AIDS in Cultural Bodies

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Scripting the Absent Subject (1980-2010)

By

Sathyaraj Venkatesan
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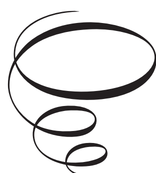

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Dedicated to

The people living with HIV/AIDS

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ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ARC	AIDS-Related Complex
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
HAART	Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
MSM	Men who have sex with men
PLWA	People living with AIDS
PLWH	People living with HIV
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
DL	Down low

It is the health crisis that Black America has yet to fully comprehend and come to grips with. Festering beneath a shroud of secrecy and facilitated by a complex web of lies, shame and misinformation, it is an epidemic that is placing whole communities in jeopardy. Even in the face of tremendous advances in detection and treatment, even with the mountains of information disseminated about protection and prevention, the spread of HIV/AIDS has become a public health emergency among African-Americans, one that has radically altered the profile of the disease's "typical" victims.

—Whitaker, *Ebony*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> The devastation and loss of life in the African American community from HIV/AIDS is far from over, and will continue until a significant response to this plague transcends political positioning and those willing to claim that this disease is a plague threatening all Americans alike.
>
> —William Yarbro, *Not in My Family*.

> Our work against the AIDS pandemic can only be won at the cultural level. This is why cultural production organized around the social problem of HIV is so important. Cultural production opens space for us to make meaning of our situations, expose injustices, and craft solutions without having to constantly draw on empiricism to understand our truths. It also permits us to put sex and sexuality on the table for discussion—no hiding, no apologies.
>
> —George Ayala and Vallerie Wagner, *War Diaries*.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that African Americans, who comprise approximately 12 percent of the population,[1] account for 46 percent[2] of AIDS cases. According to the latest report published by the Kaiser Family Foundation in March 2011, African Americans account for 45 percent of new HIV infections.[3] The disproportionate affliction of HIV/AIDS among African Americans, in fact, has transformed and diversified the demographic landscape of HIV/AIDS in America, making AIDS "a largely black disease" (*The Secret Epidemic,* 270). Commenting on the increasing incidence of AIDS among African Americans, the National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC) observes thus: "Race and ethnicity in the U.S. are associated with key factors that determine health status such as poverty, access to health care, health care seeking behaviors, illicit drug use and high rates of sexually transmitted diseases."[4] Although HIV/AIDS-related mortality has marginally declined owing to pharmacological advances (such as combination therapies, etc.) and various HIV/AIDS awareness programs, HIV/AIDS continues to pose a threat to Americans in general and African Americans in particular. Phil Wilson, the CEO of the Black AIDS

Institute, succinctly sums it up thus: "AIDS in America is a black disease" (*AIDS in Black Face,* 49).

Whither AIDS criticism?

While the aforementioned statistics illustrate the impact of the AIDS crisis in the African American community, AIDS literary narratives portray the effects of HIV/AIDS on human lives. AIDS narratives, irrespective of racial and ethnic divides, produced since the recognized beginning of the epidemic provide a cultural and literary interpretation of AIDS and also envision discursive possibilities for PLWH/PLWAs. If, on the one hand, the various academic responses make "sense of the AIDS epidemic in a critical manner by analyzing AIDS discourse" (*Moral Threats and Dangerous Desires,* 20) as Deborah Lupton contends, then on the other, the literary AIDS narratives aim "to alert people," "to explore multi-facets of the epidemic," and "to educate the general readership" (*Confronting AIDS Through Literature,* 93). What differentiates African American AIDS narratives from their white counterparts is that they significantly brought the taboo subject of black sexuality out of the closet and thus broke the culture of silence surrounding AIDS and sexuality forever.

Existing critical studies on HIV/AIDS literary narratives have provided only cursory attention to the HIV/AIDS narratives produced by African American writers. A few works that selectively analyze African American HIV/AIDS literary narratives include Judith Laurence Pastore's *Confronting AIDS through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation* (1993); *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis* (1993) by Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier; *AIDS: The Literary Response* (1992) by Emmanuel Sampath Nelson; Steven Kruger's *AIDS Narratives: Gender and Sexuality, Fiction and Science* (1996); *Stagestruck: Theater,* AIDS, *and the Marketing of Gay America* (1998) by Sarah Schulman; Nancy L. Roth and Katie Hogan's *Gendered Epidemic: Representations of Women in the Age of AIDS; Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (2004) by Ross Chambers; and Simon Dickel's *Black/Gay: The Harlem Renaissance, The Protest Era and Constructions of Black Gay Identity in the 1980s and 90s* (2011).

A few sociological studies also examine the structural and social impediments to confronting HIV/AIDS in African American communities. For instance, Cathy J. Cohen's *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (1999) examines the reasons for the tardy response of the black community, especially the black leadership, the

black church and the black press in dealing with HIV/AIDS. In a different vein, *African American Women and HIV/AIDS: Critical Responses* (2003), edited by Dorie J. Gilbert and Ednita M. Wright, voices the concerns of female African American PLWH/PLWAs. Then there is Jacob Levenson's *The Secret Epidemic: The Story of AIDS in Black America* (2004), which uses stories of African American PLWH/PLWAs, researchers, AIDS activists and politicians to analyze the causes of the growing incidence of HIV/AIDS. Levenson, by way of conclusion, argues that more than social policies it is the nature of the racial gap and disparity that caused the spread of AIDS in black America. *African Americans and HIV/AIDS: Understanding and Addressing the Epidemic* (2010), edited by Donna Hubbard McCree, Kenneth Terrill Jones and Ann O'Leary, is concerned with "the history and context of HIV/AIDS in African Americans and interventions targeting specific subpopulations" (McCree, 9).

Given the cursory attention that this issue has received thus far, this project serves to fill a significant gap by critically investigating African American HIV/AIDS literary narratives published between 1981 and 2010. With this aim, the present study, comprising of five chapters, considers for critical treatment the major African American HIV/AIDS literary narratives, which include Samuel R. Delany's *The Tales of Plagues and Carnivals* (1985); Cheryl L. West's *Before It Hits Home* (1989); Larry Duplechan's *Tangled Up in Blue* (1989); Essex Hemphill's *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991); Michael Hunter's *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993); Arthur Ashe's *Days of Grace: A Memoir* (1993); Steven Corbin's *A Hundred Days from Now* (1995); Charlotte Watson Sherman's *Touch* (1996); Sapphire's *Push* (1996); Pearl Cleage's *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1997); Shaneska Jackson's *Li'l Mama's Rules* (1997); Gil R. Robertson's *Not in My Family: AIDS in the African American Community* (2006); and Marvelyn Brown's *The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful and (HIV) Positive* (2008). Common to these texts are the psychosocial and sexual hardships endured by African American PLWH/PLWAs and the various coping strategies they adopted to come to terms with their HIV/AIDS identity.

It would be instructive at this stage to define the term "HIV/AIDS narratives" as used in this book. Porter Abbott, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, defines narrative as "the representation of events consisting of *story and narrative discourse*; story is an event or sequence of events (the action) and narrative discourse is those events as represented" (19). Narratives are powerful forms of human expression structuring the experiences of the world. HIV/AIDS narratives produced

since the recognized beginnings of AIDS in 1981 are discourses that express the trials and tribulations of PLWH/PLWAs. An HIV/AIDS narrative consists of "the dominant voice of HIV/AIDS as a subject or theme and is made up of the trends in the different thematically interrelated ideas and the materials which communicate such ideas" (*HIV/AIDS, Health and the Media in China*, 28). As an expressive medium, the earliest task of HIV/AIDS literary narratives, according to Judith Pastore Laurence, was to "combat the multiple untruths and prejudices surrounding the disease" (*Confronting AIDS through Literature*, 3). From then on, these narratives had the pedagogical goals of "preach[ing] the need for safe sex and clean needles, dispel[ling] unwarranted fears, and win[ning] sympathy for the infected and their loved ones" (3). Thus, HIV/AIDS literary narratives, through an empathetic portrayal of the physical and emotional strivings of HIV/AIDS patients, not only resist the figural meanings of AIDS but also educate, subvert and revise public (mis)conceptions about AIDS.

This book consists of five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one, titled *Introduction,* lays down the major themes/issues discussed in the work. Chapter two, *Plotting the Crisis: HIV/AIDS and African American Response*, provides a historical insight into African American literary and cultural responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis from 1981 to 2010. Taking into consideration the major political, cultural, and scientific responses, the history of the AIDS crisis among African Americans can be configured into three distinct phases: 1981–1989, 1990–1997 and 1998–2010. This historical overview should help readers understand the specific socio-cultural issues pertaining to African American PLWH/PLWAs.

Chapter three, *HIV/AIDS, Abjection and Social Death*, explores the concept of social death in relation to HIV/AIDS. Using Julia Kristeva's notion of "abject," the chapter investigates how enforced and self-imposed alienation threaten the meaningful existence of PLWH/PLWAs. Synthesizing various definitions of social death, the first part of the chapter attempts to evolve a working theoretical framework of social death in relation to HIV/AIDS and then seeks to examine its ideological import in African American HIV/AIDS literary narratives. While the social discrimination against PLWH/PLWAs is a tragic global reality, the condition of African American PLWH/PLWAs is unenviable in that they confront and negotiate multiple oppressions of racism, institutional inequalities, and intracommunity marginalization among other socially discouraging forces. Taking these cues, the chapter attempts to answer the following: What is social death? What constitutes social death? How are venereal diseases and social death related? How is HIV/AIDS linked to

social death? What are its implications for African Americans? Does it pose a unique problem for African American PLWAs? Analyzing African American HIV/AIDS literary narratives such as *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* (1985), *Before It Hits Home* (1989), *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991), *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993), *Days of Grace* (1993), *A Hundred Days from Now* (1995), *Touch* (1996), *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1997), *Li'l Mama's Rules* (1997), and *The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful and (HIV) Positive* (2008), this chapter explores the agonizing experiences of African American HIV/AIDS patients.

Chapter four, *Cartographies of Sexual Death and the New Erotic Grammar in the Age of AIDS*, extends the arguments of the previous chapter and seeks to explore how HIV/AIDS reconfigures the sexual economy of African American PLWH/PLWAs, and, in so doing, the chapter delineates an emerging sense of "the erotic." Given the fact that an individual is also a sexual being, the social abjection suffered by PLWH/PLWAs also ruptures their sexual life. They are treated as undesirable, contaminated, and toxic by the heteronormative and dominant cultural systems. Consequently, PLWH/PLWAs either negate their own sexual self or engage in non-normative sexual practices such as sexual fantasizing, among others. This realigned sexual and erotic economy also has definitive implications for black women and their bodies. Taking these cues, this chapter analyzes African American HIV/AIDS literary narratives such as *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993), *A Hundred Days from Now* (1995), *Touch* (1996), *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1997), *Li'l Mama's Rules* (1997), and *The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful and (HIV) Positive* (2008) to explore the re-orchestrated erotic and sexual economies of African American PLWH/PLWAs.

Chapter five, *Beyond Lament: Restituting the Fractured Self*, examines the various psychosocial adaptive strategies used by African Americans to come to terms with their HIV/AIDS identity. Cognizant of their abjecthood and physical predicament, these PLWH/PLWAs attempt to reaffirm their meaningful existence in various ways. The various coping mechanisms involve specific ways the PLWH/PLWAs adopt *en route* to their empowerment. They also constitute a set of tools for reframing and redirecting the cumulative effects of HIV/AIDS. While coping resources such as support networks and AIDS groups provide PLWH/PLWAs with a sense of belonging, the various individual coping mechanisms, such as narrating one's own pain, deriving strength from shared African American cultural heritage and African American spirituality, at least temporarily

amend their fractured self. Taking these cues, this chapter takes into consideration the following African American HIV/AIDS narratives: *Tangled Up in Blue* (1989), *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993), *A Hundred Days from Now* (1995), *Touch* (1996), *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1997), *Li'l Mama's Rules* (1997), *Not in My Family* (2008), and *The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful and (HIV) Positive* (2008) in order to explore the various adaptive strategies used by African American PLWH/PLWAs to come to terms with their HIV/AIDS identity.

Taken together, these chapters form a cohesive unit that examines the psychosocial and sexual aspects of African American PLWH/PLWAs and the various coping strategies they adopt to come to terms with their predicament. *Living with HIV/AIDS: The Way Forward*, the last chapter, briefly reviews the issues addressed in the African American HIV/AIDS literary narratives and draws together the findings of preceding chapters in order to map the future of HIV/AIDS writing.

Cultural Logic of African American AIDS

The cultural taboo associated with black sexuality contributes to the growing incidence of HIV/AIDS. Black sexuality has been defined primarily through distorted historical and mainstream depictions of African Americans. From the time of slavery, black sexuality has been feared, and black men and women misrepresented as hypersexual, sexually aggressive, and deviant. In fact, the legacy of racism and the dynamics of black sexuality through racialized stereotypes became the reasons for excluding African Americans from white normative sexual behavior. (Mis)represented as dehumanized beings, the sexual activities of African Americans were deemed by the whites as "disgusting, dirty or funky and considered less acceptable" (*The Cornel West Reader*, 514). While the cultural movements of the 1960s challenged the dehumanizing endeavor of classifying black sexuality as a disease,[5] black sexuality remained a taboo subject for white and black Americans.

Evelynn Hammonds' article "Race, Sex, AIDS: The Construction of 'Other'" (1986), published in *Radical America*, faults the "lack of public mobilization" (28) towards AIDS. The author ascribes the relative silence of the black community to the stereotyped black sexuality in America. Again, black leaders such as Eldridge Cleaver and Louis Farrakhan, among others, and traditional black institutions such as the church and family were reticent to discuss issues related to sexuality. During racial integration, the black leadership was engaged in gaining "accommodation

with and acceptance from white America" (*The Cornel West Reader*, 517) by adapting "respectable" white norms. In fact, the black leadership feared that the acknowledgment of AIDS would revive the preconfigured notions of black sexuality and disrupt the political and social processes of racial assimilation. As such, the black social and political institutions, as Cathy J. Cohen argues, addressed only "consensus issues"—issues thought to be "linked to, or to conform to, middle-class/dominant constructions of moral, normative, patriarchal citizenship" (*Boundaries of Blackness*, 19). What is at stake are the "cross-cutting issues" within the community, such as AIDS, which "disproportionately and directly affect only certain segments of a marginal group" (*Boundaries of Blackness*, 13) such as black gays and IV drug users.

With the white community stereotyping black sexuality as deviant, and the African American community considering black sexuality an impediment to the process of assimilation, the discourse surrounding black sexuality remains marginalized. Referring to this reticence to address the AIDS crisis, AIDS advocate Keith Cylar explains:

> To counter white bigotry . . . African-Americans often try to present a flawless image. Anyone who deviates from that ideal—such as those who are at the highest risk of HIV—face extra ostracism for 'betraying the race.' Then there is the widespread fear that if the truth about who is getting AIDS is known, whites will use it as another club to pummel blacks. (Roth, 106)

The intersection of blackness, sexuality and HIV/AIDS thus constitutes a contested site for negotiating the meaning of queer sexualities and HIV/AIDS. The refusal to "acknowledge, examine or engage" black sexuality, according to West, would limit the black community's ability to "confront the overwhelming realities of AIDS epidemic in America in general and black America in particular" (*The Cornel West Reader*, 520). Concurring with West, Philip Brian Harper, in his *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity*, identifies the specific discursive forces that prevent African Americans from finding a public language with which to address the AIDS crisis productively. Thus he states:

> If, even today, response to AIDS in black communities is characterized by a profound silence regarding actual sexual practices, either heterosexual or homosexual, this is largely because of the suppression of talk about sexuality generally and about male homosexuality in particular that is enacted in black communities through the discourses that constitute them. (16)

Further, the socially conservative ideology followed by African American churches also paralyzed the early response to the AIDS crisis. The black church, even today, remains the "community's spiritual, political, and often material anchor" (*The Secret Epidemic*, 111) and is involved in extra religious and civic activities. However, in the name of Christian moralistic tenets, it distances itself from the socially sensitive issues of HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, IV drug use, and homosexuality, among others, that plague the African American community. In addition, the social classification of homosexuality as a white gay man's disease further prevented the already homophobic African American church's engagement in forming a rhetorical and practical response to the AIDS crisis. Even though the church initiated affirmative action to address the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s, homophobic religious discourse continued to prevent effective intervention.

During the early years of the epidemic, the mainstream media, as well as African American media, failed to create awareness about the impact of AIDS on African American communities. Despite indications from the CDC as early as 1982 regarding the risk of HIV/AIDS to African Americans, there remained a lingering neglect on the part of the mainstream media. It was only in 1985, almost four years after the official beginning of the epidemic, that articles on AIDS were published in African American magazines such as *Ebony* and *Essence*.

Stakeholders in HIV/AIDS Discourse

Homosexuals, bisexuals, and women are the most vulnerable populations affected by HIV/AIDS in the African American community. Given the influence of the black church on the African American community, homosexuality was seen as debasing the "black family"—the cornerstone of heteronormative hegemony. While the fear of ostracism from the community prevented many African American homosexuals from disclosing their sexual orientation, they were also marginalized in the white gay community. Black gays had to confront racist seclusion from the white gay community and isolation from within the black community. bell hooks (*sic*) illustrates the alienation and isolation black gays face from the white gay community and the black community thus: "Often black gay folk feel isolated because there are tensions in their relationships with the larger, predominantly white gay community created by racism, and tensions within black communities around issues of homophobia" ("Homophobia in Black Communities," 125). Described as a "physiologically and economically depressed subgroup of the black

community" ("Race, Sex, AIDS," 32), black homosexuals were perceived as "mitigating one's racial identity and deflating one's community standing" (*Boundaries of Blackness* 14).

Since the identification of the initial cases of AIDS in black communities, the discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS have been couched in the retributive rhetoric of sin and punishment. Further, homophobia, coupled with the prevailing misconception about HIV/AIDS as a gay disease, led to a complete disavowal of the AIDS crisis by the larger black institutions. Centered on the discourse of respectability, the black socio-political institutions distanced themselves from the marginal groups disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS. As Laura Randolph argues: "The greater religious [and social] conservatism in the Black community encourages a level of homophobia that leads Black gay and bisexual men to be more secretive about their sexual orientation and to define themselves as heterosexual in spite of same sex sexual activities" ("The Hidden Fear," 123). This intolerance towards homosexuality and HIV/AIDS has prevented many blacks from "seek(ing) treatment"; instead they suffered in "silence … keeping their affliction secret" ("AIDS: Is It a Major Threat?" 92).

On the other hand, bisexuals were treated as the culprits transmitting HIV/AIDS to heterosexuals, especially women. Among African Americans, this behavior, of men having sex with both male and female partners, is known as "down low" or DL. Debra Fraser-Howze, the CEO of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS, in her introduction to La Joyce Brookshire's *Faith Under Fire: Betrayed by a Thing Called Love* (2006), blames the secretive sexual lifestyle of men who have sex with men as well as with women for the spread of AIDS to black women: "We have a group of brothers, not all but some, who are simply doing the wrong thing and putting sisters at great risk" (xxix). Bisexuality and DL are distinct concepts. While bisexuals are attracted to both male and female partners, DLs are men who have sex with men as well as women but in a secretive way. The term originated in the African American community during the late 1990s to refer to a "socially questionable act or behavior engaged in secret by any other person who maintained a very different behavior and image above ground" ("An Anatomy of the Straight Black Sissy," 42). Given the abomination of homosexuality within black communities, many homosexuals, in order to maintain their racial connectedness and their familial affiliation, become DL.

While subsections of blacks such as gays had to suffer intracommunity marginalization, the case of African American women was no different.

African American women have been subjected to extreme images of "sexualized, deviant, exotic and dehumanized behavior" (*African American Women and HIV/AIDS,* 16). Given the historically marginalized status of black women owing to the triple burden of racism, sexism, and gender oppression, the increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS revived every possible racist stereotype about black female sexuality. In the AIDS discourse, African American women are constantly represented as the "victims that are the 'other' of the 'other,' the deviants of the deviants, irrespective of their sexual identities or practices" ("Toward a Genealogy," 179). Cindy Patton contends that "sensational media attention to the research finding that women of color were over-represented in HIV and AIDS statistics, especially as sexual partners of infected men, shored up racist ideas that African American and Latin sexuality were exotic and categorically different than 'white' (hetero)sexuality" (*The Last Served*, 11). In short, AIDS revived all the familiar bigoted ideas of gender, sexuality, and race.

CHAPTER TWO

PLOTTING THE CRISIS: HIV/AIDS AND AFRICAN AMERICAN RESPONSE

This chapter provides a historical overview of the African American literary and cultural responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis from 1981 to 2010. The literary history of AIDS can be configured into three distinct temporal phases: 1981–1989, 1990–1997 and 1998–2010.[1] This historical overview helps in delineating the specific socio-cultural and literary issues pertaining to African American PLWH/PLWAs discussed later in this book.

"The Secret Epidemic": The First Phase (1981–1989)

AIDS in America officially began with the CDC report of June 5, 1981.[2] By late August 1981, over 108 cases of PCP and Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) were reported by the CDC. Since the majority of incidental victims were active homosexuals, the syndrome was (mis)named as GRID[3] (Gay Related Immune Disorder) and was colloquially referred to as "gay cancer." In order to avoid a political backlash from the homosexual community, Haitian immigrants,[4] and hemophiliacs[5] (the initial incidental victims of AIDS), the CDC named the syndrome AIDS in 1982.[6] Although one in the five cases reported in the first CDC report was a black American,[7] classification based on race and ethnicity was only addressed in 1983. The CDC reported two AIDS cases among females (one black and one Latino) and, later, in an accompanying report, documented sixteen prisoners as afflicted with AIDS in New York and New Jersey, out of which seven were black and two were Latinos.[8] In view of the above, the CDC began to report the AIDS crisis based on a racial and ethnic divide in 1983. By 1985, African Americans constituted roughly a quarter of all people diagnosed with AIDS, thereby making AIDS a unique black problem from the start.

Resisting the Epidemic of Signification

Limited knowledge about the etiology of AIDS led to an explosion of figural meanings, making AIDS simultaneously an "epidemic of transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification" ("How to have Theory in an Epidemic," 11) as Paula Treichler puts it. The paranoia surrounding AIDS was further augmented by the way science and popular culture, especially the media, tenuously but steadily defined AIDS as a gay plague.[9] If the media, through its reckless representation of HIV/AIDS, held homosexuals responsible for the outbreak of the disease, then the Ronald Reagan administration[10] and the State machinery, with its conservative attitude, were equally negligent. In a similar vein, religious discourse surrounding the AIDS crisis revolved around retributive moralism, and did its share of targeting homosexuals.

To counter such gross misrepresentations of PLWH/PLWAs and homosexuals in the dominant discourse and further to challenge the ineptitude of the Reagan administration in addressing the epidemic, gays formed community collectives such as the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), NAMES Project, AIDS Memorial Quilt, Silence=Death, and ACT UP. Even though these organizations were dominated by white gay men, African American gay leaders like Reggie Williams were involved in AIDS activism in black communities. By joining the Black and White Men Together (BWMT)[11]—a group that organized gay men to build a visible, supportive community—and allying with Phil Wilson, black gay activists sought to fight the dangerous misconception among African Americans that AIDS afflicts only white gay men or the blacks who have sex with white men.[12] The resulting activities launched the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, a coalition of groups working to stop HIV/AIDS among gay men of color. The black gay community also found support from black women such as Debra Fraser-Howze, the founder of the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS in 1987. Local activists from around the country, such as the Philadelphia-based BEBASHI, the Atlanta-based Outreach Inc. founded by Sandra McDonald in 1987, Black Coalition on AIDS in San Francisco, and the Minority Task Force on AIDS (MTFA), also provided support to black PLWAs.

Even when the CDC[13] reported the growing incidence of HIV/AIDS among other sections of the population, such as heterosexuals, IV drug users, and ethnic minorities, AIDS was predominantly understood as a white urban middle-class gay man's disease. With the medical community's focus on white gay PLWAs, there developed a culture of silence around the other sections of people affected by AIDS. Further, the

"relative invisibility" of affected black Americans, according to Cohen, "sent a wrong message to the general population and especially black and gay communities" (*Boundaries of Blackness*, 23) that AIDS was a white gay man's disease.

In spite of the growing incidence of HIV/AIDS among African Americans, especially among gays and women, the African American community was slow to respond to the crisis. Harlon L. Dalton cites "deep-seated suspicion," "mistrust," and "homophobia" ("AIDS in the Black Face," 211) as fundamental reasons for the tardy response to the AIDS crisis. Similarly, Cohen, in *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, elaborates on the reluctance of black leadership and community to address AIDS. While the "consensus issues"—issues "framed as somehow important to every member of 'the black community'" (*Boundaries of Blackness*, 11) —were deemed important by the black leadership, the "cross-cutting issues"—"those concerns which *disproportionately and directly* affect only certain segments of a marginal group" (13)[14] were completely neglected. Further, the black leadership failed to engage and assess the role of "other primary identities such as . . . gender, sexuality and class" (*Boundaries of Blackness* 14). Put bluntly, the "issues of stigma, fear, rejection, invisibility, classicism, sexism, homophobia and drugphobia" (*Boundaries of Blackness*, 21), as Cohen puts it, prevented the community from responding to the AIDS crisis effectively.

AIDS, Race and Literary Resistance

A plethora of AIDS-themed narratives produced by gay writers in the first decade sought to challenge the dominant illogical equation of homosexuality = AIDS. Earliest and prominent among them were Larry Kramer and William M. Hoffman.[15] Through vividly capturing the emotive aspects of PLWAs, both playwrights underscored the need and urgency to address the crisis. The first major novel to address the AIDS crisis is Paul Reed's *Facing It* [16] (1984). However, Samuel R. Delany's *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* [17] (1985), Part III of *Flight from Neveryon*, published by a major university press (Wesleyan University Press), is perhaps the first full-length work of fiction featuring AIDS by a black gay writer.

In Appendix A: Postscript of *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, Delany characterizes the novella as "*a work of imagination* [and] . . . *a document* . . . [of] misinformation, rumor and wholly untested guesses *at play through a limited social section of New York City during 1982 and*

1983" (361). The plague in Delany's fantasy milieu, Kolhari, is a fictional correlate of AIDS in present-day New York. Interspersed within this fictional narrative are Delany's objective and subjective accounts of AIDS. Juxtaposing the plague of prehistoric times and the AIDS crisis of the present, Delany draws parallels between the two and analyzes the chaotic responses generated by the onset of a new disease. Furthermore, the narrative also critiques the metaphorical understanding of AIDS, the governmental/administrative lapses in addressing the AIDS crisis, and the shortcomings of CDC studies. However, Delany's primary objective in this narrative is to unravel the role of alternative literature during a crisis. Although the racial identity of the characters in *The Tales* is not clearly mentioned, obscure references to the color codes, such as brown and dark, signify people of color.

Yet another prominent work published during this decade is Joseph Beam's *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986). Republished by RedBone Press in 2008, the anthology, consisting of stories, verses, interviews, and plays, addresses the concerns and aspirations of black gays. In his introduction to the book, Beam states its objectives: "The bottom line is this; we are Black men who are proudly gay. What we offer is our lives, our love, our visions . . . we are coming home with our heads held up high" (xi). Presenting a wide range of themes such as homophobia, homosexuality, and the double lives of black gays, the anthology also contains critically acclaimed Craig G. Harris' "Cut Off from Among Their People," which depicts the social loss caused by AIDS. The short story narrates the incidents taking place at the funeral of Jeff's lover, who has died of AIDS. The story foregrounds how the family and the church, the two major institutions in the African American community, prevent Jeff from attending his male lover's funeral. Furthermore, the pastor's homophobic sermon at the funeral illustrates the silencing of homosexuality and AIDS by the black hetronormative community. Though AIDS is a minor issue in this anthology, the text remains a valuable document in that it inaugurates black gay AIDS literary tradition, as noted by James Earl Hardy in the introduction to the new edition. Elsewhere, Hardy laments that half of the contributors to the anthology, including the editor Joseph Beam and the poets such as Melvin Dixon, Essex, and Assotto Saint, among others, have not survived AIDS. Though the anthology *In the Life*, as Joseph Beam argues, "didn't prevent the deaths of the contributors of their many peers in the death tolls of the AIDS virus in black communities in the 1980s . . . it did *save their lives*" (*In the Life*, viii) by immortalizing them.

Interestingly, black men with AIDS appear in several AIDS novels written by white novelists. Howard Fast's *The Dinner Party* (1987) narrates the story of Leonard, the son of a senator coming home to disclose his AIDS status and his relationship with Jonsey, a black man with AIDS, to his family. Though Leonard escorts Jonsey to the dinner party, the homophobia and racism of the guests force Jonsey to leave immediately. Reynolds Price's *The Promise of the Rest*, which is the last part of his *Mayfield's Trilogy*, details the story of Wade Mayfield, a white gay architect diagnosed with AIDS. Unable to manage his own needs, Wade allows his father, Hutch Mayfield, a bisexual English professor at Duke University, to come to New York. As the story unfolds, the readers learn that Wade was in love with Wyatt (an African American) and they stayed together in an apartment. Wyatt infected Wade and later committed suicide. What follows is a long conversation between Wade and his father that ends with Wade's death.

Compared to the literary response to the AIDS crisis by white writers, the African American response during the first decade was minimal. One of the reasons for this minimal response is the dominance of the white heterosexist publishing industry and its reluctance to publish the works of black gay writers. The profit-only motive of the publishing industry further discouraged them. Steven Corbin describes the discriminatory practice of the publishing industry thus: "The publishing world is decidedly an exclusive, white-male, predominantly heterosexual, elite fraternity that stretches itself to any length to protect its narrow confines, even in its exclusion of women who, statistics convincingly show, comprise the majority of readers and book buyers" ("White Men," 14). Notably, in spite of established gay presses (St. Martin, Naiad, Alyson, Knights Press) and the "booming trade in gay books," publishing was still "the domain of a select few gay white men" ("Black Out," 80). Furthermore, the inability of white gay writers to identify with the black gay experience and "the underlying racist and classist idea that blacks don't read and buy books" ("Black Out," 80) further hindered the publication of works by black gay writers. Besides the exclusionary practices of the publishing industry, the issue of readership also posed a challenge to black gay writers. As Corbin states: "Even though the face of AIDS has changed, you can't find publishers willing to take on books related to AIDS and Black Queers . . .there is no market for an AIDS novel that is multicultural. Our men are dying too. Our writers are also doing work like Paul Monette and other white writers with AIDS. We need to be able to see the multicultural context of AIDS. We too are fighting this killer" ("Black Out," 83).

Even the AIDS-related deaths of Max Robinson, the first African American broadcast network news anchor, in 1988, and Alvin Ailey, a black dancer and choreographer, in 1989, failed to evoke the necessary practical responses in the black community. However, the CDC report of 1986,[18] which revealed that blacks accounted for half of all AIDS cases, provoked a minimum political response to the AIDS crisis. This response from the community, Cohen argues, was "not one of acceptance and mobilization" (*Boundaries of Blackness*, 101); instead, the black community leadership and ministries embraced moralistic values and impractical solutions.

The late 1980s witnessed a heightened literary response to HIV/AIDS. Larry Duplechan's *Tangled Up in Blue* voiced the reluctance of the heteronormative society to accept homosexuality and its consequences for gay men. Set in the mid-1980s, the novel revolves around three white characters: Daniel Sullivan, who poses as a heterosexual; Crockett Miller, Daniel's ex-lover who is diagnosed with ARC (AIDS-Related Complex); and Maggie Sullivan, Daniel's wife and Crockett's friend. In an interview with Christopher Davis, Duplechan explains his preoccupation with white characters and interracial relationships thus: "I don't have a strong black identity. My gay identity is much more important to me" ("CS Interview with Larry Duplechan," 62). Though Duplechan doesn't address the concerns of black PLWH/PLWAs, the novel contributes to broadening "the literary representation of AIDS by exploring the complex connections among gay, bisexual and straight characters who are at risk" (*Contemporary African American Novelists*, 139).

Yet another important African American cultural narrative addressing the issue of the AIDS crisis is Marlon Riggs' semi-documentary film *Tongues Untied* (1989). Weaving poetry, performance, personal testimony, and history in a complex pattern, the narrative presents the situation, politics, and culture of black gay men. Both a documentary and a work of poetry, *Tongues Untied*, according to Riggs, was "motivated by a singular imperative: to shatter America's brutalizing silence around matters of sexual and racial difference" (Riggs, "Tongues Re-Tied"). The rhythmic chant of "brother to brother" in the beginning of the documentary sets the pace as Riggs explores the complex dynamics of acceptable black masculinity and sexuality. He effectively uses this narrative space to articulate the painful lived experiences of young black gay men with AIDS, and in so doing critiques the culture of silence surrounding the AIDS crisis. Riggs, who was diagnosed with HIV in 1988,[19] died of AIDS in 1994.

Novels with AIDS as their central theme published in the first decade (predominantly by the white gay writers) voiced the suffering of HIV/AIDS patients. Nonetheless, "drama," as Don Shewey argues, "has taken the lead in educating the audiences and showing concern for the afflicted" ("AIDS on Stage," 5). Cheryl L. West's *Before It Hits Home* (1989) is one of the first plays by a black woman to confront race in relation to homophobia and AIDS. The two-act domestic drama focuses on Wendel Bailey, a covert homosexual who is diagnosed with AIDS. The inability of Wendel's mother, aunt, and brother to deal with Wendel's homosexuality and subsequently his AIDS echoes homophobia and the prevalent negative social attitudes towards PLWAs. Reba (Wendel's mother), who walks out of their home, refusing to take care of Wendel, perhaps for the first time unsettles "the prevailing stereotypes of the unconditionally loving black mother" (Macdonald, 111). While Wendel's mother challenges the "dominant gender and sexual construction" (Watkins, 160) of women as mothers and caregivers, Wendel's father assumes the role of caregiver to his dying son. Though the central focus is on Wendel, the play also introduces a pregnant black woman, Angel Paterson, who has been diagnosed with AIDS, suggesting a possibility of infecting the unborn child with the AIDS virus.

To conclude, the literary and cultural responses during this decade were predominantly produced by black gay male writers, with the exception of Cheryl L. West. The black LGBT movement, unlike its white counterpart, was in its infancy when the AIDS crisis struck the black community. Lack of community collectives and financial and economic resources prevented an effective response to the crisis. In fact, the black gay writers were engaged in gaining political visibility around the issue of AIDS. In spite of these impediments, black writers, at least a few, addressed the issue of AIDS. While Delany's novella was preoccupied with the metaphorical aspect of AIDS, governmental negligence towards the crisis, and the shortcomings in CDC studies, among others, *In the Life* documented the concerns of the black gay community and their attempt to de-closet homosexuality. Duplechan's *Tangled up in Blue* and West's *Before It Hits Home* are concerned with issues related to closeted homosexuality and feigned heterosexuality. Notably, the main characters in these narratives are blacks afflicted with HIV/AIDS. In projecting their concerns, these authors laid bare the prevalent (mis)perception of AIDS as a homosexual disease.

"We are not immune": The Second Phase (1990 – 1997)

Unlike the conspicuous silence surrounding AIDS in the first decade, the beginning of the second decade witnessed a half-hearted response from African American political and social institutions. Importantly, the period witnessed a "professionalization of AIDS work in black communities" and "an emphasis on community based organization" (*Boundaries of Blackness*, 111). Instituted primarily by black gay men, black AIDS organizations such as Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), Audre Lorde Project (ALP), VOCAL (Voices of Color against AIDS and for Life), and BAM! (Black AIDS Mobilization) challenged the "indigenous ideologies which constructed gay and lesbian lifestyles, drug use and premarital sex in general as wrong and immoral" (*Boundaries of Blackness*, 111). Confronting the ideological hostility of these institutions, the black AIDS organizations initially worked in coalition with white AIDS organizations such as ACT UP to secure more funding and resources for black PLWH/PLWAs. The fierce confrontational politics of ACT UP, coupled with the mounting pressure on the government to address the crisis, paved the way for the enactment of the Ryan White CARE Act[20] and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

The beginning of the second decade witnessed an assimilated social and political response from both the white and black gay communities. Even though *Emerge* was one of the first black magazines to publish a cover story on AIDS, entitled "We Are Not Immune," as early as 1985, AIDS as a theme was ignored in the black media for many more years. However, Earvin "Magic" Johnson's disclosure of his HIV-positive status in 1991, and Arthur Ashe's in 1992, were eye-openers for the African American community. The disclosure of Johnson, Cohen argues, "forced both print and television media to cover a story that for so long had been ignored" (*Boundaries of Blackness*,149). Further, as David Roman remarks, "Johnson, single handedly with his announcement, returned AIDS to the international spotlight, so much so that even George Bush was forced to admit that he needed to improve his AIDS record" ("Fierce Love and Fierce Response," 204). Ironically, the media frenzy following Johnson's disclosure to a large extent "barely touched upon AIDS and gay and bisexual men of color" ("*Fierce Love* and Fierce Response," 204); instead, it focused on heterosexuality and AIDS. Nonetheless, Johnson's disclosure raised consciousness about AIDS among blacks.

Black gay writers, like their white counterparts, were at the forefront of confronting the AIDS crisis within the community in the beginning of the second decade. White gay writers such as Tony Kushner and Larry