDS poetry. AIDS, to hemophiliacs, is contextualized as a medical issue.

3.4) HIV Seroprevalence Test and Gay Sex: Richard Taysan

While Andrews explains that "as a hemophiliac, ... [he] should carry HIV" and that for a while he "was convinced ... [that he] carried HIV," (12) it was the HIV seroprevalence test that proved that the virus was not present in his blood. The odd power of the HIV seroprevalence test to prove the presence or non-presence of the antibodies to the virus in the bloodstream is a central theme in Richard Taysan's poem "Blood Test" as the test is compared to the sexual act. Taysan writes that

As the needle goes into my arm
I think of the moment
we first got into bed together.... (172)

The penetration of the needle evokes the recollection of sexual penetration. The penetrations become the symbolic tearing of the "hymen." Derrida explains that

the hymen, the confusion between the present and the nonpresent, along with all the indifferences it entails within the whole sense of opposites (perception and non-perception, memory and image, memory and desire, etc.), produces the effect of a medium (a medium as element enveloping both terms at once; a medium located between two terms). It is an operation that *both* sows confusion *between* opposites *and* stands *between* the opposites "at once". What counts here is the *between*, the in-between-ness of the hymen. the hymen "takes place" in the "inter-," in the spacing between desire and fulfillment, between perpetration and its recollection. (Kamuf 185-6)

AIDS alters the speaker's experience with sex. The "tearing of the hymen" in this case is not the act of penetration, but rather the altered understanding of sex. AIDS, as both "present and nonpresent," complicates his perception, memory, and desire. He becomes

open to AIDS not only because the HIV seroprevalence test can confirm the existence of the antibodies to HIV in his blood, but also because his "hymen," as the site where seroconversion takes place, is already torn. By fearing the sexual act because of its associations with AIDS, the in-between-ness that the act represents is decentered because it already "sows confusion *between opposites and stands between the opposites at once*" (186). He remembers his lover reaching "for the extra-strong condoms on the table" (172). Even safer-sex practices and condom use cannot ease his fears that his lover "could *tear my inner membranes, expose my blood to your own*" (172) (emphasis mine). The memory is re-experienced to the point that he recalls saying

no, you
want me to say it
again and again, your eyes
closing as you fling your
seed across my body.... (172)

He is trapped between past and present, between the possibility that the sexual act has exposed him to the virus for which he is being presently tested. It is not "until I hear the nurse say she's *going to take the needle out of my arm*" (172) that the speaker is brought back to the present. The lover and the nurse both penetrate the man, and pull out. With the lover, he sees

the white drops of your
sperm on my stomach, watch
as your eyes open and
you see that I want it
off my body. You wet your
fingertips with the glutinous
fluid, shake them in my
face, saying *this is it, man,*
the only life we have now. (173)

The lover expresses the fact that they cannot make sex completely evil and diseased because that would be saying that what they are doing is wrong. To have gay sex is not wrong, diseased, or dangerous. To have unprotected gay sex is the problem. Homosexual sex can be non-monogamous and safe which reinforces the correctness of their lifestyle. What is at stake is the fact that gay sex is fine. AIDS has altered the way gay sex is practiced, not that gay sex is practiced. Taysan rejects the idea that gay sex is imbued with 'necrophillic pallor' (Montgomery) by making the sexual act a distinct part of gay life. *"[T]his is it, man, the only life we have now"* (173). They must negotiate the sexual act during the AIDS era because the only alternative is never to have sex again.

3.5) AIDS and Race II: Marvin K. White

While Taysan's "Blood Test" is about the paranoia of having sex during the AIDS era, Marvin K. White's poem "That Thing" represents how AIDS, as an unnamed disease, fails to change the life of an infected and unnamed person. The disease is called "that thing" and the infected person is simply referred to as "he." The chorus catches both the forward movement and the stasis contained in the adverbial intensifier "still." The stanzas between the chorus detail the character's illness as it takes more and more of a toll on his life.

He still singing in the choir
 he still loving men
 he still kiki-ing at the club
 he still sometimes real still.²⁶ (187)

²⁶Reading White's use of "still" as a negative aspect of his character's own failure to come to terms with the changes AIDS should force on his life against Allen Ginsberg's use of "still" in "Sphincter", where "still" intensifies his resolve to continue to enjoy an adventurous gay sex life unchanged by AIDS, reveals the ability of "still" to capture both the stasis and the forward movement contained in the word.

In "That Thing," AIDS is contracted through gay sex. His character's lifestyle led to his becoming HIV infected.

He got that thing
 from his friend
 from being smart enough
 to sell his body
 when he was in prison
 when he was in the hospital
 when he was in the bushes
 and through the red cracked
 skin of his lips
 he says he gonna be all right (188)

The man was "smart enough to sell his body" when he was in prison and at other times during his life. AIDS crosses cultural lines. The black gay man is a gay prostitute, a prisoner, and a patient.

"That thing" he got cannot be traced to one specific event or moment, but it can be traced to a pattern of risky and dangerous behavior. The generic "he" in the poem suffers from AIDS in a different way.

He got that thing
 that Magic Johnson got
 That Arthur Ashe had
 That Easy-E had
 That Ryan White had
 but he's never been a basketball star
 tennis ace
 rapper
 or little white boy (187)

"He" suffers from the same disease as celebrities and sports stars, yet his experience with sickness is entirely different. "That thing" serves as a convenient trope for

AIDS, the unnamed and unmentionable signifier, referentially. AIDS is different from other sexually transmitted diseases

cuz it ain't like that thing
 he got in high school then college
 this thing and that thing
 as different as he is now
 but he told me it still burns
 more like freezing
 less like fire (187)

While his character compares the symptoms of AIDS with his past experiences with sexually transmitted diseases, what emerges is a pattern of infection. The sexually transmitted diseases he "got in high school then college" could be cured with antibiotics while AIDS cannot be cured.

He got that thing
 and he stopped looking
 for all the same differences
 in his body
 he stopped remembering
 forgotten or torn condoms
 he stopped remembering
 the highs and the lows
 the raw and the rips
 in his skin (188)

White represents AIDS as an unnamed, yet unmistakable, disease. The sheer mass of repetition creates the sense that the disease is constructed upon its own referentiality. We know about AIDS because we know famous people who are infected. "That thing" becomes the trope for AIDS, as if changing the name not only allows a measure of control over how people will perceive illness but it also makes it seem trivial and implied, even if it is not spoken.

White's representation of AIDS is considerably different from David Warren Frechette's and Essex Hemphill's. While Frechette writes about dying of AIDS with dignity as a Black homosexual and Hemphill is mainly concerned with describing the "sexual turbulence" a Black HIV-seronegative homosexual must navigate in the days of AIDS, White represents a conflicting image with the mainstream celebrities who have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. The generic "he" in the poem suffers differently than the celebrities whose suffering has become a national concern. The celebrities are mourned; "he" is dying invisibly.

3.6) Representing the Feminine: Beatrix Gates and Marilyn Hacker

Beatrix Gates' poem "Homeless" represents the feelings of a lesbian who believes she may or may not have been swindled by someone claiming to have AIDS. She is approached by an almost delirious man who explains that

"It's dangerous
now," he continues, "it's no good anymore. They ruined it.
The addicts. They steal everything. They stole
my money, my medicine, my AZT. They sell it on the street." (84)

She asks the man if he has "been to the GMHC [Gay Men's Health Crisis]" (84) for help to which he answers "Yeah, . they got me a place at the AIDS Hospice, GMHC only takes people under \$5000, my checks put me over, . but they got me a referral to the hospice" (84). Broke, exhausted, and alone, he begs for ten dollars to get to the GMHC. She gives him the money and directs him to a bench where he can rest until he takes a cab to the GMHC. The next day, she sees the same man doing the same thing to another lesbian.

Lying son of a bitch, goddam faggot, draining off women's
energy, lesbian energy like no one
ever dies from anything besides AIDS. Community,

my ass. How many faggots are nursing women
with breast cancer or anything else for that matter. (86)

The man she helped the day before is no longer considered gay, but a "goddam faggot" who takes advantage of AIDS and lesbians. Part of what makes the situation so unforgivable is that she believes gay men are self-involved with their own suffering and that they are oblivious to the suffering of others. The politics of AIDS has marginalized women, as is the tendency of almost every social trend.

Gates equates breast cancer and AIDS as medical and political issues. She is curious to know "how many faggots are nursing women with breast cancer or anything else for that matter" (86). While Gates attempts to strategically equate breast cancer strategically as the female equivalent of AIDS, the male counterpart to breast cancer would be prostate cancer. While women have been marginalized by the politics of AIDS, AIDS is not, as my entire thesis is trying to argue, a gay disease. Time has changed the ways AIDS is treated and understood. As Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox explain in the introduction to AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease,

AIDS was institutionalized within academic medicine and the medical care establishment. The patterns of research, services, and financing of care in the 1990s have much more to do with long-term strategies for responding to diseases such as cancer than with the epidemic diseases of the past. It may well be horrifying to realize that AIDS is fitting our patterns of dealing with chronic disease, since it puts the problem into a long-term perspective. But if we assume that the rate of HIV infection will continue for the 1990s much as it did for the 1980s; if we assume that, as with cancer, most treatment will prolong life rather than cure the disease; if we assume that scientific research will continue to expand our knowledge rather than soon provide a means of prevention or cure; if we assume that we will continue to respond to AIDS through the provision of specialized hospital units, long-term care, and other institutional services, we must also conclude that we are dealing not with a brief, time-limited

epidemic but with a long, slow process more analogous to cancer than to cholera. (4-5)

As AIDS is presently understood as a chronic rather than a debilitating and fatal disease, it is being repoliticized and restructured. If the equation AIDS = death no longer applies and a new paradigm exists in which AIDS = chronic disease, then it stands to reason that the political implications of the disease will be altered

Gates gains control over her emotions and resolves that she has no right to judge the man.

I begin to choke on my own breath
as I realize he may not remember.
AIDS in the last stages.
Is he lying or not remembering?
Is he dying or running a scam
or both? Does he know the difference? Do I?
Do I need or deserve to know
because I gave him \$10, because
I'm a lesbian who has seen too
much of this disease? (86-87)

She entitles herself to her anger, yet she realizes that ten dollars does not give her the power to denounce the man, let alone all gay men. She questions her need or desire to know if the man actually has AIDS. If he does have AIDS then he was worthy of her help, and if he does not, then this man is somehow reduced to claiming he has AIDS in order to swindle ten dollars here and there.

- In "Homeless," AIDS, as a subject, brings other subjects to the forefront. The poem is more about a lesbian living in the AIDS era than it is about AIDS, and as such, the poem is important because AIDS is peripheral. AIDS is decentered by such themes as cancer, confidence scams, and lesbian and gay politics, becoming part of the social landscape. AIDS remains a political issue, but it is brought to

bear upon itself and other diseases and issues that have not received the same amount of public sympathy and attention. One can speculate that while AIDS does not affect her directly, she is aware of and angered by its implications and the overshadowing of her own life and suffering.

While in Gates' poem AIDS is compared with breast cancer, Marilyn Hacker's poem "Against Elegies" lumps AIDS, cancer, and all the war atrocities of our century together. By not privileging one type of death over another, she allows for different associations to take place. Hacker places AIDS and cancer together and by so doing erases the equating of gender and sexuality with death and disease. Men and women are suffering equally, and in the end death is the issue. Cancer and AIDS are both epidemic and equally political.

James has cancer. Catherine has cancer.
Melvin has AIDS.
Whom will I call, and get no answer? (93)

Cancer and AIDS have touched her personally. She lives with the knowledge that each phone call could result in the discovery that a friend has died. Cancer and AIDS have made death part of the daily life experience instead of being some dubious force that exists at a safe distance. Loss becomes political when she positions historical atrocities from our century within the context of present-day suffering.

But this was another century
in which we made death humanly obscene:
Soweto El Salvador Kurdistan
Armenia Shatila Baghdad Hanoi
Auschwitz. Each one, unique as our lives are,
taints what's left with complicity,
makes everyone living a survivor
who will, or won't bear witness for the dead. (95-96)

Here, AIDS and cancer share the same political light as man made atrocities such as the Holocaust and Soweto. Even death borrows from "the cultural field from which ... [Hacker] must draw ... [her] words and ... [her] syntax, the historical field which ... [she] must read by writing on it" (Derrida, "La Parole Soufflée" 178). AIDS has not only politicized death but it has also politicized disease. The final two lines of the above quoted section explain the title "Against Elegies." One is either bearing "witness for the dead," or is not. By not writing an elegy, Hacker makes the act of writing the poem, and remembering, the act of a survivor who will "bear witness for the dead." Writing becomes an empowering endeavor because it gives Hacker the power to express how she is bearing "witness for the dead."

Her decision not to elegize the dead is not arrived at without complications. She explains that

Pregnant women with AIDS, schoolgirls, crack whores
die faster than men do, in more pain,
are more likely than men to die alone. (94)

Hacker, much like Gates, politicizes and privileges the plight of women. Women who die of AIDS are shunned, forgotten, and they die a more terrible death than men because their systems of support are more likely to disappear with an HIV seropositive diagnosis. Complicating the distinction between men and women with AIDS is Hacker's presentation of Lidia. Hacker wonders

where's she
who got her act so clean
of rum and Salem Filters and cocaine
after her passing husband passed it on?
As soon as she knew
she phoned and told her mother she had AIDS
but no, she wouldn't come back to San Juan. (94)

Hacker confesses how Lidia contracted the disease. She is the victim of her "passing husband that passed it on" to her. While Hacker does not give the husband's means of contraction, she does strongly suggest that Lidia is somehow an innocent victim of AIDS. Her husband inflicted AIDS on her. Hacker provides a second example of how women suffer more from AIDS

The earth-black woman in the bed beside
Lidia on the AIDS floor--deaf and blind:
I want to know if, no, how, she died.
The husband, who'd stopped visiting, returned? (94)

The woman dies and Hacker wonders "how," as if to ask if she died alone or if someone was with her.

AIDS is not only politically charged on its own, but Hacker's representation of AIDS effects a restructuring and repoliticizing of AIDS as far as its poetic representation is concerned. AIDS is necessarily recontextualized to include then suffering of women who are either infected by their husbands, or by some other unknown means.

3.7) Conclusion

The representation of AIDS has always already begun to efface itself. As each poet comes to represent the disease, the poet becomes

the *subject* of the book, its substance and its master, its servant and its theme. And the book is indeed the subject of the poet, the speaking and knowing being who *in* the book writes *on* the book. This movement through which the book, *articulated* by the voice of the poet, is folded and bound to itself, the movement through which the book becomes a subject in itself and for itself, is not critical or speculative reflection, but is, first of all, poetry and history. For in its representation of itself the subject is shattered and opened. (Derrida, "Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book" 65)

The poem becomes a simulacra, representing the poet and the subject infinitely bound and invaginated upon itself. As each poem shatters and opens the subject of AIDS, the possibility of altering the paradigm (from marginalized to universalized) of the representation of AIDS, creates the possibility for the "worst political violence." Derrida argues

that AIDS could not, as some had thought or hoped it would, be confined to the margins of society (delinquency, homosexuality, drug addiction). [because] we are facing something within the social bond that we might still want to consider as destructuring and depoliticizing poly-perversion: an historic (historical!) knot or denouement which is no doubt unique. In these circumstances the (restructuring and supposedly repoliticizing) reactions are largely unforeseeable and entirely capable of bringing forth the worst political violence. (Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs. An Interview" 20-21)

At issue is the reality that the representation of AIDS is framed by, as Yingling suggests, "[m]yths of identity ... that promises--falsely--to explain their contraction of the disease..." (303). At issue is who has the power to define AIDS. As the poetry itself has shown, the variety of identities that come to be represented problematizes any simple reduction that attempts to link AIDS with one specific identity. While critics like Morrison and Edelman contend that AIDS is "a subject whose content is suggested but not exhausted by reference to 'male homosexuality,'" (10) the same reference to homosexuality forever historicizes the original paradigm that HOMOSEXUALITY=AIDS. Just as medical and scientific research alters our understanding of AIDS, from a completely fatal gay disease to a chronic viral disease, so to have the poets who come to the subject of AIDS. Moreover, the confused homosexual past of the disease was more a product of homophobia than of scientific truth, and to continue to perceive AIDS as a gay issue is to overlook the complexity of AIDS. "[N]o human being is ever safe from AIDS" (Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs" 20). While

some critics attempt to privilege poetry about AIDS written by homosexuals, this is limiting. What I have proposed is not a break from or a separation of AIDS and gay issues, but more to the point, I am simply calling for the acknowledgment that poetry about AIDS eludes any possibility of being defined as a gay subject, much as AIDS was never a gay disease. Reading the poetry about AIDS written between 1985 and 1997 *in toto*, we see that AIDS poetry is continually repoliticized and restructured with the addition of every new identity that inscribes itself in the representation of AIDS. Derrida positions the poet's language within a larger cultural context by explaining the "irreducible secondarity" of the speaking subject who draws his/her words and syntax from "the cultural field," and reads from "the historical field" by "writing on it" (Derrida, "La Parole Soufflée" 178). Each new identity borrows from the same cultural field to create its individual representations. The cultural field dictates that AIDS poetry cannot be gay poetry, but at the very least, a coalition of all the identities described in the various representations of AIDS.

AIDS Poetry

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