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The AIDS Poets, 1985-1995:
From Anti-Elegy to Lyric Queerness

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Aaron Bradley Gorelik

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The AIDS Poets, 1985-1995:
From Anti-Elegy to Lyric Queerness

by

Aaron Bradley Gorelik

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles 2014

Professor Arthur Little, Chair

This dissertation argues that the AIDS crisis produced a sudden radical shift in intellectual and activist conceptions of “homosexuality” (from identitarian to poststructuralist) in the United States because of, in large part, the generic concerns of early AIDS poetry, which insist on the ethical priority of mourning over militancy. The untenable nature of the abject, isolated, and melancholic lyric AIDS speaker, however ethical, further led these poets (particularly Paul Monette, Thom Gunn, Tim Dlugos, Timothy Liu, Essex Hemphill, Melvin Dixon, Reginald Shepherd, Tory Dent, Rafael Campo, Henri Cole, Gil Cuadros, Richard McCann, and Mark Doty) to place pressure on the boundary between lyric voice, dramatic monologue, and

performance as well as foster an aesthetic and political philosophy that employed the indeterminacy of direct address to problematize the cultural binaries of presence and absence, self and other, and abjection and subjectivity. As a result, early AIDS poetry (from 1985 to 1995) helped give rise to the quasi-poststructuralist praxis of “queer theory” and form a new, long-lasting era in American poetics and politics geared toward preserving the specifics of experience while also tending to the exigencies of the sociopolitical present.

The dissertation of Aaron Bradley Gorelik is approved.

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2014

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Paul Monette and the Ethics of AIDS Poetry	49
Chapter Two: AIDS Poetry and the Problem of Containment	110
Chapter Three: Black Gay AIDS Poetry and the Lyric Self	164
Chapter Four: The Emergence of Lyric Queerness	226
Appendix: Major AIDS Poetry Volumes	288
Endnotes	289
Works Cited and Consulted	347

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Introduction

[. . .] they lie who say it's over
Rog it hasn't stopped at all are you okay
does it hurt what can I do still still I
think if I worry enough I'll keep you near
the night before Thanksgiving I had this
panic to buy the plot on either side of us
so we won't be cramped that yard of extra grass
would let us breath THIS IS CRAZY RIGHT but
Thanksgiving morning I went the grave two over
beside you was six feet deep ready for the next
murdered dream so see the threat was real
why not worry worry is like prayer is like
God if you have none they all forget there's
the other side too twelve years and not once
to fret WHO WILL EVER LOVE ME that was
the heaven at the back of time but we had it
here now black on black I wander frantic
never done with worrying but it's mine it's
a cure that's not in the books are you easy
my stolen pal what do you need is it
sleep like sleep you want a pillow a cool
drink oh my one safe place there must be
something just say what it is and it's yours

—Paul Monette, “The Worrying” (ll.57-79)¹

The poets I have come to call “The AIDS Poets” wrote at a crucial moment in the history of gay male literature in the United States, a transitional time between two regimes of thought surrounding the idea of homosexuality: what I call “gay liberationism” and what has become institutionalized in academia as “queer theory.” As critic David Bergman points out in the first paragraph of his definitive critical work on the 1970s gay male writing group, the Violet Quill, *The Violet Hour: the Violet Quill and the Making of Gay Culture*, the history of gay and lesbian

folk in the past fifty years has been a dramatic one, full of seismic ideological and cultural shifts that have come in rapid succession. He quotes Violet Quill writer Edmund White as saying, “To have been oppressed in the 1950s, freed in the 1960s, exalted in the 1970s, and wiped out in the 1980s is a quick itinerary for a whole culture to follow” (*BL* 215).² White’s comment that gay culture was wiped out is at once hyperbolic and accurate: hyperbolic because gay culture still exists today, even though AIDS devastated and continues to impact negatively its constituency (to date, it has been estimated, that a half million gay men have died from AIDS-related causes³), and accurate because gay male culture was transformed by the crisis, from a more or less distinct political and culture movement focused chiefly on the politics of sexual liberation into a cultural hot topic in the United States. Indeed, not only do current debates surrounding “marriage equality” indicate as much, but also academic thought—under the auspices of “queer theory”—largely considers “homosexuality” to be an epistemological site around which Western sexuality (if not Western culture by and large) can be theorized. My dissertation claims that the AIDS poets (primarily Paul Monette, Michael Lynch, Thom Gunn, Tim Dlugos, Melvin Dixon, Walter Holland, Michael Lassell, Essex Hemphill, Timothy Liu, Mark Doty, Rafael Campo, Tory Dent, Reginald Shepherd, Henril Cole, Carl Phillips, and Richard McCann) not only wrote at a pivotal moment during the ascendance of this second regime of thought (a period clustered around the year 1990), but also became, at least in part, the pivot upon which this ideological and cultural shift conducted itself.

In order to make this argument, a principally historical one, I firstly have to define as neatly and concisely as possible the gay literary culture of the years preceding the AIDS poets’ output. Although highly dialogic like any other historical milieu, gay male literature of the 1970s and 1980s preceding the AIDS poets fixated on the utilitarian need to write about and represent

gay male (mostly white and urban) life.⁴ In this dissertation, I often use the expression “gay liberationism” (or, even, “gay separatism”) without prejudice or judgment, one way or the other, to describe succinctly this type of literary exigency. The published writings of gay men during these years, after the Stonewall Riot in 1969⁵ and before the publication of the AIDS poets’ major works (in the late 1980s), often coalesce around the need to use, for understandable political and ideological reasons, literature in a manner that reaffirms the existence and coherence of the then-fledgling construct of the gay community.⁶ As fodder for the subject matter of this literature, challenges to the coherence of the politically-mobilized gay community—such as homophobia and its internalization in the gay subject—were frequently used to reaffirm the very need for a gay community.⁷ In other words, gay male literature produced in the years before the AIDS poets collectively emerged focused mostly, directly or indirectly, on the parameters and purposes of its own cultural production as a means to reaffirm its worth as a central force in the shaping of a young gay culture. This self-reflexive, or self-reassuring, impulse becomes even more pronounced, as I will discuss later on, in the AIDS literature produced before the AIDS poets published their most influential works.

In this literary climate of self-affirmation, however, unlike their counterparts in fiction, drama, journalism, and the memoir, the AIDS poets brushed up against a sense of existential despair; they were fearful that the act of writing (especially the act of writing poetry⁸) might be unable to intervene in the present AIDS crisis or, conversely, that writing could only beneficially intervene by coding those who had already died (each and every individual) as nothing more than epitaphs and statistics (that is, as two-dimensional remnants of the past that merely informed the direction the present should take). In his poem, “When My Brother Fell” (first published in 1991⁹), Essex Hemphill conjures both these fears while referring to his close friend

and literary associate, Joseph Beam, who died from AIDS-related complications in 1988 after staunchly promoting the cause of black gay literature; Hemphill's speaker proclaims, "Our loss is greater / than all the space / we fill with prayers" (ll.23-25) and that building monuments to Beam, "will not bring him back / nor save us" (ll.61-63).¹⁰ Paradoxically, the poem's speaker urges the reader to follow Beam's activist example while also lamenting his own inability—the inability of discursive representation—to affect the material world or rescue his friend.¹¹ The AIDS poets reeled with existential doubts regarding the value of literary and cultural production in what seemed like nearly apocalyptic circumstances as they simultaneously found uninhabitable the utilitarian directive prescribed by gay writers and activists to convert grief into activism as quickly as possible. This directive, most influentially articulated by Douglas Crimp in 1987 as "art *does* have the power to save lives,"¹² struck the AIDS poets as redoubling the erasure of specific lost loved ones, an erasure already physically enacted by the AIDS crisis itself. To be sure, in "The Worrying," excerpted above and explored in my first chapter, Paul Monette reassures his recently-deceased partner of twelve years, Roger Horwitz, that he will not allow him to fade away into the past. "[T]hey lie who say it's over / Rog," he declares, expressing hostility not only toward the cosmic injustice of death and the homophobic culture undervaluing and underestimating the persistence of his same-sex love and grief, but also—if not primarily—toward any utilitarian imperative that insists he turn his attention from the specifics of his loss to the travails of the living. Monette and his contemporary AIDS poets propose that poetry's proclivity (especially lyric's, a finer point I discuss throughout) to present an isolated speaker endlessly reaching toward an absent other naturally resists—at least more so than any other genre—any functionalist end, including that of gay liberationism.¹³ As a defining feature, then, AIDS poets collectively worried over the complex ethical need to balance grief—their only

remaining connection to their lost loved ones—with the sociopolitical concerns of the ongoing present.

If not always explicitly in conversation with one another in their poetry—and despite their diversity of aesthetic and social backgrounds—the AIDS poets were nevertheless highly aware of each other’s works. It is an awareness evidenced by the frequency with which they refer to each other in their volume’s acknowledgements, reviews they wrote, and interviews they gave.¹⁴ But this awareness can also be found in the shared thematic and formal qualities of their major output: they collectively move from a coherent confessionalistic lyric voice to an avant-garde fractured one; they obsessively work to integrate biomedicine into their economies of thought and expression; they scrutinize the then popular—and homophobic—notion that AIDS could be described as a “plague” or “divine retribution”; they examine the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and the crisis; and they demonstrate a strong affinity for deictic linguistic markers like “still” and “here.”¹⁵ Most notably, however, the AIDS poets assemble a coherent narrative arc that begins by questioning the ethicality of applying poetry to functionalist ends in the age of AIDS and ends by (tentatively) promoting a quasi-poststructuralist identity politics and poetics.¹⁶ Moreover, the AIDS poets I discuss also share the distinction of having written entire volumes of AIDS poetry (as opposed to individual poems),¹⁷ about the crisis, whether specifically about their own imminent finitude or that of a lover or life partner, the loss of a lover or life partner, the loss of myriad lovers and/or friends and acquaintances, or any combination thereof. Simply put, when viewed holistically, this diverse group of poets tells us a cogent and critical story about American poetry, literature, and politics in the late twentieth century, a story this introduction works to frame by describing their relationship to early AIDS literature and the emergence of “queer theory” as a discipline.

The years 1985 and 1995 serve, then, as appropriate markers for the period of the AIDS poets, or early AIDS poetry, for a few historical reasons. The first complete volumes of AIDS poems went into print, though highly-limited in circulation, in 1985: Robert Boucheron's *Epitaphs for the Plague Dead* and Bill Becker's *An Immediate Desire to Live*. They were followed three years later by Monette's *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*, which inaugurated a period in which many similarly-minded volumes appeared, a period that tapered off around the mid-1990s. This tapering might be primarily attributed to—at least in historical terms—the approval of protease-inhibiting drug therapies by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that extended the lives of “people with AIDS,” or PWAs,¹⁸ as J. Elizabeth Clark points out in her dissertation “Miles of Poems in a Culture of Blame: Activism, Advocacy, and the Poetry of AIDS” (2000). To be sure, these therapies dramatically improved the material conditions of the epidemic and thereby affected its cultural representation in the United States.¹⁹ Clark notes that from 1995 on, AIDS was no longer “merely” a “gay disease,” having spread to almost every other demographic; because of that fact in conjunction with the advent of the internet, she contends, AIDS poetry exploded into a diverse range of concerns and mediums.²⁰ Clark correspondingly asserts that this post-1995 AIDS poetry—or “post-protease poetry” as she calls it—articulates a more democratic identity politics than what had come before and locates this latter work in a third-wave feminist framework. However, as my dissertation argues, this diversification of political and cultural concerns in the mid-1990s does not resist the work of early AIDS poets, as Clark implies, but grows out of their collective movement toward a (semi)deconstructive identity politics and poetics.

This is to say, the AIDS poets' eventual deconstructivist leanings in the 1990s finds their historic roots in a multiplicity of simultaneous and complementary occurrences: the gay

community's need to build coalitions as expansive as possible to mitigate a medical crisis that threatened its very existence; the AIDS epidemic's trend outward from the gay community to other demographics; the AIDS poets' increasing need to balance grief with activism; and the way that activist and academic thought reacted to the challenges imposed by the AIDS crisis. As my final chapter argues, and as I soon outline, the AIDS poets eventually employ lyric poetry's flexible and mercurial nature—or, the indeterminacy endemic to the lyric voice and form—to preserve the bond between the speaker and the absent other while, simultaneously and conflictingly, addressing the conditions of those living at present and exterior to this bond. As a result of these generic concerns and inclinations, early AIDS poetry reciprocally assisted early queer theory in positioning gay male subjectivity, or lack thereof, as an epistemological site for understanding how Western culture organizes itself around an obsession with categorizing, policing, and valorizing specific sexualities and social types. As counterintuitive as it might sound, then, in a moment of extreme, debilitating, and potentially apocalyptic cultural and material abjection for the gay community, “queer theory” and its corresponding aesthetics sought to abstract the bodies of those termed “gay” into a culturally relevant epistemology. In other words, this dissertation asks how did we move, collectively, as a culture in the United States, from “gay” to “queer”—at least for some time and at least to some degree. As a whole, this dissertation answers that the AIDS crisis and the AIDS poets' specific generic concerns interrupted a still-young gay liberationist logic and facilitated thereafter the emergence of strategically-contradictory poststructuralist identity politics.²¹

Early AIDS Literature and the AIDS Poets:

During the first decade of the epidemic in the United States, because of where and how

the new auto-immune disease expressed itself, the literature responding to AIDS was by and large written by gay men²²; I call the earliest literature these men produced, “AIDS literature.” Comprised mostly of novels and dramas closely linked to what would be called by Randy Shilts and others “advocacy journalism,”²³ the earliest AIDS writings focused on interpolating the rather new and jarring experience of living with “gay cancer” (or GRID, which stood for “gay-related immune deficiency”²⁴) into a post-Stonewall gay liberationist politics. While the AIDS poets of the late-1980s began to question the ability of literature to affect the crisis and the ethicality of transforming grief into militancy through literature, the majority of early AIDS writers, those concentrated in the mid-1980s, framed the AIDS epidemic as another challenge to the newly formed gay identity. Early on, AIDS literature saw itself as a natural extension of the gay community’s separatist and lobbying politics. In this model of gay liberationism—in which all faculties of a gay demographic advocate for the betterment of a gay community and identity and which requires, paradoxically, challenges to its community and identity in order to maintain and perpetuate its integrity—gay literature acts as an essential faculty of the system.²⁵ In other words, when the biomedical crisis emerged, early AIDS literature sought to contain it as a challenge—however new, strange, and deadly—to the longevity and integrity of the gay community and identity; AIDS became another challenge that heightened these writers’ dedication to a gay liberationist rhetoric.²⁶ Put another way, framing the crisis as a surmountable threat to the burgeoning gay community became the nearly-singular ethical purpose of early AIDS literature.

For example, two of the earliest literary works published on AIDS, Paul Reed’s *Facing It: A Novel of A.I.D.S.* (1984) and Larry Kramer’s play *The Normal Heart* (1985), depict their main characters struggling with the onset of this new, calamitous, and mysterious disease while

simultaneously and, perhaps more importantly, in these works' formulations, struggling to legitimize their gay identities. Reed's novel, for instance, derives its central conflict from its main character's estrangement from his family; AIDS functions, thereby, as an ancillary complication that exacerbates and highlights this central conflict. Although the novel describes a variety of symptoms exhibited by its main character, Andrew, and therefore works secondarily to educate its (gay) readers about the new disease, it primarily reflects on Andrew's "coming out" narrative and ends with Andrew reaffirming the value and worth of his gay identity. Indeed, moments before he dies from the effects of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, he tells his lover, David:

I was awake for a long time this afternoon [. . .] I tried to put the pieces together, to see some meaning in it all. That's been my only thought [. . .]

My question has boiled down to one thing [. . .] Whether or not—if I had the chance I would choose to be gay [. . .] I did it the way I am, no apologies. I don't care, I don't regret it. It's too late to regret it now, anyway. But I know this: the answer to my question is that no, I wouldn't have chosen not to be gay. It has been the most compelling force . . .

You know, David, we were there! We were at the forefront of something new, something hopeful. How many people can say that? How many people have been out there—in the parades, in the papers, in the political offices—doing something that makes it easier for others to come out, to be fully gay and fully human . . . (215-17)

Instead of expressing his love for David or discussing the escalating AIDS crisis itself, Andrew reaffirms as his "only thought" the benefits of gay liberation. If anything, rather than expressing a fear regarding literature's possible cultural irrelevancy, Reed's novel actively works here to suppress the current and extremely homophobic national discourse promoted by the media and "The Moral Majority"; a cultural signification that claimed AIDS acted as divine retribution for the gay sexual revolution of the 1970s and that gay men were, relatedly, responsible for their own annihilation.²⁷ However necessarily and logically, gay literature of the period and its attendant cultural logics frame AIDS as a complication both in the stories and lives of gay men

in order to reaffirm the very notion of “gay.”

Similarly, Kramer’s watershed play *The Normal Heart* portrays the AIDS crisis as a threat to the coherence and value of a “gay community.” Indeed, the play primarily depicts its main character, Ned Weeks, as seeking a sense of unity in the gay male response to the AIDS crisis as well as acceptance from his immediate family, as represented by his brother, Ben, in the midst of their grief. Indeed, as is (and was) well known, the play dramatizes Kramer’s real life founding of Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), the earliest organized response to the AIDS crisis, nationally and internationally speaking. This is to say, the play textually and paratextually concerns itself with organizing the gay community around the emerging biomedical crisis. What is more, like the novel *Facing It*, Kramer’s play ends with a hospital deathbed scene that reaffirms the value of “gayness”; the impending death of Ned’s lover, Felix, prompts them to stage, literally, an impromptu (gay) marriage and then, shortly thereafter, Felix’s death prompts Ned’s brother to apologize to Ned for not accepting his sexual identity. In this logic, the AIDS crisis and those who die from it help affirm the value and integrity of the then young gay identity. Indeed, in his final speech which comprises the final spoken words of the play, Ned declares:

Why didn’t I fight harder! Why didn’t I picket the White House, all by myself if nobody would come. Or go on a hunger strike. I forgot to tell him something. Felix, when they invited me to Gay Week at Yale, they had a dance . . . In my old college dining hall, just across the campus from that tiny freshman room where I wanted to kill myself because I thought I was the only gay man in the world—they had a dance. Felix, there were six hundred young men and women there. Smart, exceptional young men and women. Thank you, Felix. (122-23)

Although addressing Felix, in an epistolary or even lyric mode, the play uses that device not to preserve the lost other’s trace, but to replace it with the cause of gay liberation. In the face of crisis, the earliest AIDS literature, such as *Facing It*, *The Normal Heart*, and even William

Hoffman's 1985 play *As Is* (which follows the plotting of Kramer's play almost identically²⁸), works to mobilize the gay community around its severest threat and thereby affirm the very logics of this mobilization.

In other words, the earliest AIDS literature does not eschew the question of ethics, but relentlessly asserts within its content the ethical need for the faculties of the gay community, primarily including its literature, to educate, politically-organize, and strengthen the lives of gay men about and around the AIDS crisis. *Facing It* and *The Normal Heart* not only feature gay male characters railing against their culture's homophobic tendencies, but also represent the act of writing itself as existing at the center of this activist exigency. For instance, David's character arc in *Facing It* climaxes halfway through the novel when he decides to write journalism that might educate the public about the crisis and its effects on the gay community: "He felt the pent-up tension and insanity flow out as he realized a goal; he would write about the medical crisis, would let [. . .] people know that something was going on in gay America, something serious, something deadly" (127). *The Normal Heart* also features a journalist character who writes about the epidemic, Felix. When dying, he implicitly instructs Ned, a struggling novelist, to write about the epidemic too: Ned asks, "What am I ever going to do without you?" and Felix responds, "Finish writing something" (121). The highly-autobiographical play itself—one comes to understand—stands in for that very "something." It is this conflation of gay love, gay identity, AIDS, and writing that both the novel and play recommend for the gay community, claiming that such a conflation is not only ethical but unavoidable and necessary.²⁹ To be sure, Kramer, who became one of the most vocal AIDS activists and writers of his generation, implicitly argues throughout his many works—as I discuss in my second chapter—that a writer's primary ethical directive relates to her or his responsibility to intervene into and correct the injustices of the

sociopolitical present.

Fittingly then, Randy Shilts' magnum opus of advocacy journalism, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987), argues too in favor of the necessary and ethical link between policy-making and writing by way of his treatment of Kramer and his work. Akin to a roman à clef (inasmuch as it describes the origins of the crisis through the representation of real world figures), *And the Band Plays On* narrates over an extended period Kramer's authoring of *The Normal Heart*. In Shilts' version, after exiting GMHC, Kramer searched for purpose in the midst of the mysterious, fatal, and spreading illness of AIDS; what Kramer decided to do, Shilts extrapolates, is retreat to a remote cottage on Cape Cod and write a play that "would force people to care" (358). This is to say, for Shilts and his contemporaries, writing about AIDS always already and unequivocally equals—despite the solitary nature of writing itself—public advocacy. Shilts avers that, "hours before the first preview performance, as photocopied scripts of *The Normal Heart* circulated among the city's news organizations, [New York City] Mayor Ed Koch hurriedly called a press conference to announce 'a comprehensive expansion of city services' for local AIDS patients" (556). Through this framing of the play's premiere, Shilts reinforces the notion, perhaps accurately enough, that the written word itself and its inchoate potential to reach an audiences possesses the inherent ability to affect real world policies, such as those dictated by homophobic bureaucracies. Indeed, *And the Band Played On* also insists, perhaps rightly too, that Kramer's early and highly-contentious piece of advocacy journalism, the *New York Native* article "1,112 and Counting" (1983), "irrevocably altered the context in which AIDS was discussed in the gay community and, hence, in the nation"³⁰ (245). In other words, through the figure of Kramer, Shilts recurrently interlinks the act of writing, the gay community, and policy-making, meta-discursively reaffirming thereby the utilitarian value

of his own book—which did, in fact, go on to become a New York Time’s Bestseller and a finalist for the National Book Award.³¹

To be sure, this dissertation’s introduction does not claim that the use of gay liberationist logic by these early AIDS texts was not necessary, effective, or even valiant; this introduction does claim, however, that from a historical and literary perspective the activist objectives of early AIDS literature were not merely incidental or exterior to these texts, but central and deeply engrained into their very content. For instance, in his brilliant and highly-experimental AIDS novella *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, or, Some Informal Remarks toward the Modular Calculus, Part Five*³² (1985), Samuel Delany articulates a sense of ambivalence over the ethicality of writing about AIDS, but ultimately reasserts the need for such a discourse. During a philosophical aside from the text’s main fantastical plot, Delany engages with Susan Sontag’s groundbreaking 1978 work *Illness as Metaphor*, which—as I discuss shortly—worries over the way the experience of illness tends to be transformed into metaphors that harm those coping with specific illnesses. Delany writes:

Diseases should not become social metaphors, Sontag informs us [. . .] When diseases generate such metaphors, the host of misconceptions and downright superstitions that come from taking them literally (misconceptions that, indeed, often determine the metaphors themselves in a system of reciprocal stabilization) make it impossible, both psychologically and socially—both in terms of how you feel and how others, with their feelings, treat you—to ‘have the disease’ in a ‘healthy’ manner. (176)

Delany grapples with the possibility that writing about illness risks instilling social scripts inimical to those living with illness and those who encounter the ill. However, this particular stance, articulated by both Delany and Sontag, never questions—as the AIDS poets do—the ability of literature or the need for literature to affect those who are still living. Rather, such a query implicitly affirms the notion that literature possesses an inherent ability to affect its

sociopolitical circumstance. Indeed, Delany later counters Sontag's concerns over the potential deleterious effects of metaphors by arguing that extended and complex ones might benefit those affected by HIV and AIDS:

Perhaps the job is to find a *better* metaphor and elaborate it well enough to help stabilize those thoughts, images, or patterns that, *in the long run*, are useful—useful to those with the disease, to those who care for them, or even to those who only know about them [. . .] What is most useful in the long run is what destabilizes short-run glyphs, the clichés, the easy responses history has sedimented. (179; original emphasis)

This is to say, unlike early AIDS poets, Delany and his peers resist questioning the inherent sociopolitical “usefulness” of literature or written discourse, at least not in those discourses; but the very content of their works asks and worries over how literature might best address the crisis for those living at present.³³

At the same time, however, this heightened dedication to a gay liberationist or utilitarian logic expressed in early AIDS literature points to an undergirding fear of literature's potential sociopolitical “uselessness”; it this fear, in other words, that these writers implicitly and incidentally work to suppress via their heightened dedication to gay liberationism. For instance, in his collection of essays on the crisis, *Ground Zero* (1988), Andrew Holleran recurrently insists that gay literature can and must be deployed as a socially “useful” instrument during the AIDS epidemic. In the collection's introduction, he explains: “Writing about [AIDS] presented an ethical dilemma: How could one write truthfully of the horror when part of one's audience was experiencing that horror? How to scare the uninfected without disheartening those who had everything to gain by cherishing as much hope and willpower as they could?” (15). Holleran only briefly acknowledges that AIDS literature's fundamental ethical question might relate to its treatment of grief and dying (“the horror”) before seamlessly moving his ethical gaze toward the question of how these experiences should be framed for the benefit of the living. As a result,

Holleran answers the ethical questions he poses by asserting a firm edict: “writing about AIDS [. . .] must be about fighting—it must be in some way heartening—it must improve morale, for it to be allowed a place of honor. Otherwise it will be dismissed as useless, discouraging, immoral” (17). However, unlike his contemporaries’, Holleran’s gay liberationist formulation, tacitly admits the possibility that writing about AIDS might be anything other than about “fighting.” This is to say, Holleran’s gay liberationist rhetoric seems particularly tethered to its counterbalancing fear that AIDS literature, or that literature in general, might ultimately be inconsequential. Indeed, three years prior to publishing his collection of essays, he authored a preface to the published version of *The Normal Heart*, in which he claims that before Kramer wrote his play, “The writer who sat down to treat one of the themes which [. . .] had formed our conversation and literature—the manners, the morals of gay life—felt as if he were discussing the finer points of a bridge game in the lounge while the *Titanic* was going down” (25). One of the original Violet Quill writers—writers who, as Bergman explains, had an ambivalent relationship to a gay identitarian politics³⁴—Holleran risks admitting a sense of futility surrounding the ethos of gay liberationism while adamantly promoting it in response to AIDS.

Indeed, it is this fear of literature’s possible sociopolitical futility that also animates how these early AIDS writers frame the works of their predecessors and, as I discuss shortly, highlights another integral way their views differ from those of the AIDS poets. Unlike Bloom in his theory of the literary anxiety of influence, in which writers try to kill off their predecessors in an Oedipal struggle, early AIDS writers, like Kramer and Holleran, often misprision their perceived precursors in order to fabricate a sustaining connection to the past and reaffirm the utilitarian value and values of gay literature in the AIDS era. Holleran, for example, devotes multiple essays in *Ground Zero* to uncovering gay literary precedents for addressing

sociopolitical crisis. In his essay “Cousin Henry,” for example, Holleran points to Henry James as a predecessor writing during the First World War; he also, occasionally throughout the collection, frames Walt Whitman as an active literary voice regarding the American Civil War. He only incidentally reports that both James and Whitman abandoned the task of writing during their respective crises, opting instead as in the case of Whitman to become a nurse assisting the injured and dying.³⁵ Indeed, Kramer, Shilts, and Holleran’s treatment of W. H. Auden’s famous anti-war poem “September 1, 1939” (1939), which refers to the start of the second world war in its title, especially and notably illustrates these early AIDS writers’ instinct to recover a lost “gay” literary history that always already addresses the sociopolitical good.³⁶ While each one of these writers approaches the poem in a similar fashion, Kramer goes so far to take the title of his major AIDS work directly from Auden’s poem: “the normal heart [. . .] Of each woman and each man / Craves what it cannot have, / Not universal love / But to be loved alone” (ll.61-66). In the context of Kramer’s play, the lines can be read as implying that gay love, the idea and practice of it, is “normal”; to be sure, the declassification of “homosexuality” as a mental illness by the American Psychological Association in 1975 was a landmark moment for the young gay liberationist struggle (a connotation that Kramer most likely retrospectively projects onto Auden’s lines). What is more, the play’s epigraph employs two stanzas from the poem that include not only these lines but also Auden’s famed proclamation that, “All I have is a voice / To undo the folded lie” (ll.78-9). In other words, early AIDS literature’s use of “September 1, 1939” implies that one’s literary voice functions as the strongest and most effective tool to combat politically-enacted atrocity.

However, these implications also disregard the poem’s profound sense of despair in regards to the potential inability of love—any kind of love—and literature—especially poetry—

to ameliorate the wrongs of society. For instance, as I will touch on shortly in regards to Monette's allusion to Auden's poem, the lines from which Kramer takes his title to justify implicitly the intrinsic value of gay love also announce that "the normal heart [. . .] Craves what it cannot have." These lines might not affirm the need to love (whether in a "gay" or "straight" paradigm) but deride it, instead, as futile. Moreover, the line "All I have is a voice" can be read as countering an incitation to activism: it can be read, rather, as a lament; the poet-speaker acknowledging and bemoaning his insignificance in the face of atrocity. Auden's oeuvre often underscores such a reading, however disheartening; for instance, in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Auden writes, "poetry makes nothing happen" (l.36) and late in life, he famously declared to a biographer that in the 1930s his poems did not "save a single Jew" (Carpenter 413).³⁷ Kramer and his contemporary's interpretation of the poem certainly has merit, inasmuch as Auden's poem represents an individual speaker wrestling with a desire to engage with the collective crisis of his time (what he calls "the international wrong" [l.44]); after all, the poem concludes with the speaker's wish, despite the presence of "Negation and despair" (l.98), to "Show an affirming flame" (l.99). Certainly, one can also see why these writers gravitated toward the poem, its opening lines eerily reminiscent of their own experiences in New York City of the 1980s; the poem begins, "I sit in one of the dives / on Fifty-Second Street / Uncertain and afraid / as [. . .] The unmentionable odour [sic] of death / Offends the September night" (ll.1-11). Nevertheless, these writers' interpretation of the poem—their sole application of it to activist ends and the corresponding ends of establishing a "gay literary canon"—is also, at the very least, incomplete. The opening of Auden's poem also implies that his speaker's geographical remove from the Second World War makes him unable to intervene into the "international wrong."

Kramer and his contemporary AIDS writer's incomplete interpretation, or misprisioning, of the

poem points to their desire to suppress Auden's suggestion, or any implication, that literature itself might effectively be socio-politically inconsequential.

Conversely, the AIDS poets not only grapple with this very possibility, but also assert eventually that literature's primary ethical imperative might in fact result from and rest in its uselessness on the sociopolitical scale, or its non-utilitarianism. The AIDS poets collectively worry that the gay liberationist logic vehemently expressed by these early AIDS novelists, playwrights, journalists, and essayists might be not only futile but also contrary to poetry's—perhaps literature's—relentless duty, however abstract or impossible, to recall and rescue the dead from the ever-expanding oblivion of the past. Unlike other early AIDS writers, early AIDS poets infrequently, or at least inexplicitly, search for connections to a (gay) literary past because they fear, as my first and second chapter discuss, that doing so would code literature and all of its referents, its speakers and absent others, as mere figments of an irrelevant past. For this reason, when the AIDS poets allude to their predecessors, gay or otherwise, the connection they draw emphasizes the specter of doubt regarding literature's relevancy to the ongoing sociopolitical present. For instance, Monette takes the title and epigraph of his volume *Love Alone* from the second quatrain of Edna St. Vincent Millay sonnet “Love Is Not All” (1931), which reads in part, “many a man is making friends with death / Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.” While this epigraph might affirm the value of love and grief (or love's continuation after death), it also indicates the possible futility of discourse, including that of poetry, to prevent the living from dying (“many a man is making friends with death / Even as I speak”). What is more, although Millay's poem might insinuate that love and its expression through poetry can rescue the living from death, Monette's paring of her words down to only “love alone” for his volume's title also points to the poet-speaker's persistent engagement with a severed-circuit of once-reciprocal love;

in other words, the title of *Love Alone* not only refers to the paramount importance of love in times of crisis, but also functions as a synonym for, or definition of, grief and the lyric poem. Poetry—Monette’s title suggests—cannot save lives, but persistently grieves for and thereby hopes to retain the trace of those who are absent. To be sure, *Love Alone*’s title also alludes to, most likely, the very lines in “September 1, 1939” from which Kramer’s play excerpts its title: “the normal heart [. . .] Of each woman and each man / Craves what it cannot have, / Not universal love / But to be loved alone” (my emphasis). From Monette’s vantage, however, and the subsequent vantage of AIDS poetry implicitly, Auden’s despondent speaker not only emphasizes the non-utilitarian nature of literature and poetry especially, but also declares love to be—because of its insatiability—conflictively futile and paramount.

This is to say, through their treatment of literary precedent, the AIDS poets and other early AIDS writers demonstrate their differing views on literature’s role in the midst of catastrophe.³⁸ While most early AIDS writers viewed literature, including gay literary precedent, as a tool to “undo the folded lie” of the biomedical crisis (or, combat the homophobia that obfuscated and exacerbated it) for the benefit of the gay community, the AIDS poets came to view literature as not merely non-utilitarian, but as *necessarily* non-utilitarian. These poets indicate that the ghostly nature of language itself (the way in which words only point to that which is not there materially), the growing number of the dead (it is notable that these poets did not start pressing their ethical doubts until a decade into the crisis), and the nature of poetry itself (which frequently represents its speakers as dislocated from their objects of desire) forced them to intervene not into the ongoing sociopolitical crisis but into the utilitarian ethos of early AIDS literature and gay culture. If it can do anything at all, the AIDS poets suggest to their contemporaries, literature must recurrently and unendingly voice the futile and yet necessary

impulse to love, not generally, not on a sociopolitical scale, but specifically and unendingly—especially in a context that devalues particular configurations of its expression and especially in an era of great loss. “[S]till,” Monette’s speaker confesses to his lost loved one, several years into the crisis, “I / think if I worry enough I’ll keep you near.” This dissertation firstly discusses the way these AIDS poets used the lyric nature of their poetry—that is, the recurrent representation of speaker’s addressing absent others—to intervene into early AIDS literature’s utilitarian and gay liberationist directives before secondly asserting that these poets used the mercurial nature of lyric voice (the indeterminacy of its form, voice, and implied listeners³⁹) to address both the dead and the living. In this way, primarily by way of its generic concerns, AIDS poetry interrupted a gay identity politics and aesthetics before ushering in, at least in part, an era of politics and aesthetics that works to balance—however paradoxically and impossibly—the exigencies of specific experiences with those of collective concern.

This paradigm shift from a utilitarian ethics (or a gay liberationist one) to one that attempts to blend both non-utilitarian and utilitarian ethics can also be seen in the way early AIDS writers and the AIDS poets treat the (common) experience of abjection in their milieu—abjection, both in psycho-physiological and sociopolitical senses.⁴⁰ Another way to frame the concerns of all early AIDS writers, including the poets, is to suggest that their writings primarily react to the physically and psychically traumatic experience of abjection. While most early AIDS writers represent the experience as a means to further cohere the gay community and identity, the AIDS poets first work to articulate the experience fully and then connect it metonymically to a variety of similar yet individual experiences. For instance, at the climax of the *The Normal Heart*, Bruce, a semi-closeted and politically-cautious community organizer at odds with Ned and his political zealotry,⁴¹ heartrendingly divulges a story in monologue form regarding his

lover's recent death. While on a vacation—the monologue explains—Bruce's lover grew incontinent and died; what is more, his love was then denied a death certificate, placed in garbage bags by reluctant orderlies, and cremated by a bribed undertaker, thereby compounding his bodily abjection with a cultural one (105-106).⁴² Bruce's lengthy and devastating monologue leads him and Ned, despite their differing views, to embrace and solemnly commiserate. In line with a gay liberationist logic, Kramer employs the overwhelming duress of physical and national abjection affixed to the gay male amidst the AIDS crisis as a means to unite rivaling factions of the gay community and reaffirm the very need for its existence.

Conversely, because of their generic strictures, the AIDS poets initially portray the experience of AIDS-era abjection for the gay male as occurring individually without mitigation or relief. The poet-speakers find no dramatic interlocutor to embrace or with whom to commiserate. But through this portrayal, as my second chapter argues, they also resist framing their abjection as a cautionary tale to the living, a framing that would effectively erase their voices from the present. For instance, in the first poem in one of the first AIDS poetry volumes, *An Immediate Desire to Survive*, Becker's speaker concludes, referring to himself as well as other isolated gay men: "we sit inside our cells [. . .] Life among the inmates" (ll.70-71). Through the twofold meaning of the word "cells" (the cells of a body and those of a prison), Becker depicts the experience of abjection without remediation; despite the collective parallels, there is an individual sense of isolation and despair. In "Carcass" (1992), several years later, Lui writes, "I can smell it now, / your cheap sex up my ass [. . .] don't stop / for the sirens flashing / in your rearview mirror" (ll.1-9), overtly associating gay sex with death as well as severe cultural interpellation in the age of AIDS. For the most part, however, later AIDS poets use their speaker's voice to relate the gay male experience of abjection to similar experiences in other

demographics; in this way, they preserve their unique circumstances and associate them with a variety of others. For instance, in the first section of *My Alexandria* (1993), Doty's speaker recurrently and insistently associates himself with putatively abject drag queens and figures of the homeless to highlight the similarities between their varied experiences. For example, while referring to a homeless woman in his poem "Broadway," Doty's writes, "She was only asking for change // so I don't know why I took her hand" (ll.21-22); he adds, "[she] must have wondered at my impulse to touch her, / which was like touching myself" (ll.50-51). This is to say, Doty's implicitly white, male, gay speaker compares his experience to that of a homeless woman of undetermined race and sexuality to assert (not unproblematically, of course⁴³) that poetry's impulse to connect the speaker to her or his addressee can also model a means of connecting ostensibly disparate social types. The experience of abjection becomes, in this paradoxical logic, not isolating but common and familiar. In other words, through their lyric mode of address, the AIDS poets present a literary model that attempts to preserve the ontological distinctiveness of the speaker and his or her experiences as well as that and those of the speaker's addressee(s) or referent(s). In this way, the poem, imaginatively at least, preserves these individuals' differences and emphasizes their similarities. As I will soon discuss, my fourth chapter argues that poets as diverse as Doty, Dent, Campo, Cuadros, Cole, and McCann employ lyric poetry to balance a dedication to that which is specific (such as particular lost others) with the concerns of the many living at present. The very nature of lyric address, its indeterminacy, they propose, permits this particular balancing act, at least more so than any other genre.

This is to say, while early AIDS writers working in all forms, including poetry, reacted to the social and physical conditions of the epidemic, the AIDS poets—driven by the particularly marginal status of their genre in the United States as well as their unique generic proclivities and

concerns—began to deconstruct the notion of being gay or any particular social type; or, put otherwise, while early AIDS novelists, playwrights, journalists, and essayists reinforced gay literature's purpose of improving the conditions of their corresponding community, the AIDS poets worked to connect the increasingly abject and isolated gay individual in the AIDS era to a broader network of those in similar—though not identical—circumstances. Mirroring the spread of HIV itself through almost all demographics by the early 1990s, this maneuver and ideology, which I explore more fully in the next section, also makes an impression on subsequent AIDS literature. For instance, Tony Kushner's two-part and highly-celebrated AIDS play *Angels in America*, workshopped and premiered between 1990 and 1994 (and published in 1996), provides a corrective, or so it seems, to *The Normal Heart*'s framing of gay male abjection more in line with the writings of early AIDS poetry. For instance, after the seropositive protagonist of *Angels in America*, Prior, soils himself and passes out, his then-lover, Louise, proclaims, "I can't I can't I can't" (48), before leaving their relationship. It is the way the AIDS crisis destabilizes, not strengthens, the gay community, then, that forces Prior—a white protestant male—to seek support in an assortment of others—male, female, Mormon, Jewish, black, gay, and straight characters. The play transforms Kramer's hopeful example of gay men embracing and uniting around the experience of abjection into a more pluralistic model that attempts to preserve the unique circumstances of each character's life as well as build coalitions between the social categories they represent.⁴⁴ However—perhaps because of its connection to performance, a connection my third chapter explores—*Angels in America* never questions, as the AIDS poets do, literature's utilitarian value or, correspondingly, its ability and responsibility to address and improve the conditions of those living amidst the AIDS crisis.

The AIDS poets, in other words, intervened into early AIDS literature's gay liberationist

utilitarian logics by, firstly, questioning the ability of literature to address the complex crisis of the ongoing present and, secondly, suggesting that literature's primary value rests in its impossible and therefore anti-functionalist, primordially ethical, imperative to recall the already dead from the obscurity of an insensible past. At the very least, the AIDS poets insist that the quick turnaround of grief into political capital employed by other early AIDS writers too swiftly removes the dead from the lives of those who survive them. At the end of *The Normal Heart*, for instance, nurses quickly cart Felix's dead body offstage without mention before Ned and his brother engage in an emotional reunion. Indeed, after Ned reaffirms a gay liberationist logic in his closing speech, the final stage direction reads: "BEN crosses to NED, and somehow they manage to kiss and embrace and hold on to each other" (123). This is to say, for Kramer and his contemporaries, the AIDS writer worked to transform grief into the sociopolitical good as quickly as possible. The AIDS poets as a whole, however, suggested that this transformation of grief into action had to be done cautiously, if at all, so that literature can attempt, at the very least, to balance—conflictingly and paradoxically—the specifics of experience, which contain the fragile traces of those who have died, with a variety of larger sociopolitical concerns. As a result of this oppositional and undecidable mesh of concerns, the AIDS poets helped facilitate (as my dissertation discusses throughout) an ideological transition from a structuralist notion of identity politics to a partially-poststructuralist identity politics principally—or, at least, most controversially—known as "queer theory."

Queer Theory and the AIDS Poets:

AIDS literature did not, of course, precipitate the appearance of poststructuralist thought or postmodern aesthetics; indeed, such expressions date back to the 1960s, if not well before.⁴⁵

However, the AIDS crisis and the AIDS poets' intervention into the crisis' literary representation did promote a cultural climate in which poststructuralist thought informed aesthetic and political practices surrounding sex, gender, and—eventually—the notion of identity itself.⁴⁶ In other words, by intervening into gay liberationism's treatment of AIDS and by recognizing the way in which the epidemic began to shift throughout a variety of demographics, the AIDS poets helped produce a culturally-seismic schism between the still relatively young notion of the gay identity and the even newer notions of “queer theory”—which worked, as will be explored here, to dismantle socially-constructed categories of identification for the benefit of both the marginalized and the culture as a whole. To be sure, this schism between “gay” and “queer” can also be seen in the limited amount of scholarship currently extant on the AIDS poets. Even when some of it primarily focuses on the generic, rather than political, interests of the AIDS poets, almost all of it frames the import of these poets' works as either relating to a gay liberationist logic or—in a few cases—an ideology of queerness. Put otherwise, no scholarly work currently exists that periodizes the work of the early AIDS poets en toto (those I have termed “The AIDS Poets”) or explains how this consortium of poets did not merely take sides in this cultural debate, but helped manufacture the circumstances in which this ideological shift, or schism, emerged. As I indicate in this section, although the lack of attention paid to the AIDS poets might, in fact, be attributed to the putatively marginal status of poetry itself, it primarily points to the way in which queer theory as a body of literature eventually ignored, obfuscated, or even erased, for its own ethical purposes, the very histories that produced it.

Two scholarly works, however, exist that examine to some degree the notion of AIDS poetry as a cogent field of discourse; both are dissertations that appeared in 2000.⁴⁷ The first, which I mention above, J. Elizabeth Clark's “Miles of Poems in a Culture of Blame: Activism,

Advocacy, and the Poetry of AIDS,” principally discusses the AIDS poetry published and performed in a variety of forums, venues, and publications after the advent and proliferation of protease-inhibiting drug in the United States in 1995.⁴⁸ Framing this poetry as the embodiment of a diversified and democratized ethos (which mirrors the demographic spread of the disease, the arrival of the internet, and the changes in lifestyles brought about by these life-extending therapies), she only briefly describes the AIDS poets, themselves, as constituting the “elegiac” and “gay male roots” of AIDS poetry. This is to say, the early AIDS poets, diverse as they are (ranging from male, female, gay, straight, black, white, Asian-American, and Latino), become in Clark’s work the monolithic foil (described in only two paragraphs of a nearly four hundred page dissertation) against which she contributes to, however venerably, a third-wave-feminist or queer discourse. The second dissertation that purports to periodize the AIDS poets to some degree only analyzes, however brilliantly, the AIDS poetry of primarily Monette, Gunn, and Doty in its last chapter; what is more, it only does so in order to demonstrate the way their poems exemplify Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of “exendence.” More than halfway through his dissertation, “Tainted Love: AIDS, Theory, Ethics, Elegy,” George Piggford declares that these poets, whose works he explicates fifty pages later, “intuit, at the very least, Levinas’s central insight, that behind the corpse of the God of ontology is, if not consolation, at least a (no)place of radical alterity that surpasses the binary death and life, meaning and meaninglessness” (94).⁴⁹ While this line of thinking, as my first and last chapters discuss, might be nevertheless appropriate if not clarifying in regards to AIDS poetry, Piggford’s work nonetheless primarily expresses interest in theorizing the relationship between a philosophy of ethics and elegy. He, like Clark, does not map the AIDS poets’ historical narrative or demonstrate how it helped generate significant changes in the poetic, political, and aesthetic practices in the United States at the turn of the

twenty-first century. While these dissertations significantly contribute to an understanding of AIDS poetry as a whole, the first cursorily parses the foundational work of the AIDS poets and the second uses a small sample of their work to support phenomenological theorizations of the genre of elegy.⁵⁰

Conversely, most of the peer-reviewed scholarship conducted so far on AIDS poetry focuses on individual poets, rather than the AIDS poets *en toto*, and it frames these poets' individual works as existing within or promoting a gay liberationist cause. The majority of these peer-reviewed articles, which appear in the 1990s and which I discuss in my first chapter, discuss Monette's AIDS poetry through the paratexts of his memoirs and later AIDS activism. Through this mean, they frame his poetry—despite its nearly relentless, anti-collectivist, and melancholic content—as carving out a literary and material space for gay men and those coping with AIDS in a bigoted heterosexual society.⁵¹ Similarly, the few articles that focus on the AIDS works of prominent poets other than Monette (articles I discuss in my second chapter) often describe AIDS poetry as endorsing, however incongruously with its content, a gay liberationist logic. For instance, Tyler B. Hoffman's "Representing AIDS: Thom Gunn and the Modalities of Verse" (2000) asserts that Gunn's ambivalent return to traditional prosody at the height of the AIDS crisis in San Francisco intentionally bolsters and sustains the notion of tradition, including that of gay male literary tradition. Likewise, Timothy Materer's "James Merrill's Late Poetry: AIDS and the 'Stripping Process'" (2008) claims that Merrill, who died from AIDS-complications after writing a handful of AIDS poems,⁵² used the "affirmative" nature of traditional prosody as his only means to counteract the terrifying effects of the AIDS epidemic on the gay community.⁵³ Even those few articles that ostensibly argue early AIDS poems, mainly those of—again—Monette's, employ techniques of postmodern or non-utilitarian elegy (what Peter Sachs calls

“anti-elegy,” as my first chapter discusses) do so in order to reaffirm—conflictingly so—the value of gay love and therefore the utilitarian necessity of the gay community and identity.⁵⁴ In other words, almost all of the peer-reviewed articles written on AIDS poetry, most of which emerged in the 1990s, narrowly focus on the works of individual AIDS poets and deploy their analyses solely (and often incompatibly) within the framework of a gay liberationist logic.⁵⁵

However, a few relatively-recent peer-reviewed articles, which I discuss in my fourth chapter,⁵⁶ explicitly associate AIDS poetry with an emergent queer ethos. While these articles implicitly acknowledge a paradigm shift through which these poems might be better understood, they nevertheless routinely overlook the way these poets helped facilitate that very paradigm shift. Nevertheless, it should be added that Joan Rendell’s article, “Drag Acts: Performativity, Subversion and the AIDS Poetry of Rafael Campo and Mark Doty” (2002), make overtures in the direction of that facilitation. Overall, her article notes the way in which Campo and Doty’s early AIDS poems frequently fixate on the figure of the drag queen and thereby anticipate Judith Butler’s landmark queer theory regarding the potential of drag to subvert gender and sexuality norms.⁵⁷ However, she also incidentally observes that Butler and Eve Sedgwick’s early foundational queer theories grew out of the exigencies of the AIDS crisis: she writes that Butler’s seminal work *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), “draws on the example of the ‘political response’ to AIDS [such as ACT UP “die-ins”] to show how ‘the theatrical’ can be effectively subversive and ‘political” (90)⁵⁸; and she points out Sedgwick’s warning in her article “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*” (1993) that such subversive or deconstructive tendencies should only be applied toward ameliorating the deleterious effects of, “AIDS and other grave identity-implicating illnesses.”⁵⁹ Without explicating the AIDS poets’ role in this highly-dialogic nexus of literature, theory, culture, and

politics, Rendell implies that historical links exist between the AIDS crisis, early queer theory, and early AIDS poetry. Even with this exception, however, academic scholarship has yet to explore the way the AIDS poets in combination with poststructuralist thought intervened into the utilitarian logics of gay liberationism (and even prototypically “queer” organizations like “AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power,” or ACT UP) and suggested the ethical need for preserving the specific histories of the “gay” experience (especially at the height of the AIDS epidemic) while also rewriting the inimical social scripts endemic to those very histories.

What I briefly outline here, then, before explicitly and implicitly evidencing it throughout my dissertation, is the way the interrelated ethical and generic concerns of the AIDS poets not only correlated with emergent poststructuralist thought in regards to identity formation, but also assisted in setting the stage for this particular paradigm shift. Although queer theory intellectually descends from poststructuralist, feminist, and “gay and lesbian” studies (as one of the earliest published introductions to the field by Annamarie Jagose points out⁶⁰), its earliest practitioners, we can now see retrospectively see,⁶¹ crystalized their thinking around the demands of the AIDS crisis. This is to say, the origins of queer theory as a discipline can be traced back to the advent of AIDS and the way early AIDS theorists responded to certain representations of it, including—primarily—those produced by an increasingly insular and struggling gay culture. In other words, though intellectually tethered to work like Michel Foucault’s groundbreaking study, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (1978 in English), which argues that the “homosexual” was socially constructed around the turn of the twentieth century, queer theory did not emerge as a cogent field of inquiry until a decade or more after that book’s publication (in English); literary and other cultural responses to the AIDS crisis fill in this historical gap and form the basis upon which AIDS theorists put forward their deconstructivist prototypically-queer

proposals. Indeed, the earliest AIDS theorists, like their later queer theorist counterparts, suggest—though perhaps tentatively at first—that a gay liberationist logic must be rethought, if not entirely dismantled, for sociopolitical advantageous reasons in the age of AIDS. For instance, in his article, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987), one of the earliest and most (in)famous pieces of AIDS theory,⁶² Leo Bersani indicates that the gay community needs to build coalitions with similarly oppressed communities. His proposition responds to contemporary AIDS-theorist Simon Watney’s foundational work *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (1987), which observes, “AIDS offers a new sign for the symbolic machinery of repression, making the rectum a grave” (126). As a result of this new “sign” of “repression” for the gay community, Bersani argues that the gay community can best contest the “symbolic machinery of repression” in the AIDS era by building coalitions between the sexually oppressed, or those who are putatively sexual receptive or passive, such as gay men and women. In this way, he reasons the sexually oppressed can undo the socially abjecting link between sexual receptivity and death. While Bersani notes that sexual receptivity promotes this line of thought because its resultant *jouissance* shatters the boundaries between the “self” and the “not-self,” or the subject and the other, he ultimately applies these theories toward the practical betterment of the gay community.

Early AIDS and queer theorists, Paula Treichler and Lee Edelman, however, push this logic farther in their respective (yet analogous) articles “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” (1987) and “The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory and AIDS” (1989). They suggest that the (isolating) binaries of “self/not-self” and “straight/gay” need to be intellectually and practically undone. For instance, noticing that an “epidemic of signification” (or, “a plague of discourse” in Edelman’s version) surrounds AIDS in the United States and aligns it with gay men, death, and abjection, Treichler argues, “AIDS is

to be a fundamental force of twentieth-century life, and no barrier in the world can make us 'safe' [. . .] we cannot distinguish self from not-self" (69); the "self" and "not-self" correlate here with the constructs of "the straight subject" and "the abject PWA or gay male." Anticipating the primary arguments of queer theory, Treichler and Edelman extend Bersani's logic to suggest that the socially-constructed notion of "gayness" not only poses an existential threat to those termed "gay" during the AIDS crisis, but also those inhabiting the perimeters and contexts of the discrete (and abjected) "gay community." Therefore, AIDS instructs us, Treichler and Edelman argue, that the notion of the "gay community" must be dissolved or minimized, at least, in its cultural import. To be sure, in his later article, "The Mirror and the Tank: 'AIDS,' Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism" (1993),⁶³ Edelman expresses concern for the "beleaguered gay identity" (27) to conclude, thereby, that AIDS offers "lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals" (34) an "opportunity" (12), exactly because it engages "identity as an issue" (12), to rewrite social categories as a "fluidity of differences" and generate a poststructuralist "queer nationalism" (31). Edelman asserts, in other words, that in order to survive, the gay community must—somewhat paradoxically—rewrite itself as a porous, diffuse, fluid entity that spreads throughout the whole of society (surely the notion of "viral" underpins or suggests this proposition).⁶⁴ This is to say, at a time when gay men experienced an untenable complex of bodily and national abjection, AIDS theorists reached toward poststructuralism and away from gay liberationism to argue that the very key to undoing that compounding and cataclysmic experience of abjection is to abstract the gay male body into a site of national distress.

Put another way, these theorists argue that the AIDS crisis needed to be decoupled from the notion of the gay male body while also suggesting that the very terms of this coupling, "AIDS" and "gay," were problematic in and of themselves. To be sure, in an effort to decouple

and problematize these terms, certain early works of AIDS theory go so far as to omit any explicit reference to “gayness” altogether. For instance, Susan Sontag’s short study *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988) builds upon her earlier and highly-influential monograph *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) to argue that AIDS has replaced cancer in the American consciousness as the disease most affiliated with shame and the notion of divine retribution; these diseases, she argues in both books, become affiliated with harmful social stigmatizations by way of the culturally-reiterated and -ossified metaphors that come to represent them. Tellingly, then, in her later book about AIDS, she rarely mentions the words “gay” or “homosexual”⁶⁵; instead, she occasionally observes that those most stigmatized by the cultural signifiers of AIDS “reconstituted themselves as something like an ethnic group” in the 1970s (115). (Sontag’s feelings about the cultural construct of “gayness” or any ethnic-minority for that matter were always complicated and poststructuralist in nature; for instance, in her famed and hotly-contested article “Notes on Camp” [1964] Sontag only begrudgingly acknowledges that the “camp aesthetic” finds its roots in a loosely-organizes “homosexual class.”) Indeed, while *Illness as Metaphor* parses multiple novels written about Tuberculosis, Syphilis, and Cancer (such as those by Flaubert, Camus, and Dostoevsky), its later counterpart, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, neglects to reference, let alone parse, any literary work written about AIDS. Briefly accounting for this omission in her latter book, Sontag claims that AIDS was not yet “romanticizable”⁶⁶ at the time, even though literary responses, especially within the gay community, were already prevalent. This is to say, Sontag and her cohort of early AIDS theorists sometimes worked to deconstruct the impact of the “epidemic of signification” on those most affected by it by, paradoxically, erasing any cultural correlation between terms like “gay” and “AIDS” as well as by tacitly making any logic viewing them as coherent and knowable terms in and of themselves suspect.

Nevertheless, while Sontag blatantly ignored the cultural products created by gay men during the AIDS crisis, many of these early AIDS and queer theorists referred to their works as examples of how identitarianism inadvertently worsens the impact of the crisis by supporting the cultural superstructure of subjectivity and abjection. For instance, Watney's and Crimp's early theoretical works on AIDS—such as their respective article “The Spectacle of AIDS” (1987) and book *AIDS Demo Graphics* (1990)—not only emphasize the importance of visual art in determining the discursive fields surrounding the crisis and those affected by it, but also encourage the emerging art of the AIDS crisis to make the epidemic of national, rather than gay, importance.⁶⁷ Similarly, in her pivotal article, as well as her following work *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic; Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (1999), Treichler recurrently discusses the significance of AIDS and its representation in art and media to propose that AIDS must be represented in manners that deemphasize its relationship to the gay community and expose it as a looming threat to the gestalt of the nation. For instance, in her article, she repeatedly alludes to gay male poets, such as Richard Howard, Gunn, and Lynch, as counterexamples of such a mentality; she claims in her footnotes, for instance, for most gay male writers, “AIDS is [merely] the story of crisis and heroism in the gay community” (42). I am not arguing, however, that Treichler and her contemporaries were necessarily insensitive to the travails of gay men and their community during the AIDS crisis; I am arguing, though, these theorists argue, as a matter of course, paradoxically and perhaps counterintuitively, that in order to ameliorate the devastating effects of the crisis on, primarily, those men and that community, writers, artists, and theorists had to disestablish the cultural signifiers linking the notions of “gay” and “AIDS.” For Treichler and her contemporaries, then, all the writings of gay men, even the earliest AIDS poetry that worked to interrupt a gay liberationist logic, became dangerously affiliated with a cultural

rhetoric that framed gay men as always already abject, isolated, and dying. Much of this early queer theory, or AIDS theory, finds itself, as a result, distancing itself from putatively “gay male” literature.

Indeed, related to this concern as well as the import of media, much of early AIDS theory concerns itself with representations of the epidemic on television, in advertisements, and via journalism: however, when it does take up literature as a topic, it is notable that it turns most frequently—as in the Treichler’s example above—to the genre of poetry. For instance, Edelman’s influential and already-discussed article, “The Mirror and the Tank,” takes its title from Monette’s poem “Manifesto”; he uses the poem in the body of his text as his central subject matter for arguing that the concept of “gayness” and its cultural determinants must be reimagined as nationally-relevant cultural signifiers. Although Edelman praises the poem for its instinct to improve the quality of gay men’s lives amidst the AIDS crisis, he mainly criticizes the poem for reinforcing—as he sees it—a gay liberationist logic. He writes that the poem participates, “in the ongoing campaign to refashion the gay subject in terms of an ‘AIDS activist’ that deploys [. . .] a contemptuous depiction of non-‘activist’ gay men as narcissists” (22). This is to say, in Edelman’s reading of the poem (a reading that I also discuss in my first chapter), Monette censures gay men who do not advocate for the gay community in the face of the AIDS crisis; to be sure, the poem lashes out at gay men who turn to self-help gurus that claim “sickness is self- / induced” (ll.2-3) for comfort and therefore retreat into denial and away from caring for their seropositive loved ones. Edelman thereby employs his reading of the poem to argue that a gay liberationist mentality, which very often expresses hostility toward non-activist gay men (indeed, Kramer, as already indicated, frequently voices such hostility), fortifies a social script that sees gay men as *only* gay men and as, therefore, embodiments of the AIDS crisis and cultural

abjection.⁶⁸

Nonetheless, however fair and necessary this critique of the poem might be, Edelman's reading of Monette's "Manifesto" is—like early AIDS literature's misprisioning of Auden's works—incomplete, especially given the poem's context within *Love Alone*. Indeed, the poem comes three-fourths of the way through the volume (fourteen out of eighteen poems) and constitutes a unique turn for the volume in which the poet-speaker registers, for the first time, a social conscience more extensive than his immediate and severed circuit of love and grief. But even more so, the poem itself remains—despite its gestures at a socio-political awareness—dedicated to retaining and addressing the fading specter of its lost specific other, Rog. This is to say, though implicitly and explicitly hostile toward his political surroundings, the poet-speaker always and firstly articulates this frustration within the lyric context of talking to his absent other. For instance, in the very lines of "Manifesto" from which Edelman takes the title of his essay, Monette's speaker conveys his rage primarily to and seeks comfort from his lost other: "when do we leave the mirror / and lie down in front of the tanks" (ll.71-72). In the context of his earlier explicitly apostrophic comments, such as "I love you better / than me Rog" (ll.48-49), the poet-speaker primarily addresses his question to the lost and immaterial Rog; the speaker only secondarily acknowledges his kinship with grieving others and addresses his concerns to a possible, overhearing reader. Indeed, the pronominal marker of "we" undecidably vibrates in these lines between the orbits of describing the "we" of Monette and Rog and the "we" of those still living. This is to say, for the first time in his volume, Monette's speaker worries that his non-utilitarian grief may in fact be *in vain* and therefore narcissistic in and of itself; the image of the mirror primarily refers to the speaker's fear that his dedication to a severed-circuit of grief might only be, effectually, a gesture of talking to himself. Edelman's reading of "Manifesto" is notable,

therefore, not only because of its incompleteness but also because of its engagement with the poem in the first place. Indeed, this engagement underscores the unarticulated worry of early AIDS literature and of early queer theory that gay liberationism, or any discursive response to the biomedical catastrophe, might in fact be merely narcissistic or inconsequential.

Put another way, AIDS theory, which becomes queer theory, often struggles to make its originary purposes to help the gay community bear the brunt of the epidemic commensurate with its contradictory (and yet, perhaps, logical) solution to dissolve the discursive boundaries of that very community. Edelman's surprising, if antagonistic, attraction to "Manifesto" demonstrates a sympathy between AIDS theory and the work of the AIDS poets that highlights the way early AIDS poets suggested gay liberationism unethically redoubles the erasure of the lives of the dead and fails to notice the larger cultural context in which any individual speaker projects her or his voice. Like the complex concerns of the AIDS poets, the earliest queer theorists attempted to preserve the authority and subjectivity of specific experience while also stressing, paradoxically, that such a preservation augments inimical social scripts that exacerbate the highly-untenable aspects of those experiences. Simply put, early queer theorists ask how do we make the sufferings of the few matter to the many. Their answer was and still is to highlight, however correctly, the way those sufferings produce the very structure of society itself. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), often one of the first volumes, if not *the* first volume, of queer theory, makes this double-pronged and oppositional formation of experience versus cultural schematizing the fundamental tenet, or what she calls "axiom," for queer theory. Indeed, the first paragraph of her study declares that the "homo/heterosexual" divide constitutes a "node of thought and knowledge" for "understanding virtually any aspect of modern Western culture" (1), while her second paragraph explains that this divide can be understood from two perspectives:

the first, which she calls *minoritizing*, claims that the divide is only of importance to the oppressed class (“homosexuals” in this formulation) who experience its primary effects; the second, which she calls *universalizing*, claims that the divide is “an issue of continuing, determinative importance” (1) to everyone because it constitutes the culturally-central episteme of sexuality. This is to say, one of the foundational tenet’s of queer theory as a discipline, if not *the* foundational tenet, not only attempts to create a cultural epistemology out of “homosexuality,” but also—we often forget—attempts to articulate this schematization as a complimentary reading to that of “homosexual experience,” or—in the post-Stonewall era—“gay liberation.”

As already indicated, much of Sedgwick’s early queer theories respond explicitly and implicitly to the threat posed to gay men by the AIDS crisis. She says as much in her later and previously-mentioned article “Queering Performativity”; but also, in the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, she frequently alludes to her fear that the epidemic will and has created an “open season on gay men” (5).⁶⁹ Indeed, her introduction mentions AIDS two other times, both while making key arguments in favor of counterbalancing experience (or, a minoritizing view) with epistemological thinking (or, a universalizing view): firstly, a third of the way through her introduction, she notes that the need to preserve the anecdotal evidence of the gay minority has been heightened by “the sustained, foregrounded pressure of loss in the AIDS years” (23) and adds that, “as one anticipates or tries to deal with the absence of people one loves, it seems absurdly impoverishing to surrender to theoretical trivialization” (23); secondly, two-thirds of the way through her lengthy introduction, while acknowledging this empirical or melancholic imperative to preserve the trace of personal experience, she argues that any discourse (such as, in my figuration, “gay liberationism”) that naturalizes the “homosexual

body”—that is, conceives of it as a biological fact rather than a social construction—is “tremblingly vulnerable” to the “AIDS-fueled public dream” of “gay-eradication” (43). This is to say, like Sontag, Treichler, and other early AIDS theorists, Sedgwick worries that cleaving too closely to a gay liberationist politics bolsters an apocalyptic fantasy among “the general population” of exterminating, or genocidally-abjecting, gay men and their communities. But unlike her predecessors, and like the AIDS poets themselves, Sedgwick also suggests that not preserving the specifics of experience—that is, individual’s experiences of love, loss, and grief—for the benefit of what she calls “theoretical trivialization” would be an untenable situation for the bearers of those very specifics. (Indeed, it is noteworthy, as I discuss in my fourth chapter, that Sedgwick was on personal terms with AIDS poets and theorists at the time of writing her most seminal texts.⁷⁰)

This is all to say, then, the emerging notion of queerness, at least in *theory*, labored, like the AIDS poets, to balance the exigencies of the oppressed with the those of the collective: to be sure, the then-controversial reclamation of the word “queer” points to this theory’s effort not only to defuse (and diffuse) a sense of cultural abjection on behalf of the struggling gay community, but also, even more so, to *register and alleviate* the historical experience of this abjection with a newer understanding of how that experience functions as a central episteme of Western culture. In *practice*, however, especially as an academic discipline, queer theory has, more often than not, tended toward the latter concern (that is, the exigencies of the collective); it has often expunged, as a result, the histories and experiences by which queer theory came about. In other words, as a response to the intolerable complex of abjection created by the AIDS crisis for the “gay community,” queer theory as a discourse strove to expose the ways in which—as Foucault pointed out more than a decade earlier—the notion of “the homosexual” was a modern

and socially-constructed creation. In order to do enact this maneuver, queer theorists often read texts that historically predate the cultural naturalization of the terms “homosexual” and “gay” or, conversely, focused on texts—usually those of film and visual art—that organize themselves around the missing or highly-coded figure of the “homosexual” or “gay man.” For instance, Sedgwick’s prototypically-queer study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), discusses love triangles in fin-de-siecle British fiction that represent the latent same-sex male desires that were informing an emerging industrial and capitalistic society. Similarly, Edelman’s much more recent *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), focuses on classic Hollywood cinema to explore how the shadowy cultural figure of the homosexual helps arrange American culture around the notion of the child and against, therefore, non-reproductive gay men. This is to say, as an academic practice, queer theory often works to reveal the way sexuality organizes Western culture by investigating how the “homosexual” has been seen or not seen by the many; it thereby, coincidentally, often neglects to investigate the way individuals who live and have lived within the sexual class of “homosexuality”—whether socially-constructed or not—describe and inhabit that experience.

Nevertheless, it must be reiterated that, despite its practices (and while bolstering the emergence of related fields, such as third-wave feminism and gender theory⁷¹), queer theory grew first and foremost out of an impulse to address the concerns of a gay population during the AIDS crisis. To be sure, in her introduction to *Epistemologies of the Closet*, Sedgwick implicitly and proleptically apologizes for the proclivities of her study that favor theory over experience.

She writes:

Over and over I have felt in writing [this] book that, however my own identifications, intuitions, circumstances, limitations, and talents may have led its interpretations to privilege constructivist over essentialist, universalizing over minoritizing, and gender transitive over gender-separatist understandings of

sexual choice, nevertheless the space of permission for this work and the depth of the intellectual landscape in which it might have a contribution to make owe everything to the wealth of essentialist, minoritizing, and separatist gay thought and struggle also in progress. (13)

As Sedgwick's thinking gestures at here, it is important to note, explicitly, the differences of genre and perspectives from which queer theory and its contemporary discourses, such as early AIDS poetry, wrote. This is to say, if we think of queer theory as its own body of literature, its purposes are located in *counterbalancing* the structuralist underpinnings of gay and early AIDS culture so that *both* a universalizing and a minoritizing view gain visibility; through the counterbalancing measure of its own discourse, early AIDS and queer theory hoped the lives of gay men under the duress of the AIDS crisis would be improved through *both* representational and deconstructivist expressions. Early AIDS poetry, however, unlike queer theory, finds its voice and makes its interventions into compulsory cultural logics both generically and ethically at the level of the individual and the specifics of loss. As a result, early AIDS poetry *firstly* interrupted the utilitarian imperatives that instructed it to transform deeply-personal and melancholic concerns into that which only mattered to the living; only *secondarily* did early AIDS poetry work as a whole to bring its immediate spheres of ethical concern into relationship with the vital and ongoing concerns of not just the gay community, but a larger, more unstable, and complicated sociopolitical present.

In this regard, then, my dissertation argues that the AIDS poets' intervention into the generic and ethical concerns of gay literature and liberationism provided an access point for cultural theorists to apply poststructuralist thought to the discursive manifestations of identity in the age of AIDS. As Sedgwick's preemptive apology indicates, queer theory received its "space of permission" by way of the "depth of the intellectual landscape" of "separatist gay thought" that continued to exist—rather than ceased to exist—alongside it. What her apology also

adumbrated was the way in which this innovation in cultural thought—borne out the need to protect those most devastated by AIDS via a dissolution of their culturally-abjecting and – constructed delimitations—often ignored, obfuscated, and even erased the gay community’s histories and experience (even if those histories and experiences were, like “queer theory” itself, socially constructed). This is to say, queer theory had (and still has) a stake in deconstructing the notion of “gayness” because, paradoxically enough, social constructions like it threaten those who identify as “gay.” In this way, then, by helping open this “space of permission” between gay liberationism and poststructuralism, the AIDS poets abetted and fostered the very paradigm shift, or schism, that makes their continuing cultural impact effectively invisible to us. This dissertation attempts to recuperate their lost and mostly-untold narrative as well as explain how their work helped precipitate a long-lasting era of aesthetic and political thought conscientiously poised between the coherent expression of identity and the strategic, philosophical deconstruction of it.

Overview, from Anti-Elegy to Lyric Queerness:

In order to recuperate this narrative—or, build the metanarrative of how the AIDS poets directly and indirectly affected the course of these various discourses, including that of American poetry itself—my dissertation follows a primarily historical itinerary; except in two key regards. Firstly, even though Boucheron’s *Epitaphs for the Plague Dead* and Becker’s *An Immediate Desire to Survive* both appeared as early as 1985,⁷² I do not discuss them at length until my second chapter. As opposed to Monette’s *Love Alone* which St. Martin’s Press published and distributed widely in both hardcover and paperback three years later, Boucheron and Becker’s volumes were low-quality editions produced by small, almost-unknown presses with limited

circulation⁷³; as a result, the two earlier editions had little effect on subsequent AIDS poetry. They do, however, as my second chapter discusses, exemplify the way early AIDS poetry represents their speakers as existing in an unmitigated and abject state of isolation. Therefore, *Love Alone* effectively functions as the foundational text for the AIDS poets as a whole in both ideological and practical terms; in deference to this fact, a fact already indicated by this introduction's emphasis on him, the first chapter is the only one of four to focus on one AIDS poet, Monette. Secondly, even though the works of black gay AIDS poets span this entire historical period, from Hemphill's earliest self-published and privately-circulated chapbooks to Shepherd's later highly-celebrated poetry volumes,⁷⁴ their works explicitly and self-consciously converse with one another and thereby form a cogent school of poetry in and of themselves. Consequently, I dedicate—even at the risk of reinforcing a sense of cultural marginalization surrounding these poets—my third chapter to discussing how their unique set of concerns and techniques altered those of the AIDS poets in toto as well as other aspects of American cultural thought.

To elaborate, then, this study's first chapter works to plot fully the way in which the AIDS crisis translated into an existential questioning of gay liberationism, the promise of literary immortality, and writing's ethicality in times of crisis through an in-depth reading of Monette's *Love Alone*. Even as the volume worries over its very need to exist, it primarily demonstrates how early AIDS poetry, because of its lyric penchants, finds itself caught between the fundamental, opposing ethics of melancholia (or, the need to protect the dead) and activism (or, the need to protect the living). While *Love Alone* recurrently predates and foregrounds a concern for the specific and absent other to and over the concerns of the many, it also attempts to make these seemingly oppositional ethics commensurate. As the second half of the chapter discusses,

Monette attempts to resolve this impasse of ethics through principally paratextual means that he primes within the volume by recurrently returning to an image, or philosophy, of “technocracy”; in which literature and its once living referents find a sustained trace presence in a nexus of overlapping technological, communicational, and representational means (such as film, photography, airplanes, Xerox machines, telegraphs, telecommunications, and, even, scrivener).⁷⁵ While this notion of technocracy assists Monette in imagining his lyric self and lost other at the epicenter of the ongoing present and provides him with a departure point for later political writings and activism, it also neglects to address the sociopolitical concerns of the ongoing present within the content of its poems. In other words, the volume as a whole suggests that the mode of lyric (if not the nature of language and representation itself) is primarily a melancholic one, always reaching from an already fragile state of presence to those who are absent and missing.⁷⁶ The volume also consequentially indicates that lyric necessarily opposes not just gay liberationism, but any utilitarian logic, including that of elegy; to be sure, elegiac tradition asks its poet-speakers to generate meaning out of death for the betterment of the living while relatedly replacing the missing object of affection with a new communally-beneficial object of intention like God, country, or a glorified version of art or poetry itself. Due principally to their persistent lyric address, the AIDS poems of Monette (and his contemporaries) can best be described as “anti-elegiac,” rather than “elegiac.”⁷⁷

The second chapter, then, elaborates on the effects of this fundamental conflict in ethics between melancholia and activism; predominantly focused on the works of Gunn, Dlugos, Holland, and Liu, this chapter explores the various, ambivalent ways the earliest AIDS poets thematically and formally represented and managed an ethical need to resist the utilitarian pressures of the ongoing present. As a result of this ethical impasse, however, their poetry’s need

to foreground the melancholic presence of the lyric self and other reduces to an unmitigated image of an abject isolated speaker severed from his (exclusively, “his” in the case of these poets) sphere of personal references and attachments. These poets worry, then, both within and without their texts over an uncomfortable correlation existing between their need to contain their melancholic realms of import and a cultural push within the United States, for religious and political reasons, to quarantine those infected with HIV. In this chapter, I refer to this impulse to quarantine and, by corollary, kill off the infected gay male body—an impulse that Bersani, Treichler, Sedgwick, and others note as well—as “thanapolitics”; I glean the term from the discipline of biopolitics, specifically the works of Giorgio Agamben. (Indeed, my second chapter also implicitly argues that AIDS literature and theory not only fill in a historical and intellectual gap between Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* and “queer theory,” but also explain a related gap between Foucault’s same volume and “biopolitics.”⁷⁸) As a result of the thematic and formal correlations between containment and quarantine, and in an effort to ameliorate their speakers’ sense of abject isolation, these poets search for ways—however impracticable they might be, such as praying to secular sources or undermining the impact of death through embracing its erasures⁷⁹—to transcend the ethical impasse created at the intersection of lyric and utilitarian logics.

The third chapter discusses the concurrent works of black gay AIDS poets (primarily those of Hemphill, Dixon, and Shepherd) in order to index their means of and particular reasons for circumventing this ethical impasse. Concerned with the way racial logics additionally abjected the black gay lyric self during the AIDS crisis, these poets resisted representing their lyric speakers as agent-less linguistic manifestations on a page speaking out of and into a void; instead, they labored to reconnect the written lyric—which other AIDS poets were equating with

isolation, abjection, and death—to its choric roots. They suggest that a longstanding relationship exists between lyric and performance that productively aligns or associates lyric speakers with each other and their audiences.⁸⁰ Correspondingly, these poets work to gain visibility for the genre of poetry, and therefore their referents (living or dead), by placing poetry in proximity to other genres and mediums. As will be discussed, these black gay AIDS poets, especially Hemphill, arrange an inter-generic, multimedia, and performance-oriented black gay cultural movement around the figure and figurations of lyric voice. To be sure, a wealth of black gay anthologies, films, documentaries, and dance pieces featuring lyric speakers and alluding to each other emerge during the early AIDS crisis, such as Joseph Beam's collection of written works, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986), Marlon Riggs's experimental documentary, *Tongues Untied* (1987), and Bill T. Jones' masterwork of choreography, *Still/Here* (1994). These inter-generic pieces also overtly and covertly identify (and censure) not only the Euro-centric biases of gay liberationism but also those of lyric tradition; however, it must be added that later black gay AIDS poets, especially Shepherd and Phillips, contest the manner in which earlier black gay AIDS poets frame these biases as metaphysically endemic to lyric itself. These later poets differentiate between the history of lyric (which has certainly expressed a racial bias toward whiteness) and the lyric mode (which inherently provides a platform for object selves to find expression). As a result of these techniques and later debates that highlight the choric roots and mercurial nature of lyric, this set of AIDS poets also suggests to subsequent AIDS poets new methods for resolving their conflict of ethics.

Indeed, the fourth and final chapter of the dissertation discusses the works of a wide variety of AIDS poets (Dent, Doty, Campo, Cuadros, Cole, and McCann) who attempt to answer this compound of ethical and representational dilemmas by suggesting that lyric itself presents

the very indeterminacy needed to balance melancholia with activism as well as, relatedly, the specifics of identitarian experiences with semi-poststructuralist aesthetics and politics. The last of the AIDS poets suggest—due to what lyric theorist Scott Brewster calls its “terminological looseness” (4)⁸¹—lyric can appear in almost any genre and thereby tie disparate speakers and concerns together; as critic Gerard Genette has argued,⁸² in Aristotelian aesthetic philosophy, lyric can be considered a mode rather than a genre, meaning that it might appear in mediums beyond poetry’s purview, such as fiction or drama. But these later AIDS poets also demonstrate, even more insistently, the way lyric voice itself can be considered indeterminate, both in regards to who speaks and listens as well as how many speak and how many listen. By emphasizing the flexibility of the lyric mode and voice, an emphasis my fourth chapter terms “lyric queerness,” these AIDS poets also persistently draw lines of identification across various experiences of being and alterity within a sociopolitical framework. In other words, they suggest that the ontological experience of abjection—central to gay liberationism during the AIDS crisis, as both gay literature and queer theory point out, as well as the condition of the lyric voice itself—is in fact a universal condition of being, whether consciously registered by an extant cogent self or not. Because of this phenomenological and poststructuralist understanding of lyric and being, this slightly later constellation of AIDS poets also facilitate—as I argue in the fourth chapter through the criticism of Hank Lazer and Stephen Burt respectively—the cultural legitimization of LANGUAGE poetry and the emergence of the Ellipticals.⁸³

Lyric poetry, in other words, becomes for the AIDS poets as a whole that which demands the individual meditate on the traces of the dead and thereby stave off the epitaphic nature, or deathly telos, of literature (and life itself); but it also becomes for them a means to open the individual up to the experiences of others and otherness. To be sure, in the last lines of the poem

excerpted above, Monette's speaker worries that literature and language itself fails to prompt an absent listener to speak ("there must be / something just say what it is and it's yours") as well as the possibility that the speaker himself might not exist ("there must be / something"). Slightly later AIDS poets claim, however—problematically or not—that lyric represents an affinity between the self and alterity in their many guises. Indeed, in "Broadway," quoted above, Doty writes: "She was only asking for change // so I don't know why I took her hand [. . .] [she] must have wondered at my impulse to touch her, / which was like touching myself, // the way your own hand feels when you hold it" (ll.21-51).⁸⁴ Whether correctly or not, these AIDS poets advance the notion that lyric can generically enact the very imperative that AIDS and queer theorists concurrently put forth: the discursive need to balance (or vacillate endlessly between) the experiences of the self and those of others. These poets suggest that lyric simultaneously represents and attempts to assuage the discursive and temporal disposition of being that always already codes everything beyond the scope of the mind, perhaps even the mind itself, as absent or inaccessible; to exist, these poets suggest, is an intrinsically ghostly experience. Put otherwise, the AIDS crisis compelled its writers and theorists to embrace, however provisionally, a political and aesthetic philosophy that problematized, blurred, dismantled, and jettisoned what they saw as deleterious, structuralist binaries (such as the self and other, gay and straight, or sero-positive and sero-negative); what they generated together, as a result, is a quasi-poststructuralist praxis that impacts our culture still. However, while the earliest AIDS writers and queer theorists primarily strove to undo the culturally-perceived differences between those who were granted subjectivity and those who were not, the AIDS poets toiled along a parallel, except more fundamental, axis of thought: the AIDS poets worked to dismantle the perceived differences between those who were granted *presence* and those who were not. Simply put, the earliest

AIDS poets asked, how can we protect those who are most vulnerable to being erased, not the gay male or the PWA, but the already dead. The AIDS poets collectively responded that perhaps the living and the dead—existing as they do in a spectral field of discourse and time—are not so different after all.

Chapter One: Paul Monette and the Ethics of AIDS Poetry

Opposing Ethics:

Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog (1988), Paul Monette's third book of poems and one of the earliest volumes of AIDS poetry, stands at several knotty intersections, such as elegy and lyric, genre and ethics, and literature and activism. Most scholarship written on the volume focuses on this latter relationship to claim that *Love Alone* can be characterized as participating in a gay liberationist logic that seeks to deploy representational means to cohere and strengthen the gay community.⁸⁵ To be sure, nearly all of the peer-reviewed articles on Monette's AIDS writings assert that his poetry works to affirm a sense of the gay identity and community during the height of the biomedical crisis in the United States. For instance, Joseph Cady's essay "Immersive and Counterimmersive Writing About AIDS: The Achievement of Paul Monette's *Love Alone*" (1993) argues that, "Monette hopes to jolt his audience out of its denial of AIDS and to urge on it a sense of emergency that he and his community already know too well" (250)⁸⁶; while discussing early AIDS poetry, critic Jonathan Allen Sedberry builds on Cady's work to declare, "in *Love Alone* [. . .] Monette seeks to detonate the myth that gay men cannot love, that sexual hedonism defines them" (179-80).⁸⁷ Such readings reiterate Larry Kramer's blurb on the volume's back cover, both in its original hardcover and paperback format, which reads⁸⁸: "These are gorgeous, heartbreaking screams—such beauty from such pain and loss and agony—and I want everyone to hear them, every cowardly bastard in Washington who helps let us die, every person in the world who doesn't know that men love men majestically, beautifully, heroically." Within one sentence, Kramer—the well-known AIDS writer and activist⁸⁹—rewrites

Monette's "heartbreaking screams" as a screed against the United States' deadly apathy to the epidemic.

This chapter works to slow down and parse the process by which grief extends and transfigures into a sociopolitical exigency for Monette in his book of AIDS poems—as well as how this process informs our understanding of contemporaneous and subsequent AIDS poets. As this chapter explores throughout, *Love Alone*'s activist reputation can mostly be attributed to a retrospective viewing of it through Monette's ensuing personal life and writings, rather than the poems themselves. To be sure, after Monette's significant other of twelve years, Roger Horwitz, died in 1986 from AIDS-related complications, Monette authored both *Love Alone* and an account of Roger's final years entitled *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir*. Although Monette wrote the poetry volume first, they both appeared in 1988 and the memoir received much popular and critical attention, including a National Book Critic's Circle Award nomination.⁹⁰ Monette, who was seropositive and died from AIDS-related complications in 1995, dedicated his life from then on to writing additional memoirs (one of which garnered the 1992 National Book Award), novels, parables, lectures, and poems regarding the AIDS pandemic and its interrelated history with homophobia in the United States. He even allowed a film crew to record his final years and death, the footage of which became the controversial documentary, *Paul Monette: The Brink of Summer's End* (1996). By the end of his life, in other words, Monette, like Kramer (indeed, the two had become friends by the early-1990s⁹¹), had grown into a fierce advocate for gay rights, condemning various institutions, such as the United States' congress and the Catholic Church, for exacerbating the AIDS crisis.

While *Love Alone* predates this explicit advocacy, the origins of Monette's later "militancy" can be found, however, in a few key moments of the volume itself. For instance, as

already discussed in the introduction, the volume's fourteenth poem, "Manifesto" fulminates against self-help gurus who claim that "sickness is self- / induced" (ll.2-3); its poet-speaker asks, "when do we leave the mirror /and lie down in front of the tanks" (ll.71-72). The poem then concludes with searing Holocaust imagery evocative of Kramer's AIDS activist rhetoric at the time (a topic I take up in the following chapter). As a result, critics have exclusively framed the poem and therefore the entire volume as intentionally bolstering a gay liberationist logic under the duress of the AIDS crisis. While arguing against the sociopolitical benefits of such identitarian discourses, Edelman agrees that Monette fosters a gay liberationist mentality; in his essay, "The Mirror and the Tank: 'AIDS,' Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism" (1993), which takes its title from "Manifesto," Edelman argues that Monette, "participates in the ongoing campaign to refashion the gay subject in terms of an 'AIDS activist' that deploys [. . .] a contemptuous depiction of non-'activist' gay men as narcissists addicted to pleasure, resistant to struggle, and therefore responsible for the continuing devastations of 'AIDS'" (22). In other words, Edelman critiques Monette's support of an identitarian logic which coerces, according to Edelman, all gay men to support, however inadvertently, a sociopolitical power hierarchy that always already abjects gay men; he thus takes "Manifesto" as a negative example in which the AIDS crisis presents "lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals" (34) with an opportunity—exactly because it engages "identity as an issue" (12)—to rewrite identity as a "fluidity of differences" in a way that can generate a semi-poststructuralist "queer nationalism" (31). Nevertheless, while differing on their views of its value, both Edelman and his peers agree that "Manifesto" deploys gay liberationism as a compulsory, if flawed, logic.

Such a focus on Monette as a gay activist, however, overlooks or at the very least minimizes the importance of the ethical and literary questions that recur throughout *Love Alone*.

Indeed, Monette's implicit imagining of a gay community at the end of "Manifesto," which comes three-quarters of the way through *Love Alone* as a whole, constitutes a unique turn for the volume; what is more, this turn, which can be read as "militant," can also be seen as self-referentially critiquing its speaker for his nearly exclusive interest in contacting his specific lost auditor. This is to say, the palpable frustration expressed in "Manifesto" might be, in fact, self-directed. After all, most of "Manifesto" explicitly addresses Rog, so when the speaker inquires, "when do we leave the mirror / and lie down in front of the tanks," he does not merely put forth a rhetorical question to (non)activist gay men; rather, the poet-speaker asks his lost significant other, narcissistically perhaps (because he inquires in isolation), when it becomes the ethical choice for a lyric speaker to turn away from the other's trace presence and toward activist ends. How, the speaker implicitly wonders, is his solitary grief any different from a narcissistic self-regard? When and how can he leap, the poem inquires, from melancholia to militancy; and at what cost could it make such a leap? *Love Alone* must work through questions of genre—poetry's ability or lack thereof to generate presence and ethically restore, thereby, specific lost alterity—before Monette's speaker can begin to constellate an ethics of alterity on a larger sociopolitical scale. *Love Alone*'s eighteen poems interrogate, in other words, elegy as practice, placing the act of mourning at the center of phenomenology, politics, language, and poetry itself. As a result of these uncompromising and pressing interrogations, *Love Alone* comes to emblemize, moreover, the ethical conundrums that haunt most of early AIDS poetry as well as, however indirectly, American poetry as a whole that follows.⁹²

Despite its framing by criticism and even Monette himself as militant in nature, *Love Alone* primarily and overridingly conveys its central worry that written discourse—including poetry—fails to fulfill any promise of immortality or legacy that it purports to make. Even in the

volume's introduction—which he wrote over a year after composing the volume's poems and which frames them as polemics against a homophobic society in the age of AIDS—Monette interposes an anecdote about the ephemerality of written language. Describing his and Roger's last vacation abroad in 1984, he writes: "On the high bluff of ancient Thera, [. . .] my hand grazed a white marble block covered edge to edge with Greek characters, line after precise line. The marble was titled up to the weather, its message slowly eroding in the rain. 'I hope somebody's recorded all this,' I said, realizing with a dull thrill of helplessness that this *was* the record" (xii; original emphasis). Rather than communicating his confidence in the ability of written discourse to affect its surroundings and project its referents into the future, Monette describes his shock, here, at realizing that written words undergo the same material degradations as the human body, though perhaps on a protracted scale. Underscoring this epiphany by italicizing the past-tense word "was," the preface to *Love Alone* telegraphs, despite itself then, an anxiety over the mutability and—what I call throughout this dissertation—the "past-ward-ness," or "past-ward pull," of literary endeavors. *Love Alone*'s central struggle materializes around the way written discourse marks its human referents as always already located in the past and as always already immaterial and erasable. For the Monette of *Love Alone*, questions of how to employ grief as an effective political tool become only secondary; as he explains in his later preface to *West of Yesterday, East of Summer: New and Selected Poems* (1994), the first ten poems of *Love Alone* were written "without thinking," with "no sense anyone *else* would want them" (xviii; original emphasis). Until editor and critic Michael Denny (Monette's longtime associate⁹³) expressed interest in publishing—what Monette's memoir, *Borrowed Time*, refers to as—his "conspiracy poems"⁹⁴ (or lyrics that privately shuttle from interlocutor to absent listener), Monette wrote his desolate poems *to* Rog alone, rather than *for* "anyone *else*."⁹⁵

This is all to say, *Love Alone* as a whole—both its composition and publication—finds itself trapped between two opposing regimes of ethics. First and foremost, the volume participates in what R. Clifton Spargo refers to, in *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (2004), as “protest mourning.” In this conception of ethics, a melancholic state protests—not society’s injustices, but—the cosmic injustice of death and, even more so, refuses to turn away from the absent other in that other’s greatest moment of vulnerability; namely, when that other’s unreachable alterity becomes infinitely exposed because actualized by her or his absence. This stance reframes Freud’s melancholia as an ethical imperative that a social utilitarian imperative threatens.⁹⁶ In his significant 1985 study, *The English Elegy*, Peter M. Sacks suggests that this refusal to let the absent other recede into oblivion interweaves with a modern (Americanized) “anti-elegiac” form that resists replacing the lost other with broad abstractions like God, Country, or Art or with a new libido-object.⁹⁷ Sacks asserts that this anti-elegiac form refuses tradition or becomes a paradoxical non-traditional tradition because it sees genre as erasing the particular significances and differences of its specific lost others; this erasure creates in turn a generic deathlike sameness that relegates lost others to the catacombs of tradition. Under this regime of ethics, then, given that it is tied intimately to the form of the elegy, it is unethical to use elegy to transform the poet-speaker’s grief into an affirmation of current public mores and their corresponding functionalist ends because doing so would violently erase the lost other’s trace.

For *Love Alone* (as well as most early AIDS poetry, as I will discuss), anti-elegy primarily finds its resistance to utilitarian mourning in the lyric mode of direct address to its lost other. The constant address to Rog in *Love Alone* by Monette’s speaker, who is explicitly conflated with Monette throughout, can be rephrased as a refusal to forsake the lost other

especially during that other's material absence.⁹⁸ For instance, in "The Worrying," the fifth poem in *Love Alone* (part of which I use as an epigraph for this dissertation's introduction), the poet-speaker declares: "Rog it hasn't stopped at all are you okay / does it hurt what can I do still still I / think if I worry enough I'll keep you near" (ll.58-60); he later asks Rog, "are you easy / my stolen pal what do you need is it /sleep like sleep you want a pillow a cool / drink oh my one safe place there must be / something just say what it is and it's yours" (ll.75-79). For early AIDS poetry and for *Love Alone* especially, at the exact moment the other vanishes that other's unreachable alterity is thrown into drastic relief and the lost other's infinite (because fully realized) vulnerability demands unlimited responsibility from the lyric, or isolated, self. To be sure, "Half Life," the seventh poem, opens: "exactly half the phenomenal world is gone." Such phrasing implicitly refers to Rog's death and absence, and yet paradoxically the poet-speaker claims over a dozen lines later: "all the while you are getting more whole Rog" (l.17). By addressing the lost other and repeatedly demanding his impossible responses, Monette's anti-elegies situate the lost other as the self's object of psychic intention to the necessary exclusion of an overhearing reader who represents the ongoing and historicizing present.⁹⁹ Monette persistently engages in the lyric mode, in other words, because it promises his speaker the possibility of sustaining an exclusive and uninterrupted connection with the nevertheless unresponsive other. While resisting the utilitarian ends of elegy, *Love Alone* suggests that the essence of the lyric mode, as will be discussed shortly, is the melancholic gesture of pointing imploringly to who (or to what) is not there.¹⁰⁰

At the same time, however, the content of *Love Alone* also indirectly voices an ethical responsibility to the gay liberationist imperative of engaging AIDS as a primary challenge to the longevity of the gay community and its constitutive members. Cultural critic Douglas Crimp

articulated the call most cogently (and probably most influentially) in his 1987 essay “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism,” when he asserts that “art *does* have the power to save lives, and it is this very power that must be recognized” (32; original emphasis).¹⁰¹ Even though Crimp later allows for the impulse to mourn in his ethical universe, militancy—Crimp tells the gay community and People with AIDS (PWAs)—must be a present and teleological condition in all art. Famed Violet Quill writer Andrew Holleran similarly espouses a utilitarian and, implicitly, gay liberationist ethos in 1988, when he declares, “writing about AIDS [. . .] must be about fighting—it must be in some way heartening—it must improve morale, for it to be allowed a place of honor. Otherwise it will be dismissed as useless, discouraging, immoral” (17).¹⁰² This ethos, or edict, especially in combination with elegy’s traditional convention of supplanting its lost object of desire with an object of communal good, derides grief and its representation in the AIDS era as non-utilitarian and, therefore, pathologically melancholic or narcissistic. As the prospect of his poems’ publication arose halfway through *Love Alone*’s composition, then, Monette’s speaker increasingly wonders over the ethical soundness of his melancholic voice, especially when its public airing implicitly exposes it as isolated and alone; hence his question posed to Rog and possibly those living in his contemporaneous moment, “when do we leave the mirror / and lie down in front of the tanks.” The nature of this question organizes much of early AIDS poetry, prompting it to search for means to make its principal, philosophically-minded, and unending duty to protect specific lost others commensurate with its secondary, utilitarian, and exigent necessity of protecting those others who are still living amidst the AIDS crisis.

Nevertheless, the content of *Love Alone* privileges melancholia over militancy to suggest that the ethical duty of the former predates, precludes, and yet—as I will discuss—undergirds and suggests the obligation of the latter; the volume troubles, in other words, over the way its

caring for one specific other points to and negates its ability to care for diverse others. Most of the volume's ostensible activist work, then, occurs paratextually, such as in Monette's subsequent writings and interviews¹⁰³ as well as, initially, in its preface. In his preface, Monette declares, "I would rather have this volume filed under AIDS than under poetry" (xi) and then concludes:

The story that constantly eludes the decorum of the press is the death of a generation of gay men. What is written here is only one man's passing and one man's cry, a warrior burying another 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, learned in the joy of my best friend what all the meaningless pain and horror cannot take away—that all there is is love. Pity us not. (xiii)

For the Monette of *Love Alone*, his poems' critical reception hardly mattered; in fact, in later writings, as will be touched upon, he often scoffs at what Hank Lazer has termed "official verse culture."¹⁰⁴ What matters for Monette here is the need to align lyric's and activism's opposing ethics as well as models of alterity, both those that relate to the individual's experiences versus those that relate to the collective's. Indeed, in the final paragraph of the volume's preface, the "we" of "Monette and Rog" transforms into the "we" of "gay men" immersed in the AIDS crisis; the melancholic mourner becomes the grieving warrior. Put otherwise, while conceding that his grief and anti-elegies are mere instances of, or "fuel" for, a larger sociopolitical imperative, Monette also simultaneously reduces sociopolitical imperatives to their lowest common denominator: "all there is is love" or, as the volume's title suggests, "all there is is love *alone*." Monette and his volume as a whole thusly posit that "love" and its related severed-circuit of grief, which are given discursive form by lyric anti-elegy, not only oppose but paradoxically underpin and necessitate activist ends, or the "love" of others en masse. As his prefatory passage and my later discussion of *Love Alone*'s final poems indicate, Monette eventually places his local

grief at the center of an ongoing sociopolitical discussion, paving the way, thereby, for the AIDS poets as whole to balance—or at least attempt to balance—lyric ends (or, melancholia) and utilitarian exigencies (or, activism).

Lyric and Dramatic Monologue:

The content of *Love Alone* is not apolitical per se; however, it is effectively and fundamentally anti-social toward anyone exterior to the lyric self and lost other's bond.¹⁰⁵ To acknowledge the presence of third-parties, it suggests, risks admitting the absences of the lyric self and other. In other words, Monette's anti-elegies worry that privileging an ethics of activism (which relates to the struggles of the ongoing present) over an ethics of mourning (which relates to the self's need to preserve the other's diminishing trace) locates both the writer and the writer's lost love-object in the irretrievable and deathly past. For instance, in the volume's sixth poem, "Readiness," when the poet-speaker hazards imagining his and Rog's future significance in a gay liberationist milieu, he and the lost other transform into mere coded and epitaphic reminders from the past. After describing the way his tombstone will proclaim his love for Rog,¹⁰⁶ Monette says:

only if we're lucky some far-off
men of our sort 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* (ll.49-54; original emphasis)

The phrase "generation hence" recalls, of course, the Whitmanian gesture of using literary tradition to project oneself into the future, as most notably seen in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."¹⁰⁷ However, Monette's anti-elegy also implies that this connection to the future automatically places the lyric self and other in the past (no matter what Whitman's intentions might have

been). “Readiness” suggests that writing, rather than promising literary immortality, remains epitaphic, locating the writer and the writer’s contemporaries as the reader’s past referents.¹⁰⁸ In this logic, to write and to publish is to die and potentially—even worse—to murder the objects of one’s writings.¹⁰⁹ By corollary, then, the gay literary tradition employs its human referents as examples and counter-examples for the betterment of the gay community as well as the further codification of the gay identity while correspondingly erasing the presence and specificity of those once human and embodied referents. As a result, *Love Alone* (as well as most early AIDS poetry, as the second chapter discusses) favors a plainspoken and earnest lyric voice that works to disrupt the past-ward-ness of literary tradition, especially when placed under the aegis of gay liberationism.¹¹⁰

To be sure, although the volume makes multiple allusions to literary history throughout (mostly gay literary history), just as “Readiness” alludes to “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,”¹¹¹ such references in Monette’s anti-elegies supplant the notions of a gay liberationist logic or of elegy’s idealized notion of literary immortality with a fear of literary tradition’s deathly, or past-ward, telos. For instance, the poem “Black Xmas” recalls Monette’s final Christmas with Rog while comparing it to Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol*, which promises Scrooge a beneficent rewriting of the past, present, and future and ensures, in part, Dicken’s own literary legacy.¹¹² However, “Black Xmas” counters Scrooge’s cry “There’s still time” with Monette’s assertion that “there’s no time”; he adds, “the third ghost with / his bony finger reading the tomb like Braille / is the dream from which we shall not wake” (l.46). Through this composite of deathly images, the poet-speaker indicates that literature works merely as an epitaphic medium through which the past referent is only, if at all, indirectly touched by the equally ephemeral reader.¹¹³ Similarly, the first book of *Love Alone*’s last poem, “New Year’s at Lawrence’s Grave,” details Monette’s

pilgrimage to D. H. Lawrence's grave just after Rog's death, implicitly aligning Rog's grave with Lawrence's. While this comparison, as well as the title of the poem, may summon the notion that literature makes a presently relevant marker out of the grave, near the end of the poem, Monette says to Rog, "we'd read [Lawrence] / out loud and bring him back [but] I can't alone" (ll.100-101). By way of its literary allusions, *Love Alone* demonstrates doubt, then, at the very least, over literature's ability to resuscitate written discourse's always already lost referents.

Similarly, near the end of "Last Day at Molera Beach," the third to last poem in the volume, Monette explicitly interrogates poetry's myth of immortality. The speaker recounts taking a solitary trip to Big Sur's Molera Beach days before Rog's death, where he "traced with a naked finger P & R" (l.134) in sand as "fine as talcum" (l.133). In the present of the poem, Monette acknowledges that the inscription is "not / there now" (ll.135-36). This image recalls the sonneteer tradition of the Early Modern period which claimed—if somewhat irreverently or ironically—that poetry has the ability to immortalize their subjects, authors, and the bond between the two. For instance, Spenser's eighty-first sonnet begins, "One day I wrote her name upon the strand / But came the waves and washed it away" (ll.1-2), and concludes, "whenas death shall all the world subdew, / Our love shall live" (ll.13-14); in this way, Spenser implies, however playfully or perhaps insincerely, that poetry serves as the proper medium for the lovers' ascendance over the historic pull of time. However, "Last Day at Molera Beach" principally compares poetry with the ephemerality of writing in the sand, rather than, as in Spenser's case, juxtaposing the two means of writing to form a distinction. To be sure, the poem's occasion of relating a "last day" before Rog's death, as will be discussed further, highlights language's failure to preserve those who are absent. Language, written or otherwise, "Last Day at Molera Beach" suggests, only points to absence. For instance, near the beginning of the poem, when

trying to describe Molera Beach's namesake, Monette cuts himself off, declaring, "he's as gone / as anything man" (ll.18-19). The phenomenological manifestation of all "men" or "humans," including himself and Rog, Monette indicates, become signifiers of absence when set in the medium of language.

Only direct address and its linguistic manifestations (as explored in this chapter's next section), stave off for Monette's speaker a collective sense of time and thereby, the speaker hopes, retains a sense of presence for Rog and their bond. For instance, in the volume's second poem, "No Goodbyes," Monette tacitly admits that his significant other has died but only within the framework of addressing that lost other and distancing him from a collective temporality. Indeed, in the poem's conclusion, while describing Rog's death, the lyric speaker laments:

[. . .] it can't it can't
be yet not this just let me brush his hair
it's only Tuesday there's chicken in the fridge
from Sunday night he ate he slept oh why
don't all these kisses rouse you I won't won't
say it all I will say is goodnight patting
a few last strands in place you're covered now
my darling one last graze in the meadow
of you and please let your final dream be
a man not quite your size losing the whole
world but still here combing combing
singing your secret names till the night's gone (ll.33-38)

Rather than saying "goodbye," the speaker seeks to preserve the very moment at which his listener's presence slipped into absence, thereby creating the speaker's melancholic, and lyric, condition. Through direct address and its promise of a "secret" language shared by the lyric speaker and lost other, the speaker works to affirm the connection between his lyric I and you as well as, relatedly, severs their bond from a collective sense of time—as the demarcations of "Tuesday" and "Sunday" and even "night" suggest. Indeed, such demarcations require the speaker to transpose his lost other from a lyric you into a collective and historicized object of

narrativity, or the pronominal third-person “he.” If anything, the poet-speaker labors to sacrifice his sense of immanence and presence, coding himself as an unspecific “man,” in order to imagine and recover his other’s now lost and fully inaccessible perspective. This is to say, through recurrent and persistent lyric address, the speaker dedicates himself to outlasting the historicizing notions of time that always implicate a sociopolitical present successive to the lyric’s “I and you” and which reframe them, therefore, as dead and absent.

To be sure, *Love Alone*’s dedication to such an earnest plainspoken lyric voice divorced from the concerns of the collective present—its readymade conflation of the lyric voice with Monette himself—constitutes a radical shift in Monette’s preceding poetics, thereby underscoring its necessity. His earlier published works, both his poetry collections and novels, revel in a sense of persona as well as in the emerging gay literary climate. For instance, many of his preceding novels—*Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll* (1978), *The Gold Diggers* (1979), and *The Long Shot* (1981)—explicitly feature gay characters and take up topics central to a gay liberationist ethos, such as the allure of monogamy versus the political valences of gay sexual liberation (or, what was sometimes neutrally or scornfully referred to as, “promiscuity”).¹¹⁴ To be sure, in Monette’s final published work of nonfiction, *Last Watch of the Night: Essays Too Personal and Otherwise* (1994),¹¹⁵ he explicitly asserts that his earlier novels participated in the Violet Quill paradigm of representing the lives of gay men in a sophisticated, upper middle class, implicitly-white, protestant milieu.¹¹⁶ What is more, while his first collection of poems *The Carpenter at the Asylum* (1975) mostly discusses “homosexuality” in a coded fashion akin to what critic Robert K. Martin describes as the “homosexual” underpinnings of the American poetic tradition,¹¹⁷ his second collection of poems, *No Witnesses* (1981), explicitly treats gay themes and figures by way of persona and dramatic monologue. Indeed, in *Last Watch of the*

Night (1994), depicting his younger self as a member of the “Stonewall generation” (40), he explicitly calls his second book of poems, “a group of dramatic monologues” (41). The volume’s final and longest poem, “Musical Comedy,” for instance, speaks from the perspective of the gay literary and cultural icon Noel Coward and explicitly acknowledges Coward’s “homosexuality” throughout.¹¹⁸ This is to say, gay liberationism and fictitious literary persona helped Monette affirm in his pre-AIDS works the notion of “gayness” as constituting a social type, or coherent and knowable political identity.¹¹⁹

Love Alone’s insistent conjoining of the poet and the speaker as well as its corresponding techniques of earnest direct address suggest, however, that his previous gay liberationist techniques might reduce the lyric self and other to social types and erase, thereby, their real world specificity and presence. While some critics, such as Roger Platizky and Lloyd Edward Kermode, have noted this tonal shift in Monette’s oeuvre and even attributed it to his anti-elegiac stance,¹²⁰ they also argue, conflictingly, that the purposes of this anti-elegiac stance ultimately lies in Monette’s gay liberationist ethos.¹²¹ Kermode’s particularly nuanced and relatively-recent reading of *Love Alone* in “Using Up Words in Paul Monette’s AIDS Elegy” (2005), for instance, implicitly agrees with Edelman’s reading of the volume; Kermode admonishes *Love Alone* for “publici[z]ing the voices of gay men” (218) because such a framing of identity confirms “an extreme heterosexual system of difference that sees as inevitable the gap of silence [. . .] between homosexuals and heterosexuals” (219). In other words, while neglecting the fact that by their very disposition of “anti-elegies” resists participating in utilitarian logics as well as the fact that Monette’s anti-elegies, specifically, primarily if not exclusively work to traverse “the inevitable gap of silence” between the lyric self and other, Kermode argues that *Love Alone* reinscribes what he sees as the dated logics of gay liberationism. However, Monette’s volume

indicates through its persistent and earnest lyric address that it departs from his previous sociopolitical goals (and precipitates his later sociopolitical goals, as this chapter's conclusion argues). Indeed, by overlooking the prominence of direct address in the volume, both Platizky and Kermode, like Edelman, neglect the significant distinction that *Love Alone* draws between lyric and dramatic monologue as well as, by corollary, an ethics of mourning and an ethics of activism.

For Monette, while lyric becomes closely associated with his drive to retain a sense of presence for his speaker and other, his previous and predominant poetic technique of dramatic monologue becomes implicitly affiliated with utilitarian ends and therefore historicity. In other words, even though language and literature themselves threaten to code Monette's lyric self and other as objects of the past because of their sociopolitical nature, lyric—he proposes—works not only to provoke the absent listener into dialogue and therefore presence, but also to retain the speaking self and implied silent other in a non-historic or a-historic place and time (that is, a place and time dislocated from the reader's historicizing gaze). Likewise, in her critical work *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (2006), Multu Konuk Blasing theorizes that the lyric mode, in general, works to return its speakers to a time before language acquisition and the Lacanian mirror stage created a divide between the self and other.¹²² Put otherwise, language itself can be said to create, for Monette and other lyric poets, a sense of social historicity and identity that severs the self from the other; lyric endeavors, in this schematization, to return to a time before the self and other's differentiation, or separation, took place. While bolstered primarily by poetry's onomatopoetic penchant according to Blasing, lyric's end of reuniting the self with the other is mostly enacted by Monette and other AIDS poets through lyric address itself. Indeed, as poetic theorist William Water's has argued in his monograph *Poetry's Touch*:

On Lyric Address (2003), lyric's primary "axis of concern" is "the contact that it is (or is not) making with the person to whom it is speaking" (1); lyric's proclivity for direct address, then, works to make contact with, or "touch," those who are absent or missing. For Monette, earnest lyric address attempts to correct or negate the way discourse, especially when written, codes its referents as always already immaterial and of the past.

Of course, such an interpretation of lyric contradicts fundamental arguments put forth about lyric's "monologic" nature—in regards to the speaker's lack of interlocutors—by lyric theory as a whole. To be sure, far from claiming lyric to be an epistolary-like expression from one speaker to one listener, John Stuart Mill's foundationally treatise on poetry, "What is Poetry?" (1833), famously declares that lyric address is, by definition, a speech not heard by one listener but *overheard* by the reader. More recent critics, such as W. R. Johnson and Heather Dubrow, insist as well that lyric descends from, and still essentially relates to (despite its contemporary manifestations), the performance of interiority in a public setting. Based on Gérard Genette's Aristotelian theories of aesthetics, Scott Brewster also argues in his brief study *Lyric* (2009) that lyric has been strongly affiliated with performance or, or a "means of enunciation" of, a constructed self and implied listener.¹²³ Influential critic Jonathan Culler went so far, in his seminal article, "Apostrophe" (1977), to claim that lyric reduces to—as demonstrated by the Romantics—the "trope of an *O*" (68), or an apostrophization of what Helen Vendler later terms "invisible listeners."¹²⁴ However, unlike Vendler's interpretation of this rhetoric as a bid for intimacy between the self and other, Culler asserts that the poetic voice ultimately addresses absent or invisible forces not to establish a connection with those forces but "to establish [itself as] poetical and prophetic" (63) for the reader; that is, lyric address functions as a means to construct and differentiate the self from the other for the "overhearing" audience. Even Barbara

Johnson's response to Culler's argument,¹²⁵ which claims that lyric poets apostrophize in order to represent a semblance of control over those intangible forces and therefore the uncertainties of fate, also suggests that lyric has historically worked to assert not just the "poetical and prophetic" prowess of its poets but also the sociopolitical agency of its traditionally white, male speakers. This is all to say, according to these (nevertheless) compelling arguments, lyric's ultimate and intended, if not primary, audience is always already the "overhearing" third-party reader and their implied collective, ongoing, present, rather than the constructed stage-prop of the implied specific auditor.

However, even these definitions point to, rather than negate or problematize, the way in which lyric centers around its primary "axis of concern," as Waters put it; that axis being the ability or inability of a Cartesian, isolated mind, or lyric self, to reach toward and make contact with an object beyond its present confinement—or to reach toward and make contact with what phenomenology calls an "intentional" or "aesthetic" object. Indeed, even while Brewster's study views lyric as a calculated performance for an audience, it inadvertently admits to lyric's primary axis of concern: "lyric far from presenting the unmediated thoughts and feelings of an isolated individual, centres [sic] on the relationship between the self and others, the self and history, and the self and language" (14). Culler similarly concedes that lyric poetry deploys its central rhetoric of apostrophe in order to dissociate, however imaginatively or impossibly, the self and other from their representative dispositions in narrative and history and, instead, "locate them in the time of apostrophe" or "a timeless present" (66).¹²⁶ The lyric, in other words, puts pressure on the site where the self and other meet language and history. To be sure, as Sharon Cameron argues in her brilliant and highly-influential study *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (1979)—though written primarily in reference to Dickinson—"lyrics [. . .] attempt to cross

boundaries, blur distinctions between life and death, time and timelessness” (135); or, as she also describes it, “the lyric cry against time [. . .] does not even know how to imagine anything outside of the temporal limitations it desires to overcome” (21). This is to say, critics like Waters, Blasing, and Cameron, as well as Monette’s anti-elegies in *Love Alone*, implicitly argue that lyric primarily and essentially teases at and worries over the boundary between the self and the always-unreachable interior life of alterity as well as the way in which the social and historicizing aspects of language and literature inevitably frame the self and other as figments of the past; lyric works, they suggest, to bridge—however impossibly—the gap between the self’s fragile state of presence and that which may or may not exist beyond it whether considered temporally present or absent by a collective, utilitarian ethos or not.¹²⁷ In lyric’s paradigm then, as I primarily discuss in the fourth chapter, the absent or lost other and the putative collective present can become one and the same, inasmuch as the lyric voice works to overcome its isolation from all that which exists beyond the temporary event of its consciousness. *Love Alone* persistently works, however, to prevent such a slippage in address between the lyric other and the sociopolitical present from occurring.

Moreover, these theorists and *Love Alone* also implicitly draw a distinction between lyric and dramatic monologue that theorists like Mill, Dubrow, and Culler sometimes elide. This is to say, for Monette and the like-minded, even though lyric and dramatic monologue might exist on the same spectrum formally because they center on the written expression of direct address, the two genres imply differing ends. To be sure, much debate exists in the realm of theory over what constitutes the difference between the two since it seems a matter of degree and interpretation how closely aligned the speaker and poet are and how closely aligned the auditor (or addressee) and reader are.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, most theorists—especially in a post-Romantic and post-

Confessional era¹²⁹—have come to differentiate between the earnest plainspoken first-person voice of lyric and the first-person personae of dramatic monologue. As a means of distinction critic Alan Sinfield has made the broad assertion in his study *Dramatic Monologue* (1977) that such monologues are, “first-person poems where the speaker is indicated not to be the poet” (42). What this distinction configures, according to critic Glennis Byron, is a close association, on the one hand, between the lyric speaker and the “experiencing poet” and, on the other hand, between dramatic voice and a “fictive narrative” (14). In other words, as its moniker suggests, *dramatic monologue* represents one side of dialogue that might be found in a longer dramatic work that suggests the narrativity of history. This is to say, while both a lyric poem and a dramatic monologue involve the notions of a poet, speaker, object of address (or auditor), and an overhearing reader, lyric emphasizes a feeling of personal connection between its self and other divorced from a historicizing metanarrative, while dramatic monologue emphasizes the dramatic action (and isolation) of its speaker as well as the narrativity and historicity of language.

Another way to think of the difference between the two—though both are sometimes merely defined, it should be mentioned, as a “short poem”¹³⁰—is that lyric highlights a mode of direct address that attempts to transcend the interrelated historical locations and differentiations of the self and other; the dramatic monologue, conversely, highlights or parodies this mode of direct address as inevitably (despite itself and naively) caught in history and social categorization. To be sure, Robert Browning’s quintessential dramatic speakers in “My Last Duchess” and “Fra Lippo Lippi” are frequently interrupted by unheard auditors—by way of their implied words and actions—inciting the speakers to respond in turn¹³¹; these interruptions accentuate the fact that language is inherently a social device caught in the nexus of a historicizing temporality. It could also be said, therefore, that the genre of dramatic monologue,

at least in its more modern guise, attempts to dispel the romance of the lyric as a mode rather than as constituting a historicizing linguistic tradition, or genre. In this logic, then, Browning rephrases—perhaps in a Bloomian response to his predecessors—the longing contained in lyric address to remove the self and other from the flow of time and, thereby, a-historically conjoin the self and other as one into as a psychosis; to be sure, Browning’s infamous “Porphyria’s Lover” depicts the dramatic speaker murdering his significant other in order to preserve their love’s a-temporality.¹³² In this reading of the lyric suggested by Browning, then, the attempt to arrest the other’s progress through time inherent in the lyric mode inflicts a deathly stasis upon the inevitably lost other just as violent, if not more so, than the deathly telos of language and socio-historic narrativity itself. Relatedly, Browning’s canonical work indicates that because dramatic monologue emphasizes the historicity of all language, it frequently uses the speaker to allegorize or typify certain cultural identities, which are, in and of themselves, types of socio-historic narratives or scripts. Browning’s “Any Wife to Any Husband,” for instance, dramatizes the (perhaps disingenuous) wish of a dying woman that her widowed husband remarry; the title of the poem universalizes this (perhaps disingenuous) wish as a common denotation of all women’s psyches. In other words, the dramatic monologue is very much rooted in cultural narratives, both in the tradition of those narratives and to some degree in reinforcing or reshaping them; thusly, the dramatic monologue pushes earnest lyric voice—often through satirizing its mode of address—toward sociopolitical and utilitarian engagement.¹³³ Simply put (if not over-simply), lyric principally labors to liberate the speaker and intended listener from the requirements and deathly telos of collective history, while dramatic monologue chiefly parodies such attempts and works, instead, to engage or disrupt the assumptions of the collective present.

In other words, while dramatic monologue generically helped Monette support a gay

liberationist logic in the post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS-era inasmuch as it underscored his interest in shaping or reiterating various social scripts, the same generic techniques if applied in the AIDS era risked admitting the deathly telos of language, literature, and poetry as well as ossifying individuals into social types and thereby erasing the specifics of their beings. Indeed, dramatic monologue was not an uncommon technique for gay poets in the pre-AIDS era, such as Richard Howard¹³⁴ and Thom Gunn; however, when translated into the AIDS era, this technique accentuated literature's deathly or epitaphic nature.¹³⁵ For instance, Robert Boucheron's highly-criticized volume of AIDS poems, *Epitaphs for the Plague Dead* (1985), aligns dramatic monologue with an epitaphic tradition; such an association is representative of (as he points out in his preface) poetic tradition, as demonstrated by, to use his examples, *The Greek Anthology* and *Spoon River Anthology*. Indeed, the volume represents fifty-six PWAs, only three of whom he describes as non-homosexual, as speaking from the grave; thereby, he associates—intentionally or not—the gay community with death and abjection at the height of the US AIDS crisis.¹³⁶ Moreover (as discussed in the next chapter), although the volume's preface promotes a gay liberationist logic, *Epitaphs* often represents these already dead gay men as “sinners,” instilling—wittingly or not—a homophobic and socially abjecting logic.¹³⁷ “Epitaph for an Innocent,” for instance, represents a baby speaking from the grave about his hemophiliac father's HIV-infected blood transfusion passed on via the mother; in this way, Boucheron suggests that purely hetero-normative routes of transmission are “innocent” relative to “guilty” homosexual ones.¹³⁸ This is to say, gay liberationism, when translated into the dramatic monologue during the AIDS crisis, threatens to reveal literature's inability to intervene in the present and its penchant to catalogue the various elements of the present as moralizing emanations from the past. In other words, Boucheron's volume exposes the narrativizing or scripting of identities (that

is, the codifying of social histories) as being inevitably epitaphic. Boucheron's example as well as the internal logics, or finer points, of the genre might explain, Gunn and Tim Dlugos's movements away from—as I describe in the next chapter—persona to a more confessionalistic lyric in the AIDS era. This distinction also relates to the way early black gay AIDS poets work—as I discuss in my third chapter—to overcome the Euro-centric biases of lyric tradition and circumvent a conflict of ethics between mourning and melancholia by returning lyric to a figurative and literal space of performance.

Monette's aligning of melancholia with lyric, however, as well as his implicit aligning of activism with dramatic monologue sets the stage—so to speak—for AIDS poets to uphold and resist this model of lyric. Indeed, Monette's turning away from dramatic monologue and toward lyric address in his own career at this time indicates a concern with the epitaphic underpinnings of language or discourse and its related predetermined social scripting (as all social scripting is a type of predetermination), such as gay liberationism and literary tradition itself. Put otherwise, Monette's resistance to dramatic persona in *Love Alone* and his decided exclusion of an overhearing third party, especially early on within the volume, indicates the volume's desire to dislocate its lyric self and other, as well as their bond, from the deathly historical draw of narrativity and representation. As I discuss at length in this chapter's fourth section, *Love Alone* worries that narrative and representation necessarily result in a deathly telos. For instance, near the end of "Current Status 1/22/87" (the anti-elegies's only clear delineation of collective history), the speaker asks Rog, after comparing Rog to Theseus and while worrying over his own health: "is this / how being a hero starts or just dying[?]" (ll.90-91). This is to say, "Current Status" nervously associates Greco-Roman myth and epic, the archetypes of both narrative and poetic traditions, with historicity, the death drive, and time itself.¹³⁹ What is more (as I discuss in

my following chapters), this alignment of lyric with melancholia, rather than performance and activism, first and most stringently articulated by *Love Alone*, leads later AIDS poets to at first question such a conflation and then embrace its implication that all otherness, alterity, and immanence rests on the melancholic cusps of self and other, being and not-being, presence and absence, and life and death. Like Cameron's work in *Lyric Time*, *Love Alone* and the Monette of its era suggest that endemic to the formulation of lyric is a melancholic desire to escape the inevitable erasures and displacements of time and written discourse itself.¹⁴⁰

Deixis, Lyric, and Anti-Elegy:

However, Monette does not just attempt to pull his referents out of time and time's imbrications of social utility by way of lyric address alone; *Love Alone* also outlines for itself, and, in practice, for later AIDS poets which poetic forms and linguistic markers reinforce these lyric ends of retrieving the lost other's trace. To be sure, on the level of form, the volume ostensibly (or, initially) suggests its ease of access or readability for the reader only to thwart or indirectly express hostility toward the comprehension of third-party listeners or readers. For instance, while imitating the visual impact of blank verse by justifying its lines into columns on the left-hand side of the page throughout, the volume's poems resist, almost without exception, iambic pentameter or, for that matter, any regular meter and syllabics.¹⁴¹ In this way, the poems suggest the palimpsest of drama or dramatic monologue (both of which are historically linked to blank verse) only to stymie and deconstruct such an association. Moreover, like the AIDS poets that follow (as discussed in ensuing chapters), Monette employs poetic conventions, such as blank verse, just as he employs language itself; that is, he mostly employs them to the extent that they might communicate with the lost other, not to the extent that they communicate with those

in the ongoing present. In other words, Monette and his contemporaries use received patterns and formal conventions primarily to ease their communications with their lost others. Indeed, striving to communicate with their specific absent listeners, they do not wish to sever all ties of intelligibility and legibility; however, they also secondarily and simultaneously work to perplex the reader's gaze and expectations which not only represent the ongoing present, but also are informed by the historicizing notions of tradition.

To similar ends, then, *Love Alone* also omits punctuations and its related capitalizations; his anti-elegies labor, in other words, not to destroy legibility but to make their own legibility difficult or inaccessible to their visually-eavesdropping readers. Although such omissions of punctuation and capitalizations might provide the initial impression of underscoring the poet-speaker's sense of urgency as well as the performance of that urgency to the reader, they ultimately work, through withholding visual road-signs of intelligibility, to slow or disrupt the reader's linear, or protensive, understanding of the poems.¹⁴² For instance, these lines from "No Goodbyes," which express Monette's ethical desire to preserve Rog's trace, "nothing passes as long as / I'm where I am we go on" (ll.26-27), could be read as *nothing passes as long as I'm where I am* and *we go on* or as *nothing passes* and *as long as I'm where I am we go on*. To comprehend the volume in its entirety, the reader must recurrently double back on her or his progressions through it; he or she must decide or fail to decide how certain clauses and phrases relate to adjoining clauses and phrases. The volume recurrently suggests that its phrases cluster into grammatically complete sentences, or at least syntactically meaningful expressions, throughout, but it leaves the definitive delimitations of those sentences or expressions unknown to the reader. Only if we imagine the lyric speaker orally communicating with his lost other, complete with the clarifying intonations and pauses of speech, can we think of the poems as

urgently issuing forth toward a listener. This is to say, *Love Alone* does not indicate a desire to deconstruct meaning or venture into experimental poetics that question the very legibility of language itself for the poet or reader; rather, the volume's formal attributes intimate and highlight the speaker's yearning to communicate without end and without limitation to the lost significant other, rather than the reader. In this regard, when Monette says, in his volume's preface (which was written, to reiterate, a year after the final poem's composition), "I wanted a form that would move with breathless speed, so I could scream if I wanted and rattle on and empty my Uzi in the air" (xii), he mostly points to his speaker's sense of urgency, not the reader's, as well as the volume's propensity for "protest mourning" or generalized "militancy," rather than activism.

To be sure, even though the subsequently-written preface purports to implicate the volume's poems in a sociopolitical discussion revolving around AIDS and gay identity, it often tacitly admits to the volume's lyric purpose of preserving the lost other's trace by way of excluding the "overhearing," or visually-observing, third-party reader. For instance, in his introduction, Monette explains the origins of his poems for Rog:

These elegies were written during the five months after he died, one right after the other, with hardly a half day's pause between. Writing them quite literally kept me alive, for the only time I wasn't wailing and trembling was when I was hammering at these poems. I have let them stand as raw as they came. But because several friends have wished for a few commas or a stanza break here and there, I feel I should make a comment on their form. I don't mean them to be impregnable, though I admit I want them to allow no escape, like a hospital room, or indeed a mortal illness. (xii)

Even though this explanation works to justify the unruly form, or unclear legibility, of Monette's anti-elegies for the reader as well as suggest that their aesthetic intends to immerse the reader in the AIDS crisis, it also indicates that the poems were previously written without the reader in mind.¹⁴³ This is to say, the poems of *Love Alone* find themselves caught in a double-bind: they

wish to communicate, but not too much or to too many. They labor to communicate with their lost other to prevent that lost other from “escaping” (or “fading,” in a non-utilitarian purview) into the permanence of absence while also working to prevent the reader’s easy comprehension of those communications; such a comprehension or apprehension would transform both the lyric self and other of the poems into immaterial and ghostly figments. The poems toil, in this scenario, at the last site of Rog’s presence, the “hospital room” combined with his “mortal illness,” or what becomes the “grave” in the anti-elegies, as will be discussed, to prohibit the lost other’s withdrawal into the void of the irretrievable past. This link between the space of the poem and the notion of quarantine, or the hospital and the grave, becomes a problematic one for following AIDS poets, as the next chapter discusses; however, the poems in *Love Alone* frames the spaces of Rog’s disappearance as access points to communicate with the lost other as well as its anti-elegies as a beneficially quarantine-like space that contain and retain the self and other while also refusing admittance to third-parties.

That being said, however, regarding the poems’ formal expressions of their lyric ends, the three books of *Love Alone* primarily reinforce the purposes of direct address through what might be termed a heightened language of deixis. In this critical move, Monette relies on a lexicon highly inflected with deictic linguistic markers—like “still,” “here,” and even the lyric “you”—only entirely meaningful to the speaker and specific lost auditor because geographically and temporally reliant upon the two. Indeed, the primary linguistic marker of lyric itself, the pronominal “you,” becomes in this logic, a means of dissociating the lyric self and other from the reader’s sphere of time and place, locating the two, instead, as Culler suggests, in a sphere of personal reference only fully knowable to them. As this section discusses by parsing *Love Alone*’s first fifteen poems, these deictic markers, which are often, in turn, necessarily

accompanied by personal references, further establish lyric's melancholic goal of creating a closed circuit of address between the self and other (even if, *or because*, that circuit is functionally severed). Operating much like the volume's formal attributes, then, this salient deictic language attempts to communicate primarily, if not exclusively, with the absent lyric other. Put otherwise, lyric address—or what might be interchangeably called, within this context at least, “lyric melancholia”—functions as a means of deixis to work against the deathly telos engrained into discourse itself.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, as I mention in the introduction and discuss in following chapters, much of AIDS poetry (as well as AIDS art¹⁴⁵), places pressure on deixis as shared intimate presence and present-ness to the purposeful exclusion of elegy's and gay liberation's directives to domesticate (or historicize) grief for a greater sociopolitical good. Of course, this language of deixis and its related lyric, or melancholic, impulse to exempt the other from the fatal sequencing of time is a fantasy, not only because of its anti-functionalist nature, but also—as Paul de Man points out in his famed article, “Autobiography as De-facement” (1979)—because of language's inherent inability to restore material presence. In this regard, then, language, as well as representation in and of itself, always already stand in for or displace its physical correlatives.

Nevertheless, the first two books of *Love Alone* establish this always precarious deictic, lyric, and anti-elegiac fantasy, in which the lost other might be preserved in a dislodged space and time, while the third book—as the next section discusses—extends this fantasy beyond the volume's parameters. For instance, the first poem of *Love Alone* “Here” provides the foundations for this deictic fantasy, as its very title indicates. Although we know from subsequent writings, interviews, and accounts that the word “here” refers to Forest Lawn Cemetery (Hollywood Hills), where Roger and now Monette are buried, the poem frequently supplants the image of the

grave with the word “here,” the deixis of which remains undefined for an overhearing third-party such as the reader. This substitution occurs most notably in the poem’s last few lines:

the day has taken you with it and all
there is now is burning dark the only green
is up by the grave and this little thing
of telling the hill I’m here oh I’m here (ll.27-30)

While speaking to the lost other, Monette first transforms “the grave” into the more benign “the hill” before transforming, in turn, this metonymic remove into a “here.” In other words, Rog’s grave, the site that socio-historically represents his absence, becomes for Monette’s speaker a private individuated space, created by the relationality of and only in reference to his self and the specific other. Incidentally, therefore, this “here” might also be viewed as the “here” of the poem, just as he compares his poems in his preface to the space of a hospital room. In this schematic, poetry may only transform absence into presence and the past into the present when the lyric, or anti-elegiac, speaker deictically dislocates through a severed-circuit of address and its linguistic markers the self and lost other from a collective sense of time and space. While the poem does not and cannot deny the other’s loss, in other words, the poet-speaker accentuates the other’s material and figurative presence by transforming the trap of the grave into an access point for the non-space of poetic deixis as facilitated by the “here-ness” of direct address.

However, as a result of its will to alchemize the grave into presence, the poem also quavers throughout on the border of communicating with the lost other and actualizing that other’s absence. In other words, because it functions through language, the very medium that historicizes it, this always precariously gesture of the deictic fantasy threatens to collapse into, for the speaker in this poem and throughout the volume, an abject isolation; a reduction of lyric voice to abjection and isolation that later AIDS poets also confront (as chapter two explores). For instance, halfway through “Here,” Monette writes, “through it all when I’d cling beside you

sobbing / you'd shrug it off with the quietest *I'm still / here*" (ll.20-22; original emphasis). This italicized phrase—a phrase that haunts the volume as a whole—in combination with the passage's direct address, works to conjure the other's presence. Yet, the poem's address cannot conceal the past-tense quality of the quotation and the line break highlights, ironically, the stillness, or deathliness, of the lost other ("I'm still"). To be sure, in *Love Alone* as well as following AIDS poetry, the deictic marker of "still" often points to the danger of deixis, because it is written language, only preserving the lost other's trace in a state of death-like stasis. What is more, this confluence of contradictions—which nonetheless strive after an ethical conveyance of the lost other from the past to the ongoing present—leads the speaker in "Here" to declare three-quarters of the way through: "I have your watch in the top drawer / which I don't dare wear yet help me please" (ll.22-23). The poet-speaker heartbreakingly asks the lost other and perhaps, in his desperation, even the reader to help him approach the question of time and loss ("help me please"). He is unsure whether he should conceal the notion of time and therefore the other's loss or not; or, he does not "dare wear" the lost other's effect, a timepiece, because wearing it and the symbolism of the piece itself would code the absent other as irrevocably consigned to the collective past. It is on this razor-thin edge that the lyric voice of *Love Alone* walks throughout; the degree to which he conceals the gauges of time determines if he is primarily talking to the other or the collective present in which the other is lost. The degree to which he conceals the very notion of collective time determines if his volume works toward lyric ends or those of the utilitarian present.

This is to say, even as the poet-speaker admits to—or fears—the impossibility of its deictic, lyric, and anti-elegiac fantasy, *Love Alone*'s first ten poems as whole increasingly disrupt, through direct address, deixis, and its complexes of personal reference, a collective sense

of time and history. The anti-elegies Monette wrote before the prospect of their publication arose, eventually collected into *Love Alone*'s first book, express an implicit dread of or hostility toward reconciling their private histories with those of the public. In "Black Xmas," for instance, although Monette admits that he and Rog "are past redeeming" (1.50), or lost to the past as well as socially abject, he does so in the context of discussing Scrooge's sociopolitical reformation in *A Christmas Carol*; this is to say, Monette implies a certain hostility toward the pressures of utilitarianism placed on his lyric self and other. Indeed, the idea of "past redeeming," in the light of the volume's lyric melancholia, can be read as a promised potentiality rather than a limitation: the potential to release the personal past from a collective historic flow, as in "we are redeeming our past here," a pun on "are" and "our" in the original line. Along these lines, after the poem summons its deictic anti-elegiac project through an ambivalent parroting of Scrooge's "There's still time" that recalls Rog's "I'm still / here," the poet-speaker chronicles his and Rog's past Christmases: "'83 César with his first / scatterburst of lesions '84 prone on / the sofa with his leg blimped twice its size [. . .] by next November / he was gone" (ll.12-17). Although these references clearly anticipate Rog's death and therefore highlight the deathliness of chronicling, they also work against that grain by including details only fully understandably to the lyric other in the content of *Love Alone*. Indeed, Monette only relays the death of his and Rog's friend César in full in *Borrowed Time*; he never clearly does so within the parameters of his anti-elegies.

Moreover, "Black Xmas" works to dissociate Monette's personal chronicling or referencing of Rog's loss with a broader and communal notion of historicity and narrativity by disrupting a collective notion of time. Referring to Rog's last Christmas, Monette writes, "'85 was yours Rog still / still time" (ll.17-18). As if asking the missing other to "still time," the poem continues by disrupting a linear sense of it by way of a personal chronology difficult to plot by a

reader:

[. . .] home after 2 months in and the gift
not anywhere near the tree but the newest drug
rarer than myrrh drunk out of I.V. bottles
6 times a day because they hadn't got a
pill yet the elixir that would give us 10
months more Cambridge the first Xmas my true
love gave to me a parakeet in a wire cage [. . .] (ll.18-24)

Not only are the personal reference hard to parse from a remove—for instance, the word “Cambridge” refers to, as subsequent writings let us know, where Roger and Monette first met and lived together before moving to Los Angeles, where most of *Love Alone* is implicitly set¹⁴⁶—but also the timeline leading up to Rog’s death can only be plotted, if at all, as moving backwards from, or away from, Rog’s death. What is more, the passage explicitly avoids the moment of Rog’s death that its chronicling circles around by retreating into a (personalized) perennial Christmas carol and therefore a conception of the cyclicity, or recurrence, of time and its referents.¹⁴⁷ To be sure, after the poem claims that Monette and Rog “are past redeeming,” the poet-speaker continues to say, without syntactical clarity, “twined / our presents each to each” (11.50-51). Through such phrasing, Monette not only suggests that he and Rog still exist in an ongoing and individuated moment in which they perpetually exchange gifts with one another, or communicate with one another via their gifts, but also implies that he and Rog’s temporal presents and ontological presences are intertwined and tethered “each to each.” Rog’s trace presence depends upon the poet-speaker’s deictically-isolated presence and present; at the same time, the speaker meta-poetically contends that his presence and present as a lyric voice depends on the lost other’s implied presence and a-historic present.¹⁴⁸ In other words, “Black Xmas” not only works to problematize away a linear and collective understanding of time out of an ethical obligation to recall and rescue its lost other’s trace, but also suggests that the lyric self would

collapse into absence if its object of address and deixis were anyone other than the specific lyric other.

What is more, while Monette's type of grief could be read through a utilitarian lens (such as gay liberationism or the elegiac tradition) as the writer's narcissistic and unethical disavowal of his responsibilities to the imperatives of the ongoing present, *Love Alone* recurrently frames its melancholia as a necessary and therefore ethical state of being. For instance, "The Very Same," which follows "Black Xmas," reasserts the volume's paradigm of protest mourning. The occasion of the poem, in which a distant cousin at Rog's funeral tells Monette that it is "time to turn / the page" (11.3-4), leads to the poet-speaker's insisting, "BUT THIS IS MY PAGE IT CANNOT BE TURNED" (l.9; original emphasis) and "This page is all that's left of time" (l.17). The lyric speaker at once strains to arrest time and protest a social (and possibly homophobic, inasmuch as the cousin's advice may be rooted in a belief that gay love, and therefore grief, is somewhat "inauthentic"¹⁴⁹) imperative to reroute melancholia into utilitarian purposes. The poet-speaker repeatedly portrays himself as straining to do so out of his ethical obligation to retrieve the lost other; he describes himself as "scrawling *why* and *where are you*" (l.46) on his a-historic page, after telling the lost other, "dear friend I didn't become your blood-brother / lightly" (11.28-29). Of course, the reference to shared blood also alludes to Monette and Rog's shared viral status, implying Monette's enduring responsibility to the lost other, especially amidst the AIDS crisis, rather than his ethical responsibility to employ his specific grief toward utilitarian ends. This is to say, the deictic image of "this page" labors, in combination with direct address, to preserve the lost other's trace, even at the cost of the speaker's utilitarian necessity to engage with the ongoing present.

Indeed, within his meta-poetically implied deitic and anti-elegiac space (or, the page

upon which he writes), the poet-speaker reframes what a utilitarian paradigm would call “narcissism” as a type of ethical grief. Halfway through “The Very Same,” after declaring that he did not become Rog’s “blood-brother / lightly,” the poet-speaker asserts that not even a personified and deified death could tell his lyric self and other apart and thereby separate them: “Death crackles in every / room yet He cannot seem to tell who’s who” (ll.30-31; original capitalizations). This image conjures the homophobic cultural understanding of narcissism as non-productive and therefore deathly, as it has been historically extrapolated from the myth of Narcissus (a Narcissus who withers away due to the love he bears for his own male body, however androgynous), a version of “homosexuality” Edelman works to deconstruct in his article on “Manifesto” as well as his later monograph *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*¹⁵⁰; however, in Monette’s version of the self and other’s mirroring of each other, “narcissistic” longing ethically preserves the other’s trace. In light of the fact that poems are often compared to “rooms” because of their etymological relationship with the word “stanza,” Monette’s speaker nearly seems to gloat here (at least on a tonal level) that his lyric anti-elegies confuse Death—who “crackles in every room”—and thereby keep finitude at bay. Along these lines, “The Very Same” consolingly recalls Rog noting their ontological intertwining years before his death: “But we’re the same person / when did that happen” (ll.33-34). In this way, their doubling of each other, just as their intertwining in “Black Xmas,” helps remove the lyric self and other from the intrusions of or distractions of *others* and thereby preserves their presences in the non-historic space of Monette’s lyric and deictically-inflected anti-elegies. This is to say, in the first ten poems that he wrote for Rog before he realized they would go into print, Monette not only lionizes socially perceived pathologies—such as melancholia, denial, trauma, and narcissism—as ethical responses to the loss of loved ones, but also, correspondingly, works

to dislodge his (severed) circuit of address with his lost other from the exigencies and histories of the ongoing utilitarian present. Put otherwise, his first ten poems, or the first book of *Love Alone*, recurrently dedicate themselves to a lyric and deictic anti-elegiac project despite *and* because of linguistic representation's deathly telos.

To be sure, in the first book's last poem, Monette places further pressure on the paradoxical structure of anti-elegy which attempts to use literature to stave off literature's pastward-ness. While the speaker in "Here" abstracts the grave into the deictic non-space of anti-elegy, the speaker in "New Year's at Lawrence's Grave" emphasizes the fragility or even impossibility of this proposition. While describing Lawrence's makeshift mausoleum in Taos, New Mexico, Monette points to poetry's longstanding myth of literary immortality: he writes, "a stucco eagle caps the roofpeak / unless it's a phoenix" (l.33-34). *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947), Cleanth Brooks' pivotal study that established the insular world and practice of New Criticism¹⁵¹ (and which Monette was surely familiar with having studied under Harold Bloom at Yale in the 1960s¹⁵²) seizes on the image of the "phoenix" to theorize that poetry's essence relates to its paradoxically epitaphic nature (or, funerary practices) and intimations of immortality (or, the idea of rebirth). With this image of the "phoenix" in mind, then, the end of *Love Alone*'s first book reframes Monette's anti-elegiac promise as paradoxically resistant too and reliant upon on the tropes of the literary canon as well as, regarding the figure of Lawrence himself, the gay literary canon. To be sure, two-thirds of the way through the poem, Monette returns to the same image and writes, "where is the phoenix now / now is the day of its rising or we are / all dead" (ll.77-79). While obliquely comparing his anti-elegies with Cleanth's essence of poetic and literary tradition, Monette suggests that his project of retaining Rog's trace through deictic lyric address at once resists the utilitarian pressures of

the ongoing present and philosophically underpins them. This is to say, Monette worries in “New Year’s at Lawrence’s Grave” that if he cannot retain Rog’s trace in the non-space of his anti-elegies, then all of his contemporaries, those directly affected by the AIDS crisis and those who are not, as well as the very notion of presence itself, reduce via the telos of time and literature to a ghostly absence and the image of the grave. *Love Alone*’s speaker worries, however grandiosely, then, if literature, his literature especially, cannot rescue the specific dead from the oblivion of the past, then no one from the past, present, or future can be saved.

However, it is not until the second book of *Love Alone*, poems eleven through fifteen, that the poet-speaker openly questions the ethics of his deictic fantasy; that is, although the entire volume of poems engages in this deictic fantasy almost exclusively, the second book begins to acknowledge, however indirectly, the volume’s public role and, therefore, responsibilities. Indeed, since a direct acknowledgement of this competing ethic would force Monette’s speaker to shift his focus away from the lost other and therefore foreclose on his ethical responsibility to that other, the second book points to the second, oppositional, and public ethic of activism by increasingly framing the deictic anti-elegiac project as at once impossible and troublingly inescapable. The first poem in the second book, “Three Rings,” for instance, dwells on the image of the grave, highlighting it not only as the abstracted space of Rog’s trace presence but also as the material site where the competing ethics of mourning and activism converge. To be sure, the central occasion of the poem—spoken nevertheless exclusively to the lost other—becomes the lyric voice’s attempt to overcome his melancholia. He describes purchasing two “mourning rings”—which Max Cavitch tells us in his work *American Elegy* were once common symbols of “immoderate grief” (6-7), a type of grief that nineteenth-century elegies encouraged and assuaged¹⁵³—and burying one at Rog’s grave; the poet-speaker says to Rog that, while burying

the ring, “I knelt beside / your grave the end of all our wandering” (l.72-73). Ostensibly, then, by participating in the tradition of “immoderate grief” and then burying the symbol of it in the lost other’s grave, the poet-speaker works to turn away from his grief; but to do so, the poem worries, would not only code the lost other as an object of the past, but also frame the speaker and the speaker’s reciprocal apostrophizing, or recalling, of the specific lost other as objects of the past too. This is to say, “Three Rings” (the first titular ring being Monette’s wedding ring) attempts to contain his lost other’s presence in the ghostly image and functionalist telos of the grave only to realize that recoding Rog’s grave as absence through this collectivist lens would also recode his lyric voice (and his ethical obligation to retrieve the lost other from the past) as absent.

Indeed, the speaker of “Three Rings” periodically rededicates himself to his lyric and anti-elegiac purposes. For instance, burying the ring prompts the poet-speaker to moan in an ostensibly cathartic and final “agony” (l.163) before realizing that Rog’s last moans in the hospital room where he died might have in fact been an effort to say the poet-speaker’s first name¹⁵⁴; he writes, “suddenly I’m moaning out loud / this very specific moan the echo of you” (ll.85-86) and, “I froze mid-moan / saw it all in a blaze YOU WERE CALLING ME” (ll.105-06). It is this reciprocal formation of the self through the other and the other through the self (the very notion of “echo,” recalling the myth of Narcissus and eliding the [female] intermediary of Echo) that once more twines their presences together across time, a phenomenological and a-historical twining (or, “twinning”) that the lyric voice labors to produce.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, the poet-speaker’s realization of this intertwining evinces the poet-speaker to declare, “I will console you yet” (l.149). Acting out of what a utilitarian ethic might describe as “survivor’s guilt,” “narcissism,” or “denial,” Monette’s anti-elegies frame his dedication to the lost other (by way of lyric address and its anti-historical markers) as the very substance which gives his poems and

their referents presence. To be sure, Monette's kneeling with his mourning ring beside his lost other's grave can also be read, through the poem's various contexts, as his proposal and marriage to grief, or Rog's absence, and—thereby—their joint deictic presence. If anything, the volume expresses hostility once more, by the poem's end, to those in the collective and ongoing present. Near its final lines, the speaker rhetorically asks the missing other, "how did they think they could hold us / to one ground[?]" (ll.156-57). The poet-speaker reaffirms the lyric self and other's a-historic and non-geographical deixis by way of opposing them indirectly to the sociopolitical and historicizing present ("they"); their socio-politically problematic "wandering" (inasmuch as such a word taps into, via a collectivist lens, the trope of "the wandering Jew"¹⁵⁶) metamorphoses into the abstract image of the grave (or the palpable presence of Rog's absence) once again. Rather than representing the site where Rog's absence necessitates Monette's reincorporation into the world of the living, the image of the grave reminds Monette's lyric speaker of his melancholic duties regarding his lost other.

Nevertheless, the poem establishes a governing anxiety in the second book over the speaker's competing responsibilities to the specific other and the collective present. For instance, the first and only epigraph in the second book comes at the beginning of "Three Rings" and thereby the second book. It underlines not only Monette's grief but also a sense of melancholia as being inherent to the condition of consciousness:

Who has twisted us like this, so that—
no matter what we do—we have the bearing
of a man going away? As on the last hill
that shows him all his valley for the last time,
he turns, stands still and lingers, so we live,
forever saying farewell.

Taken from Rilke's famed eighth Duino elegy, the epigraph not only speaks collectively about the human condition but also locates the work of *Love Alone* in a larger and historicizing elegiac

and literary tradition. As announced by this epigraph, then, the second book increasingly worries over the ability (or essential inability) of language to register the past as present as well as, conflictingly, address the difficulties of its contemporaneous collective moment. Indeed, in the poem that follows this epigraph and “Three Rings,” Monette historically dates—via its title, “Current Status 1/22/87”—his lyric speaker for the first and only time as well as expresses frustration with the image of the grave that tethers his speaker to Rog. For instance, while discussing how his current regimen of drug therapies mirrors that of Rog’s previous one, the poet-speaker makes an almost uncouth pun on the word “grave”: “my vast pharmacopoeia no more than a grave / nod to you my friend” (ll.57-58). This is to say, by the volume’s twelve “elegy,” the poet-speaker nearly chafes under his unending responsibility to address the lyric other and preserve that other’s presence; not only does that responsibility underscore and predict the poet-speaker’s own absence within a utilitarian framework, but also it prohibits the poet-speaker from engaging with the ongoing AIDS crisis (as represented by the word “current” in the poem’s title and the speaker’s drug regimen).

This is to say, as in the previously-explicated “Manifesto,” also found in the second book, the speaker of “Current Status,” implicitly asks the missing other for permission to shift his gaze toward the travails of gay men in the present. Anticipating the question of “when do we leave the mirror /and lie down in front of the tanks” near the conclusion of “Current Status,” the poet-speaker beseeches Rog to “stay at my side will you / so I don’t do anything vain or cease to honor you and all our brothers” (ll.91-93). Realizing that a utilitarian ethos would release his lost other from his side and thereby transform his grief into vanity, or narcissism, Monette attempts to balance, by way of direct address—or, apostrophe (indeed, Rog nearly becomes a demi-god or muse here)—and its deictic markers, a dedication to the lyric other with a need to confront the

epidemic's devastating escalation. *Love Alone*'s second book, in other words, occasionally tests the boundary between melancholia and activism. Later AIDS poets, as I discuss in the fourth chapter, embrace the indeterminacy of lyric voice, especially in regards to whom and when it speaks, as a means to balance these opposing ethics¹⁵⁷; however, such indeterminacy for the Monette of *Love Alone* threatens to erase, to too great of an extent, the presence of the lyric self and other. *Love Alone*'s lyric speaker recurrently resists highlighting the indeterminacies of direct address in order to protect his severed-circuit of grief from the threat of historicity.

In other words, instead of tempting Monette's speaker to turn to the ongoing present—however frustrated he might be with deixis, lyric, and anti-elegy by the end of the volume's second book—the lyric other's recurrent silence, which denotes both that other's absence as well as that other's vulnerability to erasure, makes an ethics of mourning increasingly requisite for Monette's speaker. Indeed, *Love Alone*'s lyric I begins to acknowledge by the end of its first book and increasingly throughout its second that an ethics of mourning underscores and precipitates an ethics of activism because the first ethic positions the lyric self as responsible for alterity vulnerable to erasure; however, because of lyric's fundamentals, the volume's speaker nevertheless finds itself unable to balance these oppositional, competing, and yet related ethics. In *Love Alone*'s paradigm, any degree of presence that a lyric poem achieves, and thereby any degree of its referents' presences, points to and prohibits an engagement with the reader who exists in the ongoing present; if lyric acknowledges itself as a performance for the reader—whether that performance entertains or educates—then it collapses into a constellation of words devoid of their principal and ethical purpose of retrieving and revitalizing the vulnerable other's trace presence. In other words, melancholic lyric address and its linguistic manifestations indicate and simultaneously work to disregard, by nature of its very defining features, the

“overhearing” reader. As the next chapter discusses, the double-bind engrained into the very mode of lyric and its melancholia—its ethical impasse that always privileges the specifics of alterity over the exigencies of the collective—becomes a primary source of concern for most early AIDS poets.

Technocracy and the Extended Deictic Project:

The ethical impasse between these two regimes of ethics embedded in lyric and increasingly highlighted by the lost other’s relentless silence forces the Monette of *Love Alone* to expand the notion of his deictic project beyond the volume’s anti-elegies; in the third book, in other words, the poet-speaker labors to extend his deictic, lyric, and anti-elegiac grief beyond the bounds of the volume itself. Comprised of three lengthy anti-elegies, the volume’s third and last book imagines the speaker’s deictic melancholia proliferated into a multiplicity of representational and communicational technologies. The idea, which Monette dubs “technocracy” in his poem “Last Day at Molera Beach,” as will be discussed shortly, enables the poet-speaker to envision—however logically or not—means of retaining the self’s lost other as a perpetually present object of intrigue, or what a literary phenomenologist might call a “collective intentional object” (that is, an object around which a social milieu configures its thoughts), or a psychoanalyst critic might call “an object of collective melancholia” (that is, an object’s trace that organizes socio-historic thought in the present and future). Although *Love Alone* begins to fear the deathliness of all representation, it posits the hope in its third book that through a polyvocality of representational and communicative modes the specific self and lost other of Monette and Rog can be retained as the central agent of ethically-minded sociopolitical thought in the ongoing collective present. By conceiving that the self and lost other of *Love Alone* are *the*

exceptional and preeminent objects around which future culture flows, rather than historic examples informing the present, the Monette of *Love Alone* simultaneously insists on his ethical obligation to mourn the lost other and suggests that this ethical imperative engages with or underlies a gay separatist ethic of activism in the AIDS era. Through a philosophy of “technocracy,” then, the poet-speaker proposes he can “honor,” as “Current Status” hopes, “Rog” and, therefore, implicitly or metonymically, “all [their] brothers.”¹⁵⁸

To be sure, while contemplating the idea of technocracy within its content, *Love Alone* also overtly gestures at the practice of such a philosophy by drawing the reader’s attention to Rog and Monette’s photograph on the cover of both its paperback and hardcover editions. Just as the last word of the poem “Here,” which is “here,” draws us back to the deixis of Rog and Monette in the anti-elegiac space of the text, the last poem of the entire volume, “Brother of the Mount of Olives,” which largely functions as an ekphrasis of the photograph, draws us back to the photograph on the book’s cover. While the content of the volume arrives gradually at the conclusion of what I term the “extended deictic project,” in which Rog and Monette are proliferated as a collective intentional object, the materially circulated object of the book itself comes to stand in for, in Monette’s oeuvre, the embodiment of this collective intentional object.¹⁵⁹ From this perspective, then, it could be said (as will be discussed more fully in the next section) that for Monette the act of writing during and after *Love Alone* becomes a means of perpetuating this “collective intentional object” in order to reconcile the two regimes of ethics. For instance, in the introduction to *West of Yesterday*, Monette describes feedback he received on *Love Alone* from unnamed poetry “colleagues” (xviii); in one example, which he calls “his favorite” (xix), his colleague writes, “Thank you for the book, with that wonderful picture of you and Roger on the cover. I’ll cherish it. The text, I’m afraid, is not my thing” (xix). Monette’s

amusement at such a comment as well as his willingness to publish it might indicate (more than merely the brave face of a bruised ego) that his implicitly more-institutionalized colleague ironically missed the point of *Love Alone* while acquiring it exactly; that is, the text of *Love Alone* works to retain “Monette and Rog” as a collective intentional object (or what the Geneva School called an “aesthetic object”) rather than relegate them to the catacombs of poetry’s officially-sanctioned verse. For Monette, *Love Alone* is, on many purposeful levels, then, a prelude to or an explanation of “Monette and Rog” as an evidenced object on its cover.

In one regard, then, the photograph included on the cover of *Love Alone* becomes its primary gesture toward locating its disembodied lyric voice and other in a nexus of technologies that might advance the notion of their continuing presence. Indeed, while *Love Alone*’s last book imagines an extended deictic fantasy that includes multiple technologies of communication and representation, like telephones and film, the entire volume acknowledges through the publishing and featuring of the cover’s image a special relationship between deixis, lyric, anti-elegy, and photography. To be sure, Susan Sontag makes similar associations in her 1973 monograph *On Photography*; she writes that both poetry in general and photography “imply discontinuity, disarticulated forms and compensatory unity: wrenching things from their contexts (to see them in a fresh way), bringing things together elliptically, according to the imperious but often arbitrary demands of subjectivity” (96). This impulse to wrench objects of specificity, or objects of subjective experience, from social interpellation and their attending historicity in order to see them anew leads Sontag to rewrite Walter Pater’s legendary dictum about art and music as, “Now all art aspires to the condition of photography” (149). In *Love Alone*’s case this new dictum is especially apropos; by its end, *Love Alone* aspires to place various modes of representation and communication (or informational dissemination) in conversation with

photography because of that medium's capacity to decontextualize past referents and *evidence* them recurrently in the present.

Indeed, even though Roland Barthes famously describes photography as the most ghostly of representational means in his study *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), he does so in order to theorize that this ghostliness eerily evidences the materiality of the specific past in the ongoing present. While other mediums are mimetic, he posits, a photograph is “an emanation of *past reality*” (original emphasis; 88) and therefore functions as “a temporal hallucination” or a “*shared hallucination*” (115; original emphases).¹⁶⁰ Barthes' logic then dictates that this quality of “shared hallucination” is due to the deictic nature of photography which acts *only* as a frame for the referent within; a photograph demands “Look,” (5) “See,” (5) and “Here it is” (5), the very markers of deixis, because it is “never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents)” (5). According to Barthes, therefore, photographs constitute a “pure deictic language” (5). It could be extrapolated, then, that the photograph's deictic pureness derives from its evidentiary mechanicalness of representation, a mechanicalness that written language can only (poorly) approximate through the publication of the renderings of referents. Because of this linguistic mediation, literary publication alone threatens to disseminate Monette's referents as *example* rather than material *evidence*, or specificity, and therefore potentially unethically erase the lost other. Aspiring to what Sontag calls “the condition of the photograph,” or what Barthes terms the “pure deictic language” of photography, as a result, *Love Alone* labors by its last book to recode its specific object of lyric melancholia and deixis as a—or even *the*—shared hallucination of the ongoing present.

Moreover, even though the appellation of “technocracy” might come across as ambivalent or derogatory, the speaker of “Last Day at Molera Beach” emphasizes how a regime

of technology helped him remain connected to his specific other toward the end of that other's life. The poem recounts Monette's trip to Big Sur, a trip Rog and Rog's parents insisted on so that Monette could take a break from his vigilant nursing. The poet-speaker maintains, however, that he never would have separated from Rog if he had not been able to talk to him over the phone: "never would've left Rog if you hadn't / promised to talk me through it" (ll.59-60). The poetic voice asserts that technocracy makes possible this "talking through," despite any geographic separation: "thank Hermes for ITT [International Telephone and Telegraph] its buried vein / of voices coursing beneath the cataracts / so men can be two places together at once / or call it a third place" (ll.108-111). Naming "technocracy" for the first time, he declares: "we managed / this farewell tour by pure technocracy / the same that kept us afloat two precious years / so don't finger me as a naturalist please" (ll.114-117). Although he claims that these technologies no longer provide the presence of Monette and Rog's bond ("the phone is dead" [l.149]), he suggests that any means of communication potentially acts as "buried veins," or as potentially severed and deathly conduits, as well as "a third place," or deictic non-place. This "third place" promises ethical connection between the self and lost other and, thereby, the amelioration of—not survivor's guilt per se, but—any lingering guilt the lyric voice might harbor over previously missed points of contact.

Furthermore, by asserting that he is not a "naturalist," the poet-speaker opposes a modern network of communicational and representational means to the deathliness of the pastoral elegiac tradition. In "Last Day," Monette takes his epigraph from Robinson Jeffers 1950 letter on the death of his wife: "I tell myself cold comfort that her awareness and beauty are dissolved into the world, and make it more beautiful. But an old superstition keeps me praying silently: 'Make Una joyful, wherever she is'" (51). Jeffers may express here a positivistic understanding of death as

annihilation, a chemical return to the earth without any redemptive valences; but within the framework of *Love Alone*, the epigraph seems to argue against Jeffers' Whitmanian tendency to celebrate death as nature's cyclical triumph in order not to turn away from the expanding ethical need of exponentially vulnerable lost alterity. The volume seemingly emphasizes, in other words, Jeffers' ongoing desire to comfort his missing wife. Indeed, the closest the lyric agent of *Love Alone* comes to the American pastoral elegiac tradition and thereby replacing the lost other with an idealized version of nature is when he says to Rog near the end of "Last Day," "you have become [. . .] an ocean all your own" (ll.143-44). But instead of asserting that Rog has returned to his material origins, the phrase "an ocean all your own" implies that Rog's mysterious alterity has become, after death and in its radical appearance, increasingly large and individuated from the utilitarian necessities of the material world.

This is to say, Monette's speaker celebrates a philosophy of technology, or "technocracy," only as a means of remaining connected to the specified lost other—rather than as a replacement for that other.¹⁶¹ In this way, Monette's anti-elegies avoid turning their attention away from the specific lost other and replacing him with the public good of "technological progress"; they resist their conversion, in other words, into elegy and attending utilitarian principles. To be sure, the poetic voice in "Last Day" expressly lauds ITT for reinforcing his commitment to the anti-elegiac connection between the self and other. Moreover, because of technocracy's potential for functioning as lyric melancholia's conduit, "Last Day" opens its extended deictic project up to a myriad other means of communication. After describing the splendors of a three-day hike at Molera Beach, Monette says to Rog:

yet couldn't stop thinking when can I call
again or a nurse would say you were sleeping
and I'd bump in circles like a wind-shot gull
frantic under the redwoods by the phone booth

till finally I'd reach you and cry *I can't*
I can't be here without you how you'd sleek
my feathers ease me down coaxing postcards
sending me out like a falcon off your arm [. . .] (ll.63-74)

Not only does the promise of telecommunication resolve the poet-speaker's anticipation of grief as well as possibly mitigate his current experience of it in the poem, but also the image of "feathers" in close conjunction with that of "postcards" refers to the modern technology of the postal services and conjures an impression of a wartime carrier pigeon. His grief, in other words, becomes notionally situated in a nexus of communicative means. Furthermore, when we consider Monette's documented personal interest in the Modernists,¹⁶² his mention of falconry most likely alludes to Yeats's famous lines "The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."¹⁶³ These lines have become, of course, emblematic of a fragmenting and inhumane twentieth-century landscape¹⁶⁴; however, in Monette's version the poet transforms into the falcon, placing the specific other at the center of the progressive present. In this schematic, the development of communicative and representational technology assists various means of contact between the self and the other rather than severing it. The poem therefore meta-poetically implies that poetry's frequent historical misgivings about technological advances fail to account for those very advances' potential for furthering the lyric self's ethical aim of contact with specific alterity.

To be sure, "Dreaming of You," the following poem, expands this promise of contact through technological means that communicate evidence, or simulacra of presence, not only over distance but also over time. The speaker's dream about a memory of Rog a day before his death constitutes the main occasion of the poem; he describes the dream and the memory to the lost other through a profusion of film metaphors.¹⁶⁵ For instance, he says to Rog: "it's the best / sort of imagining that clip of a dream [. . .] I recall it better than anything / ever occurred in broad

daylight” (ll.41-44). The filmic word “clip” evokes, here, a sense of excerpting from history. It also appears in another pivotal moment of the poem, in which the lyric voice describes his “willingness” (l.87) to live in fragments of the past in order to “recall” the specific past as well as rewrite absence as presence:

to live in clips dispensable as curls
of footage on the cutting-room floor quick
close-up cut to the chase what did I miss
it’s all middle over before you know it
freeze frame on us in the park end credits
and out now play it back every man is
his own screen fueled by a VCR echoing
like an old wound in the rain swiveling time (ll.88-95)

Precisely because film can “play it back” and thereby maintain an “old wound” in a somewhat problematized version of time (at once circular and linear), “Dreaming of You” proposes that film can mechanically and materially—and melancholically—preserve what memory and dreams long to: the lost other’s trace. What is more, the word “footage,” akin to the word “foot,” points to *Love Alone*’s anti-traditional prosody, one that visually echoes blank verse only to diverge otherwise. In other words, *Love Alone*’s latter anti-elegies wish to communicate with Rog and the collective present but not at the risk of releasing Rog to the collective past; the hybrid of “footage,” or of film and prosody, promises the retention of the lyric other at the center of collective concern. Indeed, while the allusion to prosody in “Here” (Monette tells Rog he will eventually lie “a foot beside” him [l.7]) aligns tradition with the grave, the related meta-poetic allusion in “Dreaming of You” converts tradition into a sense of technological progress. Put otherwise, this latter self-reflexive gesture links an extended mission of historical exceptionalism made possible by “technocracy” with the way Monette’s lyric anti-elegies work to dismantle the binary of presence and absence.¹⁶⁶

However, the poem’s tone, which aligns the poet-speaker’s fantasy of blurring fact and

fiction with the hokey-ness of a romantic comedy's final "freeze frame," makes clear a reticence over film's unilateral capacity to preserve the past as present. If anything, as Sontag and Barthes independently conclude in their monographs and as the poetic "I" suggests here through his ambivalent tone and need to replay and re-adjust film, film participates in the narrativity and therefore historicity of representation rather than the quintessence of deixis.¹⁶⁷ Barthes argues: "the cinema is protensive, hence in no way melancholic (what is it, then?—It is, then, simply 'normal,' like life). Motionless, the Photograph flows back from presentation to retention" (89-90). For Barthes, then, as well as for the Monette of *Love Alone*, the protensive style of film is merely life-like while the melancholic nature of photography implores its viewer to retain the past as present. Only by way of stopping film, cutting it, clipping it, freezing it on a certain frame—in short, turning film into photography—can the speaker find any sense of comfort or any sense of the specific lost other's presence. Even so, "Dreaming of You" also worries over the potential deathliness of even isolated filmic segments due to the inherent past-ward-ness of all representation. Near the end of the poem, the lyric speaker compares the process of collecting "curls of footage" to "gathering you [Rog] awake / the brief cling like a still *It's all a dream*" (ll.93-94). The filmic word "still" suggests to the poet-speaker, as it does in "Here," that even photographic presence is a phantasmagoric absence.

As a result, the volume's lyric voice works to overcome representation's ghostliness through a multilateral philosophy of technology. The blurring of the boundaries between dreams and reality, life and death, presence and absence made palpable, if not possible, by technocracy allows the poetic speaker to imagine a sustained and ongoing connection between the self and other. The speaker in "Dreaming of You" declares: "it doesn't matter what riddles we speak how / circular the logic it's us we are not / making it up" (ll.103-05). The poem then concludes with

the riddle-like lines, “to be a / fragment like an ode on marble erasing / in the rain sleep be [. . .] wide as a camera turned on the morning sky” (ll.108-13). The extended deictic project, in other words, threatens to fail in its preservation of the self and other—after all, the line breaks in this passage highlight the phrase “we are not.” For *Love Alone*’s speaker, only the *bundling* of the anti-elegy with other technologies (however modern or ancient) promises to transform his always already lost referents into a collective intentional object—or decontextualized fragment—circulating in the ongoing present. Only when the film camera, the anti-elegy, and the “ode on marble / erasing” (which alludes to, presumably, the stone in ancient Thera which Monette discusses in his preface as well as, perhaps, the very notion of apostrophe) triangulate their deictic fragments can the lyric speaker perceive the specific lost other’s implied presence in each; only when these technological means are put in concert can *Love Alone*’s speaker imagine—retroactively in some cases and always a-historically—Rog as a centralized and ongoing agent of organization.¹⁶⁸ To be sure, the pun on “morning” and “mourning” subtly registered by this poem’s final image proposes that the external world can be read through the lens of this specific poet-speaker’s melancholia. The cinematic camera along with myriad other means of representation and communication must aspire in unison, Monette’s extended deictic project indicates, to the condition of the photographic camera.

Indeed, the final poem, “Brother of the Mount of Olives,” subsumes all technologies of communication and representation (however ancient or modern) including that of written language and lyric, into the deictic promise of photography. Even though the poem builds a voluminous list of these technologies, cataloguing letters (l.3), novels (l.4), film (l.6), microchips (l.9), a Gutenberg press (l.44), a “library” of “vellum folios” (l.58), a Xerox copier (l.61), frescoes (l.103), even airplanes (l.126) and automobiles (l.129) (which communicate bodies over

distance), the poem's occasion becomes the photograph on the volume's cover. In the poem's opening, the poet-speaker narrates his discovery of the image months after Rog's death:

combing the attic for anything extra
missed or missing evidence of us I [. . .] turn up
an undeveloped film race it to SUNSET
PLAZA ONE-HOUR wait out the hour [. . .]
then sit on the curb poring over
prints of Christmas '83 till I hit paydirt
three shots of the hermit abbey on the moors
southeast of Siena our final crisscross
of the Tuscan hills (ll.1-13)

The lyric voice describes the photograph, one of three taken in Italy about a year and a half before Rog's death, as "evidence" two other times (l.98, l.162); this evidentiary method of representation allows the lyric voice to address the (evidenced and therefore somewhat present) lost other while narrating his anecdote in the present tense. This method of representation and communication additionally evidences the present-ness of other methods. For instance, when describing the photograph, Monette mentions a fresco of medieval monks reading mass painted on the wall in the background. This doubled or even tripled technocratic ekphrasis (the monks "trilling in Latin" [l.105] might signify the imagined ability of "technocracy" to resuscitate a "dying" language) typifies the extended deictic project of placing the unit of "Monette and Rog" as the central hub of a problematized history in the collective present. The volume argues, then, through this final poem that its extended project of deixis is held together by a photograph captured by a "Canon A-1" (l.99) camera; the word "canon" eerily summoning the poet-speaker's portrayal of the literary canon as emerging out of its deathliness by way of technological enmeshment.

What is more, the poem's focus on communicating over vast geographic and temporal distances through a regime of technology brings the lyric self and other in direct and sustained

contact—atypically so, for the volume—with a third party.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, a large part of the long poem depicts Monette and Rog’s interactions with the monk of the poem’s title, or Brother John, in Italy who represents a mode of living out of step with time or, as Monette puts it, places him “out of time” (l.37) and who Monette also describes as a man who “likes touching” him and Rog (l.82). This is to say, the poet-speaker of *Love Alone*’s final poem supposes that the technocratic project, which always already centralizes the specific self and lost other, allows him to tend toward a gay liberationist culture and even to conceive of ongoing traditions (such as monastic living) as a-historical markers. Indeed, the potential of a philosophy of technology to allow the poet-speaker to shift his gaze away from the lost other in a way that retains that other’s specificity as the central hub of discourse in the present (and the non-time of deixis) explains the volume’s only explicit address to a particular auditor other than Rog. Near the poem’s end, Monette directly addresses Brother John, who took the “wedding portrait” (l.147) on the volume’s cover, in order to ask him to pray for him and Rog to remain together always, since the monk “is so inclined” (l.146). In other words, by shifting his gaze to an implicitly gay Monk to ask him to help retain the presence of Monette and Rog’s bond, the poet-speaker also gestures at notions of gay liberationism as well as God and religion (the monk “is so inclined” in both regards) without permitting them to supplant the specific other’s import and, thereby, transmute all of the volume’s anti-elegies into historicizing and utilitarian elegies.

Moreover, the fact that “technocracy” allows the lyric voice to connect with a third party while retaining the trace of the lost other further enables him—the volume implies—to engage with, at least to some degree, the sociopolitical present. The end of the poem, and therefore *Love Alone*, reads:

[. . .] must I be content
with a wedding I almost didn’t witness

the evidence all but lost no oath no ring
but the truth sealed to hold against the hate
of the first straight Pope since the Syllabus of
Errors this Polack joke who fears his women
and men too full of laughter far brother
if you should pass beneath our cypress
you who are a praying man your god can
go to hell but since you are so inclined
pray that my friend and I 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 (ll.163-174)

Monette's pun on "being content" discloses the poet-speaker's possible acceptance of the self and other as literary "content" but only, that is, as long as that content remains deictically central to a collective present as well as gay liberationist culture. His apostrophe of the "far brother" even fosters a paradigm in which Monette and Rog specifically become the retroactive a-historic content of a gay liberationist history (or the "song" past, or "ancient," gay men sing). In other words, the end of the poem and the volume can speak out against the perceived homophobic hypocrisies of the Catholic Church, particularly in the AIDS era, because a philosophy of technology permits the poet-speaker to conceive of history as a-historic mythology (an ancient pagan past embodied in a present day Catholic monk) with Monette and Rog at the center. In other words, through its harnessing of and trust in technocracy, *Love Alone* translates—however conditionally and briefly—its cosmic protest of death as well as its attending hostility toward those in the historicizing present into a protest directed at the politically-relevant figure of the Pope. To be sure, such a supposition possibly accounts for the fact that the only poems published in the volume out of order of their original compositions are "Dreaming of You" and "Brother of the Mount"; the latter of which was written days before the former.¹⁷⁰ Such a re-ordering points to the way the volume tethers the intentional object of "Monette and Rog" not only to a regime

of technology, but also to the “pure deixis” of photography and the photograph on the volume’s cover. Put otherwise, the volume finds tentative resolution, or comes to a close at least, by imagining and pointing to the ongoing collective presence of “Monette and Rog.”

However, the poet-speaker’s gradual and indirect pointing to the volume’s cover photograph shifts the burden of activism to the framing, or paratext, of Monette’s mostly melancholic anti-elegies. The content of his anti-elegies only point to Monette’s resolution to nestle the primary regime of ethics within the framework of the other. In this formulation, *Love Alone* as a whole does not redirect the severed-closed circuit of address to an external entity (like community), but redirects all external entities back to his specific and melancholic lyric address. Indeed, the only other time *Love Alone* disrupts this severed-circuit of grief comes in “Last Day at Molera Beach,” when the poet-speaker say—rather jarringly—two-thirds of the way through the poem, “now reader / if you’ve held firm and still stand on the lip / of Molera Beach let me tell you about goodbye” (ll.121-24). Certainly, it could be argued that the entire poem shifts its focus away from the lost other as the poet revisits and narrates his last trip to Molera Beach, occasionally calling himself “you.” Indeed, Monette’s apostrophe of the reader in combination with this somewhat indeterminate “you” as well as his explicit directive to “learn to turn your back complete” (l.136) abruptly contradicts the entire volume’s dedication to an ethics of mourning. However, the poem explicitly addresses Rog throughout and eventually subordinates all utilitarian implications to his melancholic lyric address. He declares near the poem’s conclusion, “I can run there / in my head any time Rog easy as I run to you” (ll.142-43). Within the context of the entire volume, this deictic “there” refers to both the Molera Beach of the speaker’s mind and the lyric fantasy of “you,” who exists in “any time.” In other words, by its end, the poem’s lesson becomes the obverse of what it momentarily indicates: one must not turn

one's "back complete" on the lost other but find, instead, a way to incorporate that lost other and the self's responsibility to that other into the intentionality of the ongoing collective present. This slender access between the two regimes of ethics afforded by technocracy for the speaker and indirectly articulated in the volume's final book assists (as the next section discusses) Monette in the following months and years after *Love Alone*'s composition to position his anti-elegies as a central node of militancy in AIDS activist writings and gay liberationist culture. This is to say, *Love Alone* melancholically insists, however impossibly, that its specific lost other, and its bond to that other, define and organize all concepts and narratives regarding collectivity in the ongoing present, including those of identity and community. To be sure, alluding to a gay liberationist past as well as framing present culture as always already caught in the deathly telos of time, *Love Alone* concludes by telling its lost *other*, that historicized *others* "couldn't stop singing and we were the song"; the volume's speaker proposes that the "we" of "Monette and Rog" constitutes the ever-emerging focal point of those existing in the past-ward pull of historicity.¹⁷¹

The Ethical Impasse of Early AIDS Poetry:

In other words, the way *Love Alone* responds to the ethical impasse created by lyric's foregrounding of melancholia to activism implicitly requires its poet-speaker to organize the collective present around the objects of "Rog," "Rog's loss," "Monette and Rog," and "Monette's grief" not as types but as specific aspects of immanence and alterity. Indeed, even though Monette did not discuss *Love Alone* explicitly to any great lengths in the years after its publication, much of his subsequent writings—such as the novel *Afterlife* (1990) and *all* of his non-fiction—frequently describe Rog's grave at Forest Lawns. Even the script of—as well as Monette's comments in—*The Brink of Summer's End* describes the cemetery where he

eventually comes to be buried next to Rog. This is to say, in his following award-winning and explicitly gay-liberationist AIDS activist and literary work, Monette abstracts Rog's grave (the conjoined site of utilitarian absence and melancholic presence) into a "collective intentional object," or "shared hallucination," circulating in the ever-emerging present. Moreover, Monette's final and posthumous published piece, the fabular novella *Sanctuary* (1997), which seems ostensibly removed from this crux of ethical concern, could be said to allegorize *Love Alone's* conflict of ethics. For instance, near the beginning of the piece, a beneficent witch fades into obscurity because "she couldn't reach [. . .] the Other" (21; original capitalization); correspondingly, near the novella's end, she asks, when revived by a drifting wizard, "could you be the Other I've been waiting for?" (89; original capitalization). What is more, while other early AIDS writings, such as *Facing It* and *The Normal Heart*, explicitly promote writing within a gay liberationist logic (as discussed in this dissertation's introduction), Monette indicates that he came to write about the AIDS epidemic indirectly—initially at least. For example, at the end of *Borrowed Time*, when Monette asks what he should do following Rog's death, his doctor responds, "Write about him, Paul [. . .] That's what you have to do" (341). Reminiscent of, but differing from, the conclusion of Kramer's play, in which the protagonist loses his significant other to the AIDS crisis and thereby decides to write about the epidemic, the end of *Borrowed Time* frames its narrator as losing his significant other to the crisis and thereby deciding to write about that lost other. Even his most well-known piece of writing to date, *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (1992), a non-fiction bildungsroman often held up as the archetype of "coming out stories," explicitly finds its occasion in Roger's loss and ends by describing the first time he and Roger met.¹⁷² This is to say, Monette's significant contribution to AIDS activism and literature stems from, surrounds, undergirds, and—at times—exceeds his initial impulse to preserve

Roger's trace.¹⁷³

However, Monette's resolution to place the intentional object of "Monette and Roger" at the intersection of non-utilitarian and utilitarian ethics in his following writings posed problems for following AIDS poets; not only does such a resolution work to occupy—however ethically or venerably—the focal point of the ongoing present, but also it neglects to resolve the ethical impasse *within* the discursive boundaries of lyric and anti-elegy. Correspondingly, then, early AIDS poetry often portrays its speakers as descending increasingly into an inescapable isolation that replicates and unintentionally reinforces the social abjection of gay men and PWAs. Early AIDS poetry relatively contemporary to *Love Alone* labors, in other words (as I describe in the next chapter), to differentiate its lyric melancholia from a national and political fantasy of quarantining and thereby killing off the gay male body during the AIDS crisis.¹⁷⁴ Eventually representing this differentiation as unmanageable, poets like Gunn and Dlugos attempt, via their ghostly lyric voices, as I shortly discuss, to release the ongoing present (including the gay community) from its ethical obligations to the past. What is more, Monette's personal resolving of this ethical impasse, as well as what I term Gunn and Dlugos' "ethical fatalism" (or, "secular prayer") in the next chapter, depends upon the remnant traces of white privilege tethered to their nevertheless gay lyric speakers; indeed, while Monette's solution places two ethnically white men at the phenomenological center of ongoing discourse (or, as he says, of "an ancient race"), Gunn and Dlugos' solutions of acquiescing into non-existence paradoxically relies on—as chapter two's conclusion discusses—the Euro-centric agency traditionally associated with lyric voice. This dissertation's third chapter discusses, as a result, the way early black gay AIDS poets circumvent, or try to circumvent, lyric anti-elegy's ethical impasse and its cultural biases by associating lyric with its choric, rather than melancholic, roots; in this way, they redesign lyric as

performance-oriented so that it might literarily connect specific speakers with specific listeners. In other words, unlike *Love Alone*'s avoidance of lyric as performance and yet akin to Monette's effort to associate Rog with the ongoing present through various mediums of discourse, early black gay AIDS poets effectively supersede (as will be discussed) the intentional object of "Monette and Rog" with the emerging notion of a "black gay community."¹⁷⁵

Nevertheless, despite its logic's significant drawbacks, *Love Alone* thoroughly articulates the necessity of melancholia, or an ethics of mourning, for AIDS poetry; but it also highlights at the same time the lyric mode's conflicting interest in the self's responsibility not just to one *other* but all *others*. Indeed, even though most of Monette's following work espouses a gay liberationist, or at least anti-homophobic, mentality while tending to Roger's loss, it also recognizes how its specific loss translates into broad socio-politically exigencies. For instance, in an interview on PBS with Charlie Rose in 1994, Monette compares AIDS to breast cancer in an explicitly-acknowledged effort to build coalitions between gay men and women of all sexualities.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, *Sanctuary*'s allegorizing of his and Rog's bond through the female, male, and even anthropomorphized animal characters also indicates his effort to problematize the boundaries of the self and not-self as well as the gay-self and the non-gay-self; indeed, as my fourth chapter discusses, slightly later AIDS poets (from the early and mid-1990s) often deconstruct the boundary between the self and other through an imaginative interlacing of the self's immanence with animal alterity. To be sure, in his prefatory note to the posthumous novella, poet, editor, and critic David Groff (a longtime associate of Monette's as well) asserts: "the creatures of *Sanctuary* manifest the themes and preoccupations that infuse all of Paul Monette's work; the quest for justice; the fluidity of sexual identity; and the ability of forthright romance to remake the world" (7). While Groff risks eliding, here, the possible difference

between Monette's earlier associations with gay liberationist culture and his later focus on "the fluidity of sexual identity,"¹⁷⁷ he nevertheless incisively points to the way that Monette's interest in representing "forthright romance" (a phrase akin to but slightly more sociable than the titular formation of "love alone") rests at the juncture of private and public ethos.¹⁷⁸

Indeed, while most critics and activists, including Monette himself to some degree (as I discuss in this chapter's first part), misrepresent *Love Alone* through the lens of his following career and life as politically militant, the content of the eighteen poems in *Love Alone* emphasize a generally anti-social, or anti-political, notion of "protest mourning" stemming from his severed and specific circuit of devotion. The poet-speaker in, "Your Sightless Days," for instance, the volume's third poem, tells his lost other, while evidently alluding to that other's AIDS-related blindness: "I remember clearly deciding not to see / anymore myself this out of sheer protest" (ll.1-2).¹⁷⁹ He subsequently asks Rog, "why am I tapping this thin white cane of outrage / through crowds of sighted fools[?]" (ll.43-44) only to assert "I'm shut tight Oedipus-old" (l.47). Monette's speaker expresses hostility, here, toward the caprices of being that cannot be controlled as well as the world en masse, but only inasmuch as that world continues to exist without Rog's ability to perceive it. His reference to Oedipus—a critical figure, of course, for Freud as well as Bloom—indicates Monette's ethical need not only to shut out the ensuing world, but also to kill off, so to speak, tradition and its historicization of Rog's loss. The volume's later poems mitigate this sense of hostility and make it commensurate with a public ethos by way of obliquely referencing that public realm and speculatively situating Monette's grief at the center of it. For instance, in the volume's fifteenth poem, "The House on Kings Road," the poet-speaker declares to the lost other, "tell me / where you are" (ll.112-13), and recalls the other asking months before dying, "What happened to our happy life [?]" (l.126);

then, the speaker belatedly responds, “it’s here it’s here I know because I am / the ghost who haunts us” (ll.128-29). By framing himself as “the ghost who haunts us,” the speaker places the “us” of “Monette and Rog” at the conceptual center of presence against which the speaker’s ghostly form takes shape and preeminence. What is more, referring to both the space of his poems and their house on Kings Road (in what is now West Hollywood), the volume’s speaker situates Monette and his grief at the crossroads of the past and the present; the redoubled “here” abstracts their severed and yet still palpable bond into the deictic non-place of the poem while the indeterminate “us” alludes to both the object of “Monette and Rog” as well as those in the collective present.

This is to say, the volume urgently works to constellate opposing ethics found at the intersections of melancholia and activism, lyric and elegy, and literature and activism. It asserts that the non-utilitarian melancholia of lyric—its generic and desperate attempt to overcome language’s ghostly displacement of the material through address¹⁸⁰—is and must be anterior to, if not exclusionary of, activism, politics, and history. And yet, melancholia, *Love Alone* also suggests, is a necessary precondition for sociopolitical responsibility: the self’s ethical need to grieve over the lost other transmogrifies into the ethical hypothesis that at first opposes and then underpins a social ethics of activism. The second regime of ethics, *Love Alone* implies, universalizes the first. This act of universalization—that *Love Alone* only gestures at indirectly and through a technocratic projecting of the lyric self and other beyond the scope of poetry—becomes, paradoxically, the AIDS poets’ collective mean of balancing the obligations of experience with the requirements of the many *within* poetry itself. As I explore in my third and fourth chapters, subsequent AIDS poets put pressure on Monette’s insight and fear that lyric voice can easily slip between direct address and performance; these later AIDS poets develop

lyric's very indeterminacies into an undecidable semi-poststructuralist politics and aesthetics suspended between melancholia and activism, or what I will call "lyric queerness." In this regard, Monette's implicit speculation that he "is the ghost that haunts" the "us" of the ongoing present becomes unnervingly true, inasmuch as his intervention into gay liberationism's almost monolithic utilitarianism leads following AIDS poets, AIDS writers, gay authors, queer theorists, and even indirectly—as I discuss in the final chapter—American poets to some degree into an era that conscientiously weighs the specific experiences of being against the needs of the collective, in both aesthetic and political terms. Put otherwise, *Love Alone* proleptically criticizes any sociopolitical exigencies—whether those of gay liberationism, literary tradition, or queer theory—for erasing the generative and phenomenological spark of ethics.¹⁸¹ The poet-speaker of *Love Alone* insists that the fundamental need for touch between the self and other voiced by lyric—never actualized and always necessarily melancholic—paradoxically and synecdochally produces the imperative of touch between all selves and all others.¹⁸²

Chapter Two: AIDS Poetry and the Problem of Containment

At the end of “Manifesto,” the fourteenth poem in Paul Monette’s *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog* (1988), the poet-speaker compares the AIDS crisis to the Holocaust. After criticizing the way American institutions deflect their own complicity in the severity of the crisis, Monette writes:

[. . .] I had a self myself
once but he died when do we leave the mirror
and lie down in front of the tanks let them
put two million of us away see how quick
it looks like Belsen force out all their hate
the cool indifferent genocide that locks up
all the pills whatever it takes witness
the night and the waste for those who are not yet
touched for 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 (ll.70-81)

This comparison, however, does not make the passage exceptional for its time. What makes this passage and poem unique is the poet-speaker’s self-conscious awareness of the lyric mode’s ethical and generic concerns and his desire to both preserve and break free of them. As the first chapter explains, *Love Alone* recurrently refuses to engage with the sociopolitical present because doing so would risk coding Monette’s specific lost other as an object of the past. The volume’s speaker almost never turns away from this other, seeking instead to maintain, primarily through direct address, the lost other’s trace at the moment that other’s vulnerability becomes infinitely realized—at the moment after his death. Equally disturbing for the speaker is the notion that if he turns away from the lost other, he risks admitting the existential isolation of the

self. This revelation, in turn, would transform his sense of ethical grief into a merely narcissistic disregard for the suffering of those living in the present: “when do we leave the mirror / and lie down in front of the tanks.” The governing tension of *Love Alone* as a whole becomes the poet-speaker’s understanding of the lyric mode as essentially anti-elegiac and melancholic, inasmuch as the lyric “I” always already speaks in isolation while paradoxically pointing toward the ethical necessity of contact with, primarily, the specific absent other.

To reveal the lyric voice as isolated to the lyric self as well as the implied reader, however, not only threatens to undermine the poet-speaker’s dedication to the ethics of mourning, but also demonstrates a paradoxical conflict central to early AIDS poetry (that from the late 1980s and early 1990s). Early AIDS poetry frequently realizes the need for and dangers of both touching and containment. In this treacherous paradigm, touching and containment similarly preserve the trace of the lost specific other and the self in the ongoing present as well as lead to death on a catastrophic scale. For instance, while discussing the lack of capitalization and punctuation in his verse in *Love Alone*’s preface, Monette writes that he wanted his poems “to allow no escape, like a hospital room, or indeed a mortal illness” (xii). Monette does not elaborate on this logic, which would dictate that the only escape from a mortal illness combined with a hospital room in the utilitarian milieu of this imagery is, in fact, death. Rather, *Love Alone* attempts to retain the lost other before death reframes the other as belonging to the past. The lyric poem, in this regard, becomes for Monette and other early AIDS poets, akin to the hospital room, ambivalently so, where the lost other still exists on the hazy cusp of life and death. For this reason, early AIDS poetry often attempts to navigate the uncomfortable ways the ethical purposes of the lyric mode conflate with homophobic fantasies on a national and sociopolitical scale regarding the quarantine of PWAs and, by metonymic extension, gay men at this time.

Although early AIDS poets primarily rejected, or resisted, the notion that militancy must come before melancholia (which theorist Douglas Crimp famously proselytized¹⁸³), they also began to worry that a focus on anti-elegies (or elegies that refuse a traditional sense of closure) colluded with prevailing cultural impulses to strip gay men of their agency.¹⁸⁴ In 1987, for example, a year before *Love Alone* appeared in print, just after President Reagan publically supported the notion of mandatory HIV antibody testing for gay men, Senator Jesse Helms notoriously claimed that the government would “have to quarantine if we are really going to contain this disease.”¹⁸⁵ Put succinctly, amidst the AIDS crisis, the lyric mode’s generic and ethical concerns begin to mirror a national politics of containment.

In this context, references in “Manifesto” to Belsen and genocide can be more fully understood. While this charged level of rhetoric might come across as histrionic from a current historical perspective, in which the quarantine of gay men was not realized and in which HIV/AIDS has become, at least in the United States, a somewhat manageable condition, theorists, writers, and activists of the time did not dispute the legitimacy of comparisons between the epidemic and the Holocaust. Instead, this rhetorical strategy became prevalent and was used to warn that, if the call for quarantine were left unchecked, gay people, individually and collectively, could easily become a national scapegoat (many truly feared this outcome, it seems, and might have helped to prevent it with their vigilance¹⁸⁶). Indeed, although “Manifesto” additionally argues against a politics of containment by suggesting it would fail and lead to misery for the straight population, Paula Trierichler’s influential “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” (1987) points out that scientists predicted that *the best* outcome for the epidemic in the United States was “containment” and “saturation,” in which the HIV virus did not spread to the “general population.” In this best case scenario, the

AIDS crisis would *merely* kill “more than 10 million people.”¹⁸⁷ Treichler reveals that the 1980s biomedical institution and public health agencies—rather than educating gay men about the medical threat and monetarily flooding research intended to curb the disease’s spread, cure it, or make it a manageable condition—were by and large content with this scenario playing out. To be sure, journalist Randy Shilts reported in 1987 that a dean of the school of medicine at the University of California in San Francisco observed that, “At least with AIDS, a lot of undesirable people will be eliminated.”¹⁸⁸ Eve Sedgwick also worried, especially throughout her landmark study *Epistemologies of the Closet* (1990), as touched on in this dissertation’s introduction, that, “AIDS [. . .] is used to proffer every single day to the news-consuming public the crystallized vision of a world after the homosexual” and that “a medicalized dream of the prevention of gay bodies seems to be the less visible, far more respectable underside of the AIDS-fueled public dream of their extirpation” (43); she indicates, in this way, that the American cultural “gestalt,” or prevailing cultural zeitgeist, of the AIDS era harbored a “gay-eradicating momentum” (43). Even Susan Sontag implicitly claims, in her influential and anti-identitarian monograph *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), that the public discourse surrounding the AIDS epidemic connects the crisis with apocalyptic thinking and a genocidal impulses toward a “homosexual” population.¹⁸⁹

More than anyone else at the time, however, novelist and playwright Larry Kramer fervently deployed what might be termed a “Holocaust rhetoric,” by which he and others used the example of the Shoah to incite gay men to militancy. Kramer’s most explicit example, though the examples in his case are abundant, comes from the title essay of his collected activist writings *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist* (1990). In the long essay, which was originally published in 1988 and mostly compares the plight of gay people to those of Jews, he says: “It’s not too early to see AIDS as the homosexuals’ holocaust. I have come

reluctantly to believe that genocide is occurring: that we are witnessing—or *not* witnessing—the systematic, planned annihilation of some by others” (263; original emphasis).¹⁹⁰ Referring to Hannah Arendt’s definition of evil as banal and as purveyed through modernized bureaucracy, he clarifies later that “Holocausts can occur, and probably most often occur, because of *inaction*” and that “This inaction can be unintentional or deliberate” (original emphasis; 265). Throughout the volume, Kramer also blames gay men for furthering the reach of the crisis by internalizing the inimical and homophobic apathy of the National Institute of Health, the Reagan administration, and the Center for Disease Control. In his impassioned article “1,112 and Counting” (1983), which early AIDS theorist Simon Watney called “one of the most important public statements in the entire history of the U.S. epidemic,”¹⁹¹ Kramer addresses gay men to say: “I am sick of ‘men’ who say, ‘We’ve got to keep quiet or *they* will do such and such.’ *They* usually means the straight majority, the ‘Moral’ Majority, or similarly perceived representatives of *them*. Okay ‘men’—be my guests: You can march off now to the gas chambers; just get right in line.”¹⁹² Even queer theorist Lee Edelman, who objects to Kramer’s and Monette’s implicitly gendered activist rhetoric in their writings (inasmuch as their rhetoric disparagingly aligns inaction with passivity, sexual receptivity, narcissism, and femininity), finds nothing hyperbolic about equating the AIDS crisis with the Holocaust. In fact, in his essay “The Mirror and the Tank: AIDS, Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism” (1993), which takes its title from “Manifesto,” Edelman dedicates a section of his essay to arguing that gendered rhetoric further reinforces gender norms that functionally legitimize gay genocidal impulses. This is to say, in regards to my previous discussions of this article, Edelman takes issue with Monette’s gendered—not genocidal—rhetoric, which he sees as unwittingly contradicting Monette’s larger laudable goals.¹⁹³

To be sure, many of the early AIDS activists Edelman refers to in this article and throughout his career likewise wrote out of a compulsion to prevent what they saw as the AIDS crisis' potential to reverse the strides made by gay liberation and, even worse, to prompt genocidal social policies. In his (in)famous article "Is the Rectum a Grave? (1987), Leo Bersani asserts that the binary of "us" and "them" often used by activists like Kramer—and which are often contingent upon sexist and racist logics—deepen the severity of the AIDS crisis and thereby need to be deconstructed.¹⁹⁴ Laying the foundation for this argument, Bersani quotes Watney's foundational monograph *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (1987), in which Watney argues, "AIDS is effectively being used as a pretext throughout the West to 'justify' calls for increasing legislation and regulation of those who are considered to be socially unacceptable" (3). Citing Otis R. Brown, the American Secretary of Health and Human Services, as refusing to grant confidentiality for HIV testing, Bersani contends that the Reagan administration's desire to collect the names of those infected with HIV would discourage people from taking the antibody test and, by corollary, the precautions made necessary by seropositive results. Bersani concludes, "having the information necessary to lock up homosexuals in quarantine camps may be a higher priority in the family-oriented Reagan Administration than saving the heterosexual members of American families from AIDS" (201). Pointing out the political powerlessness of gay men, Bersani writes that during the AIDS crisis even racially white gay men, who depend on gendered and racial hierarchies for a sense of agency, have "nothing but a moral argument—not even recognized as a moral argument—to keep themselves in the protected white enclaves and out of quarantine camps" (205). Unlike Kramer, critics like Watney, Bersani, and Edelman emphasized the need for the post-Stonewall sexual revolution amidst the AIDS crisis because sexual jouissance had, they contend, the potential to shatter

binaries like male and female, gay and straight, self and not-self, and us and them. Like Kramer and other early AIDS theorists and activists (a category that also includes Cindy Patton, Sontag, and Sedgwick),¹⁹⁵ Bersani used Holocaust rhetoric to insist that the discursive fields of power (to borrow phrasing from Foucault) between gay men and public policies had to be readjusted, especially during the AIDS crisis, in order to prevent apocalyptic scenarios for the gay community.

Similarly, then, early AIDS literature as a whole mostly cleaves to an ethics of activism implicitly asserting that anti-homophobic rhetoric, including Holocaust rhetoric, can repair the rupture between government-sponsored biomedical establishments and the gay community during the AIDS crisis. For instance, Kramer's milestone play *The Normal Heart* (1985) literalizes Holocaust rhetoric not only in its script (when Kramer's avatar Ned Weeks repeatedly compares gay complacency during the medical crisis with American Jewish complacency during the Shoah), but also on its set. In the published version of the play, Kramer points out that the set was painted with statistics about the AIDS crisis, as well as passages from a 1984 report prepared for the American Jewish Commission on the Holocaust, entitled "American Jewry During the Holocaust," that accuses the Jewish community of acting too reservedly in the 1930s and 40s to save any European Jewish lives.¹⁹⁶ Unlike AIDS poetry, as will be discussed, most early AIDS writing tacitly believes in the ability of their mediums to manufacture positive change for the then-struggling gay community. As I have previously discussed in different contexts, the climatic deathbed scenes in *The Normal Heart* (1985) mirrors the climatic deathbed scenes in Paul Reed's novel *Facing It* (1984) and Monette's 1988 AIDS memoir *Borrowed Time* (1988) (which he wrote following the completion of *Love Alone*). All three of these works' conclusions take place in AIDS wards and affirm the idea that writing about the crisis can

prevent, directly or indirectly, more losses from accruing. Also, all three of these works feature a (straight) doctor-figure urging the surviving partner of a lost gay man to write about the crisis and in writing about it change homophobic biases worsening the epidemic.¹⁹⁷ *Borrowed Time* additionally details Monette's ability to use his minor literary celebrity and Hollywood connections to gain access for Rog to AZT and other experimental drug trials.¹⁹⁸ Along these lines, Shilts' opus *And the Band Played On* embodies the idea of advocacy journalism by allegorizing the politics of the medical establishment through the real world figures of major players in governmental medical institutions and politics. These early and influential non-poetry AIDS pieces characterize the medical establishment as misled and posit that a literary gay liberationist spirit can beneficially intervene. This literary interventionist notion also enables early AIDS writers to imagine literature as liberating the gay subject from an abject containment, as in the end of *Facing It* when the journalist figure manages, by way of institutional knowledge, to force his way into his dying other's quarantined isolation.

However, most early AIDS poetry, because of its generic dedication to the severed closed-circuit of grief, frequently prefigures what could be called a thanapolitical view of the AIDS epidemic. While many early AIDS activists and writers anticipate the avowed purposes of biopolitical theorists, such as Thomas Lemke and Nikolas Rose, who work toward an optimal relationship between governmental population controls and individual agency,¹⁹⁹ most early AIDS poetry anticipates Giorgio Agamben's viewpoint that sees the Foucaultian notion of the governmental disciplining of bodies as leading to the containment of the culturally abject, as in the death camps of the Holocaust.²⁰⁰ (It should be noted, as I mention in this dissertation's introduction, early AIDS literature and theory could be considered the missing link in a genealogy of biopolitical thought that currently leaps from Foucault to Lemke, Rose, and

Agamben.²⁰¹) One needs only look at the histories of Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) and AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) to infer the ways in which early AIDS activists experienced despondency over the United States’ handling of the epidemic, but also used this despondency to lead political actions intended to save lives and avert even greater tragedies. For example, AIDS activist and PWA Roger Lyon demonstrated a belief in the ability to redirect the nation’s passive killings of gay men in his testimony at a 1983 congressional subcommittee meeting on the topic of funding when he said, “I came here today in the hope that my epitaph would not read that I died of red tape” (Shilts 360).²⁰² Lyon does not claim that he could live indefinitely but that the inaction of American bureaucracies was expediting his death. In her 1987 article, Treichler asserts that the expedition of AIDS deaths stems in large part from deleterious social narratives surrounding the crisis: “until we understand AIDS as both a material and linguistic reality—a duality inherent in all linguistic entities but extraordinarily exaggerated and potentially deadly in the case of AIDS—we cannot begin to read the story of this illness accurately or formulate intelligent interventions” (40). For Treichler and other early AIDS critics and activists, biopolitics itself does not necessarily lead to death; rather, how the fields of discourse between relational powers (in a Foucaultian sense) is wielded may lead there. These early activists and writers, like Kramer (who founded both GMHC and ACT UP), put faith in the ability of an interventionist mentality directed at readjusting biopolitical discourses to shape and reshape public opinion and thereby save lives.

It is an opinion that early AIDS poets often repeat in prose, but do not usually reflect in their poetry. For instance, in his 1982 *Body Politic* editorial piece, scholar Michael Lynch, who later published a volume of AIDS poems (*These Waves of Dying Friends* [1989]), claims that the burgeoning biomedical crisis brings the gay community into conflict once more with a

heteronormative medical establishment and that this conflict must be carefully negotiated. Lynch writes, “we have peremptorily, almost inexplicably, relinquished the one power we so long fought for in constructing our modern gay community: the power to determine our own identity. And to whom have we relinquished it? The very authority we wrested it from in a struggle that occupied us for more than a hundred years: the medical profession.”²⁰³ Referring to the pathologizing of gayness by the medical establishment until the mid-1970s, Lynch asserts a belief in the ability of gay men to take control of their own health crisis and thereby not leave it to the supposed experts. In his 2000 essay “A Poetry of Crisis, a Poetry of Witness,” AIDS poet Walter Holland posits, by corollary, that early AIDS poetry categorically attempted to adjust the homophobic fields of cultural discourse and signification mediating the crisis for gay men:

AIDS verse focused on the strange ironies of linking love, sex, religion, and death. The body and desire became important subjects for AIDS poetry. As scientists turned their microscopes with ever-greater focus upon the AIDS virus and the human subject, so poets were forced to magnify and dissect with greater clarity the elements of modern love, sexuality, science, and death. AIDS poetry needed to redress the enormous perceived distances between “the general public” and “the AIDS infected,” between “doctor” and “patient,” between “straight” and “gay” by examining the language of political and medical expediency and finding common bonds of the human in all of us.²⁰⁴

Through a retrospective lens, Holland asserts that AIDS poetry not only recognized the inimical nature of these homophobic biases but also actively worked to ameliorate their dangers for PWAs. However, while the Monette of *Borrowed Time* ostensibly writes the memoir of his partner’s death in order to demonstrate the way U.S. biomedicine can improve the length and quality of PWAs’ lives, “Manifesto,” the most politically engaged poem of *Love Alone*, employs Holocaust rhetoric not just as a warning but also, despairingly, as a foregone conclusion. This is to say, as discussed in the last chapter, while the voice of prose allows practicing AIDS poets to address, if not directly engage with, the sociopolitical present, the voice of their lyric anti-elegies

frames their speakers and referents as ghostly specters, especially when framed by or put in contact with the ongoing utilitarian present.

In other words, early AIDS poetry itself, the very content of it, even in “militant” poems like “Manifesto,” does not support the view that literature can correct a dangerous, to use Triechler’s words, “epidemic of signification,” for the PWA or gay male. Rather, because of its generic and ethical concerns, early AIDS poetry fixates on the irretrievability of its infinitely vulnerable specific lost others; in fact, early AIDS poems do so even on the rare occasions that they work to save the imminent loss of others in a more general, utilitarian sense. For instance, Lynch’s final poem from *These Waves of Dying Friends*, “Yellow Kitchen Gloves” engages with AIDS activism, like “Manifesto,” to a uniquely high extent for AIDS poetry. The poem, which recounts a 1987 protests against homophobic Supreme Court rulings and the handlings of protesters in previous actions,²⁰⁵ features a speaker repeatedly chanting in parentheticals throughout the poem, “I want him back,” referring to Lynch’s longtime friend and significant other, Bill Lewis. Its refrain has the effect, intentionally or not, of ironically emphasizing the impossibility for political action to retrieve the already lost specific other. Like Lynch, Holland’s AIDS poems tend to undermine his later notion articulated in prose that early AIDS poetry saw itself as possessing the ability to save lives. For instance, his poem “The Dialogues,” coming halfway through his volume *A Journal of the Plague Years: Poems 1979-1992* (1992), highlights a poet-speaker almost deriding a specific dying other for putting his faith in biomedicine. The poem ends,

[. . .] All your years
of med school over—is that learning

now undone? You shift quietly
in your chair, staring at me, then
the slender tubes. The drug pours

into your wrist, passing in and through. (ll.24-40)

The oscillating tone, between tenderness and bitterness, points toward the speaker's own disillusionment with a medical situation that cannot arrest the other's passing. "The Dialogues" reveals itself in this way as being, potentially at least, "monologic"—that is, as representing its speaker as talking to himself while the dying other flickers on the cusp of presence and absence. Indeed, the poet-speaker's address to the other seems merely rhetorical here, inasmuch as the poem's other is implicitly unhearing, if not already lost and absent.

Even when Holland approaches the question of gay liberation in his AIDS poems, he has difficulty seeing the loss of specific others as leading to anything other than a genocidal outcome. Holland dedicates "Sheridan Square," a poem that appears in the last third of his first volume, to the memory of off-Broadway performance artist Charles Ludlam, who died of AIDS complications, and addresses him throughout.²⁰⁶ The second half of the poem reads:

[. . .] I think of 1969—
sirens circling Sheridan Square,
policeman in their riot gear, the sound of
bottles breaking on pavement,
the flames smoldering for hours
until Stonewall had been burned,
drag queens drenched wearing blood-stained shoes.
These are the scenes
to which we return:
boxcar and oven's cinders,
a bar boarded up, men shot at close range,
the bishop with his mitre [sic] and his edicts
of excommunication, dishonorable discharges,
hospitals, jails [. . .] (ll.32-45)

In this reverie, Holland's speaker produces a thanapolitical view of gay liberation during the AIDS crisis. The burning of Stonewall reduces to images of containment and genocide. The way the poem ends teeters on the edge of representing gay men as heroically fighting back against dire odds and blaming these men for a telos of genocide; indeed, referring to "the scenes / to

which we return” as well as a candlelight vigil held for Ludlam, the poem ends, “These will be our flames tonight / one by one WE have placed them there” (original capitalization; ll.47-48). In this context, flames allude to peaceful political actions as well as riots and gas chambers. When early AIDS poems represent gay and AIDS activism, they do so in the larger—or perhaps narrower—framework of mourning specific losses, which constitute their ethical and generic concerns. For this reason, while prose allows writers, even poets, to engage with a sociopolitical present, AIDS poems frequently equate the ethical need to preserve the trace of lost specific others with an inability to intervene into the ongoing present and, therefore, political abjection.

Of course, Lynch and Holland’s poems attempt, at the least, to move toward an ethics of activism; most early AIDS poetry, however, does not—especially the earliest published AIDS poetry, which almost without exception depicts lyric speakers who are nearly dead, or dead already, and utterly abject. For example, Robert Boucheron’s *Epitaphs for the Plague Dead* (1985), a collection of fifty-six dramatic monologues, portrays all of its speakers as talking from their graves, having died from AIDS-complications.²⁰⁷ In his volume’s preface, Boucheron purports to write his epitaphs for the betterment of gay men: “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,” he adds, “we are fighting for our lives.”²⁰⁸ The poems themselves, however, code gay men as already dead and abject victims of a homophobic society. “Epitaph for a Victim,” the volume’s seventeenth poem, for example, reads in full:

A head too big for what was left,
a sack of soup bones for a body,
I watched TV all day on shoddy
cushions I could no longer heft.

It takes two orderlies to pull
me up the stairs, and then they scam.
A handmade sign nailed to the jamb:

“Keep Away—Danger,” and a skull.

The landlord walks away. The place
has violations up the butt,
with windows smashed or painted shut.
No rent to pay, the saving grace.

Of all my so-called friends, not one
comes up to see me once they hear.
Food came thanks to a volunteer,
who took me down when it was done. (ll.1-16)

Depicting the speaker as socially abject, employing diction evocative of bodily abjection, and reframing the speaker’s life as an abject “it,” this epitaph (as do all of Boucheron’s epitaphs) inevitably ends with its speaker’s death. This telos combined with the singsong nature of their steady meter has led to much criticism of Boucheron’s work, in which critics point out that Boucheron reduces gay men to stereotypes and already-dead victims without volition.²⁰⁹ What is more, the volume’s regular quatrains of iambic tetrameter (*abba*) replicate an idea of casket-like containment. As will be discussed shortly, it is this formal mirroring of a thematics of containment that early AIDS poets often reluctantly resort to, associating, despite themselves, the most historic and enduring elements of poetry with abject isolation.²¹⁰

While Boucheron’s dramatic monologues fantastically speak via the casket, Bill Becker’s early and almost completely unknown volume *An Immediate Desire to Survive* (1985) portrays a poet-speaker coming to terms with his looming death over the course of a year.²¹¹ Titled after specific dates, like journal entries, tethering thereby lyric and a deathly telos, these poems have the effect of literally speaking epitaphically, as if from Becker’s grave. An early poem in the volume, “7 Nov 84,” begins:

Bury the live man
Carry the curse
Pump up the experiments
Plug in the iron hearse

Force down the coma
Take away the lungs
Cram a week of suffering
into an endless day (ll.1-8; original capitalization)

As in many of the volume's poems, the poet-speaker represents U.S. biomedicine, as bolstered by the anti-gay "Moral Majority," as using him in a grim ritual of medical experimentation reminiscent of those conducted at death camps.²¹² The first line of the passage, "Burry the live man," which attempts to universalize his own abjection, is perhaps all the agency the speaker can muster, phrasing, as it does, his own abjection as a command to others. However, Becker's imperative phrasing also demonstrates a lack of subjectivity or agency, inasmuch as, in employing it, the speaker becomes implicitly but not grammatically represented. The third to last poem in the volume, "2 Feb 85," written a couple months before Becker's death,²¹³ echoes these sentiments with a welter of subject-less phrases:

Fearful dissections
relentless throes and horrors
disillusionment with medicine
and multiple opinion verification—

Hospital panic
x-ray and isolation vaults
humiliation on the torture block
and forfeited rights (ll.25-32)

Becker omits the grammatical subjects, simultaneously pointing to his interiority and his absence, thereby accentuating what language and literature programmatically does. Moreover, the space of the hospital and the space of the poem conflate into "isolation vaults." To be sure, in Becker's case, politically charged phrases like "forfeited rights" often point to the lyric speaker's irreparable cultural disenfranchisement rather than to an activist imperative.

In fact, the volume begins with such a thematic (the idea of cultural disenfranchisement) that also internalizes a homophobic narrative of divine retribution, or the notion that AIDS is a

plague caused by the sin of gay (sexual) liberation. In the volume's first poem, Becker writes:

Because we carried freedom
beyond the seams
of tenderness
and found the shame
in our brotherhood—

Just what part of us
will survive the blasphemies
committed in darkened rooms (l.11-18)

Here, the poet-speaker deals as much with the effects of a biomedical crisis as with a crisis of (homophobic) signification that makes meaning out of the epidemic as a religious plague smiting the sinful. The final lines of the poem represent all gay men as isolated lyric speakers haunted by the notions of loss and sin:

Chasing after spirits
that have come to haunt us now—
All of us
Maybe listening,
Maybe praying,
Maybe even touching,
while we sit inside our cells—

Life among the inmates— (ll.64-71).

From Becker's dire mid-1980s perspective, the lyric speaker transforms into the criminal. The lyric speaker's image of the "cell" at once conjures the notion of the biomedical crisis, the prison industrial complex, the existential isolationism of the body ("we sit inside our cells"), and the space of the poem itself.²¹⁴ He offers a vision of life during the AIDS crisis, especially for PWAs, as a prison and death sentence unmitigated by ostensibly available modes of comfort; listening, meditation, and prayer—all related to poetry²¹⁵—collapse into the idea of touch which is made suspect and dangerous by the AIDS crisis. The poem suggests that, from their individual prison cells, lyric speaker's may be merely chasing after, listening to, meditating on, praying for,

and touching the already dead (“spirits / that have come to haunt us”). The melancholic and phenomenological valences of lyric, in other words, its reaching for contact with an other (or, even, others), collapses in the context of AIDS and the notion of contagion into isolation, abjection, and the epitaph.

As with Lynch and Holland, and in opposition to these earliest examples, AIDS poets from the late 1980s and early 90s attempt—though mostly unsuccessfully—not to conflate the lyric voice with abject isolationism. For instance, even though gay liberationist writer Michael Lassel’s writings often seek to regain a sense of lost sexual intimacy in the gay community during the crisis, his AIDS poetry volume *Decade Dance* (1990) frequently portrays the speaker as alone and despondent. By way of second-person address, Lassel paradoxically links his speaker with the reader only to communicate the aloneness of both—perhaps suggesting that this aloneness, or loneliness, is the very condition in which poetry is written and comes to be experienced. For instance, even though the volume’s last poem, “How to Choose Life,” evidently offers a roadmap to futurity rather than death, the last stanza reads:

No lover will be returning home to your arms
this night. You will go alone
to a too warm bed
having chosen to dance
in the mouth of death
and will pray for the strength
to dance again
tomorrow. (ll.53-60)

The image of the “too warm bed” indicates in the AIDS era both sexual encounters and night sweats, a well-known symptom of the HIV virus. Not only can the addressee not touch a lover in this environment, but also no lovers return, having implicitly died or grown too frightened of touch’s ramifications. The poem, in fact, comes close to blaming gay sexual liberation for the AIDS crisis, inasmuch as the gay “you” of the poem *chooses* “to dance / in the mouth of death.”

Indeed, although the poem, and therefore the volume, ends on the word “tomorrow,” the word resonates as a bleak vision of the future—akin to Macbeth’s famous lament of the word—in which life is at once tedious and telescoped to its final and futile death throes. The poet-speaker cannot help but offer the interpretation that the addressee’s prayers will go unanswered.

The ethical and personal need of the lyric voice to touch the implicitly lost or absent other and the danger of that touch—this irresolvable conflict—sits at the center of early AIDS poetry as a whole, or that which clusters around the year 1990. Early AIDS poetry desperately works to separate the ethical isolationism of the lyric voice from the abject isolationism of containment. Seasoned and sophisticated poets like Thom Gunn and Tim Dlugos, who already had established literary careers by the time the crisis emerged, seem particularly attuned to these difficult nuances. Take, for instance, two of their poems that bear a striking resemblance to one another: “The Hug,” which appears as the first poem in Gunn’s much-celebrated volume of AIDS poems *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992), and “Sleep Like Spoons,” the fifth to last poem ever written by Tim Dlugos, who died of AIDS complications in 1990. Dlugos positioned “Sleep Like Spoons” as the fifth to last poem (as well) in a volume entitled *Powerless* he had organized before his death.²¹⁶ While neither poem directly mentions AIDS, Gunn uses his poem as the opening to a volume with a title that conjures the specter of the crisis and that contains a large number of poems explicitly about it. Dlugos planned to flank his poem—written four months before his death and in between stays at the Roosevelt Hospital AIDS Ward—in his posthumous volume with highly-autobiographical poems that directly discuss the epidemic. To be sure, thematic conflicts between contact and containment exhibit themselves in most of their poems from this era.

Against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, then, both of these poems depict poet-speakers

turning toward monogamous embrace, or (put in non-utilitarian terms) the notion of ethical touch and contact between the self and other that preserves both individuals in an anti-historic and anti-sociopolitical present (an ethic the first chapter discusses at length).²¹⁷ Gunn's poem describes a specific significant other embracing the speaker from behind, waking him from his sleep. The last half of the poem reads:

It was not sex, but I could feel
The whole strength of your body set,
Or braced, to mine,
And locking me to you
As if we were still twenty-two
When our grand passion had not yet
Become familial.
My quick sleep had deleted all
Of intervening time and place.
I only knew
The stay of your secure firm dry embrace. (11.12-22)

The poet-speaker accepts the domesticated passion between the two men, indicating its necessity (how it acts as a “stay” against aging and therefore death for the two) while also yearning after the sexual passion of his youth (which corresponded with the years of the now-implicitly-lost, within the context of the poem, sexual revolution). What is left of touch during the AIDS years, the poet-speaker ambivalently concludes, is the security of the ambiguously-coded “firm dry” monogamous embrace. However, rather than ending the poem on a didactic note, encouraging others to turn toward monogamy at this time, the poem tonally suggests the speaker's reluctance to accept this necessity, even while subtly reveling in the pleasures and safety of long-term, though desexualized, affection. Similarly, after describing the sense of peace provided by the specific other's embrace in an apartment located in a chaotic city-scape, the last two stanzas of Dlugos' poem end on an ambivalent note:

No way to mute the blaring horns,
nor open hearts that don't discern

the trove of tenderness within
the tangled postures lovers learn

in sex and rest, limbs juxtaposed,
exhaustion mingled with delight.
We close our eyes and sleep like spoons
inside the silverchest of night. (ll.13-20)

Without its historical context, Dlugos' poem reads as almost naively mellifluous. But against this backdrop, the poem places the gay love expressed between its self and other in a homophobic and even thanapolitical world. The poet-speaker resigns himself to the fact that homophobia can never be conquered ("No way . . . to open hearts that don't discern") while gently entombing himself and his lover in an inanimate object-like sleep, at once death-like and whimsical. This is to say, the singsong nature of Dlugos' iambic tetrameter quatrains here, especially since they harken back to Boucheron's, in combination with this gentle entombment veers close to comparing ethical lyricism, or the necessity of touch, with casket-like epitaphic poetry.

For Gunn and Dlugos, as with Boucheron and other early AIDS poets, the ambivalence over touch's implications amidst the crisis expresses itself formally as well. While the metrical and rhyming patterns stand out in "Sleep Like Spoons," as in Boucheron's work, Gunn's "The Hug" formally represents this link between gay touch and containment in a roundabout way. Even though its line lengths and justifications seem anarchic, the poem approaches a formal regularity. All of its lines exist in near perfect iambics, with a couple possible spondaic substitutions, and with the true end rhymes of *abbcde daefefghiigjjkik*. However irregular this rhyme scheme may be, it leaves *only* one line near the center of the poem unrhymed (the *h* rhyme could also be categorized as *a1* or an off *a* rhyme). In addition, not only does the final line end with the most canonical of Anglophonic accentual syllabics (iambic pentameter), but also the *i* rhyme of "you/two/knew" interrupts the final *k* rhyme of "place/embrace" to link the question

of location with ethical touch. Put otherwise, the potentially lost and isolated speaker—as represented by the lone *h* (or, the off *a*) of the word “mine,” fittingly enough—grows contained by the hug and the poem. Moreover, by design or accident, the poem numbers twenty-two lines, the exact age Gunn’s speaker claims he feels during the embrace. The poem’s formal variations seem to struggle against a notion of metrical regularity while ultimately employing it, suggesting Gunn’s ambivalence with traditional form; its tendency to contain, however compassionately and comfortingly, the lyric speaker and specific other as well as place them in a closed-circuit akin to entombment during the AIDS crisis.

Similarly, Holland’s *A Journal of the Plague Years*, includes a series of eleven poems (pages 75 through 85) that allude to the lengths of and end rhymes of sonnets (each between 13 and 15 mostly off-rhymed lines) without fully adhering to any of their formal conventions, such as strict iambics. Holland’s AIDS (quasi)sonnets, which address an already lost other and dwell on hospital imagery,²¹⁸ equivocate on the need for containment, formal or biomedical, during the AIDS crisis. After the final quasi-sonnet, “Spring 1989,” describes poetry as “the artistry of death” (l.10), its final lines ask the already lost other, “What will fix us / here, after I turn the page?” (ll.14-15). The poet-speaker seems painfully aware of the Sonneteer’s tradition of bravely declaring the immortality of their verse while subtly communicating the necessary loss of its referents. Holland’s speaker indicates through the words “fix,” which could apply to one’s health or one’s permanence, and “here,” which could refer to the present and the space of the poem, poetry’s inability to retain the self and the other as present in the present, inasmuch as poetry becomes a relic encrypting its referents in the past. The reader will inevitably “turn the page” on the lost referents contained within. It should be added that even Monette’s poems in *Love Alone*, as I discuss in the first chapter and as seen in “Manifesto,” approximate, however hesitantly, the

visual impact, if not the mechanics and traditional implications, of blank verse; they echo the conventions of communication associated with lyric tradition, only to reject, in other words, the deathly telos of it.

Put another way, for the early AIDS poets, this return to prosody as a form of ethical containment conflicts with the notion of prosody as tradition, which turns its speakers into epitaphic, and therefore always already absent, ghosts that merely reaffirm the presence and presents of its readers. This conflict accounts for early AIDS poetry's reluctant employment of formalism. For instance, "A Sketch of the Great Dejection," which Gunn gives an entire section to in *The Man with Night Sweats*, addresses the notion of poetic tradition as being, what might be called, *pastly*. The poem conjures the pastoral romanticism of figures like Wordsworth and Whitman by describing a young poet-speaker going forth into a pastoral landscape because he had "read the promise of the hedgerow" (l.1). However, this literary "hedgerow," or manicured line of verse, quickly becomes the image of "a disintegrating gravestone" (l.19) that tempts the speaker into clinging to "fantasies of the past" (l.23).²¹⁹ Likewise, the titular beautician in Gunn's "The Beautician," the thirtieth poem in the same volume, finds "a thin satisfaction" (l.11) in the fact that she made "her poor dead friend's hair beautiful / —As if she shaped an epitaph by her action" (ll.13-14). Gunn metapoetically suggests here that poetry merely, trivially, and elegiacally aestheticizes the dead. Dlugos' AIDS poems come to a similar conclusion. In "Erosion," for example, the poet-speaker describes himself as keeping a journal of his symptoms and exhorts himself, morbidly and wryly, to "think / positive!" (l.18). The poet-speaker then concludes:

[. . .] No day
unless I'm part of it, unless
my stories of the days
I've passed through pass

like rain down mountainsides
appropriating all that glitters.
What I write's erosion
of a time (ll.27-34)

"Erosion" depicts a speaker obsessed with translating experience into poetry in the hopes of preserving his own presence, while ironically implying that poetry, in this new AIDS era, only takes away from the present, shifting elements of it to the past. Moreover, even if his memories survive via poetry, the poet-speaker laments, he will never experience that survival. Along these lines, "Hoosier Rhapsody," written a year later and addressing already deceased obscure writers and artists from the Midwest,²²⁰ declares, "Sheaves of paper blow away / like pages torn from a calendar, / their versos filled with verse" (ll.60-62). In the AIDS era, Dlugos' speaker likens writing, even writing verse, with the passing of time (the page of a poem becomes, in this paradigm, the page of a calendar²²¹) and time's deathly telos. Indeed, in a poem entitled, "It Used to Be More Fun," his speaker proclaims, after alluding to poet Frank O'Hara's untimely death, "it wasn't sloth / or lust or self-absorption / that put me where I ended up, / *I was a poet*" (ll.21-24; original *emphasis*). While slyly refuting a cultural narrative of divine retribution, the poet-speaker instead notes how poetic heritage, craft, and tradition (the idea of being a poet itself and the very act of writing poetry) deposit the speaker and the speaker's referents, because of language's socio-historicity, in the past.

As in the case of alluding to O'Hara, Dlugos further indicates that the past-ward-ness of Western poetry is linked to a tradition of gay male writers, coming close to aligning the telos of death not just with verse but with gayness during the AIDS crisis. For instance, in his AIDS poem "The Far West," Dlugos describes an almost apocalyptic image of the West. In a visionary gesture, Dlugos' speaker sees the western edge of the United State from his location in Manhattan, which he describes as the "western edge" (l.4) of "America" itself, where the

“drugged / and dying [. . .] queue up / for Hades” (ll.9-11). In this paradigm, the most western part of the cultural construction of “The West” in its main guises (the American Wild West and Greco-Roman Western Culture) amounts to nothing more than abjection and death. The poem concludes that a Stygian “gondola departs / for ‘the other side’” (ll.33-34) and that the “western edge” (l.40) is lapped by, in the poem’s final words, “the hungry waves of *Lethe*” (l.48; my emphasis). Dlugos’ odd substitution of the river Lethe for Styx here alludes to Allen Ginsberg’s famous poem, “A Supermarket in California,” which discusses the notion of a gay poetic tradition explicitly. In Ginsberg’s poem, his poet-speaker imaginatively encounters Walt Whitman cruising men in a grocery store in San Francisco; the poem ends with the same exact word and odd substitution seen in Dlugos’s “The Far West”: “Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?” (l.12). While Ginsberg alludes to Whitman’s poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” here in which he addresses “generations hence,” thereby working to weave gay poetic tradition into a trans-historic project that counteracts the properties of Lethe (which make its drinkers forget their pasts), Dlugos mourns the fact that, as brought to relief by the AIDS crisis, Western culture and gay poetic tradition leads only to loss and the double-erasure of the lost by way of poetry’s pastly nature. “O western edge,” Dlugos’ poet-speaker declares before mentioning Lethe, “where [. . .] individual / hearts and bodies disappear” (l.40-42). Tradition for Dlugos, even when gay, designates its speakers and referents as dead and—at best—ghostly.

It is for this reason that early AIDS poet’s turn, reluctantly and ambivalently, to prosody. Even though this turn historically corresponds—perhaps even interrelates—with the emergence of the New Formalist movement (as I touch on in the fourth chapter), New Formalism wished to

reunite the lyric with its traditional aesthetic tools. Early AIDS poetry, however, sought to build an aesthetic boundary around the self and other who are always at risk for slipping into the past.²²² Put otherwise, AIDS poetry's turn toward prosody can be understood as a product of ethical mourning and a need to retain the trace of the specific lost other. Only as a byproduct does this retention collapse into an image of containment, abjection, and past-ward-looking tradition. To be sure, Dlugos does not just employ regular meter in "Sleep Like Spoons"; he sets almost all of his late poems in steady yet subtle iambics.²²³ His fourth to last poem, a sonnet entitled "Ann Frank House," written directly following "Sleep Like Spoons," equates containment formally and thematically with safety as well as thanapolitical outcomes, the final couplet reading, in part, "where she tried to sleep / [. . .] I start to weep."²²⁴ Dlugos' gradual turn toward iambics and an earnest plainspoken voice in the late 1980s diverges especially with his earlier affiliations and groupings with second and third generation New York School poets who adopt the experimentation and breezy conversational cadences of the first generation.²²⁵ Gunn, who was first known as a formalist in the tradition of the metaphysical poets, turned toward free verse in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. His ambivalent, even tortured, return to formal meter and rhyme, dramatized through the irregular line lengths and rhyme scheme in "The Hug," points to Gunn's inherent discomfort and yet need for prosody during this period.

In other words, while New Formalist practitioners and theorists like Timothy Steele might justly instruct us that this turn toward prosody indicates a return to tradition for the early AIDS poets,²²⁶ this turn could be better or more fully understood as a growing need, on the part of AIDS poets, for containment—of the self and the other as well as the self's horror amidst the crisis. Most reviewers of Gunn's work from this period say as much. In his 2007 introduction to *The Man with Night Sweats*, poet August Kleinzahler's claims that Gunn's formal style in this

volume helps “contain his horror” (viii) at the loss of specific others.²²⁷ Fellow AIDS poet, Henri Cole, who later embraces a hybrid mode of formalism and free verse in his 1995 collection of AIDS poetry *The Look of Things* (as will be discussed in the fourth chapter), asserts in his 1992 review of Gunn’s volume that “metrical patterns help control elegiac emotions” (223). Only one critic has asserted that Gunn’s return to formalism intended, or had the ability, to intervene into the socio-historic present; Tyler B. Hoffman argues that *The Man with Night Sweats* attempts to reinscribe a gay or queer sensibility into our contemporary understanding of antiquity and modernize this tradition through “the revolutionary subject matter” (16) of AIDS.²²⁸ This perspective ignores the fact that AIDS was a material reality for various poet-speakers (not merely subject matter) as well as the fact that the content of Gunn’s volume and most early AIDS poetry worries over the fact that tradition designates the self and other as posthumous.²²⁹ The primary concern of *The Man with Night Sweats*, as well as most early AIDS poetry, seems to be the retention of the always already lost specific selves and others in troubling and hazardous times, not the adjustment of heteronormative understandings of antiquity. For instance, “Sacred Heart,” one of the final poems in Gunn’s AIDS volume, describes, in perfect heroic quatrains, a friend mourning the loss of his significant other. When the poet-speaker says to his friend, “Drugged you drag grief from room to room and weep, / Preserving it from closure, from a healing” (ll.27-28), he aligns the idea of the “stanza,” which etymologically means “room,” and therefore an aesthetic of containment, with an anti-elegiac or ethically melancholic project. In other words, the elegiac impulse during the AIDS crisis becomes inexorably intertwined with the conflicting cultural idea and aesthetic practice of containment.

In *The Man with Night Sweats* in particular, this intertwinement between lyric touch and an aesthetic of containment quickly collapses into a vision of death and abjection. Much of the

volume organizes around the motif of embrace, a fact Gunn alludes to in a 1992 interview when he explains his surprise at finding “an image of embracing running right the way through the book” after its publication (48).²³⁰ Explicit images of hugging appear in six of the volume’s poems, three of which are pivotal for the volume’s arc of concerns: in order of placement, “The Hug,” “Philemon and Baucis,” “The Man with Night Sweats,” “The Reassurance,” “Memory Unsettled,” and “The Missing.” “Philemon and Baucis,” the seventh poem in the volume, like “The Hug,” ostensibly describes the pleasures and comforts of monogamous touch, but indirectly associates the image of embracing with a deathly telos (even more so than “The Hug” does). The poem imagines what happens after Zeus rewards two lovers for their hospitality with the “comfort” (l.8) of becoming two trees with the same trunk, which Gunn describes as a “wooden hug” (l.2). After the lovers become trees, in Gunn’s rendition, they forget “the slow thrill of learning how to love” (l.18) and, as the last two lines of the poem read, “They have drifted into a perpetual nap, / The peace of trees that all night whisper nothings” (ll.20-21). “Nothings,” of course, suggest the notions of amorousness and oblivion at once. Not only does the poem represent embrace as akin to lifelessness, but also it intertwines this lifelessness with a structure akin to blank verse that concludes with a couplet set apart as its own stanza. Gunn additionally sets the last line in perfect iambic pentameter. This is to say, the second explicit embrace in the volume codes touch (however romantic) and an aesthetic of containment (however oriented around retention) as isolating and deathly. Likewise, Gunn suggests that lyric tradition, rooted as it is in Classical mythology, redefines the promise of literary immortality as deathly, leaving its referents at the very least without volition.

Fittingly then, the final four explicit examples of embracing in the volume, all three of which are found in the last section of the book (the section most overtly engaged with the AIDS

crisis) feature their speakers struggling with a loss of agency in the AIDS crisis. The titular poem of the volume depicts a speaker waking in the middle of the night paranoid about his sero-status. The poem, written in alternative quatrains (*abab*) and couplets (both in iambic trimeter), ends:

Stopped upright where I am
Hugging my body to me
As if to shield it from
The pains that will go through me,

As if hands were enough
To hold an avalanche off. (ll.19-24)

The lyric “I,” who starts out by explaining his sexual awakening years earlier, now speaks to no one while hugging himself in distress. The meta-poetic conceit (the “hands” that write the poem) implies the poet-speakers’ aloneness and powerlessness, a sense Gunn reinforces with the dissonant off-rhymes of “am/from” and “enough/off.” To be sure, the poet-speaker of Gunn’s “The Reassurance,” a three-quatrain poem set in iambic tetrameter as well, describes his dream about a deceased friend who returns to hug his friends. The poem undercuts this image of embrace’s comforts, by curtly concluding, “How like you to be kind, / Seeking to reassure. / And, yes, how like my mind / To make itself secure” (ll.9-12). The word “security” critiques an aesthetic of containment as self-serving and ultimately isolating. “Memory Unsettled” conversely portrays embracing as a generous gesture and yet a gesture that nevertheless leads to a deathly telos. After describing a visit to a dying friend’s hospital room, the poet-speaker describes another friend climbing in bed with the first one to comfort him: “You climbed in there beside him / And hugged him plain in view, / Though you were sick enough, / And had your own fears too” (ll.17-20). The second friend’s act of compassion as well as his implicit political statement against homophobic biases in hospitals and even, meta-discursively, literary tradition (“plain in view”) results, from the poet-speaker’s perspective, in a soon-to-be-severed closed-

circuit of grief in which the griever, the second friend, will die soon too, leaving the addressing lyric I alone in his severed circuit of mourning. In the AIDS era, then, even a poem about compassion ends by producing a cycle of diminishing presence and agency.

In the volume's third to last poem, "The Missing," Gunn produces his most disturbing and unsettling image of embracing amidst the biomedical crisis. The speaker laments:

Contact of friend led to another friend,
Supple entwinement through the living mass
Which for all that I knew might have no end,
Image of an unlimited embrace. (ll.9-12)

Gunn equates touch and embrace with the spread of the epidemic itself, suggesting that the touch between the self and the other has a potentially apocalyptic, even genocidal, outcome. In the last stanza, the poet-speaker describes himself as "[a]bandoned" (l.21) and "incomplete" (l.21) and with "no escape" (l.23).²³¹ But even though this dire depiction of embracing resonates as the most distressing in the volume, "The Hug" holds within its tonal and formal misgivings the kernels of this rapid collapse from touch to containment to genocide. It is a deathly telos that "Philemon and Baucis," ostensibly a love poem, swiftly puts forth, and the following "embrace" poems literalize. It must be added that, the rapidity of this collapse from embrace to abject isolationism and death could be attributed to Gunn's exceptional attunement amongst his peers to portraying a sense of touch and kinesthesia in his poetry—as critic Stephen Burt's excellent essay on Gunn argues.²³² Burt points out that most poets represent the notion of lyric touch through the self and other connecting via sight (think of Whitman cruising specific love interests in his "Calamus" cluster²³³ or Monette's conclusion in "Your Sightless Days" that his lost other "saw [them] through"); however, throughout Gunn's career, Burt goes on, his poetry represents this ethical gesture of touch and contact through the intimacy of bodies connecting via movement. In the context of his career then, Gunn's AIDS poetry volume struggles over what it

comes to see as the calamitous, however arbitrary or unmoralistic, outcome of his speaker's faith in touch. Titled after the poem in which Gunn's speaker first indicates that a sense of abject isolationism might have been instigated by his very "hands," *The Man with Night Sweats* fears the notion that lyric's inherent ethic of mourning might in fact precipitate a lack of subjectivity and agency for the self and accentuate the other's absence. Simply put, Gunn worries here that lyric's nature is predominately monologic rather than phenomenological.

Early AIDS poets like Gunn, Dlugos, and even Holland labor throughout their poems to find a sense of volition and agency for their speakers amidst the crisis. Dlugos and Holland in particular work against, at times, the idea that aestheticization innately or only designates its referents as ghostly. For instance, both poets occasionally point to, even rely on, an avant-garde New York School strategy of comingling genres, like poetry, visual art, and film, in order to make that which seems ephemeral cross-disciplinary and as approaching trans-historic cultural universality. For instance, Dlugos' "Radiant Child," written on the day pop visual artist Keith Haring died of AIDS-related complications, describes a photograph of a baby wearing a t-shirt featuring the artist's drawing of a small crawling child (the "radiant child" in the nomenclature Haring had created for his symbols²³⁴). Ostensibly enough the poem asserts Haring's survival via the prevalence, the everyday-ness, the banality and ephemerality of his art. This notion of the prevalence of ephemerality—or, the mixing of fine and applied arts via mechanical reproduction—transcending into a universally understood and trans-historic symbol might be said to find its immediate roots in the works of visual artists like Andy Warhol and poets like Frank O'Hara. For instance, in their famed interpretations of Marylyn Monroe on the day of her death (the colorful silkscreens of her face and the poem "The Day Lady Died," respectively),²³⁵ Monroe is framed as an ever-recycled and ever-present cultural touchstone. But Dlugos' poem

ends on an ambiguous note, in which the poet-speaker claims that Haring “would have loved to see” (l.18) the photograph of the baby in the t-shirt. The mixture of tenses (the subjunctive and the present tense) at once points to Haring’s lingering trace in the minds of the living and his irrevocable absence without agency. Dlugos’ statement subtly puts forward the unanswerable supposition of what Haring might think regarding the photograph in question.

In other words, Dlugos’ and Holland’s AIDS poems allude to this New York School tendency to elevate the culturally banal as well as declare its mission of transcending the pastward-ness of representation a failure. For instance, Holland’s poems “On the Beach” and “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” take their titles from 1950s horror cinema classics that allegorized the threat of communism as an invasion as well as a mentality that spreads like a virus. But Holland’s poems ultimately do not argue that the AIDS crisis can be averted as were the threats and hysteria surrounding communism in the United States; instead, his filmic AIDS poems point toward a bleaker outcome. The latter poem ends with the poet-speaker isolated and reflecting upon an implicitly apocalyptic eventuality, when he says, “I hardly / knew who was among the living / and who among the dead” (ll.27-29). Likewise, in the former poem, after referring to the iconic image from the titular movie of a banner dangling over an empty square in San Francisco that says, “It’s never too late,” implying that a nuclear holocaust has just taken place, the former poem ends: “I’m seeing / you die again in the hospital and I’m listening / to Paul say he’s started the pills and I’m hearing / of Grover who’ll be transfused tomorrow” (ll.25-28). While the film presents its 1950s audience with a worst case scenario in order to avert it, that scenario resonates for the poet-speaker steeped in the AIDS crisis as accurate and inexorable. His lyric speaker, in other words, only sees—through the lens of poetry—his specific others “die again.” Holland suggests, wittingly or not, that the banner “It’s never too late”

ironically communicates its opposite in the age of AIDS.

Dlugos' late AIDS poems that rely on filmic allusions also communicate a dire or deathly telos. "Parachute," which starts by describing Ingmar Bergman's famous image of a man cheating the grim reaper of his death by winning a game of chess, ends, after describing the loss of an eccentric friend who had a canary-colored parachute in a pile by his bed:

I know AIDS is no chess game
but a hunt, and there is no
way of escaping the bloody
horror of the kill, no way
to bail out, no bright
parachute beside my bed. (ll.91-96)

Like Holland's "On the Beach," "Parachute" claims that pop culture has gotten it wrong; that pop culture cannot deny loss and avert tragedy, especially during the AIDS crisis. The last poem Dlugos ever wrote, "D.O.A.," named after the 1950s film noir classic, asserts that, in fact, representation leads to death. The poem starts with a lengthy quote from the opening of the movie:

"You knew who I was
when I walked in the door.
You thought that I was dead.
Well, I am dead. A man
can walk and talk and even
breathe and still be dead." (original quotation marks; ll.1-6)

While the speaker in the film speaks to policemen, Dlugos appropriates the lines to frame the lyric speaker as always already dead. The end of the poem describes an ill poet-speaker making the most of his finite time left; after describing his plan for that particular day, he says, "Not so bad / for the dead" (ll.74-75), ending the poem (and his astounding body of work). The poet-speaker implies that the act of representation in any medium of art only codes its referents as emanations from the past. Although this seems to be the message of the movie as well, the movie

represents a hero who avenges his death before he dies. Dlugos' poem asserts that the PWA cannot avenge his death: "I'd like to have a show down too" (l.50). But he asks who the villain is: "Lust, addiction, being / in the wrong place at the wrong / time?" (ll.54-56). The poet-speaker briefly humors the divine retribution narrative, in which the "Moral Majority" blames gay sexual liberation for the crisis ("Lust, addiction"), before emphasizing with the line breaks that "being" and "time" themselves are the culprits, that life itself leads only and always to death. Dlugos implies that his AIDS poetry speaker has little to no agency in light of this inevitability, not even enough so to seek revenge against a person who might have infected him. Rather, Dlugos implies that his death is no-one's fault but the phenomenon of existence.

In other words, the effort to conceive of representation across genres does not create a sense of agency or futurity for most early AIDS poets. (For Monette, however, as I discuss in chapter one, cross-linking mediums and modes has the potential to retain his specific self and other as circulating collective objects extant in the ongoing present.) As a result, early AIDS poets frequently face the task of finding agency in a situation of existential and cultural abjection accentuated by the intersection of elegy and the lyric mode, or the precedent of melancholia over activism. Poets such as Gunn and Dlugos look for counterintuitive ways in their AIDS poems of finding agency within abjection (however impossibly), ultimately attempting in some of their more well-known works to transform abjection into a choice or preferable state of being and therefore a sense of agency. For instance, Dlugos' "Powerless" frames powerlessness as both a choice and as spiritually evolved. Written in 1989, the poet-speaker describes hitting rock-bottom with alcoholism in the early 1980s, but turns this story about coping with difficult circumstances into an allegory for living with AIDS. Near the end of the poem, the poet-speaker looks back on his former self, arguing, "I was powerless to change / the *horror* and the *shame* /

that had *infected* my whole life” (my emphasis; ll.95-97). He insists that he did not change his life, but that a spiritual visitation from an invisible entity, akin to “the Virgin Mary” (l.74), did. The speaker’s sense of horror and shame “were lifted / by the power of whatever / held my hand that night” (ll.98-100). In other words, the poet-speaker finds redemption in the idea of touch prompted by lyric isolation: “There was / no hand that I could see, but / I clung to it” (ll.69-71). In this paradigm, the existential isolationism inherent in the lyric form throughout the AIDS crisis becomes not a limitation for the speaker per se, but the horizon at which the self diminishes and the notion of the other emerges. Poetry becomes, for the poet-speaker, the act of choosing to obliterate one’s own sense of self and agency in the ethical and phenomenological pursuit of touch. Because of the poem’s centrality in his oeuvre (he had intended for “Powerless” to be the title poem of his final volume²³⁶), Dlugos’ body of work ultimately suggests there is a value to *choosing* abjection and a lack of agency. According to this counterintuitive logic, the only degree of agency an abject person or lyric voice has is to choose abjection and thereby release his or her own volition to a state of transcendental empowerment, or a state of authority and being that transcends her or his own.

But this viewpoint also taps into religious tropes that Dlugos attempts to avoid, most likely because of his own personal struggles with religion and because of these tropes’ implications for gay men living with AIDS. Before composing “Powerless,” Dlugos stopped writing poetry for a number of years to attend Yale Divinity School and become an Episcopal priest.²³⁷ In the poems he wrote upon returning to poetry, however, like “Powerless,” Dlugos often expresses a discomfort with the connotations these religious tropes summon in the AIDS era. In “Powerless,” for example, he never directly claims that he was visited by the Virgin Mary and, by the end of the poem, directly states, “This is not about religion” (l.101). Poems like

“Signs of Madness” and “Prayers, Works, Joys, and Sufferings” make the dangers of employing these tropes in AIDS poems apparent. The former poem lists signs that a PWA might suffer from AIDS-associated dementia, the first of which attributes meaning to coincidences, such as:

the fact that each
of Ronald Wilson
Reagan’s three names has
six letters, Mark of
the Apocalyptic Beast (ll.5-9)

While Dlugos might be said to critique religious fundamentalism here, because it takes symbolic language (such as the Bible) literally, he also suggests, via his reference to the Reagan era, that gay men living with AIDS cannot access religious narratives—that to do so for a gay man would mark them as mad (or at least suffering from AIDS-related dementia) or, as “Prayers, Works, Joys, and Sufferings” points out, as sinful. This latter poem, written in 1990, ends with a prayer that perhaps inadvertently agrees with the divine retribution narrative:

Dearest, I offer you my prayers, works,
joys and sufferings of this day,
for all the intentions of your sacred
heart, in reparation for all my sins,
for the good of all my friends, especially
for those most in need of mercy. (ll.56-61)

While the poem begins with an address that might be understood as a personal address to a significant other, its doctrinal discursiveness makes the poem’s ending explicitly religious, and reinforces, as a result, a vision of PWAs as sinners and in need of divine mercy. Although intimating perhaps the universal sinfulness of every individual, the poem resonates within the context of gay culture of the time as a judgment on PWAs, specifically, as sinful. It might have been this unavoidable resonance that prevented Dlugos from publishing the poem in his lifetime and including it in any manuscript. Both gestures of omission were unusual for Dlugos, especially regarding poems that were considered to have poetic merit, as poet David Trinidad’s

placement of the poem in the 2011 collected works affirms.²³⁸ In other words, Dlugos found it difficult in his verse, even as it grappled after a religious understanding of his and his friends' sufferings, to claim any sense of command, religious or otherwise, over the crisis—a difficulty that must have proved particularly troubling for a religious man like Dlugos.

One of Dlugos' final and longest poems, "G-9," named after the AIDS ward in New York's Roosevelt Hospital, widely considered his masterpiece,²³⁹ wrestles with this disconnect between the lyric "I" and a sense of control. The poem lists ways in which the speaker seeks to master his experience of dying from AIDS-complications only to represent the speaker as isolated and abject. For instance, the long poem opens with a thanapolitical portraiture of hospital life, in which "leucovorin, Zovirax, / and AZT" (ll.16-17) will not do any "good" (l.20) and a hallucinating PWA must be strapped down to a gurney, as he distressingly yells, "Nurse . . . nurse . . . / untie me, *please* . . . these / rags have strange powers" (ll.49-51). The scene of medical abjection, in which patients lose all control over their own bodies, leads Dlugos to declare, "I wanted to drop / dead" (ll.66-67). In this colloquialism, the poet-speaker at once philosophically embraces a thanapolitical telos and tonally—vehemently—rejects it. The lyric voice also notes, as others die in other rooms, that he will become a "fondly regarded / regular" (ll.243-44) one day by the nurses and will share the same eventuality of the currently dying. The biomedical establishment, rather than rejuvenating the lyric speaker, leaves him without an access point to resist his own death. But in contrast to the speaker in "Powerless," the speaker in "G-9" initially resists choosing a lack of control, or powerlessness in the face of the "strange powers" of the biomedical establishment, because this choice could, the poem implies, lead to his demise.

The collapse of biomedicine's promise of vitality and longevity also translates for the

lyric speaker into the failure of literature's promise to transmit one's trace into the future.

Dlugos' speaker frequently discusses, throughout the poem, a list he keeps of those living with HIV and those who have died from AIDS-related illnesses; he mentions that people frequently jump lists from the living to the dead and provides the example of "Cookie Mueller" (l.154), the performance artist and writer. The lyric speaker realizes that everyone on the list will eventually switch columns like Mueller and that he "may be on somebody's / list" too (ll.159-60). These lists illustrate the fact for the poet-speaker that in the AIDS era written discourse implies only a deathly telos. For the poet-speaker, literature's ephemerality only mirrors and emphasizes the ephemerality of life itself, which has been accentuated, in turn, by the AIDS crisis. After recounting a number of humorous anecdotes circulated by his dwindling circle of friends, the poet-speaker declares:

[. . .] When I pass,
who'll remember, who will care
about these joys and wonders?
I'm haunted by that more
than by the faces
of the dead and dying. (ll.207-12)

The charged word "haunted" indicates how the speaker conceptualizes the nature of literature: instead of fulfilling the responsibility of preserving the lost others' traces, it redoubles the loss of others, preserving them only enough so that they *indistinctly* haunt the present. But Dlugos also suggests that stories only exist, as fully as possible, in the minds of individuals who will eventually slip into the past. The self's unending responsibility to the lost other can never be fulfilled because of the self's finitude. For instance, the speaker says that when he learned his friend had AIDS, he urged him to "write [. . .] down" (l.316) his anecdotes, only to conclude swiftly that his friend's "mind went first" (l.317). The speaker suggests the futility of capturing experience on the page, declaring, after sharing one of his friend's stories, "there were lots /

more where that one came from, / only you can't get there anymore" (ll.345-47). Dlugos asserts that in the age of AIDS, literature's promise of immortality—its promise that it can excerpt experience and preserve it across time in a dislocated space of deixis (the "there" of the final turn of speech in the passage)—remains inaccessible at best. The speaker expresses a sense of futility, in this way, about his own endeavor to preserve memories and therefore the traces of specific others when he summarizes the extensive loss of presence and experience in the past tense and dismissiveness of the phrase "there were lots more."

It is in this context of powerlessness, a lack of control over his physical and extra-physical longevity and vitality, that the poet-speaker's revelation of religious inaccessibility emerges, only to compound his sense of abjection. As in "Powerless," "Signs of Madness," and "Prayer, Works, Joys, and Sufferings," Dlugos expresses in "G-9" a self-awareness that his longing for spiritual actualization reads as insane or inane in his sociohistoric moment. For instance, when the poet-speaker declares his desire to have "a closer personal / relationship with Christ" (ll.513-14), he adds, "which I know sounds corny / and alarming" (ll.515-16). The poet-speaker undercuts or even apologizes for his spiritual longings, acknowledging an awareness that these longings come across as ludicrous or even disturbing in the AIDS era, especially for a gay male speaker. He also represents religious aspirations as potentially damaging or deadly at this time, when he discusses a spiritual guru of his own, who died from AIDS-complications, as living in denial because of religious pretenses:

He did a lot of work
with people with AIDS
in the epidemic's early days,
but when he started losing
weight and having trouble
with a cough, he was filled
with denial. By the time
he checked into St. Luke's,

he was in dreadful shape. (ll.436-44)

Dlugos adds that a “respirator down his throat / squelched the contagious / enthusiasm of his voice” (ll.445-47). The word “contagious” in this context indicates that the biomedical establishment quieted and symbolically took away a particular PWA’s voice as well as suggests that this particular PWAs’ spiritual practices spread denial like a disease. The poet-speaker expresses a confusing mixture of reverence for the guru as well as despair over medicine’s and religion’s inefficacy at restoring vitality to gay male speakers during the AIDS crisis.

Indeed, Dlugos regularly expresses ambivalence toward religion throughout the long poem. Even though “G-9” describes communion rituals, daily intercession rituals, theologies of Calvin, experiences of Tibetan mediation, chants to Tara the Tibetan goddess of compassion, Catholic icons, Hebrew mythologies, and Buddhist philosophies of dying, the poem refuses to affirm any of the corresponding narratives of redemption and proselytize them. Near the end of the poem, after describing a friend’s Buddhist belief in “the three stages in death” (l.608), the poet-speaker says, “I’m glad / she has a road map, but I don’t / feel the need for one myself” (ll.614-16). However, the poet-speaker’s dismissive tone perhaps belies the poet-speaker’s central concern throughout the poem: his inaccessibility to religious meaning amidst the AIDS epidemic, especially that of Christianity. Halfway through the poem, the poet-speaker (perhaps wryly) announces, “Thank God I read so much / Calvin” (ll.369-70), which taught him:

[. . .] the absolute
necessity of blind obedience
to a sometimes comforting,
sometimes repellent, always
incomprehensible Source
of light and life. (ll.371-76)

In other words, throughout the poem, the poet-speaker simultaneously expresses his desire for a sense of empowerment descending from religious narratives and his suspicion that narratives

asking for “blind obedience” as a source of redemption and vitality possibly culturally abet the abjection of gay men during the AIDS crisis.

Ultimately, as in “Powerless,” Dlugos resolves these conundrums in “G-9”—as much as they can be resolved—by aligning lyric’s ethical and melancholic project of touch with religion’s motif of finding empowerment through abjection. But in order for Dlugos to avoid conjuring the homophobic and condemning conclusions of religious narratives in the AIDS era, Dlugos must, as in “Powerless,” disguise this very alignment by representing his religious motif in secular poetic terms. He must insist, in so many words, as he does in “Powerless,” that his speaker’s desire to release himself and others from the burden of agency and volition “is not about religion.” Two-thirds of the way through the poem, while speaking about his last and longest romantic relationship, the poet-speaker pleads:

Let him hold on, please
don’t let him lose his
willingness to stick with me,
to make love and to make
love work, to extend
the happiness we’ve shared.
Please don’t let AIDS
make me a monster
or a burden is my prayer. (ll.582-94)

Strikingly, the poet-speaker’s prayer manifests in secular and poetic terms as an address to no one in particular, avoiding as he does throughout the poem, directly apostrophizing God as his invisible listener.²⁴⁰ He does not ask for spiritual longevity, but rather worries over the problem of lyric touch in the material world during the AIDS era. In this passage, two-thirds of the way through the poem, the poet-speaker realizes that as a lyric speaker in the AIDS era he is not just the implicit mourner but also the future melancholic object of loss. As a result, he transitions from seeking touch beyond death (the word “extend” signifying this longing) to choosing to

release his specific other from the “burden” of tending to his presence. For Dlugos, because of his lack of agency, in medical, literary, and spiritual terms, in the age of AIDS, the lyric I only has one achievable act of volition and that is to use the lyric mode to insist on his own erasure as an ethical gift to the specific others and readers of the ongoing present.

This construction of lyric as what could be called “secular prayer” also closes the long and masterful poem. Once more speaking in isolation, not directly addressing his significant other or God, the poet-speaker prays:

I hope that death will lift me
by the hair like an angel
in a Hebrew myth, snatch me with
the strength of sleep’s embrace,
and gently set me down
where I’m supposed to be,
in just the right place. (ll.630-36)

Dlugos’ lyric prayer hopes that there might be an afterlife, but the poet-speaker uses religion as a metaphor (“*like an angel*”) and discusses the idea of an afterlife in a secular register (“the right place”).²⁴¹ Furthermore, the only degree of touch the poet-speaker asks for is from abstractions, that “death” will “lift” him and that “sleep” will “embrace” him.²⁴² In this way, the poet-speaker maintains his abject isolationism, inasmuch as he does not place the ethical burden of touching his trace on a specific other, and chooses instead to relinquish agency, inasmuch as he places his hope in undefined forces to guide him to a space of comfort beyond his comprehension and control as a gay male lyric speaker dying from AIDS-complications. In other words, the close of Dlugos’ most enduring poem, the one he was seemingly most proud of,²⁴³ cements this interpretation by harkening back to the end of “Powerless,” the poem written immediately prior to the composition of “G-9,” with the choice of the word “lift”; this is to say, the only way Dlugos resolves the abject isolationism of his quarantined and dying speaker is through the

counterintuitive solution of choosing the fate, as if in anticipation, of the fate that chooses him. He elevates this last vestige of agency for the abject speaker to an ethical choice, in which his already lost voice as a lyric speaker uses its ghostly and tentative presence to release others from the ethical and impossible obligation of retaining his presence. To be sure, when Dlugos writes, three-quarters of the way through “G-9,” that there “may come a time when / I’m unable to respond with words, / or works, or gratitude to AIDS” (ll.529-31), he seems to be implying, through the larger context of the poem and his AIDS poetry, that this fate as an AIDS poetry speaker frightens him but that it should not inhibit others from finding their own sense of comfort and resisting placing him at the center of their ethical pursuits.

Gunn echoes this desire to alleviate the ethical melancholia of the ongoing present by thinking of death in his AIDS poetry as a superior state to that of life because it annuls the existential isolationism and abject suffering produced by the individual body and lyric (or melancholic or Cartesian) consciousness. Dlugos toys with the notion that death might be a preferable state to life when he says that death might put him in the “right place,” but Dlugos also suggests in this instance that death might be just as isolating as life, inasmuch as he will remain an object separated from its context, its place. Gunn, on the other hand, frequently contends throughout his AIDS poetry that life itself might in fact create a painful sense of isolationism, which the lyric mode mirrors and laments, and that, in fact, death might release the self from this individuation. In other words, Gunn works to flip the hierarchic valuing of life over death in a time when death seems an ever-present and horrific eventuality. (Put otherwise, although Gunn might have been a staunch atheist who did not believe in afterlife, he also paradoxically, though logically, suggests in his AIDS poetry that to claim that life is a preferable state over that of death lacks just as much evidence as a belief in an afterlife.²⁴⁴) Gunn’s much

admired poem “Lament,”²⁴⁵ which describes in detail the death of his good friend,²⁴⁶ for instance, curiously inverts the typical evaluative connotations of the two states in its conclusion. The poem frequently asserts the fact that the AIDS epidemic and the biomedical establishment, not death itself, strip the poet-speaker’s dying friend of agency: near the beginning of the poem, the speaker says that the hospital staff forcibly “conveyed” (l.27) him from the world of bodily pleasures; near the middle of the poem, the speaker depicts the friend’s intubation as taking away his voice (as does Dlugos in “G-9”) and claims that “drugs [. . .] failed” (l.70) to save his friend’s life; near the end of the poem, the poet-speaker describes his friend’s blood as being “hospitable” (l.111) to the virus, “betraying” (l.112) his body all together. The resonance of the word “hospitable” in this latter example with the setting of the poem in a hospital suggests that hospitals work in tandem with HIV to fulfill a deathly telos.²⁴⁷

However, no matter how fearful or debilitating the speaker indicates the process of dying to be, the poem surprisingly concludes that the state of death might in fact be preferable to that of life because the painful process of dying no longer troubles the dead. The speaker says:

Outdoors next day, I was dizzy from a sense
Of being ejected with some violence
From vigil in a white and distant spot
Where I was numb, into this garden plot
Too warm, too close, and not enough like pain.
I was delivered into time again. (ll.97-102)

At first glance, the word “delivered” might express a positive connotation. However, the passage’s general gist asserts that the most painful aspect of his friend’s death is the poet-speaker’s realization that he, the poet-speaker, must reemerge from the scene of death into the scene of life.²⁴⁸ The phrase “garden plot” at once signifies the originary story of Western civilization that leads to a deathly telos and the scene of the grave as well as the “plotting” or narrativity of life tending toward death. The poet-speaker suggests that original sin at once

creates life and the process of dying, our punishment, in religious terms, for living. In this schema, the poet-speaker accepts the religious premise that life is a process of dying while carefully excluding the “moralistic” notion that gay men are particularly sinful and deserving of retribution. Ultimately, the speaker seems to lament, as the title of the poem points to, the troubling existential state of time that always already anticipates its demise (even as it provides and takes away pleasure) as much as he laments the passing of his friend. The couplet that comes directly before this pivotal passage indicates as much: “And so you slept, and died, your skin gone grey, / Achieving your completeness, in a way” (ll.95-96). Even though the speaker leaves doubt open about the value of life and death respectively, he also suggests that dying, though terrible in and of itself, *completes* the foretold arc of life and therefore implicitly carries with it a comfort akin to sleep, recalling the containment aesthetic first introduced by Gunn in “The Hug.” Not only is the poem written in the most contained of Western forms, the heroic couplet, but also the poem itself fulfills this need for completion that contains the pain of dying promised by life. Indeed, the first line of the poem calls dying a “difficult enterprise” and the final line reads, “This difficult, tedious, painful enterprise” (l.214). Through such a bookend (the end rhymes of its first and last couplets echoing and mirroring each other), “Lament” works to contain the horrors of dying, suggesting that his friend, a proxy for the abject and isolated lyric speaker, escapes these horrors and his abjection by completing the business of dying and crossing over into the state of death.

To be sure, one of the final poems in *The Man with Night Sweats*, “Death’s Door,” takes this logic one step further by imagining an afterlife for the dead in which they break free from their isolating individuation. The poem describes Gunn’s dead friends as at first watching their living friends by way of a television set, still absorbed and invested in the dramas of the living.

His four dead friends, “though they never met” (l.9), “sit side by side” (l.10) with their “[a]rms round each other’s shoulders loosely” (ll.13). But eventually, Gunn imagines that the “habit of companionship / Lapses” (ll.29-30) and the television screen turns to snowy static. Then the “[s]now blows out toward them” (l.37) and they “find themselves with all the dead” (l.40) though they do not “recognize each other” (l.44). It is through this process that the dead, Gunn envisions in the poem’s final lines, are “weaned / From memory” by which they were “briefly barracked in” (ll.47-8). In other words, in at once religious and secular veins, the atheistic poet-speaker asserts that the individuation of consciousness isolates the living and becomes a habit that death, once being achieved, breaks—painful though this lack of consciousness might seem to the living (including perhaps the poet-speaker). The poem certainly remains tonally ambivalent and yet the poet-speaker strives after an understanding of death as a return to unconsciousness and unindividuation that one cannot achieve while embodied because while embodied touching (“Arms round each other’s shoulder loosely”) only approximates, never actualizes, a lack of isolation.

In this way, the poem’s central conceit anticipates one of Mutlu Konuk Blasing main arguments in her study *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (2006), a study I discuss in this dissertation’s first chapter. Blasing contends that poet-speakers seek to return to a primordial unindividuated state before language acquisition by placing emphasis on the sounds, rather than meanings, of words; Gunn similarly argues in “Death’s Door” that lyric can work to resolve the existential abject isolationism it depicts by imagining life, and its trappings, as containment and imagining death as a return to a liberating primordial unindividuation. Of course, the hierarchic inversion of life and death for Gunn is at best provisional. Without full access to religious narratives, Gunn can only imagine that death abolishes the pain and suffering of

individualized embodiment because it abolishes consciousness and therefore existence. However bleak it might sound (because it is), for both Dlugos and Gunn, a sense of agency can only be regained by the abject lyric speaker in AIDS poetry, indicative of the lyric “I” by and large, by reframing abjection as a state that releases the dying and the dead from the ethical task of touch. Dlugos and Gunn use their speaker’s abject isolationism to suggest that the severed closed-circuit of address places an unbearable ethical task of retaining the lost other’s trace on the self while simultaneously, and mercifully, releasing the lost other from this burden. They both imply, therefore, that the other’s release from the ethical task of touch should release the living from that melancholic task as well. This is to say, Dlugos and Gunn do not embrace death as much as they seek to alleviate, generously so, the unending ethical burden of the ongoing present to rescue and revitalize the dead. Dlugos tacitly asks his reader to release his lost otherness and Gunn implicitly works to release his reader from the imperatives of the dead, by releasing, however imaginatively, the dead from the narratives and imperatives of the living.

However, this goal of escaping the ethical conundrum of lyric touch by way of, counterintuitively, turning toward a containment aesthetic that completely isolates the dying self or other—and thereby more fully severs the circuit of touch—remains possible, at least to a modest degree, for speakers like those of Dlugos and Gunn’s poems because of a trace amount of agency provided them by the cultural currency, however marginal, of their lyric I. Put otherwise, Gunn and Dlugos are only able to release readers from lyric’s ethical binds because they speak, however abjectly, with authority granted by their success as poets and their cultural positionalities as white and male. While Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich have famously pointed out the links between poetic tradition, authority, and maleness, critics like Hank Lazer have pointed out the implicit links between the earnest lyric I, or self, and whiteness.²⁴⁹ Both Gunn

and Dlugos' AIDS poems can be taxonomized as belonging to what Hank Lazer terms, in his pivotal work *Opposing Poetries* (1996), a post-Vietnam, "official verse culture" that favors an earnest plain-spoken voice. To be sure, critics frequently point out the constructed-ness of Gunn's lyric personas and Dlugos' sense of chatty irony throughout their careers²⁵⁰; but it is important to note that their AIDS poetry often turns away from, in Gunn's case, dramatic personas by explicitly clarifying in his volume's endnotes that many of the poems are memorials written in the midst of great loss about specific friends²⁵¹ and, in Dlugos' case, the breezy casualness and stylized sociability of the New York school. Dlugos' AIDS poems opt for, instead, a tone of somber lament and an increasing adherence, as already mentioned, to meter and rhyme. This is to say, the turn toward a containment aesthetic for these two poets can also be read as a turn toward—if not the past-ward-ness of poetic tradition, then—the authority of the implicitly white male lyric I (specifically, his ability to retain or release what he views as alterity).

To be sure, their AIDS poems frequently allude to racial others (from their perspectives) in a way that wittingly or unwittingly aligns their speakers with an ethnic whiteness and its cultural authority. For Gunn, this tendency seems overt, if not, perhaps, unexamined from his perspective. While most of his pre-AIDS poems find their occasion in anthropomorphizing the radically other (think of the well-known "Considering a Snail" where the speaker asks, "What is a snail's fury?" [l.11]), the third section of *The Man with Night Sweats* brings up a sense of otherness, embodied by animals and plants, only to redefine the poet-speaker as owning an Adamic authority and humanness in contradistinction with them.²⁵² For example, the section's first poem, "Patch Work" describes a mocking bird's "inhuman joy" (l.29) thereby rejecting, at least to some degree, the analog, historically sanctioned throughout poetic tradition, between the

lyric speaker and birds.²⁵³ Problematically, inasmuch as comparing human beings to animals, especially in a racialized paradigm, has been seen as dehumanizing (though later AIDS poets work to dismantle the negative connotation of dehumanization, or deconstruct the boundary between human and animal alterity, as I discuss in my fourth chapter), Gunn goes on to equate indirectly, if not unwittingly, the radical otherness of animals with a racialized “blackness.” The third section, which mostly focuses on animal alterity, ends with a number of poems that reject comparisons briefly made between the lyric self and the culturally abject and racialized other²⁵⁴; for instance, in “Cafeteria in Boston,” the poet-speaker describes a homeless man going from table to table eating leftovers as a “black scavenger” (l.35) with a face like a “black skull with a slaty shine” (l.19). Instead of evoking sympathy or even empathy from Gunn’s speaker, the “black” man inspires “revulsion” (l.28). Although Gunn’s AIDS poems raise the question of sympathizing with the culturally abject figuration of blackness, each poem in *The Man with Night Sweats* almost without exception uses the comparison ultimately to frame the poet-speaker as, at the very least, less abject and more human than that otherness.

Dlugos’ AIDS poems seem less invested than Gunn’s, however, in defining the racialized other as abject; but they nevertheless employ these tropes to gain a degree of agency for their lyric speakers. For instance, one of Dlugos’s last poems, “Swede,” connects—however humorously—phallogocentrism with Euro-centrism, by saying in its opening that one of Dlugos’ friends calls his penis “The Swede” (l.2). The poem describes at length a female Swedish acquaintance who also “had a black producer boyfriend” (l.25), later adding, “I imagine them, she so blonde, / he so black” (ll.51-52). Her boyfriend’s blackness becomes a way to define her whiteness and therefore make her identifiable, despite being female and foreign; although Dlugos works to expand white American subjectivity here to include non-American

women, he does so at the cost of abjecting the “black” other. Additionally, in another late poem, “Etiquette in 1969,” while discussing the counter-cultural movement, Dlugos writes that “‘Nigger- / lipping’ was a no-no, / [. . .] it meant to leave / the refer soggy” (ll.10-13). While Dlugos’ glossing here both defines the term and points to the term’s disturbing racism and tastelessness, the poet-speaker, nonetheless, can only imagine blackness as a mysterious force external to his own subjectivity. At the end of the poem, Dlugos writes that he learned the expression, “two years before [he] softly / kissed a black man’s lips, / a black dancer’s gentle lips, / for the first time” (ll.20-23), grouping, however tenderly, however beautifully, all black men together as exotic and unremittingly other.²⁵⁵ Indeed, despite his sense of self-critical irony, Dlugos frequently defines his lyric voice as white and male. Even in “G-9,” when the poet-speaker worries over the way hospitals remove agency from PWAs rather than restoring their vitality, he describes a “black guy on a respirator / next door who bought the farm” (ll.216-17). Because this is Dlugos’ entire elegy for the man, “G-9” associates the utter abjection of death brought about by the hospital with the cultural abjection of “blackness.” In other words, both Gunn and Dlugos depend to some degree on finding a sense of agency for their AIDS speakers in their maleness and, even more so, in their whiteness.

To be sure, because of the additional cultural abjection produced by these racial logics, some early AIDS poets of color, such as Timothy Liu, for instance, could be said to find almost no egress from the abject isolationism of the AIDS crisis. While Gunn and Dlugos wield their residual agency, linked to their cultural privileges, to suggest that their lyric speakers can *choose* their own erasure and permit their readers to turn away from their unending responsibilities to the dead made necessary by the generic concerns of the lyric mode, Liu’s speaker in his first book of poems *Vox Angelica* (1992) collapses into a sense of abject isolationism. In the volume’s

foreword, Richard Howard (an associate of Monette's and a poet often identified with dramatic monologue, as the first chapter discusses) depicts Liu as "a young Asian of conflicted (Mormon) faith" (x) and the volume as possessing a "demonic insistence upon abjection" (x).²⁵⁶ Indeed, the poems themselves regularly despair over their ability to find meaning (whether literary or religious) and, therefore, any sense of control or agency amidst the AIDS crisis. For example, the volume's title poem, which translates to "Angelic Voices,"²⁵⁷ despairs over the ability of religion and art to provide meaning; the poet-speaker announces, "The hour of the Bible is dead" (l.28) and laments, "The words I speak I cannot revise [. . .] All art is an afterthought" (l.53-54). Liu at once points to a belatedness and a feeling of being out of step with time that disallows him to affect even his own life. Although Liu can revise his own written words, he suggests that literature exists outside of time, not in a way that preserves presence, but in a way that disconnects the self from the ongoing present.²⁵⁸ The present remains out of reach for the poet, making him untimely and without any sense of control. To be sure, near the end of the poem, the poet links this sensibility to the medical crisis, exclaiming, "and me almost late / to my next appointment where more of me / must get cut out" (ll.57-59). Not only is the poet-speaker out of step with time, but the biomedical establishment seems to possess control over his body. He implies that this establishment generally takes from, rather than contributes to, his vitality. The last lines of the poem insist on the deathly telos implicit in this state of abjection: "everything in the end is made / equal by the wind" (l.69-70). The elemental diction here lacks the flourishes and sentimentalism necessary to elevate the death into pastoral and romantic notions of the lost returning to an immortalizing (even democratizing) nature. Instead, Liu tonally presents a secular, literary, and scientific understanding of oblivion as an absolute telos made palpable by the biomedical crisis.

Liu also connects this state of abjection to the gay community and the deathliness of their need to touch. For instance, the sparse poem, “Sodom and Gomorrah,” near the volume’s end, declares, “swan song in our throats / a falling cloud of ash” (ll.7-8), after referring to “The men I cannot touch” (l.3). These men are either dead or dangerous to touch; or, perhaps Liu refers to the lyric voice’s existential and melancholic isolation. To be sure, the poem’s title associates the lyric speaker’s abject isolationism, a product of a self-imposed quarantined state, with the divine retribution, or plague, narrative. Similarly, another late poem in the volume, “911” portrays the speaker engaging in phone sex in order to avoid the risks of touching amidst the crisis. The poet-speaker suggests, by way of the phone call, that lyric only allows the self to touch another figuratively at best. Most bleakly perhaps, the volume’s penultimate poem, “The Quilt,” portrays the gay community’s response to the crisis as only mapping its deathly telos, rather than arresting its progress:

Together, we begin to see
the future’s design,

each a square bleeding
into the next, our voices

a fallen choir. Each day
the quilt spreads out

more rapidly. (ll.8-12)

The passage begins with the optimistic thought of futurity through unity but then flips its meanings, across its fragmenting and disorienting line breaks, to emphasize the deathliness of both the crisis and the gay community’s representation of it. Even the staggered justifications of the lines mirror this theme of progress versus regression, meaning versus meaninglessness. The future, in this schematic, translates into an exponentially growing map of abjection and death.

Unlike Dlugos and Gunn, however, Liu does not find, or perhaps does not even desire, an

egress from this sense of abjection, suggesting that his lyric “I” only exists enough to demonstrate its utter lack of agency. Two poems that come halfway through the volume, “Mama” and “Canker,” depict the poet-speaker as caught in psychoanalytic and cultural dramas beyond his control. For instance, in “Mama,” without every coming to a sense of resolution, the poet-speaker asks himself, “If I had known this burden on my tongue, / would I have refused the first syllable / she taught me in the garden? *Ma. Ma.*” (ll.1-3). Referring to the psychoanalytic notion—articulated by scholars like Blasing—that poet-speakers seeks to return to an a-historic state before the self (the poet-as-child) differentiates from the other (the mother-as-other) through returning to the sounds of words before they *mean* and transform the “I” into a socio-historic subject, the poet-speaker fittingly locates himself in “Franz Hall” [l.32], the psychological studies building at UCLA. The poem also alludes to the Dada movement (“*Ma. Ma.*”), which sought to return on a collective level to a state of innocence before the two World Wars. But the poet-speaker implies that he had no control over his differentiation—that his individuation was forced on him by his mother through language acquisition. The poet-speaker indicates that he cannot return to a state of innocence (represented by the primal scene of the garden in Western culture) and that perhaps he would not want to if he could. In this way, he implies that the lyric project of breaking through its isolationism remains impossible and that in the age of AIDS religious narratives that promise to return us to this state of undifferentiation and innocence remain inaccessible or unbeneficial to the gay speaker. Indeed, “Canker” reinforces and bolsters these implicit assertions. After hinting that his mother might have molested him (if not literally, than at least figuratively), the poet-speaker says, “I wanted her in the earth, her body contained” (l.58). Liu indexes touch and unindividuation as being akin to molestation and insists, therefore, that the compartmentalization of ontologies or individuals is ethically necessary. The

poem concludes, “Mother, nothing heels as long as I stay alive” (l.69). For Liu, the abject isolationism of the lyric speaker only, finally, and perhaps preferably reduces to his unredeeming absence—not into alluring undifferentiation or ethical self-sacrifice. He asserts that the self’s erasure (and therefore the erasure of the self’s attending traumas) is the very essence, inescapably so, of abjection. In other words, unlike other early AIDS poets who do not fully recognize the way in which the lyric mode mirrors inimical cultural narratives of containment, and unlike Gunn and Dlugos who use their remaining cultural agency to frame abjection in ethical terms, Liu suggests that the lyric I only dwells or wallows in, or re-inscribes, its own abject isolationism and deathly telos.

As my third chapter argues, other AIDS poets of color, such as Assotto Saint and Essex Hemphill, actively work within their poetry as well as paratextually to escape a sense of abject isolationism magnified by the racial logics associated with the lyric voice. Although Liu’s AIDS poems never directly, or even indirectly, state that the added burden of cultural marginalization makes it necessary to rethink the abject isolationism of the gay male lyric speaker in the AIDS era, their speakers entrenched isolation and abjection seem redoubled by a salience of cultural marginalization hinted at throughout (in terms of sexuality, race, and religious affiliation). Early African-American AIDS poets, however, prompted in large part by the traditional, if assumptive, coupling of the lyric mode with white privilege, attempt to destabilize the notion of the isolated, abject, or individuated lyric self altogether. As the next chapter discusses, they do so through genre-blending and collaborative practices with the purposes of escaping the ethical isolationism and resulting deathly telos the coherent and ostensibly authentic lyric “I” necessitates, especially for the black gay speaker in the age of AIDS. Because most early AIDS poets in “official verse culture” ignore or benefit from these racially charged assumptions, they either, in the case of

Becker, Boucheron, and Lassel (as well as Lynch and Holland to some degree),²⁵⁹ lament the collapse of ethical touch into abject isolationism or, in the case of poets like Gunn and Dlugos, employ their last traces of agency to reframe the resulting abjection of touch's correspondence with containment as an ethical release for the living from the dead and the dead from the living. To be sure, Gunn and Dlugos do not attempt to circumvent or dismantle lyric's ethical impasse (between mourning and activism) accentuated by the mirroring of lyric's fundamental ethical and anti-elegiac project with inimical cultural calls to quarantine. Rather, caught in that impasse because of their work within "official verse culture" (and its associations with a post-Vietnam, earnest, plainspoken, and implicitly-white lyric voice), Gunn and Dlugos rededicate themselves, however impossibly and paradoxically, to the lyric and melancholic ethos by harnessing the remnant authority of the lyric voice to insist on the necessity of touch between the self and other while simultaneously permitting the reader (the extant self in the ongoing present) to let the lost other (or the lyric self as read in the ongoing present) go.

Chapter Three: Black Gay AIDS Poetry and the Lyric Self

In her article “Memory, Community, Voice” (1994), which she nearly titled “Black Poetry in the Age of AIDS,”²⁶⁰ poet Elizabeth Alexander asserts that the poetry of black gay²⁶¹ men came “into collective voice and visibility concurrent with the community’s annihilation” (408). “We will not have an opportunity to read it,” she asserts, “because the people who would write it are dead and dying” (410). She notes that the groundbreaking anthologies *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986), edited by Joseph Beam, and *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991), edited (after Beam died from AIDS-related complications) by Essex Hemphill, “tell the bluntest truth of the progress of the disease through the black gay creative community” and that their contributor notes “list more and more who have died or who identify themselves as ‘living with AIDS’ or ‘seropositive’” (410). She asserts that “many of these writers who would have gone on to leave collections of their own poetry in libraries will simply not live to do that work” (410). Alexander elegizes these men in her poetry volumes—in *Body of Life* (1997) and *American Sublime* (2005) in particular. Her sonnet-like “When,” from the latter volume, for instance, mourns an entire generation of black gay men: “In the early 1980s, the black men / were divine, spoke French, had read everything [. . .] then all the men’s faces were spotted” (ll.1-14). Because of her close friendship with Melvin Dixon, a scholar, novelist, and poet, Alexander attempted to rectify the lack of individual volumes of black gay poetry by editing and posthumously publishing Dixon’s collection of AIDS poetry, *Love’s Instruments* (1995). But even in that volume’s introduction, she reiterates her worry that “When literary historians try to write the story of gay black poetry in the late twentieth century, it will be a

history swathed in absence” (5). Since much of the poetry she mentions and alludes to focuses on the multiple intersections of race, sexuality, gender, and the AIDS epidemic, she could easily have said that the history of black gay poetry (the poetry of black gay men from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s) will be and is a history swathed in the AIDS epidemic itself.

Unfortunately, her fears seem to have been founded, at least in one significant regard. Only two individual volumes of what might be called black gay AIDS poetry appear in this early period: Assotto Saint’s short, almost chapbook-length, *Stations* (1989), and Essex Hemphill’s genre-blending *Ceremonies* (1992).²⁶² However, operating out of an official verse culture that preeminently values the idea of the individual genius, Alexander overlooks what else the lack of these singular volumes suggests. This lack not only indicates untimely deaths in a community of writers as they came into being and the recurrent inaccessibility they faced in mainstream routes of publishing, but also points to a critical choice these writers made to question the parameters of the lyric self and verse culture. In other words, Alexander mourns the loss of traditional poetry volumes that might have been in this milieu, rather than discussing what is extant and what appears to be a trend in this period of black gay poets cross-pollinating their works with one another’s as well as with other genres and mediums. Not acknowledging this trend, but indirectly indicating it, Alexander remarks that “The prose about AIDS is not ‘better’ but is, to generalize, more compelling, as though the compression of poetic form cannot contain the enormity of what the writers are facing” (411). She continues:

Some of the most memorable work by black gay men [. . .] is taking place in performance: Rigg’s “Tongues Untied,” Bill T. Jones dances, Assotto Saint’s performance poetry, Pomo Afro Homo’s “Fierce Love.” Ironically enough, Riggs works with poetry, but his staging and filming it makes it bigger, louder, wider than the same poems might have been on the page. And so much of this performed work is insistent: insistently refusing to let go of sex, insisting, despite the myriad voices sounding, on collectivity, community, memory. (411)

Especially telling is the word “despite” near the end of this passage because the phrasing would make more sense if it read that “[because] of the myriad voices sounding” these performed and collaborative pieces insist on “collectivity, community, memory.”

This is to say, for the poets that Alexander alludes to, locating lyric in “myriad voices sounding” is the main point. Indeed, many of these early collaborative pieces—which also includes the anthology of black gay poetry *Tongues Untied*²⁶³ (1987) and Isaac Julien’s avant-garde feature film *Looking for Langston* (1987)—respond to the problems of the lyric self (or the notion of the self as monologic speaker) in the age of AIDS. Early black gay AIDS poetry (circa 1986 to 1992²⁶⁴) views the lyric voice as inextricably tied to the abject isolationism of the AIDS crisis as well as the trace remainder of the white privileging that abjects black gay speakers ineradicably. By foregrounding a sense of “myriad voices sounding” from the black gay community, these early black gay AIDS poets work to decouple their lyric poems from what they see as the culturally and generically compounded abjection of the lyric I. Mixing poetry with other genres through the performance arts and anthologizing become essential tools of this pursuit to bring the (black) lyric self out of an abject isolated state. What is more, because of its historical vantage, “Memory, Community, Voice” does not anticipate what follows these collaborative pieces: the individual contributions of black gay poets Reginald Shepherd (who was seropositive) and Carl Phillips. Without focusing on the AIDS crisis, though frequently, sometimes explicitly, alluding to it, both of these poets, who are the main representatives of what I call “later black gay AIDS poetry” (circa mid-1990s),²⁶⁵ predominately engage with questions about the philosophical, or phenomenological, value of lyric voice in the age of AIDS. While the appearance of their volumes might support Alexander’s implicit argument that the presence of individual black gay voices in official verse culture signals a larger sociopolitical presence,

Shepherd and Phillips promote the notion of the lyric self, or mode, not because of its social currency but because of its centrality to an ethics of mourning.

In other words, almost all black gay AIDS poetry, early and later, seeks to dissolve the socio-historic ties binding the lyric “I” to ethnic whiteness and abject isolationism. But two distinct schools of thought at the height of the AIDS crisis develop as to how and why to do so. Early black gay AIDS poetry attempts to eschew the melancholia and resulting abjection of lyric voice by emphasizing poetry’s ability to speak with other voices and other genres in the present. As in the example of the title *Tongues Untied*, which refers to both the earlier poetry volume and the later experimental multi-genre documentary by Riggs as well as suggests the notion of individual voices speaking out collectively, much of early black gay poetry explicitly shares titles and governing concepts with black gay cultural productions in other genres, thereby reinforcing a sense of community and collectivity.²⁶⁶ Later black gay AIDS poets, however, fixate on the ethical obligations of the lyric self. They see the essential melancholia of lyric voice (that is, the way the lyric speaker attempts to make the self and other cohere into cogent knowable objects dislocated from the past-ward telos of language, literature, and time through address) as a liberating proposition, inasmuch as it postures the self and other—individually and universally—as *process* rather than predictable and classifiable facts. In other words, early black gay AIDS poetry minimizes the import of the lyric self to promote a reorganized structuralist identity politics in which black gay speakers collectively gain a sense of agency, while later black gay AIDS poets highlight the instability of the lyric self and other to reimagine socially reified relationships between the self, other, and community as open-ended and ongoing. For the former, what they see as the inherently biased and isolated lyric self must be repurposed to uphold (black gay) communal ends; for the latter, the lyric self is not inherently flawed but

functions, in fact, as the very key—however circuitously—to rescuing selves and others from the deleterious effects of cultural definitions.

Put yet another way, both perspectives, however radically different from one another, primarily and fundamentally invest in rescuing a sense of the (black gay) self or selves from not only a lack of agency, but also the past-ward draw of time and representation. The early group of poets works to make a “collective intentional object” out of an entire community through communal and intertextual practices. While Paul Monette—as I explain in the first chapter—sought to exempt himself and his specific other, Roger Horwitz, from collective time by using technologies of communication and representation to make the two a circulating object of attention, or a “shared hallucination,” in the ongoing present, early black gay AIDS poets employ postmodern methods of collage, genre-blending, poly-vocality, performance, multi-media, and intertextuality to exempt an entire community, the emerging black gay community, from historicity and abjection amidst the biomedical crisis. Later black gay AIDS poets focus on a different though related task—that of projecting the present into the future by ordering the multivalences of the self, the other, and community through a fractured and melancholic lyric voice always approaching, but never quite reaching, wholeness.²⁶⁷ Shepherd writes in 2007, the year before he died, “Poetry rescues nothing and no one, but it embodies that helpless, necessary will to rescue, which is a kind of love, my love for the world and the things and people in the world.”²⁶⁸ It is poetry’s non-utility, its melancholia and failure to preserve, its act of unremitting “love,” Shepherd suggests throughout his career, that ethically reminds us that the past was once present, so too were the *passed*. As will be discussed, later black gay AIDS poets argue that this relentless reminder provides (lyric) poetry’s only avenue—unfeasible though it is—for rescuing the self and other from the past-ward draws of time, representation, and social definition.

This is not to say, however, that early black gay poets were naively unaware of the difficulty or even impossibility of literally rescuing an entire community from the AIDS crisis through lyric address. Instead, these earlier poets recognized a tradeoff rather than an impasse between an ethics of melancholia and an ethics of activism as well as, correspondingly, between lyric voice and political pertinence (as expressed through elegiac and oratory means). While other early (mostly white) AIDS poets, such as Monette, Gunn, and Dlugos, insist that the lyric speaker's unending obligation to the lost other predates, precludes, and yet paradoxically necessitates the speaker's engagement with the conditions of the ongoing present, early black gay AIDS poets insist that to view these two regimes of ethics as mutually exclusive is a luxury built on racial privilege. For instance, poems like Hemphill's "For My Own Protection" (which I parse more fully shortly) walk a fine line between the concerns of lyric voice and political peroration in order to draw attention to the disastrous confluence of the AIDS crisis and the abjection of black men. "I want to start / an organization / to save my life" (ll.1-3), the poem begins. "If [. . .] Chrysler, and Nixon / can be saved," the speaker declares, "the lives of Black men [. . .] can be saved" (ll.4-12). As I discuss in the end of chapter two and throughout this chapter, the isolation and abjection of contemporaneous, white, official verse culture speakers could be withstood—early black gay AIDS poets frequently suggest—because of the implicit sociopolitical privilege (the implicit associations with financial stability and authority, Chrysler and Nixon) coupled with their lyric voices. For this reason, early black gay AIDS poets frequently work to balance grief and action by highlighting the ability of lyric to address not only lacunae (the absence of specific others or—proleptically—that of the self), but also, in both literary and utilitarian senses, community and audience. They accentuate this ability by implicitly alluding, through oratory rhetoric, to the choral and public origins of lyric²⁶⁹ as well as by

featuring the lyric mode of address between one self and one other in multi-genre and performance-oriented settings. Nevertheless aware of literature's past-ward draw, early black gay AIDS poets often chose to sacrifice the lyric self and specific other to the sequential nature, the ongoing-ness, of time in an ethical attempt to cohere those facing similar circumstances in the present into a community with a collective sense of agency.

For example, Hemphill's poem "When My Brother Fell," dedicated to Joseph Beam and published in *Ceremonies* and *Brother to Brother* (both compiled and edited by Hemphill), attempts to maneuver these complex and often contradictory imperatives. "When My Brother Fell" jostles back and forth—though not altogether undecidably—between mourning the loss of a specific other and placing that loss in a larger socio-historic context as well as between speaking from a ghostly position and a position of presence. The poem, as a result, deploys a substrata ethic of melancholia while insisting, ultimately, on an ethics of activism—or, put otherwise, the poem simultaneously invokes the anti-elegiac purpose of preserving the trace of the lost other through direct address and commits to the elegiac purpose of transforming loss into a sense of meaning for those living in the present. To be sure, the poem's opening statement, which the speaker also returns to in the poem's last stanza, is at once written in the past tense and militant or activist-oriented: "When my brother fell / I picked up his weapons" (ll.1-2). Straddling ethics in a similar fashion toward the middle of the poem, the speaker says to his lost other, "I stand / on the front lines now" (ll.56-57), locating his actions in the present and thereby tentatively releasing his specific other to the past. Indeed, the poem recurrently fluctuates between addressing the lost object of Beam himself and professing a sense of solidarity with an implicitly black gay and present audience, as when Hemphill writes, "Every night / a light blazes for you / in one of our hearts" (ll.40-45). This is to say, the poem places its anti-elegiac

mourning, its lyric address, in an elegiac and politically conscientious context. To be sure, the two stanzas at the center of the poem emphasize the loss and isolation central to a collective sense of militancy, beginning respectively, “It is difficult / to stop marching, Joseph, / impossible to stop our assault” (ll.37-39) and “There was no one lonelier / than you, Joseph” (ll.46-47). Hemphill highlights the isolation of the specific lost other, even when speaking to him directly, as if apologizing to the lost other for promoting his cause, for progressing through a collective sense of time without him, in the light of his death.

Caught in what might be called a compulsory need to turn from mourning to activism, the poem’s speaker draws attention to the melancholia inherent in lyric while also, however reluctantly, working to transform this sense of loss into political exigency. For instance, in a melancholic register, Hemphill’s speaker declares, a third of the way through the poem, “Our loss is greater / than all the space / we fill with prayers / and praise” (ll.23-26), and, two-thirds of the way through, “I realize sewing quilts / will not bring you back / nor save us” (ll.61-63). The poet-speaker likens the space of the poem to the representational quality of the AIDS quilt, telling us that neither the poem nor the quilt can retrieve the lost other but only reiterate the magnitude of the lost other’s absence repeatedly. As a result, the poem’s penultimate stanza suggests that the futility of lyric melancholia, as well as perhaps the futility of lyric and representation entirely, necessitates the growing political awareness of its implied readership:

It’s too soon
to make monuments
for all we are losing,
for the lack of truth
as to why we are dying,
who wants us dead,
what purpose does it serve? (l.64-70)

Here, the lyric speaker’s “we” and “us” slip from referring to the lyric self and other to referring

to the black gay community in the collective present. In other words, the poet-speaker sacrifices his self and other to the past in order to promote militancy in the present. Indeed, the last stanza reads:

When my brother fell
I picked up his weapons.
I didn't question
whether I could aim
or be as precise as he.
A needle and thread
were not among
his things
I found. (ll.65-73)

The lyric I at once expresses a sense of personal futility and implies the need for collective militancy among his readers. To be sure, the phrase, "I didn't question," at once suggests that the isolated and ghostly lyric speaker was not and is not up to the task of carrying on Beam's now-unfulfilled activist ends and implies that the reader (and black gay audience) should follow the lyric speaker's example of transforming grief into action.²⁷⁰ The poem, in other words, represents the self and other as casualties—causalities created by the epidemic and representation itself—in order to urge its implied audience to save itself. While Sontag warns that war metaphors often enact cultural and psychological violence upon those suffering from illnesses, especially cancer and AIDS,²⁷¹ the lyric speaker of "When My Brother Fell" counters that when this violence is willingly enacted upon the self and specific lost other by the self it might benefit those facing similar challenges in the ongoing present. Differing from Dlugos' "secular prayer" and Gunn's "ethical fatalism," as discussed in the last chapter, which both release those in the present from their obligations to the past (which Dlugos and Gunn come to represent), Hemphill and his contemporaries insist that their sacrifices to the literary past must incite those in the present to political action.

To be sure, Dixon's "And These Are just a Few . . .", the final poem in his posthumous volume,²⁷² conjures a sense of unending loss and the infinite vulnerability of the specific lost others while sacrificing its self and others in order to place a joint melancholic and political exigency upon the reader(s). The poem, which lists thirteen others dead or dying from AIDS-related-complications, giving almost everyone of them a stanza of their own that epitaphically summarizes their unique features, begins, "This poem is for the epidemic dead and the living," adding "Remember them?" (l.1). The tone of the question is at once hopeful and accusatory, inasmuch as it implies that the reader cannot—obviously—remember the specific others that Dixon's speaker has lost. Dixon's keynote speech delivered at the 1992 OutWrite conference and included by Alexander as the afterward, coming right after "And These Are just a Few . . ." in his posthumous volume, demonstrates an acute awareness of literature's ability to invoke the presence of specific others while simultaneously erasing it. He writes, "As creators, we appear to strike a bargain with the immortality we assume to be inherent in art" (75) and that "We want to avoid putting a final period to it all" (76), but that, nevertheless, only two people he mentions in his "And These Are just a Few . . .", "are presently alive."²⁷³ Dixon declares that in light of this pervasive association between publishing and loss he finds "it difficult to imagine a glorious future for gay publishing" (78). Nevertheless, he hastens to add that this dreary outlook "does not mean I cannot offer some concrete suggestion to ensure that a future does exist" (78). His suggestion is that the present is obligated to remember those who are lost; he includes himself as imminently lost and concludes, "I'll be somewhere listening for my name. You, then, are charged by the possibility of your good health, by the broadness of your vision, to remember us" (79). Dixon asserts, in other words, that remembrance stands at the juncture of loss and futurity.

His poem expresses the same conviction by using the lyric mode to highlight the juncture

and yet vast gap between absence and presence. Anticipating the conclusion of his OutWright address, “And These Are just a Few . . .” ends: “This poem is for the epidemic living and the dead. / Remember them, remember me” (ll.27-28). By the end of the poem, its refrain paradoxically suggests that the division between the living and the dead grows slippery in the age of AIDS, but that there also exists a firm division between the two. It is this paradox that necessitates the living’s remembrance. What is more, Dixon suggests that lyric can only address the present through admitting its past-ward-ness. Dixon’s speaker must admit in the poem’s final turn of phrase his own absence. It is at this critical juncture, where the poem ends, where the lyric voice implies its leap from its implicit ghostliness to the reader’s ongoing presence, that demands the most ethical responsibility of the reader and those who populate the ongoing present. The speaker sacrifices himself and his specific others to the past so that the readers in the ongoing present can at once remember the speaker (and, as if the speaker were a nesting doll of memories, all those he remembered) to the best of their abilities and transform a sense of loss into an ethical *point d’appui* to better their own present moment. Put otherwise, the poem sacrifices its referents to suggest that by remembering the dead, which inevitably and paradoxically places them in the past, we can remember or be responsible to the living. Lyric as an act of remembrance, in other words, places pressure on the point at which melancholia impossibly transforms into activism. Indeed, while some early AIDS poets like Gunn and Dlugos work to release the ongoing present from the burden of remembrance by sacrificing the dead, including their speakers, to the past, early black gay AIDS poets propose that the sacrifice of the self and the other to the past within the lyric vehicle does not release the ongoing present from its ethical obligations to the recently dead but redoubles those obligations, necessitating an ethics of activism rooted in the specifics of loss.

Early black gay AIDS poets put forward the notion that through the lyric speaker's sacrifices and the ever-emerging black gay community's receptive recognition of those sacrifices that both the lost lyric referents (however ghostly they may be) and the black gay community discover, and mutually reinforce, a sense of agency and futurity. This newly discovered sense of agency crystalized around a melancholic and lyric kernel of loss also, these poets frequently imply, beneficently readjusts the relationship between the black gay community and the black community more generally speaking. As suggested by its collective refusal to turn away from an ethic of activism and toward an ethic of melancholia alone, early black gay AIDS poetry insists that official verse culture AIDS poetry of this era relies on the remnant of agency provided by the implicit whiteness of its lyric voices to release the ongoing present from its obligations to the past. Early black gay AIDS poets observe that to release their implicitly black gay separatist audience from the obligation of remembrance, even if it locates the lyric self and other in the past, would further the isolation and abjection of the black gay individual (an analog to the lyric self) and the emergent black gay community. In response, then, to the implicit white privilege of even the most abject and isolated lyric speakers in early AIDS poetry, these early black gay AIDS poets assert that their speakers' self-sacrifices to the past could facilitate the emergence of a black gay community as well as function as a corrective to the longstanding homophobia and heterosexism of the Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism. In turn, in creating this new and adjusted sense of black community, black gay AIDS poet-speakers, such as that of Dixon's "And There Are just a Few . . .", can imagine a sustainable context for their legacies (however ghostly and past-ward legacies might be).

To be sure, much of the early black gay anthologies explicitly engage with the theme of turning away from the specious logics of white privilege (and their prevalence in the "gay

community”) and going “home” to the black community. For instance, Joseph Beam’s introduction to *In the Life* ends, “We are Black men who are proudly gay [. . .] We are coming home with our heads held up high” (18) and his conclusion begins, “When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left” (231). In his introduction’s first paragraph, Beam points out that this homecoming was made necessary by not just white culture by and large but more specifically Post-Stonewall gay culture and its exclusion of black gay experiences and voices.²⁷⁴ Indeed, going “home” to the black community in the AIDS era becomes a central trope for black gay poets and writers.²⁷⁵ The second section of Hemphill’s introduction to *Brother to Brother*, later reprinted as a stand-alone essay in his volume *Ceremonies*, echoes Beam’s sentiment. Hemphill asserts that black gay men must go home and begin a dialogue with their families in the age of AIDS because they will increasingly need, as they die, the support of their biological families. Like Beam, Hemphill also asserts that this homecoming to the black community is made necessary by the white gay community’s representation of black men, when it rarely appears in literature and art, as mere sex objects. In the introduction (as well as the first essay in *Ceremonies*, “Does Your Mother Know About Me?”, excerpted from this introduction), Hemphill famously provides an example of this objectification when he critiques Robert Mapplethorpe’s “Man in a Polyester Suit” for featuring a black man’s flaccid penis and cropping out his face, and therefore interiority, from the photograph. In reference to this dehumanizing objectification by the gay community, Hemphill concludes the second section of his introduction (and later essay) by declaring, “I *am* coming home. There is no place else to go that will be worth so much effort and love” (47; original emphasis).²⁷⁶

Correspondingly, much of the black gay literature of this time focuses on priming the black community to be receptive to this homecoming. For instance, both Hemphill's essay "If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Woman Reading Dr. Frances Cress Welsing" (1992, *Ceremonies*) and media critic Ron Simmon's essay "Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals" (1991, *Brother to Brother*) sustain an effort to decouple Black Nationalistic rhetoric from homophobia. These essays insist that homosexuality is not a genocidal plot engineered by white society against black people (what they present as the standard ideology regarding homosexuality to emerge from Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement by the 1980s); rather, Simmons writes, it is the "divisive and heterosexist reactions" of white people to the "natural sexual expression" of black gay individuals "that play into the plot of divide and conquer" (213). In this schematic, whiteness, not gayness, becomes the central opponent to a cohesive black community that would include black gay and lesbian individuals. Indeed, while Hemphill contradicts the image of the black gay traitor to the black community by creating a black *gay* genealogy from the Harlem Renaissance through the Black Arts Movement to the 1980s in *Brother to Brother*'s introduction, Simmons even suggests that the Black Arts Movement could be understood as organized around a sense of internalized sexual oppression promoted by white culture. Along these lines, Simmons singles out Black Art's founder Amiri Baraka as having both homosexual and homophobic tendencies.²⁷⁷ Alexander's poem "When" also alludes to these complex dynamics; while listing the many quirks of black men in the 1980s, she writes that they "quoted Baraka's / 'Black Art': 'Fuck poems / and they are useful'" (ll.10-11). Alexander, in this way, concurs that a greater sense of continuity exists between black gay AIDS poets and the Black Arts than incompatibility.

Put otherwise, black gay AIDS writers, as well as later straight, black, female, ones like

Alexander, imply that the Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism often found its voice in relationship to the intersection of blackness and homosexuality. For instance, Black Arts poet Sonia Sanchez advances—despite herself, it seems—the same point in her AIDS poetry volume *Does Your House Have Lions?* (1997). One lengthy multi-part poem, the volume depicts the homecoming of a young man dying from AIDS-related complication to his African-American biological family.²⁷⁸ The volume’s call-and-response conclusion features male and female voices chanting to the dying man, “come here African” and the dying man chanting in response, “i am coming” (70). While the book-length poem could be seen as fulfilling Beam and Hemphill’s demand for the black community to accept its gay brothers, the poem also depicts the dying brother figure as asking for forgiveness from his family (62). Even the final response, “i am coming,” which links sex with death, suggests the culpability of the brother figure’s (homo)sexual activities and even, perhaps, lapsed spirituality. In this way, Sanchez implies that gay brothers, biological and otherwise, can return to the black community if they renounce their implicitly immoral homosexuality. Her dialogic structure, then, seeks to promote the coherence of a black community around the abjection of black male homosexuality. Sanchez demonstrates, therefore, rather than critiques, the way the Black Arts and Black Nationalism defined—according to Hemphill and Simmons especially—blackness against homosexuality.

In other words, early black gay AIDS poetry recognized a penchant in Black Nationalism to define blackness against that which does not conform to gender and sexuality norms. The early black gay AIDS poets employ the sacrifice of the lyric self to precipitate the activist ends of reorganizing Black Nationalism around the shared, however sexually diverse, experiences of blackness, rather than around the abjection of a certain kind of black experience. To be sure, the main argument of cultural theorist Phillip Brian Harper’s *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety*

and the Problem of African-American Identity (1996) states that “all debates over and claims to ‘authentic’ African-American identity are largely animated by a profound anxiety about the status specifically of African-American *masculinity*” (ix). What is more, Harper highlights the particular fervency of this anxiety in the age of AIDS.²⁷⁹ Early black gay AIDS poetry works, then, to intervene into this epistemology of blackness by making space in the black community for the putatively non-masculine. This early AIDS poetry does not, therefore, deconstruct “blackness” per se, but reorganizes it. For instance, “Heavy Breathing,” Hemphill’s longest poem and the second collected in *Ceremonies*, criticizes the treatment of women and gay men by Black Nationalist and Black Arts discourses, especially in the AIDS era. Near the beginning of the poem, the speaker admits that “At the end of heavy breathing” (or, as the AIDS era drew sexual liberation to a close), “Nationalism disillusioned me” (1).²⁸⁰ The poet-speaker echoes this sentiment throughout the poem, rhetorically (and sarcastically) asking black leaders three-quarters of the way through the poem, “you want me to give you / a mandatory vote / because we are both Black” (17). Near the end of the poem, the speaker declares, “I’m not content / with nationalist propaganda” and “I’m not content / loving my Black life / without question” (20). Adding “The answers of Negritude are not absolute” (20), the poem explicitly calls prevailing black sociopolitical discourse into question.

By corollary, “Heavy Breathing” shifts Black Nationalist discourse away from (primarily) focusing on the external oppressions it faces to confronting an internalized complicity with these discursive power structures. Throughout the poem, the poet-speaker implies that the black community fails to protect its own women and gay men. After discussing the commonly accepted sexual harassment of women on a commuter bus he calls “a slave slip” because a “majority of its riders [are] black” (6), Hemphill’s speaker introduces the subject of a brutal gang

rape of a “Black mother” (7) named Mrs. Catherine Fuller.²⁸¹ The poet-speaker declares, “Every participant was Black. / Every witness was Black” (8), registering, in this way, his central concern that Black Nationalism creates a climate in which such actions are—if not acceptable, then—overlooked. Hemphill does not merely lament the fact that the woman was “sodomized before a crowd” and that no one “holler[ed] STOP!” (8). He explicitly admonishes the black community itself, those who stood by, for not arresting the criminal acts:

There was no white man nearby shouting
“BLACK MAN, SHOVE IT IN HER ASS!
TAKE SOME CRACK! SHOVE IT IN HER ASS,
AND THE REST OF YOU WATCH!” (8; original emphasis)

“Heavy Breathing” asserts, then, that Black Nationalism’s insistence on masculine authority, however rooted in a legitimate response to racism, fosters a climate in which violence against women flourishes.

Ceremonies stresses this controversial point (inasmuch as it risks absolving white society of its historical complicity in these dynamics) recurrently in both its poems and essays. For instance, in his essay “If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Women,” Hemphill makes a similar claim when he criticizes social scientist Frances Cress Welsing for espousing the homophobic and heterosexist overtones of Black Nationalism. Responding to the fact that she blames white culture for spreading homosexuality among black men and women, Hemphill writes, “If we dare follow her ideas to their logical conclusions, then we could easily argue that every Black action that fails to conform to Black societal codes of morality and ethics is caused by racism” (61). He adds, “Such reasoning allows for the shirking of responsibility for our actions and choices” (61). Hemphill insists both in this essay and “Heavy Breathing” that the black community’s abjection of women and gay men, intimately linked as it is to questions of black masculinity, weakens rather than strengthens the community. Indeed, the passage in which

Hemphill discusses the brutal rape of Mrs. Fuller pivots upon the word “sodomy,” placing an emphasis on the connection between violence against women and discourses surrounding sexuality. Hazarding the demonization of gay sexual acts, Hemphill’s choice to employ this politically charged word not only sensationalizes the criminal acts but also, and conversely, associates violence against women with the violence of homophobic discourse (the word “sodomy” carrying with it denotations of religious, social, and legal condemnation) during the AIDS crisis. (As previously discussed throughout this dissertation, the link between the sexually-oriented oppressions of women and gay men, who are both derogatorily framed as “passive,” echoes Leo Bersani’s similar conclusion in his (in)famous essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” [1987].) To be sure, the passage of the poem that follows the word “sodomy” features the poet-speaker—once more “At the end of heavy breathing” (8)—attending his “brothers” (8) funerals, intertwining thereby the oppressions of women and gay men.

However, not letting any faction of the black community ignore its complicity in these dynamics, “Heavy Breathing” links violence and loss in the age of AIDS to the black *gay* community’s internalization of sexual and gender prejudices as well. Halfway through the long poem, the poet-speaker admonishes a black man at a gay bathhouse for rejecting other black men and only choosing white blondes as sexual partners.²⁸² While many black gay writers of the time merely celebrate the act of two black men loving each other, including Beam who frequently claims that “Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties,”²⁸³ “Heavy Breathing” also explains through the complex of its many concerns that this act is revolutionary because, more specifically, it restructures Black Nationalism; restructuring it, in other words, to be more inclusive of sexual and gender diversity by interrogating and making suspect the Nationalist cornerstone anxiety over black masculinity. With “Heavy Breathing,” Hemphill

suggests that the act of black men loving black men, rather than the act of the black community abjecting black gay men and women, can strengthen the black community by organizing it around the shared experience of oppression and inclusion rather than merely defining it through a white-centric economy of oppression.

Out of this imperative to create a black gay community included under the umbrella of a black community, the poem additionally works to reclaim a black gay poetic tradition and substitute it for an implicitly-white gay tradition. For instance, “Heavy Breathing” begins with allusions to Walt Whitman both indirectly (the speaker calls himself a “yearning bride” [l.11], a common trope for Whitman) and through italicized quotations. The poet-speaker asks of his reader, “Do you think I could walk pleasantly / and well-suited toward annihilation?” (6), lines Hemphill explicitly attributes to Whitman’s “To think of Time” in his volume’s endnotes. While this quotation aligns lyric with an impulse to escape its implied deathly telos, the long poem concludes, however, not with a Whitman quotation but by referring to Langston Hughes’s “A Dream Deferred.” The beginning of its last stanza reads, “At the end of heavy breathing / the dream deferred / is in a museum / under glass and guard” (21). The poem as whole, then, moves away from Whitman and the white gay poetic tradition which seems—according to this misprisioning of “To Think of Time” at least—to adumbrate, if protest, its own abjection and deathliness within the age of AIDS and toward a black gay poetic tradition that employs the lyric voice to build community, the promise of futurity, and political exigency. While the final stanza of the poem also links this deferred dream of equality to an image of “the skeletal remains / of blank panthers” (21), it does so in the service of an implicit call to action that implicitly brings the black gay community and black community together, asking them to act in coordination to right the lessons of history rather than codify the history of inequality. In this way, by linking

Hughes with black panthers in the context of a black gay AIDS poem, Hemphill links the struggle of black gay men to a common history and common futurity with the black community as a whole. He uses the image of the museum as an anti-example of art as merely glancing pastward. This it to say, early black gay AIDS poetry frequently claims that the black gay lyric voice traditionally spurs a sense of community and political progress through transforming its implied ghostliness into a political ethics for the reader in the ongoing present.

In large part then, early black gay AIDS poetry's penchant for harkening back to the Harlem Renaissance and Jazz Age, as well as to black gay literary luminaries like James Baldwin, stems from a desire to revise Black Nationalistic thought, priming it for a black gay homecoming. Early black gay AIDS poetry's proclivity to reference the past, even sacrifice the lyric self to this past, points to a desire to build, or rebuild, specific types of community in the ongoing present, rather than a desire to acquiesce to the past-ward-ness of literary production. To be sure, allusions to the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age are particularly prevalent in this milieu. Not only do allusions to Hughes, Jean Toomer, Bruce Nugent, and Baldwin saturate *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* (each featuring entire articles on these figures), but also the AIDS poetry from this era frequently employs epigraphs culled from these writers. For instance, Dixon's posthumous volume includes both of these techniques: "Silent Reaper" employs a Jean Toomer quotation as an epigraph, while "Into Camp Ground" dedicates itself and speaks directly to James Baldwin. In the latter poem, Dixon concludes by writing, "One fiery still November, not in Harlem [. . .] you seared my hands where the rocks cried out / opening to your deepest room, Giovanni's, and mine" (57). Linking Giovanni's room with the stanzas of a poem ("stanza" meaning "room"), Dixon asserts that the linking of his lyric voice to a black gay past locates all of his referents, including himself, in the past as well as provides a model for the

reader of how the literary past—operating as a message in the present—can open up a black gay present and futurity (even if this future excludes the lyric self).

Along these lines, besides the explicit allusions to Hughes in its longest and second poem in *Ceremonies*, the final two poems in Hemphill's volume allude, respectively, to Billie Holiday and Jazz musicians: "Gardenias" and "I Want to Talk About You."²⁸⁴ In these poems, Hemphill links black Jazz Age musicians, including Billie Holiday, to a sense of black freedom, or the promise of such in the future: the deferred dream. He describes Jazz band members especially in this vein, writing, in the latter poem, that they were "Soul boys who found freedom" (l.14). Through this recurrent trope of freedom enjoyed collectively, Hemphill also locates his black gay AIDS poetry in a context of performance that emphasizes its immediacy and communality. The final stanza of the poem and volume therefore reads in part, "They were wizards. / We were in love" (ll.36-37). While the poet-speaker places these actions in the past and therefore relates the lyric project to an act of looking backwards, he also insists that performance, and lyric as performance, implies a collective audience that responds with a sense of immediacy. Early black gay AIDS poets might sacrifice the lyric self to the past while revising the Black Arts genealogy to be more socially inclusive, especially that of black gay writers like Hughes and Baldwin, but they also highlight a tradition of performance that points toward community, presence, and sociopolitical visibility. This is to say, these poems suggest that the tradition of Black Arts performance indicates—despite its ostensible ephemerality—imperatives of collectivity, political immediacy, and inclusion, rather than isolation, abjection, and homophobia.

Indeed, early black gay AIDS poets emphasize the way that African-American literature, as a tradition, finds communality across gender and sexual divides as well as invigorates a sense of community in the ongoing present through figurative and sometimes literal links to musical

performance. Rather than merely relegating its referents to the past, as representational means and traditions inevitably do, the notion of performance as exhibited in the history of black gay cultural production—early black gay AIDS poets suggest—helps recode lyric melancholia and the loss of the lyric self as sociopolitically pertinent. Early black gay AIDS poetry reaffirms the connection between poetry and musical performance, and therefore community, in a number of ways. While editor and critic Martin Humphries, for instance, notes in his introduction to *Tongues Untied* (the black gay poetry anthology) that Hemphill, “performs much of his work with musician Wayson Jones, and musical qualities are inherent in the work” (9), most early black gay AIDS poetry primarily reaffirms this connection, as does the printed work of Hemphill. Their poems often reject a strictly metrical and rhymed, or neo-formalist, patterning, while mirroring a more flexible spoken-word, or musical, even Jazz-like, cadence and pronunciation. To be sure, while most of these early poets eschew a rigid sense of meter and rhyme, they often employ a loose musical or oral sense of it, aligning them both with early AIDS poetry’s mistrust of prosody and tradition (because it binds its referents to the past and “ghettoizes” them along identitarian lines) and, contradictorily, tradition within African-American poetry. This spoken, rather than traditionally formalist, emphasis links these early black gay AIDS poems to the “dialect” works of—for instance—Paul Laurence Dunbar, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks.²⁸⁵ Instead of aligning themselves with a Euro-centric version of traditional prosody, in other words, which raises the paradox of the written words’ immortality and mutability, early black gay AIDS poets associate themselves—however uneasily at times, because of its implications of primitivism—with a tradition that raises the notion of language’s spoken, heard, and communal qualities. What is more, this turning toward lyric as speech and performance, historically coming as it does—to a certain degree—by

way of a tradition of spirituals,²⁸⁶ also links the work of early black gay AIDS poets to the public and choral origins of lyric dating back to antiquity (as well as the corresponding link between *lyric* and *lyre*).²⁸⁷ In other words, by connecting to a black poetic tradition to the specter of music and performance, early black gay AIDS poets align lyric with community and audience and, thereby, the socio-political and collective present.

For instance, the first poem in *Tongues Untied*, “Right It Now!,” by Dirg Aaab-Richards, harkens back to poets like Dunbar and Hughes, and even Sterling A. Brown to some degree, who, controversially within the black poetry tradition, occasionally wrote in a “black dialect.”²⁸⁸ Beginning “A gwine rite it down / Ah don’t care what it’s about” (l.12) and adding later on, “Prude or rude / Ah gwine rite it / Copy it / And send it to you. // It can improve?” (ll.18-22), the poem presents a conflicted relationship with black poetic tradition (inasmuch as it sometimes walks the line, historically speaking, between “authentic” speech and satirically pandering to white tastes and stereotypes). But the poem also presents, through this “local speech,” an interest in the relationship between written and spoken poetry. The content of the poem, in other words, insists on participating in the written tradition, but the form of the poem, its dialect, and its assonance and rhymes (prude/rude/you/improve) draws our attention to its spoken, or performed, quality. This performance aspect implies, further, a present and communal audience, transforming the specific other, the “you” of the poem, into a politicized group with agency—hence the pun in the poem’s title (“Right It Now!”). This is to say, through the performance quality of the poems’ cadences, rhymes, assonances, and dialect, the act of lyric address (writing) encourages the reading community to correct the wrongs of the past (righting). To be sure, the poem literally ends with a didactic moral, calling it such explicitly, which reads: “It’s from acorns like these that our stories get told / Use a little logic; when and to whom it is showed”

(ll.26-27). Aaab-Richards indirectly indicates, then, that his poem speaks to a black and most likely black gay audience to instruct that their traditions—which ride the cusp between telling and showing, or speaking and writing (hence the off-rhyme “told/showed”)—should be strategically deployed to build community and to urge literary and political actions beneficial to it.²⁸⁹ He suggests, in other words, what might be called, then, a critical deployment of dialect poetry and its performance-oriented qualities.

Moreover, early black gay AIDS poetry also works to supplant the pastward-ness of written representation with the communal aspect of performed lyric by frequently pointing toward the notion of musical refrain. Not only do Hemphill and Dixon use this technique as previously mentioned, but anthologies from this milieu often print song lyrics written by black gay performers, making explicit the connection between lyric and music. For instance, *In the Life* features both an interview with and printed song lyrics by San Francisco-based musician Blackberri. His printed lyrics, called “Beautiful Blackman,” address, at once, a specific black man and a community of black men and include the directions “Chorus” and “Bridge” throughout. By conflating lyric voice with lyric performance, in other words, early black gay AIDS poetry purports to address specific others and the black gay community all at once. To be sure, in *Tongues Untied*, for instance, almost all of Isaac Jackson’s poems include refrains or the word “song” in their titles. One of his poems, entitled “aids vigil,” recounts an AIDS protest and vigil in Washington D.C. and contains the refrain, “my hope / my life / mocked by the light of a candle.” While the poem depicts individuals speaking publically, implying a sense of community and activism, the poem despondently ends, “holding hands at the aids vigil / listening to the testimonies / hearing the wind as breath / that will blow this candle out” (l.21-24). In this way, Jackson points to the melancholia of lyric address—inasmuch as it locates its human referents in

the past—on the one hand, and the collectivity of performance, on the other.

To be sure, Hemphill's AIDS poems recurrently employ refrains, monosyllabic rhymes, and "local speech" to arouse a sense of rhythmic recitation. For example, the fifth section of his long poem "The Tomb of Sorrows," collected toward the end of *Ceremonies*, begins, "Where's my needle? / Fetch my thread. / I'm going to sew / a prince to my bed" (97) and contains the refrain, "Stich by stich / I shuttle my thread / in and out / and around his head" (98).²⁹⁰ Focused more on the lines' accents than their syllabics (two stresses per line with variable syllables), the poem presents a singsong tone (rather than a more subdued sprung rhythm) used primarily for mnemonics, or *retention* (both on the part of the speaker and the present listener), as well as indirectly alludes to the Western tradition of performing accentual verse accompanied by a stringed instrument.²⁹¹ Not only does the speaker refer to the AIDS quilt, but also he refers to the AIDS crisis, adding in the fifth section's fourth stanza, "Be he live / or be he dead / I'll sew his heart / to my bed." Hemphill once again questions the ability of representation to preserve the lost amidst the AIDS crisis (to be sure, sewing a "live" heart to a quilt, an image evocative of blood and the medical crisis in and of itself, would not preserve it) as well as suggests that lyric as performance (the poetic persona asks for assistance from an auditor listening to him) simultaneously implies deathliness concurrently with dialogue, presence, and community. The overhearing reader, by way of these performance elements, becomes the present facilitator of the lyric self and other's union as well as sociopolitical import.

Related to this emphasis on musical performance then, early black gay AIDS poets also draw attention to the way dramatic personae, or lyric voices speaking to auditors imagined to be present, help to push the melancholia of lyric, or lyric monologue, toward dialogue and therefore collectivity. While early AIDS poets working within official verse culture see dramatic

monologue as inauthentic speech—as I argue in my first chapter—that turns away from the lyric speaker’s dedication to the specific lost other, emphasizing the socio-historic scripting and therefore ghostliness of the self and other,²⁹² early black gay AIDS poets see dramatic monologue as an opportunity to bring lyric voice in line with a sense of performance that may sacrifice the self and other to the past (even as it engages in the paradigm of ethical lyric address) but simultaneously conjures the notion of audience and community. While both sets of poets see dramatic monologue as codifying socio-historic types or identities, the former group suggests that the codification of identity through dramatized personae associates identity with a deathly, abject, and epitaphic sense of social scripting²⁹³; the latter group sees this codification as a vital—instead of deathly—chance to foster the coherence of the black gay community in the ongoing present as well as employ the lyric speaker as a means to understand and build coalitions between multiple marginalized positionalities. Dramatic monologue, in other words, helps early black gay AIDS poets, who are willing to sacrifice the lyric self and other for the betterment of those in the ongoing present, to align *performance* elements and an understanding of *performativity* in a way that reorganizes, or reshapes, the black and—to some degree—gay communities around newly interrogated and adjusted identity classifications.

For instance, the first poem in *Ceremonies*, entitled “American Hero,” works to interlink the notion of blackness in America with gay identity constructions by speaking from the vantage of a professional basketball player. While Hemphill prints the monologue as early as 1987,²⁹⁴ his decision to begin his 1992 AIDS volume with the poem might point to Magic Johnson’s then recently announced seropositivity, an announcement that Harper describes as a watershed moment of masculine panic within the African-American community.²⁹⁵ Highly inflected with (homo)sexual innuendos (“I aim at the hole [. . .] I let the tension go [. . .] Choke it” [11.7-9]),

the poem portrays the poet-speaker existing within a homosocial environment (“All my men surround me, panting” [l.1]) as well as blurring expected gender boundaries (“I spin the ball above our heads [. . .] It’s a shimmering club light / and I’m dancing” [ll.3-6]). By its end, the poem delivers an explicit message about the double-standards of American racism: “Everyone [. . .] is a friend tonight [. . .] But there are towns [. . .] where I’d be hard pressed / to hear them cheer / if I move on the block” (ll.16-22). Through these enmeshed nuances, Hemphill suggests that the prejudices African-American men face are commensurate with those faced by gay men. Rather than affirming extant identity constructions, the beginning of *Ceremonies* works, by highlighting the performativity of masculinity through dramatic persona, to reorient Black National rhetoric around an acceptance of, as opposed to exclusion of, femininity and homosexuality. Indeed, Hemphill places “Heavy Breathing” right after “American Hero,” thereby following an implicit comparison between blackness and gayness with an explicit conversation about Black Nationalism’s misogyny and homophobia. This is to say, early black gay AIDS poetry often puts pressure on the juncture between performance and performativity, by way of the lyric I’s relationship to personae, not to deconstruct identity categories—as queer theorists like Judith Butler might advocate²⁹⁶—but to cohere black culture around the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity (rather than around its exclusion).

To be sure, much of early black gay AIDS poetry emphasizes the links between the lyric voice and dramatic personae in order to invoke an ethics of activism. Dixon, for instance, includes two explicit dramatic monologues within his volume *Love’s Instruments*. The lengthy “Aunt Ida Pieces a Quilt,” also published in *Brother to Brother*, depicts a black female interlocutor explaining to an unidentified set of auditors the process of stitching a panel for the AIDS quilt in honor of her nephew, Junie. She discusses the process as something “to bring him

back” (l.16) and implores her auditors to assist her, saying, “Y’all got to help me remember him good” (l.19). In this way, Dixon locates dramatic monologue at the intersection where melancholic and isolated lyric voices meet the concepts of audience and collectivity. Dixon implies that by arranging lyric voice around a suggestion of performance and dialogue, AIDS poetry can help transform loss, by inscribing it, into a call to action. (Indeed, Dixon’s exhortation to “bring him back” echoes AIDS poet Michael Lynch’s refrain “I want him back” in the highly political “Yellow Kitchen Gloves,” but even more so opens such a specific exigency to a shared communal response.²⁹⁷) Accordingly, the second of the monologue’s two epigraphs—the first is by Jesse Jackson and the second is by Cleve Jones (gay activist and founder of the AIDS quilt NAMES project)—states, “When a cure is found and the last panel is sewn into place, the Quilt will be displayed in a permanent home as a national monument to the individual, irreplaceable people lost to AIDS—and the people who knew and loved them most.” By way of this epigraph, which links memorialization with national politics, and the poem’s dramatic quality, “Aunt Ida Pieces a Quilt” locates the worth of representation and communication in the age of AIDS on the cusp of remembrance and political awareness.

Dixon’s shorter dramatic monologue, “The 80’s Miracle Diet,”²⁹⁸ makes a similar point about the need for modes of representation and communication to serve, ultimately, an ethics of activism, albeit it in a vastly different tone. Parroting an infomercial-esque late-capitalistic diction, the poem begins: “Yours free without the asking / Quick delivery via overnight male, / Special Handling, or ten year incubation. / *How I lost 40 Pounds in Two Weeks*” (ll.1-4). The satiric dramatic monologue, more a collage of sound bites than a specific self speaking to a specific other, demonstrates the power of address to form consensus among its auditors—for better or worse. Constituting a rare instance of humor, even gallows humor, within AIDS

poetry,²⁹⁹ the poem resolves through tonal irony to draw its auditors out of an acceptance of American culture's domestication of and capitalization on the AIDS crisis. It insists instead that its auditors recognize and act to resolve the threat of this particular brand of apathy. To be sure, the end of the poem cleverly transforms a common sales pitch into a political call to arms. "Act now," Dixon writes, adding, "I have photographs to prove it: / Before and After and Passed Away" (ll.13-14). By introducing a lyric I for the first time in close conjunction with the term "Passed Away," the end of the poem ironically underscores the specter of lost human specificity suppressed by the dominant discourse of the time. Because it can root an ethics of activism in an ethics of melancholia, dramatic monologue helps Dixon, therefore, to reveal the genocidal undertones, or lethal indifference at least, of popular discourse to PWAs and gay men as well as point to his readers' responsibility to counteract those undertones. Moreover, by following this poem with "Aunt Ida Pieces a Quilt," Dixon suggests that dramatic persona can further codify black and gay communities around these ethical imperatives rather than around a capitalistic paradigm that reinforces already extant forms of privilege.

However, unlike Dixon's interest in the way socioeconomic factors affect both the black and gay communities, Hemphill's use of dramatic personae seems primarily directed at correcting the patriarchal strains of Black Nationalist discourse. To be certain, the first section of *Ceremonies*, the only section of the volume composed entirely of poems (six in total), includes four dramatic monologues and two lyrics. Given the content of these dramatic monologues, "American Hero" being one of them, Hemphill orients his entire volume around the question of to what degree, if any, can lyric voice (the primary model and object of critique for dramatic monologue) intervene into the governing principles of Black Nationalism. For example, both "Civil Servant" and "Voices" take up controversial, even disturbing, instances in which female

speakers attempt to justify the violence they have enacted upon black males. While the former poem, “Civil Servant,” portrays Nurse Eunice Rivers, a historic figure, helping white doctors at the Tuskegee Institute to carry out their infamous syphilis experiment on poor black men, the latter depicts contemporary figure Erica Mendell Dayel explaining why she murdered her five year old son to a judge.³⁰⁰ In both examples, Hemphill indicates that the actions of these two women were contingent upon the internalizations of racism. Hemphill imagines that Dayel declares, “The voice wanted me / to free my son / from his breed / and complexion” (ll.30-33), adding that he was “Too dark to live!” (l.34) and that Rivers reflects, “I never thought my silence / a symptom of bad blood” (ll.83-84). Through this allusion to blood especially, Hemphill interconnects historical narratives about the supposed inferiority of black males with the supposed expendability of black gay males during the AIDS crisis. While neither poem validates the actions of their subjects, both poems consider the psychologies of its female referents with empathy and compassion. However controversially, these poems locate their actions— notwithstanding Dayel’s apparent mental health issues—as a response to the systemic oppression of black men in the United States. In other words, Hemphill uses these speakers to jar his reader into questioning the black community’s frequently unexplored and potentially fatal links between black and female oppressions. While these two poems could be taken to imply a black female complicity with violence against black men and therefore the need for a stronger black male agency, they suggest instead, especially in light of their placement alongside “Heavy Breathing” and their inclusion in a volume inflected by AIDS and gay activist rhetoric, the need to coalesce black men and women, as well as black gay men and women, into politically mobile coalitions.

What’s more, by way of the pressure he places on the interplay between dramatic persona

and audience, Hemphill asserts that the lyric voice can occasionally imply as well as transcend its own past-ward-ness and melancholia while simultaneously retaining a dedication to both an ethics of mourning and activism. For example, following “Civil Servant” and “Voices,” the final poem of *Ceremonies*’ first section, “For my Own Protection,”³⁰¹ which I have already commented on in part, struggles to make the personal discourse of an isolated speaker politically engaged in the ongoing present. Beginning in isolation, the poet-speaker declares, “I want to start / an organization / to save my life” (ll.1-3) and explains that the “lives of Black men / are priceless” (ll.8-9), thereby transforming the specific isolated speaker into a social type. The poem ends by assuming that its readership is a community concerned with the same identity politics, asking, “All I want to know / for my own protection / is are we capable / of whatever, / whenever?” (ll.38-41). By placing the pronoun “we” in close conjunction with the lyric speaker’s personal self-concern (“for my own protection”), Hemphill suggests that his innately vulnerable lyric speaker becomes not merely a figure and figuration of the past but also, and moreover, a representative speaker of the ongoing present. In other words, admitting to the peril of the death and past-ward-ness faced by his lyric speaker, Hemphill links his inevitably ghostly lyric speaker to the potential autonomy and agency of his collective and ongoing (as well as implicitly and primarily black gay male) readership. “For my Own Protection” teeters, in this way, on the edge of lyric and peroration—or, on the edge of presenting chiefly an authentic speaker and a representative dramatic or oratory one—as do many of Hemphill’s poems. Even though the poems are printed and not orally delivered, Hemphill indicates through tone and rhetoric both the physical absence and ghostly presence of his lyric speakers, bolstering in this way the exigency of his political exhortations.³⁰² Put otherwise, by locating lyric within a performance-like context, Hemphill works to cohere specific communities and provoke them toward a sense of

political agency, even potentially violent agency (“whatever, / whenever”), paradoxically rooted in the lyric speaker’s inherent vulnerability and lack of agency.

Moreover, on a number of occasions, Hemphill’s poetry and that of other early black gay AIDS poets literalizes the connection between lyric and performance, interweaving, through this means, as equally as possible the competing ethics of melancholia and activism within the black gay community. For instance, two black gay AIDS films that interpolate performance poetry, impressionistic montage, documentary, and dramatization appeared in 1989: Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston*, which describes itself in its opening title card as “A Meditation on Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and the Harlem Renaissance,” and Marlon Rigg’s *Tongues Untied*, which borrows its title from the slightly earlier anthology of black gay poetry. While both films primarily feature Hemphill’s poetry, scoring it and minimally choreographing it, as if staging a music video (*Looking for Langston*’s second credit shot reads “With the Poetry of Essex Hemphill and Bruce Nugent [1906-1987]”), *Tongues Untied* also dramatizes half a dozen poems written by early black gay poets such as Reginald Jackson, Craig Harris, and Donald Woods (all of whom are represented in early black gay anthologies³⁰³). *Tongues Untied* even occasionally presents Hemphill as a talking head reciting his poems, emphasizing their oratory nature. For the most part, the films focus on poems that locate black gay lyric speakers in the age of AIDS dealing with threats of erasure and invisibility. Accordingly, the only poem that both films depict is Hemphill’s “Now We Think,” which includes the refrain “Now we think / as we fuck / this nut / might kill us” and the observation, “There might be / a pin-sized hole / in the condom. / A lethal leak” (ll.5-8). Both films also employ the music of Blackberri, highlighting the continuum between black gay AIDS lyrics, music, and performance art. In other words, *Looking for Langston* and *Tongues Untied* create a network of communication and representation

that, much like the black gay anthologies of this period, interlinks black gay (lyric) selves to promote a notion and feel of community, blurring the boundaries between speaker, auditor, performer, and audience. Although filmic modes of representation and communication come up against the same inability to communicate directly with an audience that all other modes do, except live performance perhaps, early black gay AIDS poetry and the movies that feature them mutually emphasize the performance aspect of the melancholic speaker. These intercalated—or, collaged—modes of representation and communication work to capture the immediacy and presence of performance and the ethical melancholia of lyric while also minimizing the fleetingness of performance and the past-ward-ness of representation.

To be sure, both *Looking for Langston* and *Tongues Untied* confront the slippage of the black gay lyric speaker—or, self—into history and therefore the erasure of that speaker from the present through the bundling, juxtaposition, and interlayering of technologies of communication and representation. Julien's film demonstrates a particular interest in interconnecting a sense of community with transgressions against history through these technological means. In the film's commentary track, he explains that in making the film his primary interest was in comingling the stillness of photography (which can be seen, as I argue in chapter one, as a paradox of representation's deathliness and historical exceptionalism) with the movement of cinema (which can be seen as replicating narrativity and its past-ward telos as well as simultaneously invoking a sense of that past's preservation). He also expresses a desire to present a trans-historical glance at black gay literature and black gay urban culture; to these ends, the film regularly collates footage of Hughes reciting his poems with the images and sounds of jazz quartets, excerpts of Nugent's landmark prose-poem "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade," and five dramatizations of Hemphill's poems. Near the end of the commentary track, Julien additionally explains that the film ends on a hectic

unresolved note, in which the contemporary moment (a house party) blends with the past (a speakeasy setting with formal ball elegance) as well depictions of a looming homophobic riot or pre-Stonewall gay bar raid. The telos of this latter threat, however, never fully materializes—as Julien instructs—in order to avoid what he calls a “narrative” conclusion and evoke, instead, a “poetic” one.³⁰⁴ In other words, by bolstering the lyric voice’s (Hughes’, Nugent’s, and Hemphill’s) impulse to overcome, however impossibly, the self’s existential isolation, abjection (cultural and otherwise), and ghostliness through other non-teleological, or non-narrative, means of representation and communication, the film works to create a sense of a black gay community as well as that community’s collective volition. Put one other way, through interlinking representative modes antagonistic to historicity, the film locates the lyric’s melancholic dedication to the specificity of the always fleeting—always already lost—present as the foundation of the black gay community’s efforts to gain coherence and agency in the ongoing present.

Lingering behind this drive to root an ethics of activism in an ethics of melancholia and mourning are the specters of both of these filmmakers’ finitude and deaths. The films, it could be said, ultimately transform the loss of their implicit speakers into the notion of a politically viable black gay community. Julien’s film, for instance, embeds images of a black gay man in a coffin throughout the film, transforming—as Julien notes, once more, in his commentary—the happenings of the speakeasy into a wake. Julien also reveals that he himself is the figure filmed in the coffin and that his purpose behind this decision was to confront the image of his own death at a time when many of his friends were dying from AIDS-related complications. Similarly, Riggs’ film raises the specter of his own mortality in the face of his HIV-positive status. Near its end, *Tongues Untied* features a sequence in which the newspaper obituaries of black gay men

lost to the AIDS crisis flash across the screen and that ends with a photograph of Riggs himself slowly dissolving away. Throughout this sequence, he narrates his experience during the AIDS epidemic, suggesting the dual nature of representation, which inscribes its referents in the past and presents them as ghostly hallucinations, or participants, in the present. This is to say, both Julien and Rigg's echo the self-sacrifice of early black gay AIDS lyric speakers to the past in order to conjure a sense of responsibility in their viewers, implicitly urging them to respond as if in dialogue with their ghostly images and to act to ameliorate the biomedical crisis facing the black gay community. Their films, then, employ the loss of the specific self—that representation always inscribes and that lyric voice attempts to forestall—to generate political agency, at least the notion of such agency, for those akin to the lost self in the ongoing collective present.

Likewise, even this period's black gay performance art which does not directly reference early black gay AIDS poetry seems to respond to Beam and Hemphill's call to represent the lives of black gay men—and thereby risk relegating them to the past—for the benefit of the living. For example, workshopped with the terminally-ill at community centers throughout the United States in the early 1990s, *Still/Here* (1994), a two-act modern dance piece, envisioned and assembled by famed black gay HIV-positive choreographer Bill T. Jones, juxtaposes its dances with spoken words, film footage, and sound recordings lifted from the workshops as well as flashing images of Jones himself and unidentified injured body parts. While he focuses on a multiplicity of terminal illnesses (primarily cancer and AIDS) as well as a diversity of individuals (primarily white straight women and gay men, both black and white), Jones reveals in his 1997 interview with Bill Moyers on PBS that the work grew out of losing his life partner Arnie Zane to AIDS-related complications and his own HIV seropositivity. This is to say, the dance piece couches the self's specific melancholia in a network of melancholia to create not only a community of the

terminally ill but also an audience organized around this melancholic nucleus. Moreover, the title of the piece evokes what I describe in my first chapter on Paul Monette as “an extended deictic anti-elegiac project” in which deictic words such as “still” and “here” in conjunction with various technological means of representation and communication work to exempt the specific already lost referents, the self and the other, from their inevitable socio-historical erasure. Jones follows the photographic duality of the word “still” (both its deathly and preservative qualities) with the word “here,” which works toward a spatial deixis always leading back to the lost self as reference; the piece’s title at once points to the self’s absence and presence as well as the deathliness and endurance of its created community of the ill (the slash cleaves, in both senses of this word, all these notions together). This is to say, although Jones’ does not seek to foster a black gay community specifically, his dance piece—as if referencing an early black gay AIDS poetry model—uses the melancholia of the (black gay) self as an epistemological site to organize a greater notion of community.³⁰⁵ Indeed, it could be said that, unlike Monette who uses a mesh of technological means to ensure the ongoing pertinence of his lyric other (and self), early black gay AIDS poets and artists use such a mesh of modes and mediums to promote, ultimately, the ongoing pertinence of particular communities (mostly black and black gay ones).

What is more, performance artists from this era, like early black gay AIDS poets, constantly demonstrate that their genre-blurring efforts emerge from the AIDS epidemic and how it highlighted and exacerbated the isolation and melancholia of monologic (or, lyric) speakers. Jones, for instance, saw his work in *Still/Here* as embodying a lyric interruption of narrative that at once points to the historicity of representation and tries to evade the past-ward-ness of time and representation; in his 1997 interview, when Moyers asks him about the impact of the AIDS epidemic on his work, he says, “This is the time you make the poems, you know [. . .] That’s all

there really is, the making of the poems now.”³⁰⁶ In other words, Jones employs in his dance piece postmodern techniques of juxtaposition to weave, paradoxically and impossibly, community and presence together with lyric melancholia, or “the making of poems now.” Moreover, performance groups like the famed Pomo Afro Homos also employ postmodern techniques (their name starting with an abbreviation of “postmodern”) to give voice and agency to a multiplicity of black gay individuals, identities, and communities. As critic David Roman points out,³⁰⁷ since the three performers of the group constantly construct new personas and leap between monologues and dramatized scenes, Pomo Afro Homo contests the narrowly circumscribed identities prescribed to black gay men in the AIDS era. In other words, the stage assists these performers in transforming monologue into dialogue and in negotiating the relationship between speaker and audience, recoding the black gay speaker as subject rather than as object or, even, abject non-object. Roman asserts that by renegotiating this relationship via these postmodern strategies the performance group can contest stereotypes that further the AIDS crisis, noting that the group was brought together initially to dramatize “safe sex” stories.³⁰⁸

This is to say, the link between lyric monologue and performance in this era helped early black gay AIDS poets counteract the ultimate proposition put forward by official verse culture AIDS poets that the lyric I could only ever ethically speak about its isolation and abjection—an ethical proposition, or impasse, which early black gay AIDS poets imply (as previously mentioned) relies on the lyric speaker’s trace and vital cultural association with white, masculine privilege. Seen from another angle, while early white AIDS artists such as David Wojnarowicz and Keith Haring frequently harnessed the power of the juxtaposition between visual mediums and lyric texts (or texts rooted in individual and isolating experiences) to approach arresting the past-ward-ness of representation,³⁰⁹ early black gay AIDS poets further recognized that this

postmodern blurring of genre might also link the melancholic lyric speaker with community and sociopolitical agency. Similarly, bell hooks famously argues in her foundational essay “Postmodern Blackness” (originally appearing as an article in 1990) that techniques of collage and juxtaposition can “enact a postmodernism of resistance” because such techniques can contest inimical stereotypes and identity formations while also affirming the real world experiences of black individuals.³¹⁰ In other words, the critical theory surrounding “blackness” at this time resonates with early black gay AIDS poetry’s insistence on honoring the specificity of black experiences while also employing these experiences—even at the risk of erasing them and the specificity of their referents from the present—to gain agency for a greater black community via performance and performance elements. Along these lines, toward its end, *Ceremonies* juxtaposes the poem “Cordon Negro,” which ends “I guard my life with no apologies. / My concerns are small / and personal” (ll.46-48), with the personal essay “In an Afternoon Light,” in which Hemphill recounts angrily confronting an older black male stranger about his heterosexist biases only to discover that man’s willingness to reconsider his perspective once the issue had been raised. Through this juxtaposition, Hemphill asserts that when lyric isolationism moves toward sociality (in person and in prose) it awakens a sense of sociopolitical agency, helping to beneficially transform the black community as a whole. Akin to—yet also differing from—Monette’s *paratextual* resolving of his lyric melancholia in *Love Alone*, then, early black AIDS poets labor to *intermesh* lyric voice and mediums of (literal and figurative) performance. Also, unlike slightly later AIDS poets who attempt to resolve the conflict between specific experience and social concern mostly within their poems (as will be discussed in the next chapter), these early black gay AIDS poets attempt to open up lyric voice to performance and thereby open up specific experience to social, or communal, concern.

It should be added that the techniques of postmodern resistance seen in early black gay AIDS poetry persist throughout much of black gay cultural production in the early AIDS era, even when that production does not directly engage with the crisis. For instance, *Brother to Brother*, the 1995 film that clearly alludes to the anthology of the same name, extrapolates on these themes and formal concerns. Halfway through, when Perry, the main character, presents a short film to his literature class that imaginatively depicts Baldwin and black panther leader Eldridge Cleaver arguing over the role, or lack thereof, of homosexuality in the Civil Rights era, the professor insists that his presentation must relate “to the present.” *Brother to Brother* makes this same point by recurrently staging homoerotic scenes from the Harlem Renaissance in reference to what happens to the film’s protagonist in the film’s present. Ending with a Hughes poem set to music, the film at once places a late-twentieth-century emphasis on recovering the black gay past as well as an early-AIDS-era emphasis on employing that past toward improving the ongoing present. The ending also reaffirms the dedication of early black gay AIDS artist to taking the Modernistic techniques of the Harlem Renaissance and transforming them into a postmodernism of resistance, an aesthetic ideology that employs collage, genre-blending, and collaboration—all Modernist techniques—not to create a sense of individual genius—as the Modernist principally did—but in order to create a sense of community organized around a Dixon-like ethics of remembrance: an ethics that at once relegates its specific referents to the catacombs of history and works to preserve their traces in the ongoing present. To be sure, *Brother to Brother*, the film, forms what can be seen as an addendum to the work of early black gay AIDS poets to formulate a collective intentional object out of the black gay community through embedding the lyric mode throughout its collaborative and trans-generic practices. In other words, unable to escape the implied abjection and ghostliness of the isolated lyric speaker

in the AIDS era, ipso facto inscribed through the confines of its mode and its expression in official verse culture, early black gay AIDS poets highlight lyric's performance quality and locate it in a larger social and multi-media discussion in an attempt to interpolate the ethic of melancholia with an ethic of activism (and vice versa).

Later black gay AIDS poetry, however, points to the impossibility of this maneuver, asserting that collapsing lyric voice into community necessarily and unethically erases the specificities of loss (by localizing the self and other as historical referents of the past). To be sure, both Phillips and Shepherd, in their first poetry volumes, *In the Blood* (1992) and *Some Are Drowning* (1994) respectively, emphasize lyric's ethical task of retaining the self and other while railing against the predeterminations of tradition and history in the AIDS era. Phillips' volume begins by indexing the essential melancholia of his speaker in the volume's first poem, "X," which includes the explanation, "X, / as in variable, // anyone's body, any set / of conditions, your // body" (ll.13-17). Although Phillips establishes a lyric self that seeks definition through its relationship to an undefinable, perhaps absent, and changing other, therefore presenting the impossibility of this task, with "X" he foregrounds the necessity of lyric's melancholia—its instigating vitality for the poet-speaker—in his first book. He implies that the lyric self must inevitably and primarily seek out the lyric other. Shepherd outright declares in his poem "How Long Has This Been Going On?" (whose title might refer to Ethan Mordden's epic novel on gay liberation history leading up to the AIDS crisis) that "Lyric means loss" (l.20). Much more brashly and boldly than Phillips, then, Shepherd contradicts gay (or, even, black gay) liberationist logic, or an ethics of activism, by asserting and insisting on the primary meaning of the lyric mode: unending and obliging loss. To be sure, Shepherd in particular profoundly engages throughout his career with reconnecting lyric to this originary purpose.

The first poem in *Some Are Drowning*, for instance, at once circulates Shepherd's sense of melancholia around a specific lost other and resists doing so, inasmuch as the poet-speaker of the volume recognizes that this task, as well as implicitly the ethical task of activism reliant upon the foundation of touch between the self and other, is categorically impossible. Called "The Difficult Music," the poem begins, "I started to write a song about you, then I decided, *No*" (l.1) before clarifying parenthetically who the specific you is: "You were my mother; I love you more / dead. Not a day goes by when I'm not turning someone / into you" (ll.3-5). The poem at once communicates a sense of obligation to its lost "you" as well as registers its desire to escape this particular responsibility into a wider field of social contact. The line break in the phrase "I love you more / dead" emphasizes the poet-speaker's cruel desire to be free of responsibility toward his mother as well as the conflictingly fact that his mother's death increases his love, and therefore responsibility, for and toward her. "The Difficult Music," in other words, establishes the poet-speaker's task of ethical melancholia while indicating that the task is too burdensome because of its exponentially increasing difficulty. Along these lines, after the speaker claims he thought a billboard that reads, "'In a dream you saw a way to survive and you woke up / happy' [. . .] was talking to [him], but it was just / art" (ll.13-16), he says, "*Take it from me*, my stereo claims, *some day / we'll all be free*. If anyone should ever write that song" (ll.27-28). In this way, the first poem in Shepherd's AIDS poetry volume tonally and substantively raises doubts about early black gay AIDS poetry's insistence on the link between music and art, or performance, and ethical activism, inasmuch as the poet-speaker indicates an unbridgeable gap between public communal art and the specificity of his self and other. To be certain, Shepherd opposes the "you" of his lyric to the "we" of the song, suggesting that the task of rescuing others from oppression rests on the impossible task of rescuing the lyric other from the past. What is

more, by making his lyric you his mother, rather than significant other, Shepherd suggests that the AIDS crisis does not alter lyric's purposes, tailoring them toward the AIDS crisis, but hones them to their quintessence of mourning without end; AIDS, if anything, he suggests, strengthens lyric's connection to this task. In a 1998 interview,³¹¹ Shepherd explains that this ethic of melancholia rooted in his mother's loss extends throughout his first volume: "Many of the poems in *Some Are Drowning* centered around an absent, inaccessible, speechless other who stood in for my mother, though she's an explicit presence in very few of my poems. But her absence was always a palpable one, a ghostly presence haunting the text. My poems were an attempt to speak to her, to get her to speak back to me, and above all to redeem her suffering: that is, to redeem her life" (306). Shepherd enacts a type of protest mourning throughout his volume of AIDS poetry, thereby resisting a utilitarian (or, elegiac) ethic of activism, as well as predating and privileging the melancholic imperative to that end.

However, Shepherd does not merely universalize the melancholia of the AIDS epidemic. He interconnects his self's dedication to those he has lost, however reluctant or shifting this dedication might be at times, to the AIDS crisis specifically. For instance, the final poem in the volume, "Until She Returns" (which establishes through its title alone the poet's unending and insurmountable task of retrieving the lost other) describes, however obliquely, the circumstances of his mother's death. It begins, "This is how I say it ends, Bronx County, 1978" (l.1), wrapping the poem in, from its very start, a deathly telos. Asking toward the end of the poem, "Who isn't her these days?" (l.21), the poem concludes, "When death comes he'll be a fine young man / and I will kiss his rotten lips and find her there. / *Here I go, singing low*" (ll.26-28). Linking, perhaps problematically, homosexual desire and the death drive, the lyric speaker explicitly and structurally positions the AIDS crisis and the death drive as a route back to his specific lost

object, his mother. In other words, the poet-speaker of *Some Are Drowning* begins and ends his volume by stressing the melancholic basis of lyric, depicting the lyric speaker as a voice employing address and the music of language to repair the violent rupture created between the self and other through the historicity of language (a Lacanian rupture between the self and other Blasing describes, as I discuss in the first and second chapters).³¹² In the AIDS era, Shepherd foregrounds the lyric mode's responsibility to the specificity of loss and suggests that at the point where the poet-speaker's presence becomes absence is the point at which the poet-speaker might repair the differentiation between the self and other as well as, implicitly, others.

Put another way, the lyric becomes for Shepherd the space in which the self encounters the idea of its own ghostliness as well as the space where the self possibly connects or reconnects with the phantasm of specific others. For this reason, the lyric is where the speaker's self, Shepherd's discursive self, can asymptotically approach a wholeness as well as a corresponding unity between the self and specific alterity that erases the isolation of the self and others—however fleetingly or fantastically. Much like his contemporaries, whom I discuss in the next chapter, Shepherd suggests that lyric represents the moment at which absence reflects presence and vice versa, inasmuch as lyric discursively stages the yearning—through its emphasis on language's sounds and direct address—to reconnect the always already unreachable and lost self with the always already unreachable and lost other. Shepherd insists, then, that the poet-speaker's sacrifice to the past-ward-ness of the published page serves a primary and paradoxical purpose of rescuing the other *as well as the self* from oblivion, impossibly working to alchemize that sense of oblivion into presence through lyric melancholia and touch. To be sure, the final line of the poem, "Here I go, singing low" completes a couplet with the second line in the poem, "Packed up all my cares and woe." Both lines come from the 1926 jazz standard "Bye Bye

Blackbird.” Through this allusion, Shepherd once more acknowledges the early black gay AIDS poets’ project of invoking communal presence through performance and the notion of the Jazz Age but revises it to point toward the primacy of the self and other, inasmuch as “Bye Bye Blackbird” describes a speaker’s decision to return home not to an abstract community but to his or her specific family in a moment of tribulation. Imprecisely encasing this couplet in his poem indicates Shepherd’s discomfort with a relationship to tradition (the traditions of formal rhymes and of popular music), a discomfort that both early black gay AIDS poets and early AIDS poets operating in official verse culture display as well. This discomfort, as I discuss at length in the second chapter, stems from both the link between tradition to the past as well as the link between containment and received forms which at once retains the self and other and thanapolitically isolates them. In Shepherd’s case however, the lyric speaker receives a sense of agency, however provisionally, from framing the speaker’s melancholia as the very route to touch and—subsequently, indirectly, and impossibly—the collectivity of performance.

In other words, in response to both “official verse culture” AIDS poets (such as Monette, Gunn, and Dlugos) and early black gay AIDS poets (such as Hemphill and Dixon), Shepherd insist that lyric’s ethical task to retrieve the lost other, as well as the ethical task of activism descending from and made impossible by this originary task, is in fact principally and fundamentally a responsibility to preserve the *self*. In this paradoxical logic, the sacrifice of the self to the past through written discourse becomes a way of rescuing, firstly, the self and, only thereby, the other. The lyric poem, in other words, generates the self through its seeking of—its addressing of—the other and this always-in-process generation of the self rescues the other (who rescues the self) and provides the bases upon which others are rescued. To be sure, the poems in *Some Are Drowning* indicate the way the self at once is formed by and forms the other by

frequently confusing the self and other as well as interlinking the myths of Narcissus and Orpheus (two foundational myths for lyric because they dramatize the relationship between the self and alterity³¹³). For example, “My Foolish Friend” concludes, “I have a friend [. . .] when you call his name / I turn” (ll.22-25). In addition to confusing the self with *an* other, if not *the* other (or, the “you”) in this example, this image of turning also conjures the mythical moment in which Orpheus turns to find Eurydice has disappeared—a moment he explicitly references in “A Primer of Small Stars,” where he writes, “Go to the depths of the bottomless sky / to find wave-clasped Eurydice” (ll.27-28). This image of transposal (the sky becoming sea) mirrors, in turn, the lyric poem’s interest in the instance where presence becomes lack. What is more, these images of transposal appear in a number of the volume’s Narcissus poems. For instance, “Narcissus Explains” contains the parenthetical near its conclusion, “When I bent down to drink of him // he drank of me” (ll.24-25). The stanza break amplifies the impossible leap between the self and other, while the content of the line insists on the unending and constitutive connection between the self and other contained within the self’s presence—the self is established by producing and consuming its putatively external counterpart, a specific alterity external to the self and yet only produced, in turn, by the self’s knowledge or consumption of it. This is to say, the self constitutes the self, brings itself into knowable and pliant formation, through its seeking of the other who is external to the self as well as always already constructed, mediated, and made palpable by the framework of the self.

To be certain, on a number of occasions in prose, Shepherd describes the process of writing poetry as the process of constituting and reconstituting the self for ethical ends. His 1998 interview finishes on such a note, when Shepherd asserts, after discussing his mother’s loss, that within his poetry “there’s also a sense of rescuing myself from my own existence” and that the

present “moment vanishes without a trace and then the person who experiences that moment vanishes and then there’s nothing” (307). He then adds, “Except perhaps there’s my poem, which can’t change anything (as Auden said, poetry makes nothing happen)” (307). For Shepherd, the lyric’s impossible and non-utilitarian imperative of retrieving the specific other relies unendingly upon the rescuing of the self because the other’s trace presence relies upon the vessel of the self continuing in the ongoing present (hence—Shepherd might add—Monette’s insistence in *Love Alone* on conflating, as discussed in chapter one, the objects of “Roger,” “Roger’s loss,” “Monette and Roger,” and “Monette’s grief”). Moreover, for Shepherd, this ethical goal of projecting the self and other, via the self’s continuing in the ongoing present, depends upon characterizing the self as in a process of development, as definable and yet undefinable, defined and yet undefined. “In the act of writing the poem,” Shepherd explains, in the second essay of his 2007 collection of essays *Orpheus in the Bronx: Essays on Identity, Politics, and the Freedom of Poetry*, “the self is not affirmed or even ‘found,’ but rather it is created: the self is a process, not an object” (45). To reify the self, rather than constantly create it, would denude the self and therefore other of agency and presence. In the penultimate paragraph of the collection’s final essay, “Why I Write,” he states, “I won’t live to know whether my work has outlived me [. . .] There is no guarantee that one will reach any of one’s goals in this life. But not to struggle toward those goals is to guarantee that they won’t be attained” (197). It is the approach toward these goals, the endless recovering of the presence of the past even into a future that precludes the past, Shepherd claims, that points toward the survival of the *self*’s trace as well as, thereby, the trace of the *other*, a connection that undergirds the self’s responsibility toward all *others*.

Along these lines, even the obliqueness of the allusions to the AIDS crisis (as opposed to the direct statements made about it in early black gay AIDS poetry) indicates a reluctance on the

parts of later black gay AIDS poets to subsume the melancholia of lyric address into an ethics of activism, inasmuch as such a maneuver would nullify melancholia by definition. To be sure, in the half dozen poems in which the crisis becomes an explicit concern for Shepherd and Phillips, both poets express uneasiness with focusing lyric directly on AIDS. To be sure, while they both describe the symptoms of AIDS, neither of them explicitly name it. Nevertheless, “In the Blood, Winnowing,” the titular and final poem of Phillip’s 1992 volume, presents the notion of a pathogen in the bloodstream by way of its title. Within its content, the poem asks its “you,” a reflection of the lyric self throughout the poem, to imagine his own death: “there was this morning now, / in the shower, when you know / you are dying” (ll.9-11). The poet-speaker continues by connecting this notion of mortality to an image of wasting away, an image both linked with death and disease historically as well as linked specifically with the early AIDS crisis: “you are dying and your body— / a lozenge or a prayer, whatever goes / slim and unimportant” (ll.12-14). The poem finishes with a meditation on aging and the nature of touch:

[. . .] the man beside you,
strange and familiar as a tattoo
the hand wakes to and keeps
wanting to touch,
refusing to believe
in that part of the world
where things don’t wash off (ll.75-81)

Through the image of the tattoo, the poem interconnects the idea of touching through written discourse and the permanence, as well as impermanence, of the human body. Indirectly linking these ruminations to major metanarratives of the AIDS crisis, the final lines simultaneously protest the notion of divine punishment (the link between ablutions and absolution) as well as lament the impermanence of touch. Phillips, however, does not fixate on the AIDS crisis alone; through his title (“In the Blood”), he folds a conflict between touch and contagion present in

nearly all early AIDS poetry into a historical conversation about the “race” of individuals and communities as defined by “blood.” Moreover, the poem does not cogitate primarily about AIDS or race, but about the way these discourses interrupt the fleeting and always attenuated connection between the self and other as well as the self’s short purchase on presence. Put otherwise, Phillips ends his volume by meditating primarily on the necessity of touch—despite its risks and even impossibility—intrinsic to the lyric voice, especially in the AIDS era. He gestures at AIDS in his long poem, without ever naming it, while leaving the possibility of other interpretations open (perhaps cancer or just morality itself) as a way to prioritize lyric touch and lyric melancholia over the AIDS crisis. For Phillips, AIDS becomes merely another challenge, however substantial and immense, to the need for touch.

Although it more directly alludes to the precise symptoms of AIDS than “In the Blood, Winnowing,” Shepherd’s only poem blatantly about AIDS, “Kindertotenlied,” refers first and foremost to the pervasiveness of the theme of mutability in western art. The title, meaning roughly “the death of children,” refers to Gustav Mahler’s song cycle based on German poet Friedrich Rückert’s poem sequence about the deaths of his two children. In addition to the broad focus on mutability in this poem, Shepherd also characteristically expresses a desire to refocus AIDS poetry on the image of touch between the self and other as opposed to employing AIDS poetry as a political vehicle. After directly discussing the opportunistic infection “pneumocystis carinii pneumonia,” Shepherd says, “I wouldn’t want / to make that beautiful” (ll.5-6) and declares, in the poem’s last stanza, “How afraid I am / of your outstretched hand” (ll.22-3). The poem emphasizes the problems and centrality of touch in the AIDS era and refers to the peril of lyric touch. It does so by alluding to a principal image of lyric touch in Keat’s “This Living Hand,” a poem which ends, in reference to the poet-speaker’s hand in the act of writing, “I hold

it towards you” (1.8).³¹⁴ In this formulation, “AIDS poetry” is similar to what we might term “tuberculosis poetry”; this similarity provides a sense of trans-historical contact or comfort while also erasing the specificity of experience and relegating that experience to the past-ward-ness of tradition. This threat of a deathly telos inherent in the notions of contagion and tradition explains the poet-speaker’s fear of an “outstretched hand” in “Kindertotenlieder.” Shepherd, in other words, insistently relates his explicit AIDS poem to a prevailing notion and imperative of touch between the self and other (and, incidentally, others) while ambivalently locating this imperative in a post-Romantic lyric tradition. Put otherwise, through his troubled allusion to Keats (“How afraid I am”), Shepherd’s speaker notes that the melancholia of lyric touch connects selves and others trans-historically as well as relegates them all to the past.

This is to say, both Phillips’ and Shepherd’s poems insist on lyric’s primary, though worrisome, task of melancholic touch in response to the AIDS crisis and in response to the resulting activist politics and aesthetics of early black gay AIDS poets.³¹⁵ In his interviews and essays, Shepherd particularly contends that early black gay AIDS poetry’s insistence on promoting sociopolitical exigencies undermines lyric’s primary goal. In fact, on a number of occasions, he explicitly singles out Hemphill as an example of a poet who engages in what he calls, “identity poetics.” Shepherd defines “identity poetics” as a type of poetry that merely affirms the poet-speakers’ sociopolitical worth.³¹⁶ For instance, Shepherd claims in a 1998 interview that “People like the late Essex Hemphill basically wrote to assert a black gay identity” (293). He prefaces this comment by saying, “I’m all for people affirming themselves, but that’s not what literature is for.” This is not to say that Shepherd did not believe in representing the lives of black gay men living with AIDS, but that such a focus in poetry negates, from his perspective, lyric’s primary goal of presenting the self in an ongoing, multifarious, and dynamic

state toward the subsequent ends of preserving the other. Put another way, Shepherd insists that the lyric self should not be affirmed, or confirmed, and thereby culturally taxonomized and apprehended, but created and regenerated continually by its relationship to its other. While the former method limits the self by binding it to socio-historic definitions, the latter method, Shepherd asserts, allows for a complex multi-faceted self approaching wholeness but not yet fully defined and, thus, reified.

In his prose, Shepherd frequently makes the point that even though socio-historic circumstances impact the lyric self, they should not be seen as constituting that self. Indeed, in the same interview mentioned above, Shepherd declares that “gayness” and “blackness” are naturally “part of the material” (293) with which he and Phillips, who he directly names, work. However, he insists that Black Art, Black Nationalism, and even early black gay AIDS poetry limit the lyric self’s necessary task of endlessly becoming. Along these lines, his book of essays describes a conference in which Shepherd spoke on a panel alongside a black lesbian performance poet (left unnamed) who, “asserted that poems about spring or snow had no relevance to black people or to poor people or to HIV positive people” (52). He calls this logic “reductive,” because, as he writes, “in this view black people, poor people, HIV positive people have no experiences other than being black, being poor, being HIV positive, are nothing but their social labels, and thus don’t experience spring or snow” (52). Shepherd claims that this restrictive sociopolitical doctrine reduces lyric voice to ossified types and argues that if one follows this logic to its end, “not only could a white person have nothing to say to a black person, or a straight person to a gay person, but by definition a black person could have nothing to say to a white person, or a woman to a man, because poetry is simply the reflection of identity.” “So,” he adds, “there would be no reason for a white person to read anything written

by a black person.”³¹⁷ While this characterization of “identity poetics” might unfairly misprision the sophistication of early black gay AIDS poets in regards to understanding the interplay between self and persona as well as self and a multiplicity of intersecting audiences, Shepherd’s point is that, by neglecting the specificity of experience depicted (or, perhaps, created) in the address between the lyric self and other, identity poets (early black gay AIDS poets in particular) fail to meet what he sees as the main lyric objective of connecting the self with specific alterity.

To be sure, in their poetry as well, both Shepherd and Phillips express a distrust of “identity poetics.” For instance, Phillips’ “Passing” involves the impasse found between preserving the self and specific other and placing the lyric self in a tradition of black gay representation. Caught in an oedipal battle with his predecessors, both biological and literary, the lyric speaker primarily discusses his dislike of Hughes. Although never mentioned by name, Hughes appears throughout, as when Phillips writes: “The Famous Black Poet is / speaking of the dark river” (ll.8-9). Repeatedly comparing Hughes to his deceased father, the poet-speaker suggests these imagined similarities are the root of his dislike. In this way, the poem argues subtextually that the poet-speaker must protest his connection to lyric tradition, black gay lyric tradition specifically, if he is to preserve the particularity of the specific self and other (the lyric speaker and his father). Identity poetics, in other words, threatens to erase or obscure the specificity of the poem’s central subjects. The title of the poem, in fact, highlights this risk since it conflates a controversial term of identity politics from the Harlem Renaissance (“Passing”) with a deathly telos. The poet-speaker clearly does not desire to “pass” as a white speaker, in both senses of the word “pass,” nor does he wish to “pass,” in both senses, as a black one. No matter who the speaker identifies with, identity poetics threatens to erase the specificity of the poem’s central subjects and place them in the past. What the poem ultimately protests, then, is

Hughes' implicit codification, or delimiting, of the black gay lyric speaker. In this way, Phillips expresses skepticism over the fascination of early black gay AIDS poets with the Harlem Renaissance as well as their sacrifice of the lyric self to historicity in order to make the black gay poetic tradition matter to the communal present. Ending, "the Famous Black Poet / say[s] nothing I want to understand" (ll.45-46), the poem implies that the lyric self must not let the past delimit and thereby annex, or erase, it.

Moreover, Shepherd expresses a distrust of identity poetics not only because it locates the self in the past and erases its particularity, but also because its logic always reduces the lyric self to an abject and isolated state. For instance, "Paradise," a meditation on the poet-speaker's optimal relationship to post-Romantic lyric tradition, confesses two-thirds of the way through that a focus on tradition can only lead to mimicry and therefore a lack of agency: "I don't know / the names of flowers, though I can mimic / those who do" (ll.19-21). Referring insistently to Romantic tropes of apostrophizing nature, especially birds, the Shepherd's speaker frames his impression of being an imposter in racialized terms. Halfway through, he writes:

Swallow, swallow, when shall I
be like the swallow, singing the rape
of my voice, but singing past the rape, something
my own to sing? And not to live by white men's
myths [. . .] or drown [. . .] (ll.12-18)

Perhaps referring to Tennyson's "The Princess: O Swallow," Shepherd asserts that because of his race, and possibly because of his putative subservience to masculinist heteronormativity, his voice teeters on the edge of "drown[ing]." He at once apostrophizes and identifies with the swallow, who Tennyson's speaker asks to convey his desires to a princess, and in this way suggests that his mimicry of tradition ultimately makes him a disempowered mouthpiece for it. While Shepherd has claimed in his prose that ancient myths need not necessarily be considered

the property of white male poets alone,³¹⁸ “Paradise” suggests that the black gay lyric self becomes, when framed by identity poetics, fundamentally excluded from official verse culture and that which makes lyric lyric. When framed by identity poetics, the black gay self slips from a speaker with agency to a conduit or object without agency.

However, the poem does not lament the poet-speaker’s exclusion from Romantic tradition, but sees, rather, that tradition as limiting the self and existentially threatening it. To be sure, the poem ends ambivalently when the lyric speaker declares, “Skylar, I don’t know / if you can find that paradise, or lead me to / the blackened ruin of my song” (ll.26-28). Overtly referring to Shelley here, Shepherd ends his poem by asserting that the exuberant understanding of nature as embodying an idealized relationship to the divine or sublime (Shelley’s skylark, for instance, trills its notes spontaneously and perfectly) might only be an elusive myth for the Romantics or any poet who follows. Presenting the skylark as a metonym for this Romantic notion, Shepherd asserts that Shelley only *thought* he could find paradise by apostrophizing—or Adamically controlling—nature. Moreover, Shepherd’s use of the phrase “blackened ruin,” imbricated as it is with the poem’s preceding racialized language, once more positions the poet-speaker’s fears of tradition and the logic of identity poetics as leading to his lack of presence and agency. Identity poetics, in other words, only leads Shepherd’s speaker to the reductive notion that his voice is derivative and always already relegated to the past. His “song”—an allusion to the choral origins of lyric, Romantic tradition’s figurative use of the word, and early black gay AIDS poetry’s notion of lyric as performance—can only place the lyric self in a ruined and racially limiting landscape. This is to say, unlike the early black gay AIDS poets who wished to cohere a black gay identity and community through a notion of the choral lyric (indeed, “Paradise” uses the word “song” throughout ambivalently), Shepherd and Phillips insist that returning to the

traditions of the lyric genre—rather than utilizing lyric as a mode of address that continually generates and complicates the self and other—only leads to isolation, pastward-ness, and abjection.

Although neither of these poets denies the fact that forces of sociopolitical history shape the self and other, they both indicate that mimicking, focusing on, or heeding the tropes of tradition (especially the performance-oriented aspect of tradition) disallows their AIDS speaker's the ability to generate and thereby preserve the self and the other in the ongoing present. While early black gay AIDS poets assert that harnessing poetic tradition (its dramatic origins in particular) can open up a trans-historical community that addresses the concerns of the present, Shepherd argues that this utilitarian purpose restricts lyric's ability to escape the sociopolitical and past-ward trappings of history. In his essay, "The Other's Other: Against Identity Poetry, for Possibility," collected in *Orpheus in the Bronx*, he writes:

The identity card school of poetry is very popular in our current era, when rhetorical fantasies of democracy and equality in cultural life have become tin-pot substitutes for the real things in social, political, and economic life. But literature is one of the few areas of life in which I do *not* feel oppressed, in which I have experienced true freedom. In the literary realm one is not bound by social constructions of identity, or required to flash one's assigned identity card: one can be anyone, everyone, or no one at all. This is one of literature's most precious qualities, the access it allows us to otherness (including our otherness to ourselves), and it is one of the things that I cherish most about poetry. (51)

Shepherd boldly asserts that nothing intrinsically oppressive exists in regards to literature (poetry specifically) because its referents (the lyric I especially) are not inherently linked to or dependent upon any particular social identity. He suggests that lyric address apart from poetic tradition—that is, the phenomenological structure of lyric—can generate and regenerate the self and therefore other (and attending others) perpetually. In other words, what might be called "lyric loss"—that is, the inability of the self to define, apprehend, and reify the self and other fully—

becomes for Shepherd, as well as Phillips (but to a lesser and less explicit degree), ontological and, subsequently, sociopolitical possibility. Lyric's non-utility, lyric's melancholia, transforms, in this way, for later black gay AIDS poets into what might be termed "lyric possibility."

Put otherwise, although the Western canon has historically excluded black gay poets from among its ranks, lyric's address between the always tenuous self and other epitomizes for later black gay AIDS poets lyric's non-utilitarian ability to fashion and refashion the self (and therefore the other and others) continually, theoretically keeping the self (and all it contains) vital and thereby proliferating it (and all it contains) throughout the ongoing present. Indeed, Shepherd writes in "The Other's Other" as well, "I seek from literature an image of who or what I could be, of what the world itself could be, an image of the 'as if' rather than of the 'as is'"(43) and "The encounter that poetry can provide with a realm of experience not defined by or limited to the social (however much it may engage and interrogate that realm) is the most valuable and liberatory thing poetry has to offer in our overdetermined world" (54). Because lyric presents the self and other as always precariously teetering between definition and lack therefore, it provides the poet-speaker with the ability to approach describing an emergent sense of self never fully present or socially validated, on the one hand, but never fully absent and socially codified, on the other. Shepherd's lyric melancholia fixates not only on what the self is not and what the self has lost but also on what the self might be and what it might regain. This is to say, early black gay AIDS poets work to transform the black gay community into an intentional object circulating in the ongoing sociopolitical present by sacrificing their specific selves and others, as well as lyric's ethic of melancholia, to the past; but later black gay poets redirect AIDS poetry's focus from communal concerns to a continual parsing and perpetuation of the self. The lyric self—or the self constituted on the page and via address—for these later poets is not an isolating obstacle for the

ethically-conscious poet but the very key to preventing loss and abjection whether in the private or, ultimately, public realm.

In other words, while early black gay AIDS poets sacrifice the lyric self (and other) to the past in order to reorganize the hierarchic evaluations between identitarian categories (gay/straight, black/white, female/male) as well as incite a communal response to these ends, later black gay AIDS poets reassert the necessity of lyric's melancholic imperatives in preserving the self (and, therefore, other and others) in a state of becoming, or self-fashioning, that approximates a state of volition. The earlier view interrogates the political valences of the lyric self as it exists throughout poetic tradition and attempts to dissolve the isolation of the lyric self, especially the black gay lyric self; the later view suggests the self-in-process, or the lyric self, constitutes an epistemological site for otherness and alterity that paradoxically undermines and dissolves the lyric self's primary isolation and abjection. The stress both of these views place (when put in concert) on the paratextual valences and pliability of the lyric self leads, as my final chapter will discuss, among contemporary and subsequent AIDS poets, to a post-identity poetics, or a quasi-poststructuralist politics and aesthetics, what I term in the next chapter, "lyric queerness." Lyric queerness employs direct address's indeterminacies to preserve the differences between the self (or selves) and others and, at the same time, paradoxically deconstruct those differences and their related demographic categories that deleteriously confine all selves and others. Unlike these subsequent AIDS poets, neither early nor later black gay AIDS poets could be said to deconstruct directly a coherent notion of the self or other—rather, they work to harness, in their own ways, the self's ghostly and intangible nature which lyric accentuates. While the early school of black gay poets sets the lyric self to collective ends by sacrificing it before an imagined audience, the latter school emphasizes the lyric self's never fully achieved—

and therefore still vibrant, active, and vital—individualism. This is to say, both early and later black gay AIDS poets utilize, in their own ways, the notion of a coherent self (even if sacrificed; even if not fully actualized) to improve the circumstances of and rescue black gay individuals, directly or indirectly, throughout and because of the AIDS epidemic. For these two schools of black gay AIDS poetry, a question of ethics recurrently endures unanswered: to what degree should lyric melancholia be relinquished or focused upon in order to do the most sociopolitical good (whether that notion of good is couched in functionalist or philosophical paradigms)?

Indeed, Assotto Saint's slim volume *Stations* (1989) uniquely constitutes a conceptual bridge between these two schools of thought, representing both the differences and commonalities they share. It does so by undecidably vacillating throughout between foregrounding an ethics of melancholia (a dedication to individualism) or an ethics of activism (a dedication to collectivity). Always fluctuating between the two registers of ethics, never finding common ground between the two per se, *Stations* laments the loss of the specificities of the complex self in the AIDS era and works to bolster the formation of a black gay community. "In the Fast Lane," for instance, located a quarter of the way through the volume, borrows its title from an often reiterated phrase in *And the Band Played On* (1987),³¹⁹ which Shilts uses to depict the hypothesis that the controversial "promiscuity" of gay sexual liberation led to urban gay communities bearing the brunt of the AIDS crisis. Immediately relating, therefore, to broad sociopolitical concerns, the poem correspondingly describes two lovers fleeing (or, flying) from "some strange gay plague" (l.23). However, the semi-concrete, wing-like poem, which eventually presents all of its lines in reverse order, centralizes the notion of the specific self (and other); at the exact center of the poem and in bold, the words "i looked at you look at me" (l.25; original lower case) appear only once and comprise the only line not repeated in the poem's

mirror-like structure. The lack of repetition in this context draws attention to the line as well as the line's image of phenomenological transposal and reflection. The lower case "i" equates the self and other in an egalitarian fashion while the content of the line implies that the self creates the other only to confront a gaze that creates the self in turn. The line begins and ends with the lyric I ("i" and "me") and this lyric I parenthetically contains the lyric you. However, this transposal—this translation of the self into the other and back again—and its relationship to an ethic of mourning takes place for the lyric speaker as well as the observing reader in the past. In other words, the poem at once sacrifices the specific self and other to the past as well as, for a moment, works to establish them, or at least their absences, as the melancholic object around which the epidemic and ongoing present flows—or, in the case of this wing-like poem, floats, glides, or flies toward the following page in the book and therefore the future. The self's unending creation of the other and its own alterity as well as the past-tense loss of this activity functions as the conceptual center or intentional object around which the imagined post-AIDS future finds form. But unlike Hemphill, who continually addresses his ruminations on the failure of melancholia to preserve the self and other to the collective present in *Ceremonies*, Saint does not explicitly shift his lyric focus to the collective present (and, therefore, elegiac purposes).

In a similar undecidable vein, Saint recurrently presents his melancholic concerns while simultaneously seeking an identitarian framework for creating beneficial sociopolitical change in response to the AIDS crisis. For instance, three-quarters of the way through the volume, on opposing pages, Saint places the despairing poem "The Quilt" across from the militant, clearly activist-oriented, "The March." Reflecting in a fractured, list-like, manner upon the loss of friends ("joe" and "lew" specifically), "The Quilt" compares the AIDS epidemic to the Holocaust, asserting the belief that there can only be a thanapolitical outcome to the crisis as well

as the crisis' representational means by calling them both "100% fatal" (l.21) and "100% futile" (l.20), respectively. Like "official verse culture" AIDS poetry before and contemporary with it, "The Quilt" insists on the abject isolation and deathly telos of its referents. In other words, just like Timothy Liu's poem on the AIDS quilt, also called "The Quilt,"³²⁰ and unlike Hemphill's ultimate conclusions in "When My Brother Fell" and "The Tomb of Sorrows," both of which refer to the AIDS quilt (as previously discussed), Saint's poem presents unremitting melancholia. "The March," however, which alludes in its title to both civil rights and AIDS activism, also refers to Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" through its refrain: "let us not fall like cattle." Saint at once reverses McKay's fatalistic despondency, by asserting that the black community should not acquiesce ("let us not") to a socially systemic thanapolitics, and simultaneously bolsters the attempts of early black gay AIDS poetry to create a trans-historical community out of black literary tradition. While the juxtaposition of these poems presents an irresolvable ethical conflict, the volume ends with two poems that attempt (if not logically or effectively) to blend these ethical contradictions. Both "Chosen of Places" and "Nuclear Lovers" imagine far-off utopian futures emerging from a long-lost black gay past. "Nuclear Lovers" and the volume ends:

we will dig a deep hole
in the earth
lay together
centuries later
when they excavate
they shall hear two hearts
regenerate love
in the universe (ll.8-15)

The image of death, containment, and abjection becomes through this lyric poem, as it addresses its other, a mystical seeding of love (or, melancholic attachment) at the center of an implicitly rejuvenated futurity. Through lyric melancholia and a communal lyric voice ("we"), the volume

asserts—movingly so, if we consider its historical circumstance—that the past can rescue (however fantastically) those in both the past and the future.

To be sure, Saint's interest in genre-blending and the avant-garde often vacillates in its applications between the two governing regime of ethics, trying at times, however impossibly, to interweave the two. For instance, Saint's play *Risin' to the Love We Need: A Multi-Media Theater Piece*, part of which is included as the last selection in *In the Life*, emphasizes the collectively and multi-genre practices (as its subtitle suggests) of a black gay tradition in order to imagine a future unified, rather than sundered, by grief. The play ends with four characters—two of whom are named after Saint and his significant other³²¹—sharing stories about the inspiration they receive from historical black figures like Josephine Baker as well as their grief over the loss of specific gay figures like Harvey Milk just before they collectively sing the play's titular song (most likely composed by Saint himself). This is to say, like other early black gay AIDS poets, Saint couches his melancholic speaker(s) in an amalgamation of genres rooted in grief and aimed at summoning the notion of community through performance. However, in his poetry as well as on the stage, Saint almost never explicitly sacrifices his lyric self and other to the past—when he does so, as in the volume's last poem, it is to imagine their future regeneration. Indeed, Saint often gears his experimental forms, as well as genre-blending, toward preserving the self and other throughout the ongoing present. "Rite of Passage," for example, the third poem in his poetry volume, interlaces rules that the lyric self and other have created for practicing polyamory with crossword-like formations that associatively contemplate democracy, religion, and current affairs. In this avant-garde way, the poem works to preserve the connection between the self and other as they continually move through the difficult passages of the ongoing and social present. Although Saint and other early black gay AIDS poets could enact a postmodernism of resistance

through such experimental fashions here, it should be noted that this expression of postmodernism recurrently upholds the self and other as already absent utilitarian examples for the present. In other words, Saint repeatedly expresses a desire to preserve the lyric self and other while always already representing them as examples that might improve the ongoing present; he deploys the activist strategies of early black gay AIDS poets while anticipating the devotion of later black gay AIDS poets to an ethic of mourning. He uses, simply put, experimental forms rather than indeterminate lyric address to jostle between the two regimes of ethics.

This is to say, most early black gay AIDS poetry insists that the lyric voice is inherently coupled with whiteness, isolation, and abjection and therefore must be framed by communal ends even if those ends relegate the speaker and its referents to the past; later black gay AIDS poetry contends, however, that lyric voice must be separated from its historic appropriations and applied, instead, toward the impossible task of constantly inventing and thereby preserving the self (as well as the phenomenological world that emanates from and surrounds it). These notions lead to the earlier school's emphasis on genre-blending and performance and the later school's emphasis on lyric voice as a process that presents the self and other as unending and present possibility. Both schools, however, concur that lyric can play an integral role in negotiating the relationship between the self and its surroundings (particularly, the "black gay" or "marginalized" self) and, therefore, neither of these schools freely deconstructs the boundaries between the self and otherness. Even Shepherd, who recognizes that the self is unstable, when represented or not, applies this instability toward the ethical ends of promoting particular presences rather than dismantling social categories; in his 1998 interview, he says, "Beauty is about coherence, which is why beauty is piercing, is painful, because the self is incoherent, and beauty offers this possibility of a wholeness that's always just out of reach" (302). Shepherd

implies here and elsewhere that the self-in-process—the aestheticized lyric self, the beautified self—promises its own rescue by earnestly reaching toward a wholeness it, nonetheless, never attains. However, as the next chapter discusses, the attention early and later black gay AIDS poets bring to the social valences and pliability of the lyric self lay the groundwork for following and contemporary poets (such as Tory Dent, Mark Doty, Rafael Campo, Henri Cole, Gil Caudros, and Richard McCann) to push toward a quasi-poststructuralist lyricism. This subsequent aesthetic and sociopolitical philosophy of lyric employs, as I shortly discuss, the possibilities of its melancholia (or, the indeterminacies of lyric address) not only to coalesce and thereby rescue the self and other, but also to universalize and dismantle the abjection and isolation of the self throughout the collective present, especially in the AIDS era.

Chapter Four: The Emergence of Lyric Queerness

Collected in her second volume, *HIV, Mon Amour* (1999), and falling, therefore, slightly beyond the historical parameters of my dissertation, Tory Dent's poem "Family Romance" nevertheless addresses the question of what it means to be a female poet writing about AIDS more acutely than any of the poems in her previous volume, *What Silence Equals* (1993). It also addresses this question more directly than any AIDS poem published by Dent's female contemporaries, such as the anti-elegies written about gay men by Adrienne Rich and Marylyn Hacker for the 1989 anthology *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS*.³²² In fact, Dent's earliest poetry volume functions, effectively, as a milestone in American poetry because it is the first to be published by a seropositive, female poet. To be sure, *What Silence Equals* predates the AIDS poetry volumes written by Elizabeth Alexander and Sonia Sanchez (I discuss their volumes in my third chapter³²³); and while Alexander and Sanchez's volumes elegize the loss of specific others (gay men, in their particular cases), Dent's features a poet-speaker coping with loss *and* the personal, bodily effects of AIDS. Bleakly perhaps, the title of Dent's first volume in conjunction with its content repurposes the ACT UP slogan "Silence Equals Death" to suggest that what poetry equals is—effectively enough—silence and death; and yet, correlative with its title, the volume taps into the spirit of coalition-building and militancy associated with ACT UP by presenting a female and seropositive lyric agent situated alongside a variety of cultural others.³²⁴ For instance, poems like "Jade" from *What Silence Equal* express a lyric melancholia toward a specific lost other while also associating the speaker's specific experiences—by way of a Whitmanian litany—to those in other demographics: "Who," she

writes in “Jade,” “stigmatized the pigmentation of my skin? [. . .] Who shamed the muscular backs of two men / Making love in the privacy of their bedroom?” (80-81).³²⁵ Like Whitman’s capacious lyric I, Dent’s speaker contains multitudes. Her lyric voice works to coalesce women, people of color, and gay men around specific losses and shared sociopolitical concerns.

This is all to say, Dent’s later poem, “Family Romance,” presents a poet-speaker particularly invested in balancing the specifics of experience with larger sociopolitical concerns by way of a multitudinous lyric I. Referring to the metaphysical instability of others and the self—the self who is always already shaped by others—in its very title, “Family Romance” begins: “Whenever I catch two men kiss, in the streets, or in the movies, / I’m filled with so much envy, always wanting to be filled up / the way a woman would” (ll.1-3). In this complex opening, Dent strikes a tone that shimmers along the edge of the earnest and the ironic; the poem itself shimmers along the edge of naturalizing and deconstructing the speaker’s experience as a woman. After all, in just a few words, Dent points to a number of her speaker’s impulses, which are tightly knotted together: the speaker’s desire to compare groups of the culturally abject in the AIDS era (gay men and women); the speaker’s desire to connect with (gay) men sexually; the speaker’s semi-ironic desire to feel like a “woman would”; the speaker’s semi-ironic and self-abnegating desire to act like an agent-less vessel in a phallogentric culture; and the speaker’s meta-poetic desire to participate in an emerging tradition of mostly same-sex AIDS lyrics. Possibly working to undermine the most unsettling of these desires, the second stanza of the poem flips and problematizes the gender and sexual roles they rest upon: “I’ve lubricated my fist up to my elbow with the best of them; / and suckled a man’s tits as roughly as if he were a woman and I a lesbian. / I’ve witnessed his eyes roll back into his head with breathy subjugation. / But I am, alas, like their enemy, their opposite, yet not their equal” (ll.16-19). By depicting a

female agent penetrating and dominating a man, Dent's speaker questions what some feminist scholars, such as Andrea Dworkin,³²⁶ have claimed to be the unavoidable violence and resulting abjection enacted upon women via heterosexual intercourse. By way of this poem's indeterminate ironies, Dent questions this feminist thought without exactly upending it.

By the poem's last of five stanzas, Dent suggests a schematic for understanding the relationship between those granted cultural agency (implicitly, here, straight white men) and the many culturally abject others. Her schematic harnesses the mercurial nature of the lyric I toward poststructuralist ends. The last stanza of "Family Romance" reads in full:

I'm more than the man who mounts deep inside the man, inside me, the woman.
I'm both the truth and the lie about God.
I'm both but I'm not a hermaphrodite, nor a cross-dresser, nor do I lip-sync
"Stormy Weather" at the Hellfire Club on Ladies Night.
I'm both the id like the lake, mum and blind,
and the hyperbolic superego of the sky, tyrannically weak.
I'm both the night and a particle of the night, animadverted into annihilation.
I'm both the shark and the x-ray, my future and the elderly hand.
I'm both the killer and the lover, the father and the lioness.
I'm both the Acropolis and the gorgeous disengagement of the Parthenon. (ll.47-56)

Dent employs the image of how she might have become infected with HIV in an American context ("the man who mounts deep inside the man, inside me") to propose a series of regressions that shatter the boundaries of the self, transforming it into more than an abject isolated speaker. To be sure, the poem represents the lyric voice rhetorically vacillating from a state of being to a state of nonbeing that approximates Leo Bersani's principal proposal in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987). In that famous essay,³²⁷ Bersani argues that the shattering of the self through sexual *jouissance*, or sexual passivity, beneficially destroys the ideological distinction drawn between the self and other that inimically forms the basis for cultural abjection. In other words, Bersani promotes the notion of self-sacrifice and self-dissolution as a means of deconstructing the divide between subjectivity and abjection for the benefit of those who are

culturally marginalized. In this vein, early queer theorist Lee Edelman argues, as previously discussed too, that the cultural abjection of the “passive” gay male during the AIDS crisis presents an opportunity to rewrite identity as a “fluidity of differences” (“The Mirror and the Tank” 31) rather than as a set of rigid and oppositional categorizations.

Dent puts forward an even more complex argument in “Family Romance” than either Bersani or Edelman do in their influential essays. While conjuring the notion of the sexual outsiders on the border of gender lines (“hermaphrodites” and “cross-dressers”), she suggests that her lyric I is explicitly not them and also implicitly them; her lyric agent is simultaneously a manifestation of herself, the idea of others, abstract notions (two men kissing, God, truth, lies, the id, the superego, strength, weakness, a foreshortened future, a father- and mother-figure, the notion of protest), and annihilation itself. In other words, this late poem by Dent crystalizes a phenomenological notion of *jouissance* into an epistemological site for understanding not only human others but also an unlimited notion of alterity, one that includes human beings, inanimate objects, and abstractions. To be sure, Dent articulates this notion in her earlier AIDS poetry volume as well. For instance, “Jade” ends: “Finally you touch me, and finality explodes / Into plains of thought, layers of earth in an archeological site, / Into the history of boxes, / Until finally they collapse within themselves / And vanish into extinction” (83). In this final image of *What Silence Equals*, Dent asserts that the nucleus of the lyric touch between the self and other can function as an access point to an ever-expanding everything as well as an ever-contracting nothingness. As if directly responding to Monette’s earlier impasse between the ethics of the melancholia and the ethics of activism, Dent maintains the centrality of the self and other in the lyric mode but also suggests that this primary ethical need for melancholic touch represented by that mode leads to an ethical engagement with everything beyond the scope of the self and other,

including the concepts of everything and nothingness. Her work as a whole, just like the work of AIDS poets contemporary to her, employs the flexibility of the lyric voice to retain the specific self and other as well as acknowledge and engage with the volatility of that self and other in their ongoing cultural, ontological, physical, and historical contexts.

To be sure, the closing lines of “Family Romance” point to Eve Sedgwick’s foundational thoughts on the relationship between those who are culturally abject and the society that ostensibly abjects them. In the second paragraph of her introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick famously asserts that there are two ways to understand the relationship between the homosexual and the heterosexual: one view, which she calls *minoritizing*, asserts that this relationship only shapes the lives of those termed “homosexual”; the other view, which she deems *universalizing*, claims that this relationship is “an issue of continuing, determinative importance” to everyone because it defines the culturally central epistemology of sexuality (1). Exceeding her local goal—appropriately enough—of articulating the significance of homosexuality in Western culture, Sedgwick inaugurated a regime of identity politics and phenomenological thought, often referred to as “queer theory,” that sees the specific and the universal as mutually “determinative.” This is to say, Dent—who was a PhD graduate student in literature during the emergence of queer theory—suggests in “Family Romance” and elsewhere that the notion of the specific as an epistemological site for understanding its contexts and vice versa translates for lyric into an infinitely expandable and collapsible synecdochal relationship between the self and all alterity; indeed, Dent’s lyric agent is always already “both” the specific self and its context, both a particle of the night and the night, both the Parthenon and the Acropolis. Put in the terms of lyric theorists, such as W. R. Johnson, and Heather Dubrow,³²⁸ the lyric voice historically vacillates between a monologic and choric register; Dent and her cohort

of AIDS poets emphasize the vacillating nature of lyric—rather than adhering to one side of its proclivities, either that of direct address or choral performance, as preceding AIDS poets do—in order to address the competing and yet interrelated ethical imperatives dictated by the specific and the specific’s context.

In other words, this Sedgwickian notion of epistemology, which seems to have grown directly out of the work of slightly earlier AIDS theorists, such as Bersani and Edelman,³²⁹ also responds to the ethical impasses extrapolated from the AIDS crisis by lyric poetry. (To be sure, as this dissertation’s introduction explains, Sedgwick often points to the importance of AIDS in precipitating her theories and was personally connected to a variety of AIDS poets, such as Gary Fisher and Rafael Campo.³³⁰) While Monette’s anti-elegies primarily explore (and reify to some degree) the binaries of the self and other, presence and absence, the private and the public, the past and the present, melancholia and activism, the evidentiary and the representative, lyric and elegy, lyric and narrative, lyric and dramatic monologue, deixis and historicity, technocracy and protensivity, Monette’s immediate contemporaries (as my second and third chapters explore) add to this mix of oppositions the binaries of touch and quarantine,³³¹ gay and straight, white and black, abject and subject, formalism and anti-formalism, lyric melancholia and lyric agency, monologue and dialogue, poetry and music, performer and audience, and medicine and thanapolitics. Put otherwise, prompted by the convergence and incommensurability of melancholia and activist imperatives (or, the ethics of the specific and the sociopolitical) during the AIDS crisis, Monette and other early AIDS poets highlighted the unique generic and modal qualities of lyric address that always already point to the border between the monologue and dialogue and therefore the border between the Cartesian isolated self and the phenomenological context of a populated existence exterior to that Cartesian self. As honed by the real world

imperatives of the AIDS crisis, lyric places the self and alterity at the center of all ethical consideration; all oppositions and binaries produced by these early AIDS poets find their roots in the touch and distance between the self and alterity (whether specific or communal). As a result, the earliest AIDS poetry provided a staging ground for cultural theorists and subsequent AIDS poets, such as Dent, to configure the self and other, or the specific and the general, in a way that does not isolate or sacrifice and thereby abject the specific self (and the specific other it mirrors and intends). In short, the predominance of lyric anti-elegy in the AIDS era establishes the lyric speaker as a symbol of the self quavering on the divide between presence and absence, isolation and connection, pastward-ness and present-ness (or presence), and abjection and agency.

As this chapter will argue, subsequent AIDS poets, those writing in the mid-1990s (an era that also saw significant advances in antiviral drug therapies³³²), use the ghostly nature of the lyric self, which always quavers between the poles of these supposed oppositions, to suggest that these oppositional terms have synecdochal, or nesting, relationships to one another. In this semi-poststructuralist formulation, instead of the self and other (as well as the poles of their related binaries) having categorical differences, they (and their related poles) have ever-shifting, unstable, metonymic, and synecdochal relationships to one another. The lyric poet's work, as well as the work of AIDS and early queer theorists, becomes problematizing putative power dynamics and ontological assumptions regarding how these categories relate to one another. This diverse set of writers—poets and theorists that are, for instance, male, female, black, white, Asian, and Latino—work to blur these categories' boundaries to some degree, to tease out their similarities, and to dash the facile and codified definitions underscoring them. To be sure, the diversity of this mid-1990s cohort necessitated at the very least that they problematize the cultural alignment of gay men and AIDS in the United States to disrupt the apathy directed at

and imposed on them by the “general population.”³³³ In other words, this chapter argues that these later and yet still early AIDS poets—primarily, Dent, Campo, Mark Doty, Henri Cole, Gil Cuadros, and Richard McCann—respond to a variety of converging elements: their contemporaries’ growing dissatisfaction with the untenable ethical conflicts precipitated by the AIDS crisis; the theoretical suggestion that a way to defuse these ethical impasses would be to deconstruct the boundary of the self and other; and the spreading effects of the biomedical crisis on supposedly disparate demographics. Indeed, Bersani’s main recommendation to address the AIDS crisis in his famous essay is that by building a coalition between gay men and women, PWAs could upend the binaries of the abject and subject as well as the self and other.³³⁴ In her seminal article, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” (1987), Paula Treichler makes a similar suggestion; noting the then popular but specious notion that “the general population” would remain immune to the AIDS epidemic, Treichler argues, “AIDS is to be a fundamental force of twentieth-century life, and no barrier in the world can make us ‘safe’ [. . .] we cannot distinguish self from not-self” (69). According to this cohort of writers (both poets and theorists), distinguishing the self from the not-self, or the ego from the not-ego—even for the purposes of preserving the specificity of the self and other—leads to a detrimental chain of binary thinking that indefinitely and abjectly isolates the self, and PWAs, from the specific other and all others.

Accordingly, AIDS poetry as a whole from the mid-1990s works to deconstruct divisions between the lyric self and the not-self as well as the increasingly abject gay-male body and “the general population.” Working to ameliorate the abject and isolated state of the specific lyric self and the gay male body during the AIDS epidemic, this stage of AIDS poetry opts, paradoxically enough, to erase to some degree the notion of the discrete self and body. Like Dent, these poets

use a synecdochal model of the lyric self to propose that the experience of abjection is at once individually felt and universalizable. In this way, they hope to retain the isolated lyric I's melancholia and simultaneously respond to the lyric I's social contexts. For instance, the closing lines of Dent's first poem in her first volume, "Words Aren't Cheap," attempt to balance specificity (or melancholia) with universality (or sociopolitical concerns) through depicting overlapping, nesting, and even oppositional perspectives: "Although it should, it doesn't matter what you died of, / your sickness made sublime (much too) by our contracting lives [. . .] we love instead as representative of you [. . .] all specious things [. . .] even the incredibly ugly skyscraper / because we regard it, however conciliatorily, / in the way and not in the way / you did" (ll.40-51). By way of her pronominal "we," Dent subtly weds her isolation with the isolation of others as well as subtly frames her lost and relinquished other as the lynchpin of this unification. The lost other becomes simultaneously and paradoxically specific, central, sublime, and inconsequential. She also, as this chapter discusses later on, touches on the relationship between the alterity of a specific lost other and that of "all specious things." But overall, Dent's poems and those of her cohort frequently oscillate and churn between the self and all things in order to interweave supposedly irreconcilable oppositions stemming from the self and other's ever-increasing post-death distance. While the earliest AIDS poetry pointed toward the ethical necessity, as well as impossibility, of balancing these oppositional terms, this stage of AIDS poets implicitly argues that lyric's fundamentally flexible and mercurial voice can potentially resolve these ethical incongruities. This is to say, these poets see lyric as a fluid means of shifting perspectives (from a confessional voice to a dramatic personae, from a lone I to a choric we), of weaving between genres (if we think of it as a mode of direct address rather than as a genre in and of itself³³⁵), and of connecting with an equally indeterminate "you" (the specific

other, an unspecified other, the reader, and a plural other). For these mid-1990s AIDS poets, lyric becomes not merely a platform for anti-elegiac address but also a means to deconstruct the inimical differentiation of the self and otherness in all its manifestations. These poets—and the now-historic confluence of theory, biopolitics, and literature they exemplify and catalyzed—suggest that among genres lyric is the most analogous to the sociopolitical notion of “queer.” Put otherwise, as will be discussed at length, lyric anti-elegy, or non-closure, transforms in the AIDS era into a philosophy and practice of poststructuralist undecidability.

In Sedgwickian terms, AIDS poets began in the mid-1990s to use lyric’s ability to address, or touch, the other as well as confuse the self with others in order to universalize the lyric self’s intrinsic sense of abjection. For Dent and her cohort, cultural abjection is not a marginal experience but, paradoxically, an epistemologically and ontologically central one. For example, one of the most celebrated books of AIDS poetry, Mark Doty’s *My Alexandria* (1993), often depicts the lyric self contemplating its relationship to a specific other (Doty’s late partner Wally Roberts) as well as myriad cultural others who are usually depicted as—almost explicitly so—abject. For instance, many of the volume’s poems such as “Human Figures,” “Esta Noche,” “Broadway,” and “Chantuese” show the lyric I encountering homeless men and women as well as drag queens of color. For Doty, the individuals in these social categories become representatives of cultural abjection in racial and gendered terms that mirror his own sense of social abjection. Most notably, “Broadway” interlaces two narratives about encountering the homeless. In the first encounter, a woman asks the poet-speaker for money on the street. The speaker retrospectively muses: “She was only asking for change // so I don’t know why I took her hand” (ll.21-22). Later in the poem, he adds: “[she] must have wondered at my impulse to touch her, / which was like touching myself” (ll.50-51). In the second encounter, an African-

American man moves the poet-speaker by reciting original lyric poems on the subway in exchange for money. Through these encounters, Doty's implicitly abject gay male AIDS-era speaker and yet culturally-elevated educated (white) male speaker finds similarity rather than difference between his lyric self and others, blurring the lines, in this way, of the subject and abject to suggest an omnipresent sense of interiority and unreachable alterity.³³⁶ In other words, Doty frequently connects the dots between his speaker's sense of abjection and what he frames as that of others. He paradoxically works (if problematically, as will be touched on) to universalize the experience of abjection itself beyond the scope of the isolated lyric Cartesian self. To be sure, this gesture of cultural and lyric touch that problematizes the boundary between the lyric self and social other differs from gestures made in earlier AIDS poetry. As I discuss near the end of my second chapter, early AIDS poets, such as Thom Gunn and Tim Dlugos, often compare the lyric speaker to culturally abject others only to dismiss the comparison and thereby retain through contrast a remnant sense of agency and subjectivity for their particular lyric voices.³³⁷ Conversely, Doty and his cohort constantly emphasize rather than dismiss this comparison.

To be sure, Doty's drag poems also draw ontological connections between the lyric self and cultural other in order to universalize the experience of abjection as well as draw attention to the inherent instability, or constructed-ness, of subjectivity itself. "Esta Noche," for instance, persistently focuses on what the speaker tacitly illustrates as the marginal experiences of Latin drag queens. Finding metaphors for the cultural lack that an abject positionality marks, the speaker compares the gap in a drag queen's front teeth with the gap-like door of a bar's entrance and describes that same drag queen's dress as being "the color of the spaces between streetlamps" (l.30). Through these images, or non-images, of in-between-ness, the poet-speaker

portrays the paradoxical palpability, or presence, of absence and abjection. By the poem's end, the speaker further proposes that this ostensibly abject other becomes a unifying symbol of cultural otherness; referring to both the present moment and the drag queen's dress, the poem ends, "Put it on, / it's the only thing we have to wear" (l.52). While transforming this abject other's performance into a grammatical imperative to all others, Doty implicitly argues that the drag queen's spectacle of otherness is akin, if not identical, to each individual's involuntary process of reiterating their cultural identity each moment. He implicitly, in other words, deconstructs the authenticity or essentialism—and therefore naturalized privilege and superiority—of the cultural subject who is implicitly white, male, and heterosexual. He replaces that subject with the supposedly marginal experience of the culturally abject.

Whether wittingly or not,³³⁸ then, Doty philosophically aligns his AIDS poems with Judith Butler's poststructuralist identity politics, which she first articulated in her book-length study *Gender Trouble* (1990). For Butler and those she influenced, drag became the primary trope for sociopolitical parody—parody being Butler's only prescribed means for incrementally deconstructing what she sees as the foundational and highly-deleterious socially-constructed binaries of sex and gender. To be sure, Joanne Rendell's brief article "Drag Acts: Performativity, Subversion and the AIDS poetry of Rafael Campo and Mark Doty" (2002) argues that Doty and Campo employ the concept of drag in their poems as a means of deconstructing the boundaries between male and female, the gay male body and the putatively healthy straight population, and the self and cultural other. Incidentally, Rendell also demonstrates how both Butler's and Sedgwick's queer theories grew out of a need to address the inimical outcomes of the AIDS crisis.³³⁹ This is to say, Doty and Campo's portrayal of drag (Campo frequently refers to drag as well in his AIDS poetry³⁴⁰) becomes a means of destabilizing a coherent notion of cultural

authority and drawing the putatively marginal experiences of the abject into the vacuum left in this destabilization's wake. Doty's slightly later volume *Atlantis* (1995) makes the connection between the abjection of drag queens, gay men, PWAs, and the lyric self explicit when he ends his long poem "Grosse Fuge" [sic], which describes the AIDS-related death of his friend and former drag queen, Bobby, by asking: "What can I do but echo / myself, vary and repeat?" (179). The poet-speaker then declares: "There is no resolution in the fugue" (179). Here, the speaker suggests that through local acts of subversion—minor variations on what Butler might call the citational or reiterative norm, such as drag or in Doty's case the obsessive and specific melancholia of lyric poetry—the speaker links anti-elegiac grief with poststructuralist resistance. The ending of Doty's poem also anticipates the ending of Dent's later and long masterpiece, "Cinéma Vérité," collected in *HIV, Mon Amour*, that ends, "There is no good last line for this poem" (56). As this chapter's conclusion will discuss, this need to wed non-closure with parody (the connection being that they both seek open-ended possibility rather than cultural codification) positions AIDS poets like Dent, McCann, and even D. A. Powell, as a genealogical bridge between the work of "official verse culture" and poststructuralism that resulted in an influential era of LANGUAGE poetry's legitimization and Elliptical poetry's emergence (as I discuss shortly). This is to say, through tropes and theories of deconstructive parody and synecdochal relationality, Doty, Campo, Dent, and their cohort can reframe (as well as retain) their obsessive anti-elegiac grief as socio-politically subversive variations. Anti-elegy slips into indeterminacy.

Although *My Alexandria*'s deconstruction of the by-definition marginal experience of abjection might owe a debt to the ideological zeitgeist fostered by Butler, it is significant to note that their works appear almost concurrently. Indeed, Butler's second study, *Bodies that Matter*, which emblemized her theories, appeared the same year as Doty's second book of poems

(1993). This is to say, Doty's concurrent use of drag as a trope for deconstruction also grows directly out of the impasses faced by earlier AIDS poets: especially the opposition they observed between the abjection of the lyric self and the implicit presence and volition of those overhearing them in the ongoing present. For example, Doty's lengthy poem, "Chanteuse," which follows "Esta Noches" and "Broadway" in *My Alexandria*, also draws comparisons between the lyric self, the specific other, "a beautiful black drag queen" (26), the famed Greek poet C. P. Cavafy, Cavafy's imagined Alexandria, and New York City as a whole in order to blur the lines between lyric speaker, alterity, and the "audience" as well as the abject self and "the general population." Referring to a particular drag queen, Doty litters phrases like "her lyric that becomes, now, my city" and "when we became her audience" (28) throughout the poem, thereby problematizing the distinction between self and other as well as poet and overhearing reader so much so that by the poem's end, the drag queen's performance becomes a stream of nine possessives parroted by the speaker: "my Alexandria, // my romance [. . .] my splendid chanteuse" (29). With this last possessive, the speaker conflates the drag queen and the lyric voice as well as the supposed historicity of Cavafy's lyric voice. "My" becomes a local and yet universalized pronoun. This is to say, the lengthy poem draws trans-historical connections between the abjection of cultural others and lyric speakers as well as entire cities in order to suggest that the common experience shared by these diverse individuals and populations is that of abjection, or otherness, itself. What is more, by identifying the drag queen as black and as a chanteuse, the poem also refers to the project of early black gay AIDS poets to unify a black gay identity and community through a plurality of lyric voices poised on the edge of written discourse and performance.³⁴¹ For Doty and his cohort, however, deconstructing the boundary between the isolated lyric speaker and the performer does not help to codify a certain social type (and thereby that type's collective

agency); instead, such a deconstruction works to represent these social types while also destabilizes the naturalized circumscriptions of them. Through a semi-poststructuralist lens, then, Doty suggests that performance does not only reconfigure the relationship between performers and audiences (as well individuals and social categories), but also might reveal the unessential performativity of identity itself.

Moreover, while early black gay AIDS poets often saw the performance quality of lyric, especially that of dramatic monologue, as a means to cohere and improve the experience of their specific community and thereby lessen that community's sense of cultural abjection, Doty uses dramatic monologue at times, as well as the blurring of his lyric voice with alterity, to mirror the demographic spread of the AIDS crisis and thereby universalize the experience of cultural abjection. For instance, "Bill's Story" implicitly draws into question the codified associations between the gay-self and AIDS as well as between "the general population" and health. A dramatic monologue from the perspective of a man never identified as gay or straight, "Bill's Story" begins: "When my sister came back from Africa, / we didn't know at first how everything / had changed" (ll.1-3). The poem then discusses the sister's death in 1978 from what would become known as AIDS-related complications. In this way, the poem, which appears late in the volume, undermines the presumption that HIV is a condition originally and primarily confronted by gay men in the United States. The poem also features the dramatic speaker working to preserve the specificity of his lost sister (telling her in the poem's final movement that he will be there for her even after her death) and mulling over images where the edges of the specificity blur away; describing how he would sit backwards on a train he took to visit his sister in the hospital, the speaker says, "I'd sit there and watch where I'd been // waver and blur out, and finally / I liked it, seeing what you've left / get more beautiful, less specific" (ll.42-45). By way

of confusing pronouns and tenses, the speaker signals that the blurring of perspectives and temporalities helps mitigate his senses of loss and isolation. The poem's inclusion in the volume metonymically links the specificity of the gay poet-speaker's cultural and personal experience of grief with that of a broader perspective, in this way linking the experiences of gay men with that of women as well as, possibly, straight men. To be sure, although it is written from the perspective of the volume's explicitly gay lyric speaker, the preceding poem, "Brilliance," focuses on the relationship between a female caregiver and her dying male friend (presumably a gay PWA). In other words, *My Alexandria* does not reflect the melancholia of its primary lyric voice alone; the volume also locates that speaker's isolating experience in a larger unifying field of abjection and grief precipitated by the AIDS epidemic.

This willingness on the part of Doty, Dent, and their cohort to use poststructuralist means to balance specificity with universality also leads these poets to employ metaphors of deconstruction, especially those that imagistically dissolve the boundary between the self and other. This is to say, the earliest AIDS poets favor images and metaphors that describe the self and lost other's containment and retention (as my first two chapters discuss), leading to a sense of abject isolation that mirrors an inimical thanopolitics; Doty, however, favors throughout his many writings, images that blur the boundaries between presence and absence as well as, correspondingly, life and death. Doty's highly-celebrated memoir of Wally's passing entitled *Heaven's Coast* (1996) recurrently describes, as its title indicates, the ever-shifting salt-water marshes near where the two lived as a means of illustrating the fluidity of the frontier between presence and absence.³⁴² This image of fluidity created by shifting bodies of water and shores also finds purchase throughout *My Alexandria* and *Atlantis*. "Night Ferry" and "Becoming a Meadow," two late poems in the earlier volume, explicitly dwell on the ability of water to model

an alluring indeterminacy. While the former poem tacitly compares a sojourn on a night ferry to a phenomenological indeterminacy (“Love, / we are between worlds” [ll.46-47]), the latter poem articulates a model of indeterminacy more overtly; referring to a saltwater marsh near the shore, which he calls a “meadow,” the poetic voice says, “a meadow accepts itself as various, allows / some part of itself to always be going away, / because whatever happens in that blown, // ragged field of grass and sway / is the meadow” (ll.25-29). Near the poem’s end, the poet-speaker asserts: “if one wave breaking says / *You’re dying*, then the rhythm and shift of the whole / says nothing about endings” (ll.55-57). Doty’s speaker discovers a synecdochal and poststructuralist model for absence’s relationship to presence in the fluid relationship between the specific wave and the whole.

Doty’s later AIDS volume, *Atlantis*, valorizes this image of shifting waters and boundaries into a means for characterizing the specific self’s relationship to the lost other as equally built upon presence and absence. The title poem of *Atlantis* takes this poststructuralist image of suspension, between beginnings and ends, specificity and totality, presence and absence, life and death, one step further to suggest that water also becomes an image of cyclicity. Discussing the tides, the poet-speaker declares to his already lost other: “Look, / love, the lost world // rising from the waters again” (150). Through this declaration, the title of the poem and volume itself becomes a symbol for the way that absence (the city of Atlantis lost to the waves) becomes presence (the myth of Atlantis rising from the waves). The word “again” transforms this sense of reemergence into a cycle of absence and presence. One could even say, in pairing Atlantis’ reemergence with the receding, rather than reemergence, of tides, Doty problematizes the binary of absence and presence further. To be sure, “Nocturne in Black and Gold,” a poem that comes later on in the same volume, makes explicit the earlier implied

message of “Night Ferry.” Describing a similar passage through a harbor, the poet-speaker declares that he “feels at home in the huge // indefinition of the fog” (ll.27-28) and repeatedly poses rhetorical questions to his specific lost other that attempt to rewrite absence as presence through the metaphor of water and mist: “If we’re only volatile essence, / permeable, leaking out, // pouring into any vessel bright enough / to lure us, why be afraid?” (ll.32-35); “Haven’t we wanted, / all along, to try on boundlessness [. . .] Isn’t it a pleasure, finally to be vaporous [. . .] without limit?” (ll.58-67); “Doesn’t everything rush / to be something else? / Won’t it be like this, // where you’re going” (ll.85-88). Through combining his relentless melancholic address with images of the watery-in-between, the poet-speaker is at once able to hold onto specificity and suggest the benefits of indeterminacy for both the lost other and the self, so much so he can assert: “I’ve been no one / so many times I’m not the least afraid” (ll.83-84). Although the poem tonally and ironically indicates the melancholic (Dickensonian) speaker may be drowning in bravado,³⁴³ the poem itself extends a metaphor of the in-between into a philosophy of poststructuralist undecidability. The poem ends, speaking to the specific other: “ripple out free / as shimmer is. Go. / Don’t go. Go.” (ll.109-111). This is to say, Doty interweaves tropes of indistinction with anti-elegiac, lyric address to at once retain specificity and allow that specificity to blend into a whole. In this way, Doty can suggest that the poles of absence and presence coexist as separate categories *and* blend into one another.³⁴⁴ Doty signals as well that the AIDS crisis is at once its own specific set of circumstances as well as linked to universalizing questions about life and death.

In fact, poets like McCann, Campo, and Cuadros overtly question the cultural exceptionalism associated with the AIDS crisis by gay culture and the media by and large. This is to say, they problematize the opposition between life and death, as well as the gay-self and

“the general population,” by placing grief precipitated by the AIDS epidemic alongside grief stemming from other origins. Through this contextualization, McCann, Campo, and Cuadros retain the specificity of their losses, due to AIDS, cancer, and aging, while also deconstructing the cultural distinctions between them. McCann’s volume *Ghost Letters* (1994), though in some ways an archetypal book of AIDS anti-elegies, inasmuch as it mostly features a poet-speaker mourning the loss of a particular other due to the crisis,³⁴⁵ also features a speaker placing his sense of grief alongside similar personal experiences. While the first section of the volume situates the poet-speaker’s diffuse melancholia in the context of AIDS (that section begins with the poem “Nights of 1990”) and the last section mourns the loss of his specific other (that section begins with the poem “After You Died”), the central section focuses solely on the premature death and absence of the poet-speaker’s father. This is to say, the volume identifies its lyric voice as gay, male, and AIDS-related while also disrupting that notion by rooting the lyric speaker’s current circumstances to those experienced while growing up in a heteronormative nuclear family. The speaker’s mother, who McCann depicts as a fading southern belle, becomes the model and foil for the speaker’s AIDS-related grief: indeed, both the mother and the poet-speaker seem caught in a haunted melancholic psychic state addled by alcohol. This is to say, *Ghost Letters* at once articulates the particularities of the poet-speaker’s anti-elegiac grief and suggests their universality.

Similarly, Campo and Cuadros locate their experiences relating to the AIDS crisis in a broader landscape of grief and illness. Structured similarly to McCann’s, Campo’s first volume, *The Other Man Was Me: A Voyage to the New World* (1994), additionally explores Campo’s Cuban roots and background as a medical doctor. The book’s first section primarily focuses on the poet-speaker’s attempts to reconcile his Cuban heritage with his gay identity, while the

book's final section focuses on Campo's individual experiences with the AIDS epidemic, such as the short poem "Age 5 Born with AIDS," in which he describes administering medical care to a young PWA. Ironically or undecidably, the poem's title refers to a particular boy named Jaime through statistical and journalist phrasing. The middle section, entitled "Familia," is broken into four sonnet sequences, the first of which, entitled "Song for my Grandfather," discusses the decline and Cancer-related death of the poet-speaker's grandfather.³⁴⁶ The second sonnet sequence, "Song for my Father," features the poet-speaker anticipating the death of his aging father (for example, the fourteenth sonnet in the sequence is titled, "I Imagine He Is Ill"). This is to say, Campo sees the task of melancholically confronting the AIDS crisis as interrelated to confronting illness and death more generally as well as exploring the implications of his heritage and sexuality. To be sure, poems in Campo's following volumes increasingly feature poems about patients dealing with and dying from a variety of illnesses.³⁴⁷ Campo and McCann, thusly, work to preserve the particularities of their experiences with the AIDS crisis while also synecdochally relating the epidemic to a broader set of anti-elegiac and—conflictingly—sociopolitical concerns.

Cuadros' only book, *City of God* (1994), a collection of poems and short stories published a couple years before he died from AIDS-related complications, is tonally more conflicted than comparable works when it comes to comparing AIDS with other illnesses. The volume worries that such a comparison might erase the specific experience of gay male PWAs. For instance, the short story "Reynaldo" places issues of sexuality, race, heritage, and illness into conversation as well as experimentally interweaves a first-person narrative about a mature gay man, a third-person narrative about a younger version of that man, and letters written by both that man's grandmother and the former male lover of his grandfather. This main character's first

person account primarily juxtapose his various complications from AIDS (such as pneumonia and meningitis) with his grandmother's aging, ailing health, and death. While this narrator chafes at his family's disregard for his particular circumstances (his aunt upbraids him for not taking better care of the grandmother and his mother tells others that her son is suffering from "inoperable cancer" [33]), the story also frames the narrator's grief over losing his grandmother and friends to AIDS as comparable or at least resonant with each other (29). What is more, the multi-perspective story formally indicates Cuadros' interest in blurring the boundaries between the gay-self's AIDS-specific circumstances with the circumstances of others. The constant interchange of perspectives throughout "Reynaldo" questions the privileging of any particular one; the story ends, for instance, with the only letter from the perspective of the main narrator's grandmother, which disarms, to some degree, that narrator's previous censure of her implied homophobia. This is to say, despite its recurrent tonal misgivings, *City of God*, like Campo's volume, locates its main speaker, whether narratively or lyrically (a distinction I discuss throughout this chapter), amidst questions pertaining to heritage, sexuality, AIDS, and mutability more generally. Additionally, "Reynaldo" formally underscores the dismantling of AIDS exceptionalism by weaving its main speaker's perspective throughout alternate and conflicting ones.

Indeed, as this chapter has recurrently indicated, the most salient feature of this cohort's AIDS poetry is its constant confusion of lyric speaker with alterity, whether that confusion refers to the interlayering of voices or to the ontological identification of the lyric voice with its objects of phenomenological intention. To be sure, the juxtaposition of short stories with lyric poems in *City of God* often interlays the isolated lyric speaker with narrators who are young, old, healthy, living with AIDS, male, or female.³⁴⁸ As I have also mentioned, Doty's dramatic monologues—

“Bill’s Story” and “Golden Retrievals” especially, the latter of which I will discuss shortly—also work to disrupt the lyric speaker’s monologic experience. But Doty’s AIDS poems additionally, with frequency, confuse their lyric you with the overhearing reader and shift the lyric speaker’s allegiances between the lyric other and its readership, by using the pronoun “we” in indeterminate ways. For instance, of which there are many, the end of the long and much-lauded poem “Lament-Heaven” (the last poem in *My Alexandria*) simultaneously addresses the specific other, the reader, and a general public. Describing an experience where he stumbled into a cathedral and listened to the violin lesson of a “black girl,” the poet-speaker concludes:

[. . .] I can’t remember
even the melody, which doesn’t matter;
there’s nothing to hold
but the memory of the sensation

of such moments, canceling out
the whine of the self
that doesn’t want to be ground down,

answering the little human cry
at the heart of the elegy,
Oh why aren’t I what I wanted to be,

exempt from history?
The music mounts up,
assembles its architecture

larger than any of us
and doesn’t need you to continue.
Do you understand me?

I heard it, the music
that could not go on without us,
and I was inconsolable. (88-89)

While much can be said about this remarkable poem and its conclusion—for instance, how they relate to the divine retribution narrative explored in my second chapter—they can be said

primarily to respond to the ethical impasse created by conflicting melancholic and utilitarian imperatives at the intersection of lyric and elegy. Doty's—nevertheless painful—answer to this impasse lies in the balancing of one's significance (inasmuch as a Cartesian self creates the world) with one's insignificance (inasmuch no particular life constitutes the totality of the world). To be sure, music—the poet's analog here for phenomenological existence—does not need particular existents to continue but does need, at the same time, particular combinations of existents; the music “doesn't need you to continue” and yet cannot “go on without us.” What is more, the poem's shifting pronouns and the arresting penultimate question (“Do you understand me?”), emphasized by its lack of enjambment, aligns the specificity of Wally with the specificity of the reader as well as a broader overhearing public. Likewise, the lyric speaker places his specific self and other at the center of this symbolic music while also alternately placing a young black girl there. This is to say, unlike Monette who works to limit his reader's access to his severed-circuit of grief, Doty uses lyric's inclination to slip between the lyric you and the overhearing third party to blur, in turn, the boundaries of the self, other, and others as well as entrenched identitarian categories, such as gay men and African-American girls. Through lyric address's slipperiness and dualities, its simultaneity and indeterminacy of intended auditors, Doty recurrently nests here and elsewhere objects of intention within objects of intentions while concurrently working to rescue his specific self and other. In this way, by confusing the boundaries of the lyric ego with a wealth of alterity (from social categories of otherness to specific manifestations of it), Doty and his cohort attempt to destabilize the abject isolation of the gay male lyric speaker at the height of the AIDS crisis. Put otherwise, AIDS poets like Doty adopt a philosophy that might be called *lyric queerness*. Such a philosophy employs lyric's indeterminacy of perspective and intentionality to mirror the demographic spread of the AIDS

crisis, to dismantle perceived and entrenched differences between identitarian categories that exacerbate the crisis, and to preserve the lyric speaker's unique and immediate circumstances. This philosophy also relies on lyric's ability to weave throughout multiple genres, as in Cuadros' short story "Reynaldo." To be sure, as already mentioned, literary theorists often consider lyric a mode rather than a genre in and of itself.³⁴⁹

In most of her poems, like "At the Dark End of the Street" and "Let," Dent also deploys a lyric voice that frequently shifts allegiances between varying objects of intention, including a specific lost other, others, non-traditional others, and broader ideas. In "Let" especially, the poet-speaker works to represent the various and imagined lives of others including her specific lost other, young girls, insects, and snakes. As a result, the poem bandies about pronouns like "you," "her," "it," "we," and "they" with frequency. The poet-speaker also explicitly discusses her desire to allow these entities of alterity to coexist with her subjectivity or lack thereof. This is to say, the speaker reframes her *self* as an object of alterity like any other, so much so, in fact, that by the end of the poem she conflates the lyric self, specific other, and reader into an indeterminate pronominal "you." While describing the experience of losing her significant other to AIDS through a metaphoric image of astronauts watching an untethered colleague drift off into space, the poet-speaker seemingly discusses her own finitude as well as that of her readers: "No one can hear you or see you and eventually it's only a matter of time / before they can't even remember you exactly, what you actually looked like / the sound of your voice or your laugh in particular" (42). This is to say, the "you" here refers to the other, self, and others. Her speaker also explicitly works to level the differences between the self and alterity: "let love be an element and let me amongst it [. . .] Let me, let me, let me, let me, let me, please, at least be its metaphor [. . .] Let my silly life break swiftly [. . .] on the egalitarian landscape / leveled at last [.

. .] with the pinecone and its mulch / no less graceful than the pinecone, no less purposeful than its mulch” (43). Here, the speaker desires a synecdochal and problematized relationship to the alterity of objects and, even, ideas.

In other words, at the end of this wide-ranging, almost encyclopedic, poem—reminiscent of Whitman’s all-inclusive catalogs, which sought to incorporate the notion of America through a capacious lyric self³⁵⁰—Dent’s speaker employs the slipperiness of lyric address to break down the barriers of her particular “me” as well as simultaneously preserve it. Indeed, the poem marks the insignificant and the significant as synecdochally interdependent by way of her lyric self’s particularity and diffusion into an all-pervasive vastness, from the endlessness of space to the diminutiveness of a pinecone and mulch. What is more, the poem also seems to address a philosophy of secular prayer and ethical fatalism promoted by early AIDS poets such as Tim Dlugos and Thom Gunn (a philosophy discussed in the second chapter). Dlugos and Gunn suggest that the speaker’s only remaining ethical choice is to use their remnant agency to release others from the unending obligation to mourn their loss. Dent evokes this attitude with the leitmotif of letting go that runs throughout “Let”; indeed, the persistent use of the weak verb “let” points to her speaker’s agency and lack thereof. What is more, the verb also ties this balance of agency and abjection to an image of blood-letting and therefore the biomedical crisis of AIDS. However, the indistinct object of address in “Let”—is the imperative form of “to let” addressed to a specific other, others, a divine source, or the lyric self?—along with the poem’s list-like comparison of the self and various objects of intention undermine a strict division between the self and other that ethical fatalism and secular prayer respond to and resolve through an intensification of the speaker’s abject isolation. In other words, Dent works to level the playing field between those who have agency and those who do not, making all things, the lost

and the present, both the universe and pinecone, “egalitarian [. . .] at last,” on specific and social scales, through a philosophy and aesthetic of lyric queerness.

Like Cuadros, Doty and Dent, then, Campo and Aaron Shurin—who is difficult to identify as an AIDS poet explicitly since he never explicitly refers to AIDS in his poems—also confuse the isolated self with its contextual otherness. However, Campo and Shurin do so in dramatically different ways. Although Shurin’s prolific output spans well before and after the height of the U.S. AIDS crisis, his poetry never explicitly refers to AIDS. Nevertheless, in 1997, Shurin published a memoir about the AIDS crisis in San Francisco, entitled *Unbound: A Book of AIDS*. Unsurprisingly, then, his poems, which bridge the gap between the New York School and LANGUAGE poetry, often mysteriously shift between narrative and lyric modes in which the implicitly gay- or queer-lyric-speaker becomes a ghostly observer of both men and women involved in a variety of relationships. This technique of triangulating male and female others with his unstable lyric voice finds its apotheosis in his 1989 volume, *A’s Dream*, the title of which possibly refers to both Shurin’s first name and the acronym of AIDS. Like the poetry of the New York School (Ashberry’s in particular), his poems often grow overly-vague and confused about their pronouns while also hinting at their specificity. And like LANGUAGE poetry, his poems sometimes demonstrate a hostility toward the constructed lyric self. The last movement of “Artery,” for instance, declares, “me from myself taken and my next self of him, keeps my heart his guard and that is me [. . .] more than enough shall in others shine” (55). The profusion of first person pronominal possessives has an ironic effect here, inasmuch as the speaker confuses his self with a specific other, his heart, the idea of his heart, and the notion of caretaking. Overall, Shurin’s poems, especially his late-1980s ones, aim to deconstruct the abject isolation of his lyric speaker by blurring it with objects of intention without, at the same time,

entirely sacrificing the particularities of the speaker or its objects. In other words, not entirely like either the New York School or LANGUAGE poetry, Shurin's quasi-AIDS poems often preserve and simultaneously dismantle the lyric self. In this way, they locate the abject AIDS-related speaker in a network of diffused and problematized abjection, subjectivity, and alterity.

In the *Other Man Was Me*, Campo maintains a mostly coherent lyric self. However, like Dent, Cuadros, Doty, and Shurin, Campo ontologically confuses his lyric self with specific others. He sometimes even explicitly comments on this confusion. For example, in "I Dream I'm Him," one of the sonnets written about his father, Campo explicitly imagines—as the title explains—the self as other. In the sonnet for his life partner, "When Rafael Met Jorge," Campo additionally imagine—as the title suggests—both the self and other as equally other. Moreover, the title of the volume, which comes from the penultimate poem, "Finally," explicitly acknowledges a sense of lyric queerness when the speaker claims that the self is sometimes more other than the specific other. Recounting the night he and his life partner met, the poet-speaker says: "One lover held the other's hand. The other / Man was me. I watched as if I hovered / Far above the scene" (ll.3-5). In this formulation, the self, the lyric voice, and the other are simultaneously specific and isolated as well as conflated in a way that presents their equal levels of alterity and, thusly, elides to some degree the differences between their alterities.

What is more, Campo also overtly roots his lyric queerness in a politics that undecidably preserves the gay-self and promotes an anti-identitarian version of identity. For instance, the modern sonnet, "Gay Freedom Parade"—which conflates the lyric self and specific other into a "we" throughout—ends:

We sign petitions protesting the lack
Of funding to fight AIDS. Junked Cadillac
Convertibles glide past, their queens a way
Of saying difference is luxurious,

Delicious—abject, great. What else to say,
But that the innocence in all things gay
Belongs to every people. Even us. (ll.11-18)

This is to say, the poem places the lyric self and other in a socio-politically charged landscape that teeters back and forth between the abjection of the lyric gay self as well as the universalized deconstructed gay self that lends agency to the whole; the poem ends by articulating this thought (“the innocence of all things gay / Belongs to every people”). The poem also, accordingly, begins with a reference to “Queer Nation,” one of the first political organizations to adopt a paradoxical poststructuralist, or anti-identitarian, identity politics. This poem and volume, in other words, explicitly marks a shift in AIDS poetry’s ethical objectives from a melancholia rooted in gay identity politics to a militancy rooted in a poststructuralist lyric queerness. Campo and his cohort of AIDS poets conscientiously use the vagaries of lyric address—its ability to shift between pronouns as well as the perspectives and objects of intentions they imply—to juggle a sense of specific identities and broad alterities, on both individual and sociopolitical scales.

However, as I have indicated on occasion throughout this chapter (and dissertation as a whole), this sense of nested (or increasingly large and increasingly minute) alterity does not end for this entire cohort of AIDS poets on the register of human alterity. Indeed, these poets frequently portray their lyric speakers identifying with, or phenomenologically intending toward, objects of non-human alterity, such as animals, or even at times, inanimate objects, in an effort to universalize and deconstruct the inimical implications of the lyric self’s isolationism and exceptionalism during the AIDS crisis. Encounters with animal alterity, though common throughout poetry as a whole (lyric inherently teases the boundary between self and alterity), become particularly prevalent in this grouping of poets. Unlike Gunn, who emphasizes the AIDS speaker’s remnant subjectivity by *contrasting* his lyric agent with the culturally abject as well as

animals and plants,³⁵¹ these AIDS poets see continuity between their discrete perspectives and objects of what might be called “alien life” or, as certain philosophers have phrased it, “alien phenomenology.”³⁵² For instance, as already indicated, Dent compares her poet-speaker in “Let” to insects, snakes, birds, and plant-life. To be sure, “Let” ends with the poet-speaker comparing herself to a pinecone and even its surrounding mulch.

This proclivity to reveal the similarities and parallels between the lyric self and alien life shows up with an astonishing fervency in the works of Cole and Doty. The volume that precedes Cole’s explicitly AIDS-related volume is entitled *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge* (1989) and often focuses its speaker’s gaze on a spectrum of related alterities. More to the point, though, his AIDS volume, *The Look of Things* (1995), dwells on alien otherness in what amounts to almost every other poem. For instance, following an anti-elegiac Villanelle entitled, “Swimming with the Dead,” “Tarantula” features his AIDS speaker freeing a spider—against store policy—from its cage and letting it crawl up his arm (the arm being a common trope for writing itself³⁵³). Describing the tarantula’s movements as “strangely / beautiful as the human brain // shining through profligate grief” (ll.17-19), the poet-speaker asks, “When he looked at me with a queer / air, nearsighted as I, did he make me // out to be a giant fern, his perch, / as I have made him now into a verse?” (ll.20-23). Cole’s speaker sees his sense of self reflected in the animal’s being; he also tries to imagine what the animal might make of his alterity in return. In fact, the poem as a whole dramatizes this opaque mirroring of the self and other (this mutual “making” of the self and other) in the service of connecting individual spheres of “profligate grief.” His use of the word “queer” even shows up in this phenomenological exercise, indicating the way in which a poststructuralist queerness, as well as the lyric voice, works to preserve and simultaneously elide difference. The poem ends with the lyric speaker declaring: “I felt guilt—watching him create / a

silky floating line in haste— / knowing a sad house has no escape” (ll.25-27). While these lines possibly differentiate the speaker’s subjectivity from the creature’s abjection by insisting on the speaker’s broader perspective, the poem also ironically comments on the speaker’s similar attempt to escape his implicit “sad house” through the verse he crafts about the spider. This is to say, the poem ultimately aligns the lyric speaker and the spider through their futile attempts to escape their similar abject isolationisms; the poem itself becomes the medium through which their parallel lives are compared and, to some degree, interwoven. The poem’s ironic stance to the poet-speaker’s supposed superiority also at once privileges the speaker’s uniqueness and suggests the poem’s project of imagining, however impossibly, the life of a spider on its own terms; the speaker wonders, for example, if the spider thinks he is a fern.

Furthermore, the volume consistently demonstrates the poet-speaker’s desire to desegregate his ontology from the metaphysics of alien life. The final poem, “The New Life,” for example, describes a particular springtime vista and notes the concurrent happenings of a mallard, a crab, sparrows, eggs, and a “scarlet” plant. The poem relates descriptions thereof with a zen-like scrutiny that explicitly omits any direct mention of the speaker’s presence; paradoxically, then, the speaker’s absence organizes the highly-populated scene. In other words, the speaker’s abject absence also becomes the phenomenological existent that unifies the diverse objects of intentionality into a seamless scene of alterity. The absent speaker also integrates this vista of otherness by way of the reader’s implied presence, by comparing the eggs with “each of us” (l.17) and imploring, “Can you see?” (l.21). But Cole’s emphasis on the importance of alien alterity in preserving and dissolving the speaker’s abject isolation is sometimes even more directly put. The occasion of his poems sometimes becomes the speaker’s overt desire to see the world through the eyes of alien life. For instance, the poem “Palette” begins: “Lying on the floor

of Anna's studio, / I view her from the same angle as Nick, / her Boston terrier" (ll.1-3). In other words, human life—though a central object of intention for the poet-speaker—becomes secondary to the poem's occasion. The poet-speaker asks how the lyric self and other are seen by an alien other and implies that lyric voice can bridge the gap between the self and all others. Through the overarching metaphor of a painterly vantage point, in other words, the poem suggests that the work of lyric perspective is to push the self, especially during the AIDS era, toward the comprehension of alien life; thusly, lyric can preserve and universalize the specificity of perspective from multiple, overlapping, and interpenetrating vantages.

Indeed, the trope of a dog's perspective becomes particularly prevalent in Doty's work. Although Doty displays a desire to understand a variety of animal life throughout his AIDS poetry, the intimate and yet alien relationship between the self and a putatively commonplace housedog becomes a particularly potent symbol for Doty throughout his career. A dog's perspective gains the status of a leitmotif throughout his writings, one that helps his speaker investigate, preserve, and deconstruct the boundary between the self and alterity. It is this horizon between understanding alternate perspectives and misunderstanding them that allows the speaker to conceive of the horizon between presence and absence always marked by his self and other, whether that other is materially present or absent. Later poems "Heaven for Arden" and "Heaven for Beau" from *School for the Arts* (2005), for instance, try to imagine the particular perspectives of the speaker's now-deceased dogs when he walked them. Doty even writes the sonnet "Golden Retrievals," collected in *Sweet Machine* (1998), from the perspective of his golden retriever, whom he imagines harboring a desire for his owner to live more fully in the present. But it is in his bestselling memoir *Dog Years* (2007), which recounts the lives of his two dogs, Arden and Beau, that Doty makes his most in-depth argument in favor of respecting the

subjectivity of animals as well as the self's need to probe the boundaries of their otherness. For instance, after discussing his firsthand experience in New York on September 11th, 2001, he admits, "I know it might seem absurd, to place the death of my dog on this page with all these people, vanished parents and children and lovers and friends" (6). He movingly counters:

Yet Beau's body was a fact, too, wasn't it? The particular pink ruffle of those gums, turning to black at the jowls, and the long curl of the spotted tongue, a wet pink splashed with inkish spots like blotches of berry juice, and the palate with its fine roof of intricate ridges—those were physical, intimate realities that have been swept away. I can no longer take pleasure in seeing and knowing their presence, their actuality. Someone was here, an intelligence and sensibility, a complex of desires and memories, habits and expectations. (7)

Not only is the phrase, "someone was here," the title of George Whitmore's journalistic book on the AIDS crisis (1988), but also, throughout his memoir, Doty describes how his two dogs helped him cope with the AIDS-related loss of his partner, Wally. This is to say, not explicitly about AIDS, *Dog Years* nevertheless begins with a phenomenological meditation on the nature of otherness and loss. Doty writes: "To choose to live with a dog is to agree to participate in a long process of interpretation—a mutual agreement, though the human being holds most of the cards" (1). Doty frames the semi-accessible alterity of dogs as a metaphor for the alterity of lost human others; but he also insists that each dog is a manifestation of alterity in and of itself.

What is more, Doty's earliest AIDS poetry refers to a variety of animals, including dogs, thereby locating his speaker's abject isolationism in a broader landscape of otherness and presence, however impenetrable and sometimes ghostly. For instance, the title poem of Doty's first volume, *Turtle, Swan* (1989), begins by discussing two chance occurrences in which Doty and his partner Wally encountered a swan and, later on, a large snapping turtle. Seemingly borrowing its cues from Bishop's famed poem "The Moose," Doty implies that encountering the immensity of these animals amounted to an epiphany that helped him comprehend the inherent

“authority” (l.12 and l.48) of each animal. This is to say, Doty extends poetry’s recurrent interest in animals as a metaphor for the lyric self and other into a meditation on each animal’s individuality. He also uses their inaccessible individuality as a metaphor of the specific lost other’s presence as it slips into absence. After discussing the turtle’s possible death, the emergence of AIDS-related symptoms among his friends, and an anecdote where he lost Wally in a crowd, the speaker concludes his poem:

[. . .] I don’t know
where these things we meet and know briefly,

as well as we can or they will let us,
go. I only know that I do not want you
—you with your white and muscular wings
that rise and ripple beneath or above me,
your magnificent neck, eyes the deep mottled autumnal colors
of polished tortoise—I do not want you ever to die. (ll.87-94)

The poem proposes that the alterity of animals become an adequate metaphor for understanding the way the specific other is always already a ghostly absence and—correspondingly—persistent presence as well as the way the self is always already separated from and, paradoxically, immersed in alterity. Indeed, *My Alexandria* often uses the uncanny otherness of animals to point to the overwhelming and concurrent absence and presence of alternate ontologies. For example, the poem “Difference” depicts the self’s longing and inability to describe and therefore comprehend the “alien grace” (l.51) of jellyfish through a remarkable litany of metaphors. A following poem, “No,” involves the speaker observing children playing with a turtle and conjecturing, “perhaps / [the turtle] feels at the center of everything / as they do” (ll.16-18). The poem concludes: “the single word of the shell [. . .] is no” (ll.32-33). This is to say, Doty’s speaker consistently acknowledges the way that others, animal and human, become half-recognizable specters that affirm the self’s synecdochal relationship to existence, in its largest

phenomenological sense, as well as provide the limitation (the emphatic “no” to the implied question of “perhaps”) against which individuality and agency occurs.³⁵⁴

Along these same lines, “With Animals,” the penultimate poem in *My Alexandria*, uses animals, specifically the image of a dying dog, to assert that embodied others both reveal and conceal the specter of alterity. This semi-knowable alterity at once liberates the lyric self from abject isolation and reinforces that self’s unending vacillation from agency to abjection. For instance, after confronting the “lyrical / and awkward” (ll.12-13) spectacle of various animals’ alterities (those of deer, herons, and his own dog), the poet-speaker recounts in detail discovering a brutalized half-dead dog deserted in the snow. After taking the dog to the veterinarian to be euthanized, the speaker says:

[. . .] Something which was
and was not the dog wanted to continue,

something entirely dependent upon that body
which was already beginning to be rimed

with ice. [. . .]

Even with one eye shot away and the brain spasming

the life takes it in and says *more*,

[. . .] The life doesn’t care.
The life only wants, the fugitive life. (ll.70-88).

For Doty, the dog becomes a symbol *and* specific example of otherness: the dog also becomes an entity both there and not there, both present and absent, a joint emblem of the lyric—or ontological—self’s isolation from and connection to immanence and otherness. Indeed, upon seeing the mangled dog for the first time, the lyric voice suggests that the image of the suffering other balances him on the edge of contact and self-preservation: “I thought, *It’s a fox, / don’t touch it*, I thought *touch it*” (ll.31-32). As my dissertation discusses throughout, the image of

touch is central to lyric's struggle to invoke and break through the self's abjection isolation.³⁵⁵ Moreover, the end of the poem reconnects the lyric speaker to the ethic of melancholia by echoing the volume's dedication to Wally and its ensuing epigraph, which reads, "Anyone else may leave you, I will never leave you, fugitive" (attributed to Jean Valentine). For Doty, the specific other and otherness becomes a distillation of the abject isolation of being itself as well as the paradoxically unifying fugitive nature that all individual life shares. In other words, it is through this universalization of abjection as well as through the competing and yet complimentary expansion of subjectivity to all life, human and alien, that certain members of this cohort of AIDS poets simultaneously preserve the individuality of the self and other and deconstruct their isolating differences.

As I have indicated while discussing Dent's work, this cohort of AIDS poets also work on occasion to extend this overlapping sense of alterity and subjectivity beyond the scope of sentient life itself, both human and animal, into the realm of inanimate objects and ideas. This is to say, these AIDS poets, especially Dent, Doty, Cole, and McCann, frequently locate their selves in the midst of an even broader alien phenomenology that at once expands and contracts the self's significance in order to universalize the state of abjection. Ian Bogost's notion of "alien phenomenology," which he articulates in a 2012 monograph of the same name,³⁵⁶ includes in its purview more than what I have been calling "alien life." He asserts that metaphor, catalogs, and poetry itself help the self comprehend the experience of being an object or an idea.³⁵⁷ He calls this aesthetic and phenomenological work of listing objects in order to point to their ontology *ontography*. Ontography, he claims, places all things (in the broadest sense of "things") on equal footing, implying their existential equivalencies as well as their synecdochal, or nesting, relationships to one another. For instance, Whitman—an obvious influence for Dent (though she,

like other AIDS poets, mostly resists explicitly affiliating with literary tradition because of its deathly telos)—can be said described as building throughout his most famous writings an ontography of America, democratically placing his self, others, and the most common things (from the idea of a city to a single blade of grass) on the same level of import. Ontography, in other words, helps promote, what Bogost calls a *flat ontology* in which all things—animate objects, inanimate objects, and concepts—however interdependent and intertwined constitute an individual and equivalent status of being.

Articulated by Bogost a decade or two after the publication of these poets' works, this notion in prototypical form appears throughout Dent's work. If we return to many of the poems already discussed, for instance, "Family Romance," "Words Aren't Cheap," "Jade," "Cinéma Vérité," and "Let," we see a poet-speaker consistently cataloging her lyric self among objects and ideas, asking, as in "Let," to be one of the infinite many as well as simultaneously subservient and dominant to all things, large and small. In this way, Dent suggests that in a synecdochal, poststructuralist model of being, every object and concept is at once abject and subject. For instance, "Jade" frequently breaks down into lists devoid of a lyric I—as in the stanza two thirds of the way through the poem in which she lists twenty-nine items with the word "white" in them: "White bread, white collar, white shoe, white noise [. . .] white blood cells" (81). As already discussed, the poem ends:

Finally my rights that are my rights, as my tongue is mine, are regained.
Finally you touch me, and the finality explodes
Into plains of thought, layers of earth in an archeological site,
Into the history of boxes,
Until finally they collapse within themselves
And vanish into extinction. (83)

For Dent, contact between the self and alterity reflects and creates an equivalency in things that does and does not destroy the specific; the specific explodes into a fluid, nested, multi-layered,

everything, which contracts, in turn, through its equivalencies and therefore lack of difference, into ever-shrinking nothingness. To be sure, in the case of her “white” list, Dent draws our attention to the racially-charged inequity evoked by the word “white” while also, simultaneously, flattening the difference between the state of being “white” and therefore privileged and the state of being “white” and, like her AIDS lyric speaker, culturally abject. Indeed, the final item of “white blood cells” collapses the proceeding indicators of white privilege into the iconography of the abject PWA. This is to say, through her lyric expression of ontography—or, the equivalency of things, including the self, suggested by the catalog—Dent imagines both her abjection and the abjection of others as well as the way that the common experience of abjection undermines and thereby transcends the definition of abjection.

To be sure, her second volume, *HIV, Mon Amour*, often features poems of especially long lengths and breathy lines that describe in vivid detail the minutia of her hospital rooms and procedures, such as the opening poem, “Fourteen Days in Quarantine,” and the closing titular poem. Through these encyclopedic and persistent litanies at the primal scene of abject isolationism for the AIDS poet-speaker—the hospital room (a primal scene I mostly discuss in chapter two)—Dent explores her equivalent and synecdochal relationship to all things. For instance, “Fourteen Days in Quarantine” begins: “The TB room posits itself as at once outside me like a Richard Serra, / contained, abstract as the scientific premise upon which it was founded, / while the 75 square feet and the ceiling vent, which circulates fresh air / every eight minutes, best represent my sense of interiority” (1). Although the poem often invokes a sense of thanapolitical confinement, as it does here, Dent also frequently suggests that this confinement provides her access to a liberating sense of limitless alterity. Indeed, at the end of the poem’s eighth movement, she declares that she “loved” (7) her time in quarantine because she became,

“the other, the terrifying, the nuance, the inhuman” (7). This is to say, by discussing her equivalency to the objects of her surrounding, the ideas suggested by them, and the specific other to whom most of her lyrics are addressed, she conceives of her abjection as a universalizing and egalitarian experience that thereby provides her with the approximation of agency. For example, at the end of “RIP, My Love,” after listing all the details of her hospitalization (from the behaviors of the attendants to what’s on television, from the objects and ideas her procedures involve to the classical mythology and pop cultural references her reveries invoke), Dent’s speaker tells her specific also-dying other what she learned from the experience:

What we regard as the “self” extended itself, but I wouldn’t say in a winged way,
over the Bosch-like landscape of brutal interactions
and physical pain and car alarms and the eternal drilling of disappointment
the exigent descendance of everyday that every day you peer down or up
its daunting staircase, nauseous with vertigo
gathering like straw the rudimentary characteristics of courage, gumption,
innovation
and faking it to the hilt like a hilarious onslaught of sham orgasms.
Transcendence might be the term Emerson would lend it.
What I’m trying to say is that it wasn’t lonely. (39)

It is her ontographical perspective on existents and existence—the democratic and intertwined commonalities that constitute the whole—that lends her lyric speaker a sense of transcending her abject isolationism. As opposed to the secular prayer of Dlugos’ hospital-oriented “G-9,”³⁵⁸ for instance, which acquiesces into the speaker’s sense of isolation (as I discuss in the second chapter), “RIP, My Love” imagines the way a poststructuralist lyric perspective on immanence and alterity simultaneously indexes the significance and insignificance of all things large and small, as well as all things physical and conceptual, in a way that additionally blurs the boundaries between the abject isolated self and the immanence of all beings.

Even AIDS poets like Doty, Cole, and McCann whose poetry could be described as humanistic (or as primarily interested in promoting the sacrosanct immanence of the human self

and other in a plainspoken lyric voice), regularly dwell on the strangely compelling character of inanimate objects as well as the status of both the body and the self as things. Indeed, Doty's short prose book entitled *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (2001) explores the complex thoughts he associates with the objects he has collected from flea markets and auctions as well as the way that art—especially still lifes and poetry—instructs us that the self finds not just purpose but form through its phenomenological attention to objects. Near the slim book's conclusion, he writes: "The self is emptied into things, and thus the things shine with an astonishing life" (68). He continues:

Someone and no one. That, I think, is the deepest secret of these paintings, finally, although it seems just barely in the realm of the sayable, this feeling that beneath the attachments and appurtenances, the furnishings of selfhood, what we are is attention, a quick physical presence in the world, a bright point of consciousness in a wide field from which we are not really separate. That, in a field of light, we are intensifications of that light. (68)

For Doty, as well as for Dent, the self comes into being by way of its relationship to all things. Moreover, for Doty, as well as for Dent, the lyric speaker wields agency over things, is subject to things, and exists as one thing among the many; the self is simultaneously "someone and no one." However, unlike Dent, Doty suggests that it is not the equality of things that lends agency to the self but; rather, it is the self's authority that lends agency to all objects of alterity ("The self is emptied into things"). In other words, Doty primarily retains an anthro-centric view of alien phenomenology and yet, as he demonstrates here, he also thinks of things as having an immanence of their own; humans are merely an intensified and perhaps more fleeting version of being (or, as he names it, "light"). He also claims there is a synecdochal reciprocity between the self and its field of being; we are separate from this field of being and yet a part of it, in a way that we represent it, constitute it, and find definition through it. To be sure, halfway through his phenomenological treatise on still lifes, Doty describes a silver pitcher in his possession that

possesses an immanence of its own, an immanence that is also integrated into the whole of its context: “it radiates a sort of dignity, acquires from the company of other things a different sort of status of being” (30). What is more, he describes the pitcher in anthropomorphic terms, noting at times its “body,” even its “midriff” (30), in a way that at once places the human body at the center of being and also suggests that the human body is a mere thing that acquires its status of being and dignity from its context as well.

Doty’s AIDS poems also suggest that the poet and the lyric self are fleeting bursts of attention lending agency, or meaning at least, to what they observe, as well as two objects among a multitudinous web. Plants and animals, as previously discussed, appear with a frequency and fervency in Doty’s poems. But beyond describing alien life, his poems also regularly depict the lyric self and other in terms of insentience and inanimacy, pointing to their own numinous material beings. For instance, in “Difference”—the poem in which Doty catalogues the various forms that jellyfish take, from objects like a “rolled condom” (l.19) or a “Tiffany shade” (l.21) to concepts like “opera” (l.23) or “ballet” (l.56) or “metaphor” (l.33) itself—Doty initially describes the jellyfish as, “elaborate sacks / of nothing” (ll.6-7), and then later as, “nothing but something” (l.28). Their liminal status as objects of life and lifelessness allows the lyric speaker to approach an understanding of alterity as well as denote his own self’s lack of coherence. After searching for ways to articulate the metaphysics of jellyfish, the speaker concludes, “Hear how the mouth, // so full / of longing for the world, / changes its shape?” (ll.57-60). The speaker’s means of describing the word proves just as mercurial as the objects he attempts to define and, in this way, Doty frames the lyric self as a fluid “something” that is also “nothing.”

This is to say, for Doty, the difference between the lyric self and alien other as well as the difference between subjectivity and abjection are at once drastic and minimal. The thingy words

“nothing” and “thing” and “something” pervade Doty’s animal and plant poems to the point where those words become nearly interchangeable. In this way, Doty simultaneously highlights and diminishes the differences and similarities of the observing lyric self and what it observes. Put another way, Doty suggests that the melancholia of lyric address, its insistent intentionality, is a type of deconstructive or parodic phenomenology that can impossibly conjoin the differences and similarities of the self and alien other; in turn, this undecidable lyric model, he suggests, simultaneously retains the specificity and abjection of the self and alien other as well as universalizes the specific and the abject thereby undermining those states of being or non-being. For instance, “In the Community Garden” (collected in *Atlantis*) describes sunflowers as “nothing but form” (l.17), but also argues, contradictorily, that they desire: “believe me, they do / desire” (ll.29-30). This is to say, Doty’s AIDS speaker constantly distinguishes himself from and finds kinship with the objects of his context as a means of retaining the specificity of the self and other as well as universalizing that abject specificity. To be sure, one of Doty’s most famous AIDS poems, “Fog,” interrelates the poet-speaker’s discovery of Wally’s seropositivity with an extended reverie about the plant life of his garden, the lives of the dead who haunt his house, and the objects of the house itself. Two-thirds of the way through the poem, the speaker interjects: “I realize my garden has no outside, only *is* / subjectively. As blood is utterly without // an outside, can’t be seen except out of context, / the wrong color in alien air, no longer itself” (ll.41-44; original emphasis). Doty’s speaker primarily mourns the loss of the specific here; indeed, he suggests the tragic nature of the specific, its fragility and eminent diffusion into its infinitely expanding and interlayered “alien air” or “context.” Yet, this passage and the poem simultaneously insist that the phenomenology of being (or the notion that that which *is* “only *is* / subjectively”) also interlinks the specific with its contexts so that the self, other, others, and

things (the speaker, Wally, the garden, the plants, the house, the ghosts) mutually and paradoxically preserve and deconstruct each other's individuality and abject isolationism.

Like Doty, McCann and Cole also balance their lyric melancholia with a universalized sense of abjection and isolation by representing the body, the self, and the specific other as particular things among the many. While McCann's view mostly stresses the abjection of things, however universalizing, he also, like Doty, depicts an aura of selfhood, alterity, and authority emanating from each item. For instance, "Fragments from an Explanation" presents a speaker ostensibly hostile toward the way the lost other's effects code that other as absent and insignificant. The poem begins: "The jar of coins you left on the dresser: I worried I would spend it. // Things were wrong, because you had died. For instance: / your things, going on without you— [. . .] as if you had not coaxed yourself into *the vapor and the dusk*" (ll.1-5; original emphasis). Later, the poet-speaker says: "you are going with your body [. . .] / you were burned, like the others" (ll.54-59). This is to say, the speaker worries that the lost other is merely one absent and therefore inconsequential object among present and commonplace objects. But the poem also suggests that the other's thingness, even in absence, constitutes the basis for a commonplace universality that displaces, diffuses, and yet retains the lost other's presence; indeed, the specific other has diffused into the "vapor and dusk" and is "like the others." To be sure, the italicized portions woven throughout the poem, however bleak at times, come from Whitman's "Song of Myself" and imply an allegiance with Whitman's project of lyrical and egalitarian ontography. Constituting a unique moment in which an AIDS poet-speaker from this milieu *explicitly* aligns him- or herself with poetic tradition, McCann does so here only through and because of the lyric (Whitmanian) tradition of presenting the egalitarianism (or, physical and temporal indeterminacies) of things, including the objects of the present, past, and future. To be

sure, torn between two interpretations of thingness (the abject and isolated nature of a thing and the commonplace and therefore egalitarian nature of all things), the poet-speaker concludes on an ambivalent note: “I was alone. It was cold. // Everything seemed ordinary again. / The shop windows were lighted. There were things for sale” (ll.62-64). The ordinariness of things and the regular circulation of them threatens to bring the speaker back into the ongoing present at the expense of tearing him away from preserving the lost other’s trace: but at the same time, the ordinariness of things also extends out of, contextualizes, and retains the lost other’s thingness. The lighted shop windows, in other words, become a metaphor for the ongoing (utilitarian and capitalistic) present as well as the omnipresent and enticing inaccessibility of alterity. Tonally, the poem’s conclusion converts the speaker’s hostility into a sense of wonder at the ongoingness of things that at once heightens the speaker’s loneliness and abates it.

Indeed, a sense of wonder at the omnipresence and yet existential inaccessibility of things permeates McCann’s volume. For instance, in “After You Died,” the lyric speaker discovers that the self and other are mere things via the other’s death. The poem starts, “I had a body again. And I could recall / how it had been, back then, // to want things” (ll.1-3), and ends, “I stood outside [. . .] in a body I hated. Without it, / who’d need to ask the world for a thing?” (ll.24-27). The final question ironically indicates that the body-as-thing at once precipitates the speaker’s sense of abjection in the wake of his other’s loss and, simultaneously, leads to the self’s intentionality and presence. In other words, that final question may be sardonic but it also is sincere. The speaker rests on the cusp of hostility and wonder over the fact that a body is an ephemeral commonplace object. Similarly, in the volume’s second poem, “One of the Reasons,” the lyric self regularly expresses wonder at the alterity of objects, inasmuch as they exist apart from the speaker and help to constitute the speaker’s perspective. Indeed, Bogost argues in the

final chapter of *Alien Phenomonology* that “wonder” helps the self to gain an egalitarian perspective on its relationship to things. After describing a peripatetic street scene and cataloging various pieces of “junk” (l.15) in secondhand shops, McCann’s speaker declares: “I am so easily / convinced by things—by *things*, I mean— / I am fluttering, a blue skirt / ruffling like a lake” (ll.21-24; original emphasis). He then exclaims: “Imagine // how many things there are to buy [. . .] not just the anthurium in the slender Steuben vase / but also house slippers, bok choy, fleshy pink / bunion pads, linguini, Sardo, birds’ / shadows on sidewalks” (ll.26-32). The speaker’s notion of what constitutes “things” effortlessly slips from the material to the immaterial and fleeting (“shadows on the sidewalk”). In other words, McCann suggests that lyric provides a platform for the self to wonder at and intend toward a diffuse field of immanence and alterity. The speaker concludes:

This is just
one of the reasons
I like
certain poems, the old lady
right now perilously
crossing the street
against traffic, the weighted
left pocket of her
unseasonable cloth coat
against which the rich
secret
of her handbag
strikes. (ll.35-47)

Reminiscent of William Carlos Williams’ short lines and Imagistic credo, “No idea but in things,” the poem adds a phenomenological valence to this Modernist conceit. In other words, “the rich / secret” of things locates the speaker in more than an objectivist landscape; the many things populating McCann’s poems help the speaker imagine a world of immanence and alterity at once exceeding and permeating his finite and isolated Cartesian self.

Similarly, Cole's book *The Look of Things* frames "things," their notion and materiality, as simultaneously inconsequential and as suffused with vital immanence. Indeed, the title of the book itself can be read as either pointing to how objects appear to the subject (however deceiving that appearance may be) or to how objects see the world from their own individual perspectives. In this latter formulation, the various aspects of a vast alterity are lent a sense of subjectivity by the volume's speaker; in the context of this formulation as well, the volume's speaker characterizes his perspective as one among many intersecting and overlapping ones. To be sure, the volume recurrently calls into question the notion that the self and the other are distinct entities through its meditations on objects. In "Torso," for instance, Cole conflates the voice of a hospitalized PWA with the voice of an ancient Greco-Roman sculpture to insist that all others, including human and non-human others, long to express their individuality *and* migrate into their objects of intention. This speaking torso, or PWA, bemoans the fact that "those who visit seldom touch" him (l.7) and speculates that he is a mere aspect of a vast alterity: "As if a marauding / heart is all I am, or was, and the pink dot / on the monitor a marker for the one I sought" (ll.12-14). The speaker confuses himself with a non-human object and the intended other. Indeed, the following poem, "Paper Dolls," heavily implies the supposition that the self and other's shared thingness lends them both an abject status as well as a transcendent aura of dignity and authority. The poem opens: "To some it might / have seemed vulgar / or degrading that / he was naked [. . .] the eroding candelabrum / that was his body" (ll.1-9). The speaker's rhetoric implies he does not share this view and that the thingness of the lost other's body provides the dying other authority and gravitas. Indeed, in "The Roman Baths at Nimes," Cole makes the notion of thingness and its universal abjection alluring. He aphoristically writes, "In the hall of mirrors nobody speaks" (l.1), and, "if I touch the darkness, it touches me" (l.6), and, "good things, make

something sweet of fear” (l.14). This is to say, through the speaker’s conception of alterity and thingness as all-pervasive states, the abject lyric self finds its voice (the Dickinsonian “nobody,” just as in Doty’s “Nocturne in Black and Gold,” can speak), discovers a paradoxical relationship of immersion to its also isolating contexts (darkness can touch him back), and confronts with authority its abject isolation (the presence of things, that are good, helps the speaker transcend his fear of isolation).

Of course, Cole’s obsession with ancient Greco-Roman culture in *The Look of Things* points to a correlation among his cohort between white privilege and the lyric speaker’s willingness to embrace his or her thingness.³⁵⁹ To be sure, black gay AIDS poets, for instance, do not, as my third chapter explains, deconstruct their lyric self’s agency per se but unify it, amplify it, and make it pertinent to their collective present. They bring their possibly-abject black gay lyric selves into conversation with a broader black gay aesthetic and community; that is, black gay AIDS poets do not trade an identitarian notion of identity politics for a poststructuralist one because such a maneuver risks admitting the cultural and existential abjection of the black gay self. The white AIDS poets of this slightly later cohort, however, often work to deconstruct the differences between the abject and the subject by placing the self and other in the context of a flat ontology that includes not just other humans, but also animals, plants, inanimate objects, and concepts. This willingness to degrade the status of the lyric speaker to that of any *thing* could be said to descend from the white lyric speaker’s inherent sense of cultural agency. As I discuss in my second chapter, Gunn and Dlugos use their remnant agency, which they derive from their ties to white privilege, to release the ongoing present from an unending obligation to mourn their losses. Along similar lines, the white members of this subsequent cohort could be said to use the lyric speaker’s remnant agency, which implicitly descends from the historical associations

between Euro-centricity and the lyric voice, to grant agency to all objects of abjection. To be sure, “Torso” and “The Roman Baths at Nimes” explicitly allude to, through their titles alone, the Occidental ideals of white male subjectivity. Similarly, Cole’s other AIDS poems frequently allude to Euro-centric mythology; for instance, in “Paper Dolls,” Cole describes, “a nurse / who came to us / as Demeter had / to the frozen earth” (ll.19-22). This allusion lends the poet-speaker’s specific, dying, and (perhaps-white) other a sense of significance that allows the poem to rise above, at least tonally, what others might see as “vulgar” and “degraded.” Put simply, the willingness of this cohort’s white constituency to relate their implicitly white selves and others to alien life as well as inanimate and immaterial objects can be described as a luxury. The fact that the Latino contemporaries of Dent, Doty, McCann, and Cole—namely, Campo and Cuadros—rarely if ever focus on the self’s relationship to alien life or to what some theorists have called an object-oriented phenomenology underlines this perception.³⁶⁰

Nevertheless, though these AIDS poets might diverge in this regard, their cohort as a whole expresses an interest—unlike their predecessors—in dismantling the binaries of the self and alterity, the gay-self and the non-gay-self, the abject and the subject, as well as the deictic lyric anti-elegy and the historicity of other genres. For all of this cohort, whether Latino or white, a poststructuralist identity politics finds expression in and is advanced by formal correlatives; primarily, these correlatives are a confusion of genres and a prosody poised between free verse and received patterns. For instance, while early black gay AIDS poets employ genre-blending to cohere various audiences of the black gay community and thereby lend it a collective sense of agency (and urgency), Cuadros’ *City of God* demonstrates the ability of genre-blending, specifically between lyric and fiction, to blur the boundary between the self and other—as well as between a putatively abject, gay, male, Mexican-American, self and a variety of sociopolitical

others. While the book is ostensibly divided into fiction in the first part and poetry in the second, both genres borrow from each other's defining features and collectively articulate the voice of an almost unified and yet mercurial speaker. Indeed, the volume's lyric poems are alternately meditative—that is, they represent a lyric voice speaking to itself³⁶¹—or narrative—that is, they present a sequence of events to an implied audience. For instance, the penultimate and six-part AIDS poem, “The Quilt Series,” recounts the story of the specific other's passing as well as the self's mourning process. The poem does not address the lost other directly, but it does emphasize the isolated lyric speaker's melancholia: “I started telling him, I'm sorry I wasn't here [. . .] I began to comb his hair” (135). Reminiscent of Monette's anti-elegy “No Goodbyes” in its images and tone, *City of God*'s penultimate poem presents an isolated speaker balanced between melancholia and an awareness of the ongoing present. Subsequently, the following and final poem, “Conquering Immortality,” presents a speaker who—as the title suggests—simultaneously approaches and dismantles the notion of immortality through a combination of lyrical and narrative techniques. The speaker interweaves lyric meditation with sporadic lyric address to a specific other (and an implied audience) as well as interpolates into these lyric impulses narratives about the Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood, ancient Egyptian funeral rites and myths, and anonymous sex between an African-American man and the speaker in a public restroom. This is to say, the poems in *City of God* uses fluid intersections between lyric and narrative, or between historical exceptionalism and sociopolitical historicity, to collapse boundaries between the self and other, the past and present, and presence and absence as well as between the gay Latino self and female, straight, black, or white others (Cuadros, it should be mentioned, consistently describes the specific other as white).

The blurring of these formal boundaries is even more pronounced in the volume's short

stories. As already discussed, “Reynaldo” mixes narratives and letters from a variety of perspectives: young, old, male, female, gay, and straight. Formally, then, through its intermixing of epistolary address, first-person meditative accounts, and third-person recollections, this short story both approaches lyric and queer goals. Indeed, the volume’s short stories as a whole trend from third-person narrative fiction to first-person non-linear (or, non-protensive) essays. The last two stories, “Letting Go” and “Sight,” could best be described as prose poems or as lyrical essays. “Letting Go” especially dramatizes the lyric speaker’s conundrum of meeting his ethical responsibilities to mourn endlessly his specific lost other while also addressing the demands of the ongoing present. Imagining that his lost other hovers over him like a kite attached to a rope he must hold, the speaker says, “There are moments when I want to get rid of this rope” (92). He also recurrently wrestles with his new significant other’s demands for him to let go of the same rope. At the story’s end, the speaker hands the rope to his mirror image, effectively recreating his self as both self and other, a self that is both a-historic and subject to historicity, both melancholic and participating in the collective ongoing present. This is to say, the lyric speaker in the short story of “Letting Go” suggests that the story’s non-protensive structure helps balance him on the edge of melancholia and the ongoing present as well as selfhood and alterity.

The volume’s following and last short story, “Sight,” extends this blurring of genres and perspectives into an even more explicit expression of lyric queerness than “Letting Go.”

Engaging in similar semi-narrative, semi-lyrical conventions and modes, the speaker, or narrator, eventually encounters an elderly lady in an elevator with whom he shares a communal sense of abjection:

A warm tingle runs down my throat, informs me that she is not well, some perceived similarity with myself [. . .] I see tumors [. . .] the stench of black rotted fruit, dappling her brain. Her heart is erratic and I feel as if it is my own and that I am the one who will fall soon. I want to touch her [. . .] I feel my palm near her

shoulder and her body begins to change, slippery as mercury [. . .] She is unsure of why she feels better. (97-98)

The unconventional story ends with the speaker describing his dissolution into an alterity both material and immaterial—both embodied and ghostly—as represented by the final image of angels consuming his flesh: “I let the angels consume me, each one biting into my body, until nothing is left, nothing but a small glow and even that begins to perish” (99). This is to say, the central speaker of *City of God* indicates that by blending lyric with narrative he is also able to blend nothingness with universality, abjection with subjectivity, and the gay, Mexican-American, male, self with diverse others, both on specific and culturally symbolic scales. It should be added that Cuadros is not alone among his cohort in his blending of lyric modes into prose. For instance, Doty, as already indicated, extensively employs both the protensivity of narrative and the anti-historicity of lyric meditation in his prose and poems; indeed, his memoirs, monographs, and poems regularly feature a specific self shifting from phenomenological philosophizing to lyric address in a way that teases at the boundary between self and other and self and otherness. This is to say, both Cuadros and Doty emphasize the modal, rather than generic, aspects of lyric, framing lyric as particularly queer—or, fluid and indeterminate—among genres.

For the most part, however, Doty and his peers (Cole and Campo especially) often formally express an interest in deconstructing the binary of the self and a broadly-conceived otherness through presenting a complex prosody balanced on the edge of free verse and received forms. Through an undecidable prosody, these poets work to dismantle the problematic divisions between embrace and containment that early AIDS poets explored in the forms of their poems. As I argue in my second chapter, formal prosody initially becomes associated for AIDS poets with an ability to contain and thereby retain the lyric self and lost other as well as a palimpsest or trace image of their embrace. However, this containment aesthetic for AIDS poets also came to

divide the self from the demands of the ongoing present and associate the self and other with a cultural politics of quarantine that foreswore access to any notion of subjectivity and agency for them. Dramatizing this slippery slope from preservation to quarantine, Gunn's volume of AIDS poetry begins by promoting prosody as a comforting means to retain touch between the self and other ("The Hug") and ends by framing formal prosody as mirroring a thanapolitics in which touch between the gay-self and other becomes a viral, deathly, "unlimited embrace" ("The Missing," l.12).³⁶² With these formal concerns and conundrums in mind, it becomes notable that Doty, Cole, and Campo all occasionally employ a prosody that gestures toward received forms but also deconstructs them. To be sure, Cole reviewed *The Man with Night Sweats* in 1992, where he asserts that Gunn's apparent discomfort with formal verse and yet use of it pointed toward both a containment aesthetic and a deathly telos: "Perhaps [. . .] metrical patterns help control elegiac emotions, like the steady drum tap accompanying a coffin to its cemetery" (223).³⁶³ This insight might explain the consistency with which Cole modified received forms via imperfect rhymes and irregular meters in *The Look of Things*. For instance, written in increasingly irregular and off-rhymed heroic couplets, "40 Days and 40 Nights" resists the thanapolitical telos of formal containment while also representing formal containment's ability to promote lyric touch. Depicting a scene in which a nurse named Angel administers an HIV test to the poet-speaker and later reveals the "verdict" (l.39), which the poem never reveals as positive or negative to its overhearing reader, the poem emphasizes the literal touch between two specific men as well as refuses the epitaphic closure of determining the speaker's sero-status. That is, the poem formally represents touch without letting it creep toward a deathly outcome.

Campo also strikes a compromise between formal containment and the undecidable in *The Other Man Was Me*. The volume, for instance, makes much use of the sonnet form; but

Campo's sonnets—which are frequently elegiac and take up to two-thirds of the volume—frequently employ off-rhymes, irregular line lengths (though mostly iambic in nature), and a varying number of lines (from 12 to 16 lines). For instance, the last poem of the volume's first section, "In the Form"—a Shakespearian sonnet written in nearly perfect iambic pentameter but with at least one off end-rhyme in each quatrain—discusses the way the sonnet form helps the speaker retain a sense of connection to the memories of his parents: "A sonnet? Tension. Words withheld. A rhyme / where memory has left its watermark, / A turn of phrase that brings about another time" (ll.1-3). This is to say, Campo explicitly links received forms, especially the amorous sonnet, with transhistorical lyric touch and retention. But, by the poem's end, he also links this sense of containment with past-ward-ness and a thanapolitical outcome: "Control / Is what I shout into this microphone / About: I want to say I love them. Wait, / I can't—I'm running out of time! Too late" (l.11-14). Notably, the final rhyme—one of the only true rhymes in the poem—associates time (indeed, he could have said, "I'm running out of space!") and form, thereby drawing attention to the fact that containment, or formal control, places its referents in the past (cutting their time short, so to speak). However, in later off-rhymed sonnets, such as "My Father's View of Poetry," which has sixteen lines, the speaker links imperfect prosody with an ironic undertone that suggests lyric touch resists the past-ward telos, or epitaphic nature, of written discourse. A dramatic monologue and sonnet written from his father's perspective, "My Father's View of Poetry" begins: "You can't make much to live on doing it. / You can't. You can't tell stories—poems fight / A narrative" (ll.1-3). With this statement the poem puts forth a dramatic irony: while the poem's dramatic persona argues that lyric's anti-narrativity is a commercial drawback or flaw, the volume's overarching poet-speaker, whose presence is implied by the poem's title, obliquely suggests that lyric's non-utilitarianism and ability to

“fight” historicity lends phenomenological and ethical value to poetry. Indeed, the poem itself is an attempt to use lyric queerness (or a blurring of perspectives, genres, and modes) to retain and bring into contact the poet-speaker and his father’s psyches. This is to say, Campo blurs the boundary between lyric and dramatic monologue as well as blends a containment aesthetic with a formal volatility in order to at once preserve the distinctive voices of the self and other as well as problematize or dissolve their distinctiveness.

On occasion, Doty too employs an imperfect prosody to undermine the thanapolitical nature of received forms and bolster a philosophy of lyric queerness. Doty’s already-discussed “Golden Retrievals,” written from his dog’s perspective, is a sonnet that begins with true rhymes and finishes with a series of off and disrupted end-rhymes. For example, the sonnet ends: “This shining bark // a Zen master’s bronzy gong, calls you here, / entirely, now: bow-wow, bow-wow, bow-wow” (ll.12-14). The anticipated end rhyme here shifts to a foreshortened internal rhyme (now/wow) that underscores the poem’s emphasis on immediacy and the present. This ending also places the implied poet-speaker as well as the reader in the position of the lyric “you.” In these ways, through a combination of dramatic persona and irregular prosody, the poem emphasizes a lyric queerness that dismantles divides between the self and alterity as well as literature’s conflictingly epitaphic and immortalizing natures. Furthermore, Doty also at times, like Monette, Gunn, and even Dlugos, employs a mock blank verse structure—that is, a left-justified column of words that visually imitates blank verse without adhering to its prosody. But even more so than the AIDS poets preceding him, who emphasized the anti-traditional aspects of their forms, Doty employs mock blank verse to suggest a notion of containment and dialogism (suggested by blank verse’s historical ties to drama) while, at the same time, insistently avoiding a close link with tradition and historicity. For instance, the already-mentioned “Grosse Fuge,”

from *Atlantis*, is free verse arranged in a blank-verse-esque column. The poem mixes lyric meditation with elegy, ending with the decidedly anti-elegiac comment, “There is no resolution in the fugue” (179). Indeed, the notion of a fugue—a notion of different movements coming together to make a tentative, unresolved whole—becomes Doty’s metaphor for the ability of lyric queerness to preserve individual perspectives while also framing those perspectives as metonymic and interwoven reflections of each other in a way that disrupts, expands, and collapses lyric address’ implicit abject isolation. For Doty, mock blank verse becomes a fugue that integrates lyric touch, formal containment, anti-elegy, and the at-turns epitaphic and immortalizing nature of literary tradition. This is to say, at a time when New Formalism was increasingly fashionable, perhaps because the AIDS crisis prompted American poets to establish a containment aesthetic (as my second chapter explores), Cole, Doty, and Campo hybridize New Formalism with poststructuralist aesthetics in order to preserve the self and other as well as, paradoxically, deconstruct the border between the self and alterity.

To be sure, this hybridization of traditional lyric formalism and goals with a poststructuralist philosophy and practice of lyric queerness also finds expression in vivid ways among these three poets’ peers (both those directly concerned with the AIDS crisis and those incidentally influenced by it). This is to say, this need to deconstruct inimical binaries, especially the boundary between the self and others, precipitated by the AIDS crisis finds formal expression on a wide scale throughout the diverse field of American poetry by the mid-1990s and thereafter. For instance, though LANGUAGE poetry originally worked to deconstruct the capitalistic myth of the individual as early as the 1970s (earlier, by some accounts), its formal poststructuralist techniques of disrupting the coherent self did not gain legitimization from “official verse culture” until the height of the AIDS crisis. Hank Lazer’s foundational two-volume study *Opposing*

Poetries coined the term “official verse culture” and famously marked the legitimization of LANGUAGE poetry’s aesthetic with its arrival in 1996. Although he never directly mentions the AIDS crisis, he often uses rhetoric suggestive of it, as when he says: “While American poetry may be alive and well, its institutionalized form is both terminally ill and well-entrenched” (3). The word “symptomatic” also appears with frequency in his study.³⁶⁴ What is more, Lazer insists that the LANGUAGE poets’ emphasis on deconstructing the naturalization of discourse becomes increasingly rooted in a variety of sociopolitical concerns and primarily functions—by the time he writes his book—as an act of resistance to the privileging of the implicitly white phallogentric logics engrained into official verse culture and culture by and large. This is to say, by the mid-1990s, LANGUAGE poets balanced the deconstruction of the individual with the redistribution of cultural authority to the putatively marginalized. Indeed, Bryan Walpert makes a similar observation in his article, “AIDS and the Postmodern Subject: Joan Retallack’s ‘AID/I/SAPPEARANCE.’” Specifically referring to Stefan Fitterman, the individual Retallack dedicates her anti-elegiac AIDS poem to, Walpert argues: “Retallack’s poem uses postmodern thought, which has been characterized as anti-subjectivist, to defend the subject” (706). In other words, after the advent of the AIDS crisis, LANGUAGE poetry does not deconstruct the lyric self as an end in itself but does so to make the socially abject more culturally visible. The AIDS crisis which gave rise to queer theory’s similar paradoxical goal of deconstructing cultural difference primarily for the benefit of the disempowered also modified LANGUAGE poetry’s goals to address these ends. To be sure, the AIDS crisis rooted LANGUAGE poetry’s anti-narrative, anti-lyrical, and anti-elegiac tactics, like parataxis, disjunction, and thwarted logics, in real world concerns. Along these lines, as previously discussed, Shurin’s work—a hybrid between the New York School (a subgroup of official verse culture) and LANGUAGE poetry—

often attempts to position a problematized lyric self in surprising and contradictory relationships with alterity. Relatedly, Kaplan Page Harris' article, "Avant-Garde Interrupted: A New Narrative after AIDS" argues that Kevin Killian's book-length AIDS poem, *Argento Series* (2001), walks the line between the avant-garde and earnest plainspoken lyric by combining the serial (or the deferred, paratactic, reiterative, and disjunctive) with the narrative (or the protensive and causal). In other words, the AIDS crisis provided a stage upon which an undecidability between tradition, confessionalism, and poststructuralism grew to be valued by official verse culture.

This particular form of undecidability also catalyzed the emergence of the semi-avant-garde Elliptical school of poetry. Critic and poet Stephen Burt insists in his foundational 1999 essay "The Elliptical Poets," the essay that named this school of poetry, that Elliptical poets principally work to balance the coherent lyric I with poststructuralist thought through repetition, indeterminate address, and grammatical disjunctions.³⁶⁵ He says: "They believe provisionally in identities [. . .] but they suspect the I's they invoke: they admire disjunction and confrontation, but they know how a little can go a long way [. . .] they want to challenge their readers [. . .] while meeting traditional lyric goals" (346). In his 2004 addendum to the essay, he makes a similar point: "These poets are trying [. . .] to split the difference between a poetry of descriptive realism on the one hand, and, on the other, a neo-avant-garde" (355). This is to say, official verse culture following the advent of AIDS collectively represents the lyric self as existing on the border of subjectivity (or the coherent self) and abjection (or the deconstructed self). Burt suggests that Elliptical Poets like C.D. Wright seem to be saying: "If you can hear me through all this noise, I must be real" (349). (Unsurprisingly, then, tropes of illness pervade much of C.D. Wright's most well-known works.³⁶⁶) Put otherwise, Burt seemingly describes the Elliptical poets as exercising an aesthetic of ontography and flat ontology—that is, their formal techniques

and modified lyric goals code the self as both central to being and as a commonplace being, as alternately significant and insignificant, as simultaneously abject and phenomenologically originary to the surroundings (including to the specific other who creates, in turn, paradoxically and reciprocally, the self by offering a focal point for the self's intentionality).

To be sure, though Burt does not explicitly identify her as Elliptical, Dent anticipates and demonstrates a sympathy with many Elliptical tendencies. As I have already hinted at in this chapter, she employs repetition, parataxis, disjunction, anaphora, and conflicting logics that construct and deconstruct the self all at once. In her title poem of *What Silence Equals*, for instance, the last line of each stanza becomes the first line of the next in a way that evokes the spirit of a villanelle or rondeau. Such repetition is at once obsessive and therefore anti-elegaic, as well as parodic, quasi-traditional, and—therefore—deconstructive in a Butlerian manner. For instance, Dent's poem "Variations," uses anaphora reminiscent of Wallace Stevens' famous modernist poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."³⁶⁷ But "Variation," like "Let," does not employ variation merely as an exercise in cubist philosophy. Rather, for Dent, variation, or parody, is used as a technique of allowing multiple cultural narratives to coexist, such as agency and abjection. For instance, the poem begins, "Allow the vine to cross over the empty space of your heart" (l.1); sixteen iterations later, the poem ends with the speaker describing the self and other as sinking into a grave together. The verbs of "let" and "allow," which combine action and passivity, and their various iterations provide homeostasis of agency and abjection for Dent. This is to say, Dent's repetitive, disjunctive, and yet lyric verse often approximates Elliptical techniques and goals.

But Dent is not the only AIDS poet of her cohort to use repetition to obsessively reinscribe the specificity of the self and other as well as insistently disrupt the boundaries between

them. As already discussed, Doty's "Grosse Fuge" features the poet-speaker asking, "What can I do but echo / myself, vary and repeat?" (179): McCann often repeats lines and images in *Ghost Letters* as in his five "Premonition" poems; and Campo's poems "Café Pamplona" and "For J.W." also repeat and vary lines to tease at the boundary of the self and other. In the latter poem especially, the lines that repeat and vary themselves revolve around the lyric I and you. The speaker opens by explaining: "I know exactly what I want to say, / [. . .] Except it's poetry, / And poetry is too precise" (ll.1-3). He ends the poem by asserting, "I want to comfort you, and say it all. / Except my poetry is imprecise" (ll.24-25). This is to say, the speaker sees poetry as a forum in which the self and other at once succeed and fail to connect as well as precisely emerge and fade into imprecision. In other words, this cohort's quasi-return to formalism and repetitive forms, like the villanelle, at once evokes a confessionalist era poetics (think Bishop's "The Art of Losing") as well as an anti-formalism that leans toward Ellipticism. To be sure, although Reginald Shepherd and Timothy Liu's later works refer less frequently to HIV and AIDS than their first volumes do, those later works also adopt Elliptical techniques and concerns, implying their continued engagement with the impact of AIDS' advent on poetry. Lui's later poetry, for instance, is featured in the 2007 *American Letters and Commentary* volume focused on the Ellipticals and in which Burt refines once again his comments on the Elliptical poets.³⁶⁸ Burt also recurrently identifies D. A. Powell, whose first AIDS poetry book *Tea* appeared in 1998, as an archetypal Elliptical poet.³⁶⁹ Powell's book employs repetition, parataxis, and disjunction, as well as, correspondingly, a sparseness of narrativity, to achieve both a lyric, anti-elegiac, melancholia and a fractured, incoherent, lyric voice. In the volume's preface, he writes, that the "true heart" of his AIDS-era lyrics and "elegies" is "survival" (xiii). He goes on: "I rise out of the ashes. To survive is an astonishing gift. The price of that gift is memory" (xiii). For Powell,

Elliptical techniques become a means of preserving the self and other, in all their coherence and incoherence, as well as engaging with the dialogic ongoing present. In his preface, he says, “I took fragments and make new statements from them, just as I wished to reshape my life from its incomplete bits” (xi). For Powell, the promise of poetry’s phoenix-like nature (or, poetry’s ability to embody loss and refigure it), which Monette’s speaker fears ten years earlier in *Love Alone* (1988) tends ultimately (or, only) toward the past or the other’s absence (see the first chapter for more on the trope of the phoenix), is achieved and bolstered through the indeterminacies of lyric voice.

In other words, AIDS prompted a postmodernist, poststructuralist, politics and poetics that work in tandem to retain, rescue, represent, advance, resist, problematize, and deconstruct the specific self and other all at once in order to satisfy the conflicting ethics of melancholia and social concern (if not outright activism). As I argue in my first chapter’s case study of Monette’s *Love Alone*, the clash of melancholia and activism built into AIDS poetry proposes that the specific lyric self and other can only retain presence by disregarding the historicizing present; at the same time, however, *Love Alone* conflictingly suggests that the self’s dedication to the specific other undergirds the self’s ethical responsibility to all those extant in the ongoing present. Dent, Doty, Campo, Cole, McCann, and Caudros—as well as their contemporary American poets in toto—address the opposing ethical goals of this impasse by way of a poststructuralist notion of identity politics and poetics. Lyric queerness—the formal and thematic expression of this poststructuralist notion—allows this late stage of early AIDS poets and their contemporaries to balance (at least imaginatively so) a dedication to the specific with a public, choric voice engaged with the ongoing present. A philosophy of what I have termed “lyric queerness” enabled these poets to vacillate between ethical registers as well as synecdochally

nest and metonymically rest their imagistic manifestations of those registers inside and beside each other. For instance, the AIDS quilt shows up with frequency throughout all of early AIDS poetry—as in Lui’s “The Quilt,” Dixon’s “Aunt Ida Pieces a Quilt,” Saint’s “The Quilt,” and Cuadros’ “The Quilt Series”—as a representation of ever-unreeling grief and a thanapolitical telos, AIDS theorists and poetry critics, however, have employed the quilt as a symbol of this later cohort’s poststructuralist contradictions. Rendell, for instance, ends her article on Doty and Campo’s use of performative parody in their AIDS poems by saying: “It can be argued [. . .] that the quilt signals the importance of local resistance, especially in the sense that, owing to the urgent need for action in the face of AIDS, such action might only viably be localized. The quilt serves, therefore, as an apt model for the way subversions or resistances, such as those seen in Campo and Doty’s work, can be seen to matter” (98). The quilt, Rendell claims, engages both melancholic and political exigencies. To be sure, Clark J. Elizabeth’s dissertation “Miles of Poems in a Culture of Blame: Activism, Advocacy, and the Poetry of AIDS” (2000)—which picks up in historical terms where my dissertation leaves off—uses the quilt as a leitmotif for the formal iconoclasm, populism, and third-wave feministic mentality of AIDS poetry in the late 1990s. Indeed, the title of her dissertation refers to the sprawling nature of the quilt. And the dissertation itself, which includes criticism, interviews, and original poetry, mirrors AIDS poetry’s eventual proclivity toward postmodern genre-blending. While she argues that this formal iconoclasm and diversity of speakers descends from the demographic spread of the epidemic, the changing nature of the crisis due to protease-inhibiting drugs, and the advent of the internet, my dissertation argues that an era of poststructuralist poetics and politics took root because of the clash between lyric (or, melancholic) and sociopolitical concerns.

In other words, early AIDS poets in concert with early AIDS and queer theorists put the

local and the national, as well as existents and existence, on equal footing thematically and formally. Collectively, they sought to establish and then subvert the binary of the self and other as well as all the binaries it implied: such as those of the self and others, presence and absence, melancholia and activism, tradition and anti-tradition, and abject isolation and subjectivity. While the earliest AIDS poets, such as Lynch, Monette, Gunn, Dlugos, and Liu established the necessity of these binaries as a central concern, early black AIDS poets, such as Essex Hemphill and Melvin Dixon, attempted to sidestep the impasses these binaries created by transforming lyric into a community-oriented performance art that lent agency to their specific group. (It should be mentioned that this attempt at sidestepping these impasses left an impression on American poetry as well, helping to give rise to—at least in part³⁷⁰—slam poetry as well as subsequent AIDS poetry that took its cues from the conventions of slam poetry, such as the work of Justin Chin.³⁷¹) Dent, Doty, Campo, Cole, McCann, and Cuadros, however, attempt to have it all; they combine, interrelate, and contrast the lyric self and other with an exploded view of ontology in order to problematize the boundaries between the self and other as well as related sociopolitical taxonomies that proved to be deleterious, or even fatal, during the AIDS era. This is to say, AIDS and the poetry that absorbed its specific consequences helped divert, or even overturn, the decades-long plainspoken confessionalistic trend in American poetry. What followed the advent of AIDS is a poetry simultaneously confessionalistic and anti-confessionalistic: a quasi-poststructuralist poetry rooted in real world concerns; a neo-avant-garde poetry akin to Modernism or LANGUAGE poetry but also eager to give voice to the coherent lyric self (and lyric other that the self contains). Correspondingly, the AIDS crisis and the poetry that responded to it helped to rewrite identity as conflictually anti-identitarian for identitarian reasons. This is to say, the AIDS crisis and its poetry destabilized the notions of

identity and identity politics in a paradoxical effort to rescue the nation's most abject citizens. AIDS poetry became the pivot upon which many of these seismic interrelated shifts in politics and aesthetics occurred; the clash of genre and politics expressed and explored in the first decade of AIDS poetry, from 1985 to 1995, helped give purpose and form to much of the American literature, aesthetics, cultural theory, and politics that have followed.

Appendix

Chronology of Major AIDS Poetry Volumes:

- 1985—*An Immediate Desire to Survive*, Bill Becker
- 1985—*Epitaphs for the Plague Dead*, Robert Boucheron
- 1988—*Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*, Paul Monette
- 1988—*These Waves of Dying Friends*, Michael Lynch
- 1990—*Decade Dance*, Michael Lassell
- 1992—*The Man with Night Sweats*, Thom Gunn
- 1992—*Strong Place*, Tim Dlugos (Posthumous)
- 1992—*Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry*, Essex Hemphill
- 1992—*A Journal of the Plague Years: Poems 1979-1992*, Walter Holland
- 1992—*Vox Angelica*, Timothy Liu
- 1992—*In the Blood*, Carl Phillips
- 1993—*My Alexandria*, Mark Doty
- 1993—*What Silence Equals*, Tory Dent
- 1994—*Some Are Drowning*, Reginald Shepherd
- 1994—*The Other Man Was Me: A Voyage to the New World*, Rafael Campo
- 1994—*Ghost Letters*, Richard McCann
- 1995—*Love's Instruments*, Melvin Dixon (Posthumous)
- 1995—*The Look of Things*, Henri Cole
- 1996—*Powerless: 1973-1990*, Tim Dlugos (Posthumous)

Endnotes

Introduction:

¹ This passage constitutes the final third of “The Worrying,” which is the fifth poem in Monette’s *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog* (1988).

² See White’s book of essays *The Burning Library* (1994).

³ The recent reissue of Andrew Holleran’s 1988 *Ground Zero* under the title of *Chronicle of a Plague, Revisited: AIDS and Its Aftermath* (2008) asserts in its publishing matter that by 2008, AIDS “has claimed the lives of 450,000 gay men and 22 million others” globally.

⁴ See Bergman’s study on the Violet Quill (VQ) for an analysis of this period; as Bergman writes, the VQ’s “works have come to represent for better or worse that moment between Stonewall and the advent of AIDS, that darkly golden time that has been both demonized and romanticized” (2). He also writes that the VQ, “represent the aspirations and achievements of ‘gay writing’ in the first generation that passed through gay liberation” (19); and goes on to write, “[w]hat they really needed was help in figuring out how best to write about being gay [. . .] The various styles and approaches that the VQ experimented with offer a good indication of just how unsettled the problem of gay representation was” (21). It must be added that even though the VQ only formally met for less than a year in the early 1980s, their network of affiliations stretches historically-speaking to nearly a decade before that time and until the present time (though most of the members of the group have passed away from AIDS complications). Although not all the members were writing openly gay-themed works throughout the 1970s, that was almost always the subtext. They increasingly wrote about gay characters throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, especially Andrew Holleran, George Whitmore, Felice Picano, and eventually Edmund White.

⁵ The Stonewall Riot of June 1969, in which drag queens and gay men fought off a police raid of the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, often demarcates the beginning of the modern gay liberation movement.

⁶ My assertion that gay male literature (in the years between the Stonewall riot and the emergence of AIDS) focused on perpetuating a sense of a distinctive gay community apart from the heterosexual world is my own formulation, based on my own knowledge of this period and its transformations in the AIDS years. But I also find basis to extrapolate this assertion in how Bergman describes the mission of the VQ: “to eschew the conventions of the so-called problem novel (whose major aim is, after all, to make straight readers ‘sympathetic’ to the plight of gay people)” (30). Or put another way, he writes that the VQ, “wanted to create a gay fiction that shunned the inherent or explicit apologetics of most gay-themed novels that preceded them. They did not intend to *defend* homosexuality so much as to capture the essence to be *derived* from their gay experience” (20). Although the VQ, and the writers of this post-Stonewall/pre-AIDS moment did not actively discourage non-gay readers, the VQ and the writers of their period were

mostly writing for a gay audience; they worked to present gay culture in a way that reaffirmed the everyday existence of gay culture. This sense of “gayness” as a coherent and distinctive culture that literature can simultaneously represent, expand upon, and perpetuate is why I have come to use the admittedly oversimplified phrase “gay liberationism” and/or “gay separatism.” Once again, these phrases were born for convenience’s sake since my project focuses on the years following this period and are used without any intended prejudice. To be sure, in my experience, the idea of separatist politics has as many pros as it does cons and—what is more—is often necessity dictated by a variety of cultural pressures.

⁷ For an example of how a literary work’s central action emerges from the effects of internalized homophobia on gay male culture, see Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance*. Its main characters, Malone and Sutherland, struggle with (and eventually succumb to) the heterosexist biases of American culture, despite taking refuge in an almost exclusively gay male separatist culture. Also, Kramer’s *Faggots* and its condemnation of the sexual focus of post-Stonewall gay male culture points to this period’s insistence on employing literature to bolster and further cohere gay male culture.

⁸ As I discuss throughout the introduction, poetry itself, the AIDS poets were aware, constituted a marginalized form in American letters. See my second chapter for a correlation between marginalization (or, national abjection) and the genre of poetry.

⁹ Hemphill’s poem first appeared in the anthology he edited, *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991); it then appeared the following year in his own collection of poems and prose, *Ceremonies* (1992).

¹⁰ See my third chapter for more on the relationship between Beam and Hemphill as well as an analysis of this poem.

¹¹ Indeed, the poem begins, “When my brother fell / I picked up his weapons / and never once questioned / whether I could carry / the weight and grief” (ll.1-5).

¹² In his 1987 essay “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism” (collected in 2002 in his *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*), an important piece in the history of the gay liberationist directive to harness gay male grief into political action rather than romanticizing the impulse to mourn, Douglas Crimp vehemently argues that “art *does* have the power to save lives, and it is this very power that must be recognized, fostered, and supported in every way possible” (32; original emphasis). He summarizes his points at the end of his essay by saying that his intention was, “to show, through discussion of these works, that there was critical, theoretical, activist alternative to personal, elegiac expressions that appeared to dominate the [visual] art-world response to AIDS” (40). Crimp later modifies these dictates in 1989 to allow for the “elegiac” response as long as it is couched in an activist context. For instance, in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1989), he says that “I, too, will have something to say about the distinction between self and not-self, about the confusion of the inside and the outside, but I am impelled to do this *for us*, for my community of AIDS activists. Writing about mourning and militancy is for me both necessary and difficult, for I have seen that mourning troubles us; by

‘us’ I mean gay men confronting AIDS” (131). In the essay he talks about allowing for the response of mourning (but not melancholia) in the gay community *if* (and that is an important “if”) it is paired with an activist response. The last sentence of this essay reads, “Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning *and* militancy” (149, original emphasis). The difference between mourning and melancholia is, of course, one of duration; that is, as prominently theorized by Freud, melancholia is a pathologizable version of mourning inasmuch as it exists without end. See Clifton’s *The Ethics of Mourning*. I discuss both Clifton and Crimp further in the first chapter.

¹³ See Waters for more on how lyric works to connect individuals (the lyric self and other) rather than represent their isolated voices. I primarily discuss Waters in my first chapter. As I also discuss throughout this dissertation (especially in chapters one and two), when I refer to poetry or lyric’s proclivities of direct address, I am mostly, though not exclusively, as will be seen, referring to an understandings of lyric address in a post-Romantic lyric milieu.

¹⁴ The instances in which the AIDS poets acknowledge one another are too numerous to list. A few examples are Lassel thanking Monette for his pioneering work in *Decade Dance*, Holland mentioning Dixon, Hemphill, and Monette as influential poets for him in the years he wrote *A Journal of the Plague Years* in his 2000 article “A Poetry of Crisis, A Poetry of Witness,” Shepherd referring to Hemphill, Dixon, and Phillips in his 1998 interview, and Campo discussing Gunn’s work at length in his 1993 article “AIDS and the Poetry of Healing.”

¹⁵ The word “still” is featured in many of the AIDS poets’ works, especially Monette’s, Lynch’s, and Doty’s. I discuss deixis at length in my first chapter. Deictic words and notions also play an important role in other realms of AIDS art. For instance, dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones’ seminal 1994 AIDS multi-media dance piece is entitled *Still/Here*, short for “I’m still here.” For a discussion of the title and the AIDS politics of Jones’ work see the introduction to dance critic David Gere’s book-length study *How to Make Dance in an Epidemic: Tracking Choreography in the Age of AIDS*.

¹⁶ Although not an AIDS poet per se because she never authored an entire volume of AIDS poetry, Adrienne Rich succinctly captures, in her 1989 elegy for professor David Kalstone who died of AIDS-related complications in 1986, which was later re-titled “In Memoriam: D.K.” and originally published in the first AIDS poetry anthology *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS* (1989), the general misapprehensions the AIDS poets had in writing about AIDS when their loved ones were dying from it. Rich writes, “And what good will it do you / to go home and put on the Mozart Requiem? / Read Keats? How will culture cure you? / Poor, unhappy / unwell culture” (ll.16-20). The poem implies the following network of questions: why indulge in “culture,” why read and *write* poetry when you and those you care for are dying or at risk for dying from HIV/AIDS complications? Should one take a more active stance of advocacy than writing poetry? Is the lyric impulse an ethical impulse to follow, especially in times of crisis?

¹⁷ See the important anthology, *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS* (1989) for a variety of AIDS poems from the epidemic’s earlier years. The first of its kind, this anthology

collects poems solicited by the volume's editor, Michael Klein, about the topic of AIDS. The poems as a whole share a different set of thematic concerns than those expressed by the AIDS poets. *Poets* falls more in line with a sense of gay liberationism, for the most part, than the work of the AIDS poets do.

¹⁸ This acronym was widely used in the 1980s and was also adapted at time to mean "people living with AIDS."

¹⁹ To be sure, after this period—I would propose—AIDS has been seen in the United States more as a "global" or "African" epidemic than a "gay" or "queer" one.

²⁰ Clark documents that in the mid-1990s AIDS became a subject for a variety of poets of all ethnicities and genders, working in a variety of forms and mediums, what she calls the "seven sources": anthologies, writing groups, prominent poets, magazines, slam poetry, the Internet, and the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.

²¹ As a means of framing this argument, then, this introduction discusses further how the AIDS poets relate to the gay literature and cultural theory of their times before it provides an overview of this dissertation's following chapters.

²² Perhaps only two notable exceptions to this rule exist. The first AIDS novel was published in 1983 by a prolific and influential feminist writer, Dorothy Bryant, and was entitled *A Day in San Francisco*. Focusing on a mother's visit to San Francisco, the novel mostly disapproves of the gay sexual liberation of the 1970s. Many early critical volumes on AIDS literature, such as *AIDS: The Literary Response* (1992) and *Confronting AIDS through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation* (1993), note the urban gay community's disdain for the novel in the 1980s. The second notable exception is Alice Hoffman's 1988 bestselling novel *At Risk*, which depicts the prejudicial sufferings that a white middle-class family undergoes after their eleven year old daughter receives HIV through a blood transfusion. Most early critical work on AIDS points out the controversial feelings attending this novel in the urban gay communities of the times as well; see for instance, Michael Denny's 1993 essay "AIDS Writing and the Creation of a Gay Culture." Practically speaking, Denny also claims that in the gay community there was "a great deal of bitterness about the fact that this work of fiction far outsold any other novel on AIDS" (*Confronting* 50).

²³ "Advocacy journalism," a term that Shilts often uses to refer to his own work, can be described as an extension of "new journalism" techniques in the tradition of Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, and others, in which real world events are allegorized through the dramatization of real world characters, often in order to advocate for, implicitly or explicitly, a certain demographic of individuals. In the Shilts' example, this type of literature and journalism was written out of a gay liberationist consciousness, which advocates for the gay community among "the general population" and its own demographic. In other words, at a time when the US government failed to provide information on the new disease and educate those most at risk for it, gay literature advocated for itself to itself by gathering and distributing information about itself (and its newly acquired disease and cultural niche). George Whitmore's

Someone Was Here: Profiles in the AIDS Epidemic (1998) constitutes another significant piece of “advocacy journalism” from the early years of the AIDS crisis. Organized in three parts, Whitmore’s book focuses in very sparse prose on three disparate scenes of AIDS-related devastation in the United States: a gay couple and a GMHC worker dealing with the crisis, a mother and son in Texas coping with the effects of HIV/AIDS in their lives, and a hospital in the Bronx with the third highest case load of AIDS patients in the country (mostly intravenous drug users) managing its various struggles. The book started as an article for *The New York Times*, which was, according to Bergman, “the first article for a general public on human, not the medical, consequences of the pandemic” (226).

²⁴ AIDS, a complex of diseases that arises, or might arise, because of the immunological suppression prompted by the HIV virus, was originally dubbed by the Center for Disease Control and other public-health workers “GRID,” or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency.

²⁵ Edmund White’s comment in his 1991 article for the *New York Times Magazine* on “gay literature” points out his belief that gay literature is a cogent ideological structure as well as one that organized and continues to organize writers’ responses to AIDS and “gay culture.” He says, “Even the question of whether to write about AIDS or not is strife-torn. Some gay writers think that it’s unconscionable to deal with anything else; others believe that since gay culture is in imminent danger of being reduced to a single issue, one that once again equates homosexuality with a dire medical condition, the true duty of gay writers is to remind readers of the wealth of gay accomplishments. Only in that way, they argue, will a gay heritage be passed down to a post-plague generation” (*The Burning Library* 282).

²⁶ Perhaps the most moving example of the idea of separatist thought organizing gay male AIDS literary output is in Robert Ferro’s 1988 *Second Son*, his final novel, published the year of his AIDS-related death. I am referring to the notion of “Splendor,” a mythical planet in the novel whose all-male aliens promise to whisk away gay men from earth and cure them of their “plague.”

²⁷ For more on “The Moral Majority” and the related “divine retribution narrative,” see my second chapter as well as books of journalism from the time, such as McNaught’s *On Being Gay: Thoughts on Family, Faith, and Love* (1988).

²⁸ David Roman makes it clear in his book-length study of AIDS and theater, *Acts of Intervention; Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (1998), that AIDS performances were occurring—although with smaller budgets and publicity—as early as 1983, two years before *The Normal Heart* and *As Is* went into production (xx). William Hoffman’s *As Is* (1985), often considered the other first play about AIDS, has a similar plot structure to both Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* and Reed’s *Facing It*, inasmuch as it traces the long-term relationship between two lovers as one of them exhibits AIDS-complications. Hoffman’s plot has the added complication that before one of the lovers acquired ARC (“AIDS related complex”) the two of them had split up. The play, like *The Normal Heart* and *Facing It*, ends in a hospital room—except in *As Is*, we do not see anyone die. Like *The Normal Heart*, however, the main character’s brother arrives in the eleventh hour to reaffirm his love for his gay brother. The play also

validates gay liberationism by having some of its final words, spoken by a hospice worker, assert that while most AIDS victims are abandoned near the end, in this case, the seronegative gay lover has become selflessly involved. She says about Rich and Saul, the two lovers: “You should see how his lover takes care of him. God forbid they treat Rich badly, Saul swoops down and lets them have it. He’s making a real pain in the ass of himself, which is sometimes how you have to be in this situation” (76).

²⁹ As I discuss in my second chapter, Kramer makes the same point elsewhere by comparing the gay community’s engagement, or lack thereof, with AIDS to the Jewish American community’s engagement with the Holocaust. The opening notes of *The Normal Heart* in published form quote at length a report prepared for the American Jewish Commission by Seymour Maxwell Finger in 1984 entitled, “American Jewry During the Holocaust,” and inform us that the passage was painted in its entirety on one wall of the original set for the play. The passage reads:

There were two alternative strategies a Jewish organization could adopt to get the American government to initiate action on behalf of the imperiled Jews of Europe. It could cooperate with the government officials, quietly trying to convince them that rescue of Jews should be one of the objectives of the war, or it could try to pressure the government into initiating rescue by using embarrassing public attention and rallying public opinion to that end.

The American Jewish Committee chose the former strategy and clung to it tenaciously.

From the very onset of Jewish crises, the Committee responded to each new Nazi outrage by practicing their traditional style of discreet “backstairs” diplomacy.

With each worsening event, the Committee reacted by contacting yet another official or re-visiting the same ones to call their attention to the new situation.

The Jewish delegates were usually politely informed that the matter was being given the “most earnest attention.”

They were still trying to persuade the same officials when the war ended. (21-22)

It is an argument that Ned uses on his first date with Felix. While confronting Felix, a journalist of some standing, about his apathetic approach to the politics of journalism during the AIDS epidemic and its effects on the gay community, Ned says:

Do you know that when Hitler’s Final Solution to eliminate the Polish Jews was first mentioned in the *Times* it was on page twenty-eight. And on page six of the *Washington Post*. And the *Times* and the *Post* were owned by Jews. What causes silence like that? Why didn’t the American Jews help the German Jews get out? Their very own people! Scholars are finally writing honestly about this—I’ve been doing some research—and it’s damning to everyone who was here then: Jewish leadership for being totally ineffective; Jewish organizations for constantly fighting among themselves, unable to cooperate even in the face of death. (50)

The Holocaust and its socio-political framework were a guiding allegory for Kramer as well as a host of other gay writers (Holleran, Hoffman, etc), a point that Sontag later takes up in her

discussion of the cultural theory of the AIDS epidemic. In my second chapter, I discuss this dynamic at length. For more on this topic also see Kramer's *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist* (1994).

³⁰ The article vehemently denounces gay men and the American government for being apathetic in the face of the emerging AIDS crisis.

³¹ *Rolling Stone* columnist David Black's heterosexist *The Plague Years: A Chronicle of AIDS* (1986) serves as a notable example of AIDS journalism from the mid-1980s as well. A Pulitzer finalist, the book purports to analyze the crisis but is often merely a platform to spread misinformation and tasteless jokes about gay men.

³² *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* concludes a ten-year series about a fantastic realm and time called Nevèrÿon; it constitutes a hybrid style of genres that shifts between fiction, personal essay, theory, and memoir. Although it implicitly supports a gay liberationist logic, this type of genre-blending might be seen as a forerunner to the poststructuralist identity praxis of AIDS works like Gil Cuadros's *City of God*.

³³ Indeed, Delany goes on to say, "metaphors stuck on a good or a bad scale won't do. What is needed is a metaphor or metaphor system in which restraint of judgment as well as a certain order of complexity are part of what is metaphorically suggested" (179). Even though Delany never explicitly says what that "metaphor system" might look like, the fact that he publishes his AIDS novella and the fact that his novella is a hybrid of various genres, such as fiction (fantasy and realism), personal essay, and theory attests to Delany's approach toward a "certain order of complexity."

³⁴ Bergman's chapter in *The Violet Hour* on AIDS and the Violet Quill, called simply "AIDS," notes that the members of the VQ remained relatively silent at first on the topic of AIDS. Bergman asserts, when VQ members wrote about AIDS, "they did so doubtful [on a personal level] that their writing would make any difference" (216).

³⁵ Even though Whitman did not focus on publishing poems during his stint as an unofficial nurse in the makeshift hospitals of the Washington DC area in the 1860s, he wrote and edited drafts of "Drum-Taps" poems. He also retrospectively wrote a variety of prose and verse about the Civil War and, of course, Lincoln's assassination.

³⁶ See Shilts 381 and *Ground Zero* 168.

³⁷ See Carpenter 413.

³⁸ Consult my second chapter for how early AIDS writers as a whole and the AIDS poets differ in representing the atrocities of World War II.

³⁹ I will soon discuss in this introduction and throughout my dissertation what Scott Brewster calls lyric's "terminological looseness." But I will add here that this understanding of lyric and

poetry as mercurial or contradictory in nature also depends on Brooks' work, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) and Doty's paraphrasing of Stanley Kunitz's philosophy regarding poetry: "[I]f poetry teaches us anything, it is that we can believe two completely contradictory things at once" (*Heaven's Coast* 65).

⁴⁰ Near the end of his long chapter on AIDS and the VQ, Bergman writes, "If all writing is a function of the abject—which for Julia Kristeva is that part of ourselves that we eject from ourselves—then AIDS writing is an extreme form of that confrontation with the abject" (278). Indeed, for American AIDS writers in the 1980s there are multiple levels of abjection: the psychological abjection that is writing is; the state of physical abjection caused by AIDS-complications; and the idea of cultural abjection, which is redoubled by the interlinking of the categories of "gay" and "AIDS." My ideas on cultural abjection have also derived from Karen Shimakawa's theory that the Asian-American body/identity has been abjected from the "American national body" throughout US history in order to give definition to the concept of America in times of national crisis; see her 2002 book *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*. I believe Shimakawa's theory also aptly applies to the treatment of the gay body/identity in US history. Indeed, much early AIDS writing discusses the eerie feeling of being completely isolated from American society. For instance, Hoffman declares as much in his 1985 preface to *As Is*: "during the polio epidemic, as during the Tylenol and Legionnaire's disease scares, the media and the government committed themselves wholeheartedly to the side of the victims. In the early eighties, with few exceptions, the main concern of people outside the gay community was reassuring themselves that it was happening only to 'them,' and not to 'us.' I felt isolated from society in a way I never had before" (xii). To be sure, this sentiment is the thesis of Shilts' epic *And the Band Played On*. Also, Whitmore's *Someone Was Here* frequently depicts scenes of US society ostracizing gay men even more so than it already had because of AIDS as well as scenes of defecation and vomiting induced by AIDS-related complications

⁴¹ According to Shilts 577, Bruce is based on the real life disco idol turned activist Paul Popham.

⁴² It must be mentioned that Bruce describes the undertaker as "black." This description, which is most likely meant to underscore (problematically of course) the lowliest of positions occupied by Bruce's deceased lover, points to the way in which the gay community as a whole historically has abjected, in turn, the notion of blackness—as my third chapter explores.

⁴³ For more on why this formulation is problematic, see the ends of my second and fourth chapters. My third chapter implicitly discusses this issue throughout as well.

⁴⁴ It should be added that the hugely popular musical *Rent*, written, workshopped, and premiered between 1990 and 1996, prominently features black, white, Puerto Rican, male, female, and transgender characters affected by the AIDS crisis; it thereby, like *Angels in America* and akin to early AIDS poetry, presents a pluralistic model of identity politics.

⁴⁵ Indeed, poststructuralist thought is often linked with Derrida's work in the mid- to late-1960s but can be traced back to the much earlier work of semiotician Saussure. Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) epitomizes a trend of highly-self-referential postmodern fiction in the United

States—though of course, this type of work descends from the Modernists, if not their precursors.

⁴⁶ Before “queer theory,” as in the case of LANGUAGE poetry, poststructuralist thought was mostly applied in literature to linguistic, phenomenological, and Marxist ends; that is, early poststructuralists pointed out the constructedness of language, ontological alterity, and class. This type of thought had not yet been consolidated into an “identity politics” or as I call it later “a quasi-poststructuralist praxis” yet. Once consolidated as “queer theory,” however, this type of thought began to affect feminist thought, which transformed, in turn, into “third-wave” or “gender theory.” Also, theorists of aesthetics and race, such as bell hooks, began to frame postmodernist techniques as a way to voice a multiplicity of conflicting experiences at once, and thereby gain visibility for, for instance, the black female experience. As I discuss in my third chapter, hooks calls this type of thinking “critical postmodernism” or “Postmodern Blackness.”

⁴⁷ It should be added that there are two other AIDS-poetry related dissertations. The first of which, Dagmawi Woubshet’s “Figurations of Catastrophe: The Poetics and Politics of AIDS Loss” (2007), uses the word “poetics” in a general (and undefined) sense—that is, not just as it applies to the genre of poetry—and dedicates only one brief chapter to American AIDS poets Paul Monette and Melvin Dixon. The main thrust of the chapter is that Monette and Dixon challenge Freud’s schematizing of mourning and melancholia by having the mourner also fill the position of the soon-to-be-dead, the imminent object of loss. This is to say, both Monette and Dixon were dying of AIDS or known to be infected with HIV as they mourned the deaths of their lovers from it. The complication of this Freudian mourner and loss-object schema has repercussions, Woubshet contends, for the main purpose of the conventional elegy, which is to replace the loss-object with a new object of focus (typically, God or love or poetry itself). Woubshet dubs this new mode of elegizing, both the self and the beloved other, as “a poetics of compounded loss” (8), a poetics that seems to strive for a transcendence of hardship like negro spirituals (her comparison; 7) but in secular terms and often refuses the psychic closure promised by the replacement of the loss-object with a new object of focus. In its remaining three chapters, Woubshet’s dissertation explores the effects of AIDS on obituaries and pop art in both the United States and South Africa, as a means of investigating the trans-Atlantic politics of AIDS. Woubshet is less interested in historicizing U.S. AIDS poets and more interested in AIDS poetry’s relationship to the theorizations and representations of mourning amidst the trans-Atlantic crisis. The second of these AIDS-poetry related dissertations is Jonathan Allen Sedberry’s “Rupture and Repair: Literature, Genre and The AIDS Epidemic” (2008). Mostly interested in describing the effects of the AIDS crisis on gay literature at the end of the twentieth century, Sedberry’s dissertation dedicates one of its six chapters to discussing AIDS poetry. This chapter identifies some of the major poets (such as Paul Monette and Thom Gunn) and themes (such as the friction between mourning and monumentalizing) in this milieu; but his chapter does not historicize the AIDS poets as a whole. It also insists that AIDS poetry always gears itself to elegiac and gay liberationist ends (a premise I contest throughout my dissertation). This is to say, while it is informative regarding AIDS literature as a whole, Sedberry’s dissertation overlooks the AIDS poets’ anti-utilitarian emphasis and their corresponding role in assisting a cultural paradigm shift from an identitarian to quasi-poststructuralist praxis (as my dissertation works to articulate). I comment on Sedberry further in this dissertation’s first chapter.

⁴⁸ The FDA approved Saquinavir in 1995; it was the first protease-inhibiting drug they approved.

⁴⁹ To elaborate, Piggford uses the works of Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, to assert that literature, poetry in particular, occupies a space between the self and other that attempts to transcend the boundaries of perspective and knowledge. However, Piggford argues primarily via Levinas' theory of ethics that poetry occupies the space of the always already failed position of trying to tend to, expose, and explore the "trace," or psychologically indistinct and alluring shadow, of immanence, or God and alterity. According to Piggford, since poetry is the only hope a limited human has for "excendence," a more complicated and three-dimensional model of transcendence, it is therefore always ethical, inasmuch as it attempts to bridge the un-traversable space between the self and other—a process Piggford and Levinas call the "face-to-face." Piggford employs AIDS poetry as his "test-case" these Levinasian theories. Also, Piggford has published an article, "'In Time of Plague': AIDS and Its Significations in Hervé Guibert, Tony Kushner, and Thom Gunn" (2000), shortly after completing his dissertation wherein he explores the relationship between AIDS literature and gay culture. He notes that AIDS literature not only loses its faith in the concept of God, but also in the ability of medical science to save and extend a gay man's life. He claims that this loss of faith creates "a series of unfolding and overlapping epidemics within and between different population groups" (172). Piggford concludes that AIDS literature, just as *Angels in America*, encourages an ethical image of "liberal pluralism" (187). Like his dissertation, brilliant though they both are, Piggford does not map a metanarrative of the AIDS poets—indeed, he is only occasionally employs AIDS poetry to explicate poststructuralist and phenomenological thought.

⁵⁰ Indeed, as I have been indicating and argue throughout my dissertation, the AIDS poets' relationship to lyric, not elegy, produces the most significant changes in how the AIDS crisis comes to be seen by critics and activists.

⁵¹ See Joseph Cady's "Immersive and Counterimmersive Writing About AIDS: The Achievement of Paul Monette's *Love Alone*" (1993), Deryl B. Johnson's "Living on the Moon: Persona, Identity, and Metaphor in Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir*" (1995), Deborah Landau's "'How to Live, What to Do': The Poetics and Politics of AIDS" (1996), Barbara Frey Waxman and Eleanor Byington's "Teaching Paul Monette's Memoir / Manifesto to Readers" (1997), Susan E Hill's "(Dis)inheriting Augustine: Constructing the Ailenated Self in the Autobiographical Works of Paul Monette and Mary Daly" (1999), Kimberly Rae Connor's "'A Common Geography of the Mind': Creating Sacred Space in the Autobiographical Writings of Paul Monette and the NAMES Project" (2000), Georgia Johnston's "Geographies of the Closet: The Lives of Paul Monette" (2002), and Sheryl Stevenson's "'World War I All Over': Writing and Fighting the War in AIDS Poetry" (1997).

⁵² Most of these poems appear in Merrill's last volume, *A Scattering of Salts* (1995).

⁵³ Both Hoffman and Materer's articles end up tripping over, as a result, their poets' relationships with gay culture; both critics conclude somewhat ambiguously that their poets had, in their AIDS poetry, ambivalent feelings about the concept of "gay separatism"—often using those words

exactly. Hoffman quotes Gunn as saying, for example, that he always felt the phrase “gay community” was “bullshit, until the thing was vanishing” (26). After asserting that Gunn affirms the notion of the “gay community” in his AIDS poems, Hoffman concludes, oddly enough, that *The Man with Night Sweats* “stands as a successful form of nonseparatist political action” (36). Materer tries to make Merrill’s realistic depiction of the terror of the AIDS crisis for the gay community compatible with his adamant belief that poetry by nature affirms and heals as well as his often cool distancing from gay liberationist discourse. Ultimately concerned with projects of bio-criticism, more so than any of the questions I have outlined here, Hoffman’s and Materer’s articles focus on locating AIDS’ place in the context of their respective poets’ oeuvres.

⁵⁴ See Roger Platizky’s “Elegies in a Different Key: Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* and Paul Monette’s *Love Alone*” (2002), Llyod Edward Kermode’s “Using up Words in Paul Monette’s AIDS Elegy” (2005), and Gregory Woods’ “AIDS to Remembrance: The Uses of Elegy.” Notably, Woods’ article, published in *AIDS: The Literary Response* (1992), historicizes various gay separatist responses against the seemingly apolitical tradition of elegy to conclude that the elegiac tradition is always already radically political and therefore serviceable for a gay liberationist logic. Also see James Miller’s methodologically-odd article, “Dante on Fire Island: Reinventing Heaven in the AIDS Elegy, in which he imagines and advocates for a gay separatist heaven that he believes poets like Doty have begun to articulate.

⁵⁵ Plenty of non-peer reviewed articles exist on AIDS poetry, especially that of Gunn and Dlugos. I comment on many of these pieces in my second chapter.

⁵⁶ See Joan Rendell’s article “Drag Acts: Performativity, Subversion and the AIDS Poetry of Rafael Campo and Mark Doty” (2002), Bryan Walpert’s “AIDS and the Postmodern Subject: Joan Retallack’s ‘AIDS/I/SAPPEARANCE’” (2006), and Kaplan Page Harris’ “Avant-Garde Interrupted: A New Narrative after AIDS.” *Contemporary Literature* 52.4 (2011)

⁵⁷ See especially *Bodies that Matter* (1993), in which Butler claims that the norms of sexuality and gender are created through their repeated reiterations (or, performativity); drag ,therefore, can parody this process and possibly interrupt its naturalizations.

⁵⁸ Also see *Bodies that Matter* 233.

⁵⁹ See Rendell 95 and “Queering Performativity” 2.

⁶⁰ Jagose’s *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996) almost never mentions AIDS, demonstrating not just the way that queer theory covered its roots in the AIDS crisis but also the way that the early AIDS crisis created a traumatic rupture in gay and queer discourses; it was, thereby, difficult to parse while at its height. Indeed, when “AIDS” appears in the volume, its appearance implicitly points to the permeability or constructed-ness of terms like “gay” and “homosexual.” For instance, at the beginning of the first chapter—after asking “What is homosexuality exactly?” (7)—Jagose explains that research done on AIDS shows if you ask men who sleep with men if they are “gay” or not, you receive a variety of conflicting answers.

⁶¹ Indeed, this explanation depends on “trauma theory” which explains that sites of traumatic rupture cannot be accurately parsed while ongoing; the early year of the AIDS crisis in the United States, before protease-inhibiting drugs, constitutes such a site. This notion also explains why Whitman, in the example cited above, wrote most of his Civil War poetry and prose following the war’s conclusion.

⁶² In addition to other works I mention below, also see Altman’s *AIDS in the Mind of American* (1986).

⁶³ This influential piece by Edelman first appeared in the 1993 collection of article, *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, which is more invested—despite its title and subtitle—in multimedia art and queer theory than literature and gay history.

⁶⁴ Along these same lines, Edelman writes near the end of his essay, “in the wake of ‘AIDS,’ some might say, such a mutation of the gay subject can already be perceived in the process by which, in certain quarters, ‘gay’ is being rewritten as ‘queer’” (31).

⁶⁵ Sontag mentions the word “gay” once in regards to how the religious right frame AIDS as a “gay plague.” She mentions the word “homosexual” or “homosexuals” five times in regards to the construct of it.

⁶⁶ When Sontag uses the word “romanticizing” in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, she explicitly employs it to refer to coding a disease with a “darkly positive association” (111) through literature—an association made by, for instance, “the Romantic writers [and] pulmonary tuberculosis and heightened emotional activity” (111). Indeed, her examples of what this “romanticizing” amounts to are connected to the given disease’s ability to precipitate exceptional literary output as documented, directly or indirectly, in that very literary output. But Sontag claims that “AIDS [. . .] does not [lend itself to] romanticizing or sentimentalizing” (111-12). When talking about the cultural response to AIDS, she exclusively relies upon journalistic and scientific output. She speaks only indirectly, tensely so, about the literary output of a certain “risk group” (read “gay community”) that has created inimical metaphors surrounding AIDS. However, critic and editor Michael Denney famously said, as quoted by David Kaufman in his 1987 piece, “AIDS: The Creative Response,” that the gay community is “on the verge of getting a literature out of this that will be a renaissance” (quoted from Crimp, 29).

⁶⁷ Indeed, Watney’s primary scholastic training related to art history. For more on this type of AIDS theorization, see Bordowitz’s *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986–2003* (2004).

⁶⁸ To be sure, like Bersani’s article, Edelman’s revolves around the notion of gay “passivity.”

⁶⁹ Sedgwick makes this comment in the context of discussing the U.S. Justice Department’s 1986 ruling that employers “may freely fire persons with AIDS” (5).

⁷⁰ In the first footnote to her article, Treichler personally and professionally thanks Sedgwick.

Campo thanks Sedgwick similarly in the acknowledgments of his first book. Also, as I mention in my third and fourth chapters, Sedgwick saw the work of her former student, Gary Fisher, who died from AIDS-complications, into posthumous print.

⁷¹ Indeed, most sources do not site these two fields as emerging until the early 1990s, placing them slightly after the emergence of queer theory. This is to say, these two fields might be seen as a result of second-wave feminism attempting to reconcile feminist thought with the emergent field of queer studies. At the very least, Bersani's article suggests a strong relationship between AIDS, AIDS theory, and queer theory: in the article, he expands on Foucault's foundational notions regarding the constructed-ness of sexuality while also critiquing Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon's primarily second-wave-feminist renditions of sexual passivity. Additionally, Hooks' previously-mentioned theory of "Postmodern Blackness" arrives around the same time as queer theory (a fact I discuss in my third chapter). It might be noted here too that the popularity of performance poetry, or "Slam Poetry," around the turn of the twenty-first century might be partially attributed to the critical friction created by the AIDS crisis, AIDS literature, and queer theory.

⁷² It should be added that *Epitaphs for the Plague Dead* (1985) is tonally unique when it comes to the AIDS poetry that follows. Although it explicitly aligns itself with gay liberationism and formally mimics what it sees as its gay male literary predecessors, such as Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, and Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, its camp aesthetic—as a few critics, such as Woods and Miller, have observed—often feel cruel or unfeeling. For instance, the first poem in the volume, entitled "Epitaph for a Front Runner," speaks from the first-person position of a fictive circuit queen (a dance, sex, and drug enthusiast) who had spent his life being a follower, but ends his life a "front runner" because he dies from AIDS complications first. Also, unlike the AIDS poets or gay liberationist texts, Boucheron's replicates a homophobic logic regarding AIDS on a number of occasions; most pronouncedly, the poem "Epitaph for an Innocent," gives voice to a baby born with HIV/AIDS by way of his father's infected blood transfusion. This logic suggests that anyone who received the virus through gay sex or needle-sharing was not "innocent" and therefore deserving of infection and, even, death.

⁷³ The imprint of Becker's volume (Dorrance) indicates that *An Immediate Desire to Survive* might have been, in fact, a vanity publishing. *Love Alone*, conversely, has been reviewed and commented on widely, as my first chapter indicates.

⁷⁴ Hemphill's chapbooks do not often explicitly discuss AIDS and do not have a measurable cultural effect on the AIDS poets' works until Hemphill republished them as sections of *Ceremonies* (1992); what is more, almost no copies of these early ephemeral chapbooks have survived. I am also specifically referring here to Shepherd's book *Angel, Interrupted* (1996).

⁷⁵ As discussed in my first chapter, the term "technocracy" comes from line 115 of Monette's poem "Last Day at Molera Beach," the fifteenth poem in *Love Alone*.

⁷⁶ For more on the melancholia of lyric address, or the way lyric voice seeks presence, see

Cameron's brilliant and foundational work of lyric theory, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (1979). Also consult Blasing's *Lyric Poetry: the Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (2007); the first chapter, entitled "The Historical 'I,'" argues that language acquisition inexorably incorporates individuals into history and that poetry's emphasis on sound returns to the traumatic moment of linguistic acquisition in an attempt to heal over the divide between the linguistic and material worlds.

⁷⁷ Indeed, many critics, such as Woods and Crimp, have claimed that AIDS poetry is "elegiac." However, "anti-elegy"—as I explain in the first chapter—is a modern, mostly American, form that resists the utilitarian ends of "elegy." For more on elegy and anti-elegy, see Sacks and Ramazani. I discuss Sacks' work at length in my first chapter.

⁷⁸ Even though Foucault coined the term "biopolitics" in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, cross-disciplinary theorists did not develop the notion into a field of study until over a decade later. For more on this historical gap regarding biopolitics, consult Lemke's *Biopolitics* 34-35.

⁷⁹ In my second chapter, I respectively call these two interrelated techniques of coping with AIDS poetry's ethical impasse, "secular prayer" and "ethical fatalism."

⁸⁰ In my third chapter, I rely in large part on the W. R. Johnson's and Heather Dubrow's studies of lyric to make this argument.

⁸¹ See Brewster's monograph *Lyric*.

⁸² See Genette's *The Architext: An Introduction* (1992).

⁸³ In my fourth chapter, I apply Lazer's *Opposing Poetries* and Burt's *Close Calls with Nonsense* to this context.

⁸⁴ Another particularly concise and illustrative example regarding the mercurial, or "queer," nature of lyric voice in AIDS poetry (an example I closely analyze in my fourth chapter) transpires in Dent's poem "Family Romance," when her poet-speaker declares: "I'm more than the man who mounts deep inside the man, inside me, the woman. / I'm both the truth and the lie about God" (ll.47-48). Dent collects the poem in her 1999 volume *HIV, Mon Amour*, but she wrote it in the mid-1990s; for more on where the poem first appeared, see the volume's acknowledgments section.

Chapter One:

⁸⁵ Most of this scholarship posits that *Love Alone* seeks to better the gay community by correcting deleterious assumptions made about gay men during the height of the United States AIDS crisis. See especially Cady, Sedberry, Deryl Johnson, Stevenson, Landau, Waxman and Byington, Hill, Connor, Eisner, Johnston, and (even) Nelson. Two critics have explored Monette's place in the elegiac tradition directly: Platizky and Kermode. Both of their articles, as

I touch on shortly, conclude that Monette's AIDS elegies typify postmodern elegy's tendency to refuse closure and redemption, or the substitution of desire-objects. However, both paradoxically then assume that *Love Alone*'s main purpose is to strengthen the gay community. Both overlook the volume's persistent direct address to the already lost specific other, an element I will discuss throughout this article. For more on this scholarship, see my dissertation's introduction.

⁸⁶ Cady's article also asserts that *Love Alone* draws readers out of any denial surrounding the epidemic through "direct imaginative confrontation with the special horrors of AIDS" (244). I will dispute this type of reading of the volume shortly.

⁸⁷ See Sedberry's 2008 dissertation *Rupture and Repair: Literature, Genre and the AIDS Epidemic*; one of the dissertation's chapter's focuses on AIDS elegy while the rest of it focuses on genres other than poetry. Via a gay liberationist logic, Sedberry argues throughout that AIDS posed a challenge to gay culture that it eventually overcame by way of literary affirmation.

⁸⁸ These were the only two editions of *Love Alone* ever printed and both were printed by St. Martin's Press in 1988. Recently, I have assisted Open Road Media in producing an eBook version of *Love Alone* (2014) that features the original cover photograph as a frontispiece.

⁸⁹ For more on Kramer (his writing, rhetoric, and activism), see this dissertation's introduction and second chapter.

⁹⁰ Indeed, in his thirteen personal diaries which are housed at UCLA Special Collections and were officially processed for their online finding aid by me, Monette often refers to his "mission" to write about Rog and his loss by way of the poems that would become *Love Alone* and the memoir that became *Borrowed Time*. See journals ten and eleven especially. See my finding aid "Paul Monette Papers, 1945-1995" at the *Online Archive of California*.

⁹¹ Consult *The Brink of Summer's End* as well as *Last Watch of the Night: Essays Too Personal and Otherwise* (1994) for more on their acquaintanceship.

⁹² See my fourth chapter for how the ethical impasse discussed in this chapter and first articulated by *Love Alone* came to affect American poetry as a whole. Also, on an anecdotal level, while I spoke with Richard Siken at the 2014 AWP conference in Seattle, he volunteered that *Love Alone* was a major influence on his hugely-popular volume of poems *Crush* (2005), which was a winner of the highly-coveted Yale Series of Younger Poets Award.

⁹³ See *West of Yesterday, East of Summer* xviii.

⁹⁴ See *Borrowed Time* 150, where Monette writes that he and his friend, the well-known poet, Carol Muske-Dukes, "wondered if it was possible to write a poem that never thought about being published at all, or about reaching an audience [. . .] What about a 'conspiracy poem' that would pass back and forth like a secret between two voices?" (150). One aspect of Monette's narrative that I do not have the space to build into this chapter is the way he effectively quit writing poetry until this conversation with Muske-Dukes months before Rog's death. He had

long expressed a desire before this conversation to avoid writing poetry because it only “whined” about its speakers’ lack of time (as Monette’s notes in his journals from the early 1980s attest).

⁹⁵ Indeed, as I gesture to throughout this chapter, *Love Alone* was written in the order of its publication except for the last two poems, whose positions were swapped by Monette. He also writes about their origins in the preface to *West of Yesterday, East of Summer*:

two weeks [after Roger’s death], I was standing watch at the grave in Forest Lawn, as I did every day while dusk fell. Next morning I had to leave for Boston to visit my parents, who hadn’t seen me in a year and a half, dreading every minute of the further separation from Roger.

And I suddenly realized that if the plane went down tomorrow, there would be no record anywhere of what we’d suffered and how love got us through. So I sat in the grass in the failing light and opened my journal and scribbled about twenty-five lines—the poem called *Here* [sic]—and that night I propped it on my desk, labeled *To Whom It May Concern*.

The next day on the plane to Boston I pulled out the journal again, and wrote the whole of *No Goodbyes* [sic], in a torrent of unfiltered feeling. And that is how they were all written from then on, at least the first ten, entirely *without thinking*. [. . .] I don’t doubt that some shaping imagination was at work, even so, but it stayed resolutely unconscious, completely on its own. I had no sense that anyone *else* would want them, but I hadn’t counted on the luck of its crossing the desk of Michael Denny [editor of the St. Martin’s Stonewall Editions], who was ready to go to contract with only half of the poems in place. (xvii-xviii; original emphasis)

For Monette, eight years after the writing of his eighteen elegies, the primary function of *Love Alone* becomes reframed, at least for his audience, as the preservation of his bond with Rog for an uncertain posterity (“To Whom It May Concern”). But the poet-speaker within “Here” and the resulting poems—especially within the first ten poems, before the prospect of publication arose⁹⁵—exclusively addresses Rog, his specific lost other; creating thereby a closed-circuit of address, however unidirectional and severed, that suggests an utter disregard for a third-party reader. This chapter discusses this dynamic, a pull and tug between semi-private and public exigencies, throughout.

⁹⁶ See “Your Sightless Days” for an extended example of “protest mourning.” I discuss the poem in this chapter’s fifth section.

⁹⁷ Sacks claims that the American tradition was best adapted to the form, or anti-form, of anti-elegy because of its historic striving after originality and privacy, best represented by Whitman and Dickinson (134).

⁹⁸ Monette shifts in *Love Alone* to the lyric mode. The predominant form in Monette’s earlier poetry volumes is the dramatic monologue, which he employs to speak from the vantage point of (gay) cultural icons, such as Noel Coward and Isadora Duncan. I discuss this shift in his poetics in the chapter’s second section.

⁹⁹ For more on this dynamic, see George Piggford's thoughtful and fascinating 2000 dissertation "Tainted Love: AIDS, Theory, Ethics, Elegy," which primarily relies on the phenomenological theories of Levinas.

¹⁰⁰ As I discuss in this chapter's next section, while critics like W. R. Johnson point out lyric's public and choral origins and critics like Heather Dubrow deconstruct a narrowly understood notion of lyric by demonstrating its variety of rhetorics and audiences in early modern times, theorists like Cameron and Waters convincingly argue that a defining feature of post-Romantic lyric is the recurrent pressure it places via address on the dividing line between monologue and dialogue. In other words, contemporarily, lyric dwells on language's ability or lack thereof to push Cartesian isolation toward a phenomenological sense of contact. Cameron's impressive book *Lyric Time* further argues that Dickinson and other lyric poets employ address toward absent listeners to rescue the *self* from the implications of time.

¹⁰¹ Gregory Woods' 1992 essay "AIDS to Remembrance: The Uses of Elegy" argues that AIDS elegy should only be employed to gay liberationist ends. He also points out how early AIDS theorist Simon Watney agrees with Crimp's edict, or may even anticipate it. The first paragraph of Woods essay reads: "Simon Watney has said, 'The frequent emphasis on death in AIDS commentary is at best sentimental, and at worst simply morbid' [*Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics* (1989), 186]. Given that he is calling for an activist, interventionist literature of AIDS, committed to such tasks as health education and the agitation for effective and urgent government responses to the epidemic, Watney is right. The dead have died. The past can wait; aesthetics can wait. Douglas Crimp has underlined the point: 'We don't need a cultural resistance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it' [*AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (1988), 7]" (155).

¹⁰² See the first essay in Holleran's *Ground Zero* (1988). For more analysis of this passage specifically, see this dissertation's introduction.

¹⁰³ In his 1990 interview with Don Swaim, while promoting the novel *Afterlife*, Monette says, "my writing has become more and more political, for want of a better word" (9:50). After insisting on the need for a gay liberationist logic—growing out of a conversation about the Reagan years—over the course of seven and a half minutes, Monette says, in reference to the AIDS crisis, "How would you write about anything else?" (30:00). To be sure, in his 1991 interview with Swaim, Monette states that "Some of the greatest art being produced now is about AIDS [. . .] so much of the rest of the art of the last ten years is about nothing" (19:30). Most of the two interviews talk about the sociopolitical response to AIDS and the biomedical statistics and facts surrounding it while making overtures in the direction of Monette's novels, the second one being in regards to *Halfway Home* (1991). Indeed, in both of his Swaim interviews and his 1994 interview with Charlie Rose on PBS, Monette declares that he models his AIDS work on Primo Levi's Holocaust work, inasmuch as Monette proleptically refutes historical revisionism that erases gay history in the wake of the AIDS era as well as speaks to the current sociopolitical context (http://www.charlierose.com/search/search/paul_monette?text=paul+monette). For more

on this type of AIDS activist rhetoric, see my second chapter.

¹⁰⁴ See the introduction to Lazer's *Opposing Poetries* (1996). He defines "official verse culture" as the plainspoken, earnest, confessionalistic, style celebrated in academia in the Post-Vietnam era. And he juxtaposes this style with the fragmented voices and experimental style of LANGUAGE poetry.

¹⁰⁵ Indeed, all writing is political on some level, by the very nature of language's sociality. What I suggest in this chapter is that *Love Alone* seeks to shut out however impossibly his anti-elegies' socio-historical contexts because these contexts threaten to universalize Rog, or Monette's lost other, as a historic example rather than a specific lost other who demands ethical attention—and therefore the potential for retrieval—from the poet-speaker. Critics like Kermode, in his article "Using Up Words in Paul Monette's AIDS Elegy," assume, from an ideological perspective, that since written discourse is inevitably political that *Love Alone* necessarily seeks to engage with, disrupt, reconfigure, or intervene into its myriad or, at least, governing sociopolitical contexts. However, simply because *Love Alone* is published does not mean that its content primarily works to engage with the cultural ramifications of its contexts. I argue that *Love Alone*'s poems express a primary concern over an ethics of mourning.

¹⁰⁶ Monette's imagined epitaph in "Readiness," reads, "FOR TWELVE YEARS ALL THE LOVE IN THE WORLD WAS HIS / OTHERWISE: HE WAS A WRITER HERE I AM ROG" (11.46-47).

¹⁰⁷ Because of its emphasis on the utilitarian value of AIDS "elegy" within an AIDS and gay activist milieu, Woods' essay "AIDS to Remembrance: The Uses of Elegy" (my emphasis) reads this moment in "Readiness" as an un-ironic, even brave, projecting of the self into the future for the betterment of a gay community. Woods writes, "It is an act of real courage for a man with HIV [Monette] to reach this conclusion [that the epidemic will end and that love will prevail]" (165).

¹⁰⁸ For an extended conversation on the relationship between the "Lyric I" and the epitaph, read Chapter 3, "The Continuance of Poems: Monument and Mouth," in William Water's impressive study *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (2003). I discuss his work shortly.

¹⁰⁹ Consult Ricoeur 137, where he writes, "to read a book is to consider its author already dead." Also, as Paul de Man has famously pointed out, autobiographical language displaces (and therefore erases) presence to the precise extent that it creates it. See the last paragraph of de Man's "Autobiography as De-Facement." Also, see the end of George Whitmore's work of advocacy journalism, *Someone Was Here*; in the book's conclusion, Whitmore writes, "It's taken me months to write this [the epilogue, presumably]. I'm afraid to finish this book. I'm afraid of what will happen next" (210), implying that he will die and the end of writing his book, as he unfortunately did.

¹¹⁰ For more on the past-ward-ness of literature in AIDS poetry, see my discussion of Gunn, Holland, Dlugos, Becker, Boucheron, and Liu in this dissertation's second chapter.

¹¹¹ For more on the AIDS poets and their stance toward literary allusion, see this dissertation's introduction.

¹¹² I should note too that this poem also alludes to O. Henry's famous Christmas short story "Gift of the Magi," when Monette writes near the end of the poem, "the hair cut to pay / for a watch fob watch hocked for a bone comb" (11.51-52). The O. Henry story, as these lines point out, depicts a loving couple sacrificing their treasured timekeeper, the watch, in order to please one another. This omitting of time also seems to mirror the way in which these characters, like Scrooge, perennially circulate in the cultural imagination, thereby problematizing a linear understanding of time, but also working as past referents of bygone Christmases. The allusion also comes amidst a welter of personal chronicling and difficult syntactical lines, the significance of which I analyze in this chapter's next section.

¹¹³ While Waters suggests that lyric's main "axis of concern," as I shortly discuss, is the desire to connect the lyric self with the other, *Love Alone* periodically suggests the always impending failure of literature's promise of connection because of its rudimentary failure to promise immortality or a-historicity.

¹¹⁴ See Bergman's discussion of the Violet Quill in his study as well as classic gay novels of the era, such as Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) and John Rechy's slightly-earlier and pre-Stonewall *City of Night* (1963) and *Numbers* (1967).

¹¹⁵ In *Last Watch*, Monette also lists the writers he saw as comprising a gay literary cannon: William Forster, Walt Whitman, Rita Mae Brown, James Baldwin, Tennessee Williams, Herman Melville, Willa Cather, and even Andrew Holleran. He discusses his earlier desire to be a part of that canon. See the "Gert" essay in *Last Watch of the Night*, particularly pages 41 through 44. In *Last Watch*, he also describes his youthful insistence that the gay writers of the past were too discrete and careful, or not selfless enough, in establishing this gay literary history. For example, while explaining his thinking in publishing the (homo)sexually explicit *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll*, he writes, "When Forster decided he dare not publish *Maurice*, for fear of the scandal and what his mother would think; when he locked that manuscript in a drawer for fifty years until he died, he silenced much more than himself. He put up a wall that prevented us, his gay and lesbian heirs, from having a place to begin. He had written an unheard-of thing: a queer love story that ended in love fulfilled" (43). Monette's mid-1990s use of the word "queer" also point to the shift in identity politics that *Love Alone* helped precipitate as this dissertation's introduction argues and as I touch on at the end of this chapter.

¹¹⁶ For instance, *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) and Monette's *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll* (1978) both feature a beach home setting and the theme of an aristocratic "waspy" or "old money" sensibility passing on to a younger generation of gay men. Also, after *Love Alone*, Monette's fiction echoes a Violet Quill paradigm of coping with the AIDS crisis. For instance, both Robert Ferro's *Second Son* (1988) and Monette's *Halfway Home* (1991) feature, once more, a beach home setting and the accompanying motif of finding connections between an "old money" protestant sensibility and a gay sensibility. Of course, Monette's novels as a whole are much more sexually explicit and his later ones are much more overtly engaged with AIDS

politics than any of the Violet Quill's works. In fact, so overt and explicit are depictions of gay sex and culture in his first novel, Monette and his brother explain a third of the way through *The Brink of Summer's End* that Monette came out to his parents via the publication of *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll* (this fact is confirmed by Monette's diaries as well). While Monette is not grouped with The Violet Quill because he did not participate in their short-lived writing workshops, his fiction demonstrates an affinity for their settings, motifs, and gay liberation objectives. Although not all Violet Quill members were ethnically white per se, they are all often criticized for placing, as they frequently did, this type of identity at the center of a gay liberationist aesthetics and politics.

¹¹⁷ For more on this tradition, see Martin's groundbreaking study *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979). This tradition is usually described as a type of indirection or coding into the riddle-like nature of poetry and its imagism. Indeed, gay-identified poet Alfred Corn, who was friends with Monette throughout much of the 1970s and thereafter, wrote in his 1976 review of *Carpenter*: "Monette has many poetic gifts, and he writes with a wonderful lack of strain [. . .] the question now is whether in subsequent books he will acquire some kind of strengthening difficulty—formal, narrative, or substantive, for example—which might act as a sieve for his phenomenal embarrassment of riches" (356). Although in retrospect it sounds as though Corn uncannily predicts Monette's literary harnessing of the AIDS crisis, Corn was most likely suggesting, in a fittingly coded manner, that Monette organize his literary gifts more explicitly around the homosexual tradition of American poetry and its attending aesthetics. Also, I should add that another part of Monette's bio-critical narrative that I do not have room to explicate in this chapter is the way in which Monette started as a poet but then became better known for his fiction and memoirs. Of course, this imbalance might be attributable to poetry's marginal status among genres in the United States. Also, as will be discussed shortly, critics from within the ranks of "official verse culture" were hostile toward *Love Alone* because of its anti-traditional nature. However, critics have been much more accepting of his poetic accomplishments in retrospect. For instance, editor, poet, and critic David Groff wrote in a 2002 piece in the *Lamda Book Report* that "as an editor for [Monette's] fiction and now his co-executor, I want all of Paul's work to be read forever. Yet I think that his poems, perhaps even more than his fiction or memoirs, will ultimately garner him his greatest number of readers." And critic Richard Tayson likewise wrote in 2005 that Monette should be considered as existing in the company of Whitman and Ginsberg because of *Love Alone*.

¹¹⁸ This is to say, "Musical Comedy" implicitly locates Coward's sexuality in an identitarian project. Indeed, in *Last Watch of the Night*, after describing his version of the gay literary canon, Monette explains how he had wished to be, during the period of *No Witnesses*' composition, "a sort of latter-day Noel Coward" (44).

¹¹⁹ For a more thorough explanation of the term and concept of "gay liberationism," please see this dissertation's introduction.

¹²⁰ Both articles employ Monette's volume as a test case for literary theorist Jahan Ramazani's influential assertion—which was built on Sacks' work—in his 1994 study *Poetry of Mourning: The Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* that, "The Modern elegist tends [. . .] not to override but to

sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen wounds of loss” (2).

¹²¹ Kermode articulates discomfort with Ramazani’s general notion that before the Modern and Post-Modern eras elegists sought out a simplistic form of closure and that afterwards elegists rebelled against Victorian ideals of consolation. By way of Monette, Kermode argues that modern elegy, much like the contradictory pro- and anti-traditional “genre” of pop art, declares that it is an exception to tradition and history while also seeking legacy in tradition and history. Kermode says that modern elegy screams, “I am not the same, not usual” and “I am another small example of the familiar in history” (211). I argue that *Love Alone* emphasizes the first appeal while worrying over the fact of the second one.

¹²² For more on the relationship between language, the mirror stage, and poetry, see Blasing’s chapter “The Historic I” especially.

¹²³ For more on the relationship between Genette, Aristotle, and Brewster, see this dissertation’s introduction and the introduction to Brewster’s *Lyric* (2009).

¹²⁴ See Vendler’s *Invisible Listeners* (2005).

¹²⁵ See Barbara Johnson’s article “Apostrophe, Abortion, and Animation” (1986).

¹²⁶ Unfortunately, for the sake of my argument here, I oversimplify Culler’s complex and foundational argument about lyric apostrophe. His impressive article lays the groundwork for much lyric theory that follows as well as my reading of Monette’s lyric anti-elegies. Indeed, Culler writes, “one [can] distinguish two forces in poetry, the narrative and the apostrophic, and that the lyric is characteristically the triumph of the apostrophic” (66) and “The tension between the narrative and the apostrophic can be seen as the generative force behind a whole series of lyrics” (67). This schematization of lyric becomes especially apropos when I later discuss the way Barthes and Sontag juxtapose narrative, or “protensivity,” with photography and the way Monette seeks to align his lyric anti-elegies with the a-historicity of photography. However, as the conclusion of Culler’s influential article, which analyzes Keat’s “This Living Hand,” highlights, Culler always implicitly reads lyric’s end-goals as relating to their affect or lack thereof on readers, or an audience. This is to say, Culler sees lyric as always already constituting a performance for the reader or overhearing listener. My argument here is that for the lyric speaker of *Love Alone*—because he privileges and predates an ethics of mourning over activism—the self’s relationship to the other is *only secondarily, if at all*, a performance for the audience; rather, the lyric voice of *Love Alone* attempts to dissociate itself—through the deictic markers of lyric address that Culler discusses in his article’s conclusion and that I discuss shortly—from the overhearing audience entirely. As I explore in this chapter’s fourth section, the lyric speaker of *Love Alone* attempts to make the volume’s impending publication commensurate with his anti-social, or anti-sociopolitical, purposes through imagining his self and other as the a-historic exceptional object around which the ongoing present and future flows.

¹²⁷ The one exception to this formulation of lyric might be T. S. Eliot’s theory of “meditative verse” which suggests that Modern poetry represents speakers talking primarily to themselves or

no one; he juxtaposes this notion with the two other categories of address, “didactic” and “dramatic,” in his lecture “The Three Voices of Poetry.” But even this reading of address, expounded upon by W. R. Johnson in the first chapter of his study *The Idea of Lyric* (1982), relates lyric to the divide of isolation and contact between the self and alterity. See W. R. Johnson 1.

¹²⁸ Glennis Byron delineates the extensive critical debate about the differences between lyric and dramatic monologue in his monograph *Dramatic Monologue* (2003).

¹²⁹ Of course the unquestioned alignment of Confessionalism and earnest first-person address has been recently interrogated by poetry critics as well. For instance, see Adam Kirsch’s *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (2005).

¹³⁰ See the introduction to Brewster’s *Lyric* (2009) for more on the competing and yet interrelated formal and phenomenological definitions of lyric.

¹³¹ All references to Robert Browning’s poetry have been made with the assistance of *Robert Browning: Poems Selected by Douglas Dunn* (2004).

¹³² Indeed, it has been argued by critics like Byron, that Browning was engaged to some degree in a Freudian or Bloomian killing off of his ancestors, a misprisioning of their work, in order to allay their anxiety of influence. See Byron’s *Dramatic Monologue*.

¹³³ In other words, it could be said that the dramatic monologue is in large part a reaction to the lyric fantasy of historic exceptionalism. In this reading, the dramatic monologue parodies the lyric’s performance of self and other in order to draw attention to the fact that the lyric is—like the dramatic monologue—a temporal fragment despite its ambitions to disrupt historicity entirely. The word “satirizing,” however, feels more apropos when discussing Browning’s “parodies” of Romanticism and its attending mores.

¹³⁴ According to Monette’s diaries, he and Howard were friends throughout the 1970s. Howard even wrote a blurb for the back of *Love Alone*: “*Love Alone* seems to me to be some of the most powerful and astonishing writing I have ever encountered in my long reading life . . . these texts constitute a monumental addition to the literature of grief and the clarification of mourning.”

¹³⁵ Indeed, Helen Deutsch has—invaluably—pointed out to me that the “epitaph,” as well as the related notion of “prosopopoeia,” has a longstanding and intimate relationship with lyric, both in terms of literary production and critical theory. I touch on this relationship throughout this chapter and the second chapter; however, within the scope of this dissertation, I am afraid such a relationship is never fully parsed.

¹³⁶ Indeed, the preface to Boucheron’s volume, which contains poems entitled “Epitaph for a Drag Queen” and “Epitaph for a Disco Bunny,” explicitly associates gay men with epitaphs while also attempting to frame that association as a part of a gay liberationist logic:

AIDS has attacked people regardless of sex and personal preference. But in the United States, the greatest number of sufferers are male and homosexual, and those who have died have often been young. 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.

See this dissertation's introduction and second chapter for more on Boucheron. Let me also add here that the campy tone of Boucheron's volume—borne out of a longstanding camp tradition that evolved to cope with the sociopolitical hardships of gay life (see Bergman's critical anthology *Camp Grounds* [1993])—seems to reinforce, most likely unwittingly, the Moral Majority's mythos of gay men as being overly-sexed narcissists condemned by the divine intervention of the AIDS virus. For this reason, perhaps, Boucheron's preface works to disarm any potential criticism within the gay community. Indeed, "camp" as a practice seemingly takes a hiatus throughout the second half of the 1980s among gay writers, probably for the very reason that Boucheron's volume illustrates: when applied to the topic of AIDS in the 1980s, camp seems to replicate rather than protest the social abjection of gay men. I discuss this topic further in the endnotes to my second chapter.

¹³⁷ See Boucheron's "Epitaph for a Sinner" especially.

¹³⁸ Woods' similar assessment of Boucheron and this particular poem reads: "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 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 live the book outlines" (161-62).

¹³⁹ Marked episodically by the deaths of those close to him, Theseus' mythology also ends with his own death; Edith Hamilton famously summarizes Theseus' extensive mythology in the chapter "Theseus" from work *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (1940).

¹⁴⁰ With the word "displacements," I refer once more to de Man's "Autobiography as De-Facement."

¹⁴¹ In some of his juvenilia, written while attending Yale as an undergraduate, Monette employed a regularized blank verse; see, for instance, the poem "I Used to Have a Wart Here They Took It Off When I Was Ten" (circa 1964 and housed at UCLA Special Collections).

¹⁴² Nelson agrees that *Love Alone's* syntax is purposefully difficult in her book *Pursuing Privacy* when she writes, "Grouping words to make sense of a line must always be a retrospective act, the result not of a first impression but of some sort of earned intimacy. The reader must constantly start over, retrace steps, reformulate the line to make sense of Monette's disclosures" (153).

Although Nelson asserts that Monette wants his reader to earn this sense of intimacy, it would seem that Monette's sense of intimacy with his lost other, as I argue here, depends on the exclusion of that reader.

¹⁴³ Monette's supposition that he left his poems "raw as they came" is disproven by the archival records, in which these poems went through many stages of revision which reveal he rewrote, retracted, and added additional lines; these revisions also demonstrate that he paid vigorous attention to the placement of his line breaks. See Monette's tenth diary, housed at UCLA Special Collections, in which all of the *Love Alone*'s rough drafts were first written and dated by Monette. Indeed, an earlier version of Monette's later poem "Waiting to Die" was first written, the tenth journal shows, after "Dreaming of You" and then abandoned. The fragment of that earlier version focuses on Monette's life after Roger and seems to address its reader directly; for this reason perhaps, it was abandoned and excluded from the published volume. This is to say, Monette revises *Love Alone*'s anti-elegies so that they primarily communicate with the lost other, even if he later as a writer and activist comes to see the sociopolitical value of this attempt at communication.

¹⁴⁴ Indeed, as I discuss at the end of this dissertation's introduction, AIDS poetry reminds us that the difference between the living and the dead is merely discursive, temporary, and even negligible. After all, to the reader, as Monette implicitly realizes, the lyric self is as absent and ghostly as his specific lost other.

¹⁴⁵ I am thinking primarily of Bill T. Jones' *Still/Here* (1994) and the paintings of David Wojanowicz and Keith Haring which overlay deictically inflected texts on sexual and violent images.

¹⁴⁶ See the poem "The House on Kings Road" especially, which I discuss shortly. Both Roger and Monette grew up in and around Boston; they met at a dinner party in Cambridge in 1974. Most likely "Black Xmas" refers to the trip the two took back to Boston near the end of Roger's life in 1986 so that Roger could say goodbye to friends and family. See Monette's ninth journal; held at UCLA Special Collections.

¹⁴⁷ The end of "Black Xmas" accentuates this problematization of collective time with syntax and images nearly impossible for the overhearing reader to comprehend fully:

giving over trading off emptying out
our daily fare for 20 months to learn how
little a man can get by on no one day
will do it love costs years the rest of it all
is Toys-R-Us chill buffets for grazing
blue-flocked trees in empty lots so little
time to bear the heart so vast the desert (ll.53-59)

¹⁴⁸ Consult Levinas' *Time and the Other* (1947) in which he posits that time is created through the self's encounter with a specific other. Although Monette was not in explicit dialogue with

Levinas, it would seem, many of his anti-elegies complement Levinas' theories regarding the self's responsibility to the other because of the other's function in the narrativity of the self's existence. See Piggford's dissertation for an extended commentary on how Monette and other AIDS poets exemplify Levinas' greatest works.

¹⁴⁹ For an illustrative explication of this prevalent cultural logic, see Harvey Fierstein's 1979 play *Torch Song Trilogy*, later turned into a movie. One of its best-known scene features the protagonist's mother refusing to let the protagonist compare his grief over his male lover's death (his lover is beaten to death) with his mother's widowhood: "Listen, Ma, you had it easy. You have thirty-five years to remember, I have five. You had your children and friends to comfort you, I had me! My friends didn't want to hear about it. They said, 'What're you gripin' about? At least you had a lover.' 'Cause everybody knows that queers don't feel nothin'. How dare I say I loved him? You had it easy, Ma. You lost your husband in a nice clean hospital, I lost mine out there. They killed him there on the street. Twenty-three years old laying dead on the street. Killed by a bunch of kids with baseball bats [. . .] Children taught by people like you. 'Cause everybody knows that queers don't matter! Queers don't love! And those that do deserve what they get!" (124). Fierstein clearly writes during a gay liberationsist milieu, before the reclamation of the word "queer" by activist and academia.

¹⁵⁰ Stephen Bruhm also works to deconstruct this homophobic depiction of "homosexuality" in his influential book of queer theory, *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* (2000). In *No Future*, Edelman reframes the non-reproductive and death-driven figure of Narcissus as a sinthomosexual, which is a figuration of the "homosexual" that deconstructs American culture's privileging of reproductivity and, thereby, the notion of "heterosexuality."

¹⁵¹ New Criticism itself, as many critics point out in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, preserved a white, male, protestant, heterosexual literary canon and closed it off from revision.

¹⁵² Interestingly enough, Bloom served as the director of Monette's undergraduate thesis on Tennyson's *In Memoriam*.

¹⁵³ See Cavitch's *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (2006).

¹⁵⁴ Monette's tenth journal, held at UCLA Special Collections, includes a long entry just before he wrote "Three Rings" in which Monette expresses his belief that Rog's final moans before death were actually Roger's attempt to call Monette's first name.

¹⁵⁵ For more on the mirroring of the self and other through the myth of Narcissus in AIDS poetry, see my discussion of Shepherd in the third chapter.

¹⁵⁶ To be sure, through this very collectivist lens, the poem circuitously troubles over the cultural script of "the wandering Jew"; indeed, Roger was Jewish. In pre-Stonewall gay American literature, the figure of the "Wandering Jew" is often transposed onto the figure of the queer. See, for instance, Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1937) which closely associates wandering queer

and Jewish characters. This figuration of wandering, therefore, proves personally problematic for the “queer” or “gay” lyric speaker of “Three Rings” as well as his lost other.

¹⁵⁷ Indeed, later AIDS poets come to see Whitman’s apostrophic “generations hence” as a key advantage of lyric over other genres; that is, lyric can recurrently fluctuate between specific and trans-historic addresses.

¹⁵⁸ Monette’s turning toward technocracy also mirrors AIDS art’s similar turnings toward multi-media (a dynamic I discuss more in this dissertation’s third chapter). As previously mentioned in the context of lyric deixis, Wojnarowicz, Haring, Jones all express an affinity in their AIDS works to the a-historic dislocations of deixis and multi-media practices. For instance, *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz* (1998) explains Wojnarowicz’s melding of painting, photography, text, and video art after his seropositive diagnosis. The documentary *The Universe of Keith Haring* (2008) likewise demonstrates Haring’s shifting to an exploration of text and drawing after his seropositive diagnosis; also, see Haring’s illustrations of William Burrough’s *The Valley* (1989) in which Burrough’s describes a community shut off from the outside world undergoing the ravages of a “plague.” For more on how and why Jones mixes spoken word, dance, and media, see Bill Moyers 1995 television special on the making of Bill T. Jones’ 1994 *Still/Here*. This is to say, the abundance of postmodern and multimedia practices in the 1980s might be fundamentally affiliated with a desire to halt the deathly telos of time during the AIDS crisis.

¹⁵⁹ Similarly, much in the way Whitman constantly circulated images of himself (Whitman was the most photographed American writer who lived and died in the nineteenth century [see Folsom’s 1994 essay “Whitman’s Calamus Photographs”]) as frontispieces of *Leaves of Grass*’s many editions in order to claim that his text was his body’s present incarnation, Monette uses the materiality of *Love Alone* and its dissemination to suggest the future materiality of his and Roger’s loss, if not their future embodiments.

¹⁶⁰ “[O]n the one hand ‘it is not there,’” Barthes goes on, “on the other ‘but it has indeed been’” (115). For Barthes, a photograph is both a marker of material absence and an evidentiary retention of the past material referent. In this way, Barthes’ ghostly photographs bring the absent referent to the present again. These impossible paradoxes in photography that ultimately seem to bring the past into the ongoing present, if only superficially, lead Barthes to conclude at one point in *Camera Lucida* that photography is “a magic, not an art” (original emphasis; 88).

¹⁶¹ Kermode argues that Monette replaces his lost love object with a photograph and therefore finds a postmodern form of elegiac closure. However, Kermode does not examine *Love Alone*’s proclivity for direct address to the lost other and thereby misses the way “technocracy” works as a conduit for, rather than a replacement of, the lost other’s trace presence in *Love Alone*.

¹⁶² Monette’s private journals, now held at UCLA Library Special Collections, demonstrate his interest in early- to mid-twentieth-century poets, such as Stevens, Yeats, Pound, and Auden. According to my synopses of the journals, published by the Special Collections in their online finding aid, Monette’s third journal from the early- to mid-1970s recounts his fascination with Yeats, whose work he frequently taught at Milton Academy, a secondary prep school. For all references to his journals and diaries in these endnotes, see “Series 1: Journals” of the “Paul

Monette Papers, 1945-1995” at the *Online Archive of California*.

¹⁶³ Consult Yeats, “The Second Coming” (ll.2-3). It should also be added that although no evidence exists in his private journals that Monette read Robert Duncan’s poetry, he might be referring here to Duncan’s “My Mother Would Be a Falconress,” which uses the metaphor of falconry to discuss the poet-speaker’s mixed feelings over his relationship to his deceased mother; although Duncan equates his speaker with the falcon as Monette does, “Last Day” explicitly celebrates the way the self and other grow intermeshed via lyric address and apostrophe.

¹⁶⁴ To be sure, the title to Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), a famed book of essays that describes the disillusionment of the post-World War II era, comes from Yeats’ poem.

¹⁶⁵ The moments of filmic metaphors and diction are too numerous in “Dreaming of You” to mention here.

¹⁶⁶ The reference to a VCR clearly creates a temporal irony from our present-day perspectives since the technology itself is “dated” and thereby dates the referents (the self and other) of the poem. Nevertheless, this dating emphasizes, rather than contradicts, the speaker’s deep-seated fear throughout *Love Alone* that representative means merely communicate past-ward-ness.

¹⁶⁷ Near the beginning of *On Photography*, Sontag extrapolates the difference between film (in the context of television) and photography: “Photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow. Television is a stream of underselected images, each of which cancels its predecessor. Each still photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again” (17-18). Barthes writes: “[I]n cinema no doubt, there is always a photographic referent, but this referent shifts, it does not make a claim in favor of its reality, it does not protest its former existence; it does not cling to me; it is not a *specter*. Like the real world, the filmic world is sustained by the presumption that, as Husserl says, ‘the experience will constantly continue to flow by in the same constitutive style’; but the Photograph breaks the ‘constitutive style’ (this is its astonishment); in it, no protensity, whereas the cinema is protensive, hence in no way melancholic (what is it, then?—It is, then, simply ‘normal,’ like life). Motionless, the Photograph flows back from presentation to retention” (89-90). Like Monette, Barthes—who was mourning the loss of his mother during the composition of *Camera Lucida*—gives melancholia a positive, rather than pathologizing, connotation. It should be added that some AIDS art critics have explicitly claimed that film preserves the past as present in a way unlike any other medium of representation. See Juhasz 323. These arguments, however, tend to think of film—problematically enough—as a form of documentation free of ever-changing ongoing socio-historic mediation.

¹⁶⁸ Indeed, the “marble ode” in “Dreaming of You” most likely refers back to (though in the history of the volume’s production, *anticipates*) the stone inscription Monette recalls in the volume’s preface from his last trip to Greece with Rog. In the passage, Monette telegraphs an anxiety over the past-ward pull of literary endeavor. According to *Love Alone*, technocracy, then, as represented by a marble ode erasing in the rain paired with a photographic perspective,

records and retains, or at least promises to retain, the past as present.

¹⁶⁹ Although “The Losing Side” discusses a third party, the mother of a toddler buried in close proximity to Rog’s grave, the poem’s speaker never directly addresses her. He steadfastly and clearly addresses Rog throughout, telling him about his encounter with her. The poem does, however, come in the second section and therefore correlates with the second section’s interest in finding a means to make the speaker’s address to Rog commensurate with his obligations and involvements with third parties in the ongoing present.

¹⁷⁰ See Monette’s tenth diary, housed at UCLA Special Collections, in which he wrote and dated the rough drafts of all the poems in *Love Alone*.

¹⁷¹ Akin to Spenser’s suggestion that poetry projects the lyric self and other into the future, Monette indicates that by locating his lyric self and other in a nexus of technocracy they become fixed at the center of the ongoing present which forever falls away from their centrality into the past.

¹⁷² See *Becoming a Man* 174, where Monette writes, “I decided to write this book because so many people told me, after reading *Borrowed Time*, that Roger and I appeared to have a perfect relationship, seamless and undefended, all the bullshit burned away. Especially when the darkness fell, and we had to fight for our dwindling patch of ground, no room to hedge and make excuses. Roger, being Roger, would have squirmed at the thought of being so idealized, even for love. But he knew as well as I did, holding on to the two of us as the tortures of AIDS came raining fire, that somewhere along the way our hearts had fused [. . .] I started to think, if we really got that far and went that deep, then I ought to tell how impossible such happiness looked from the prison of twelve to twenty-five. Convinced I was the most unloved, the most unlovable man who’d ever lived. No window in my cell and no chance of release till I faced the truth that I was queer. That would be my theme, I thought: once I came out, the world was all windows. Suddenly night became day, and I could love like everyone else” (174). In this way, Monette (movingly) relates his and Roger’s relationship to a gay liberationist logic of coming out and embracing the gay identity amidst the AIDS crisis. The memoir ends, after he meets Roger at a dinner party in Boston: “Roger Horwitz, Paul Monette. Say hello to the rest of your life” (276). Indeed, although it should be mentioned that the memoir also responds to Monette’s loss of his second partner of nearly two years following Rog, Stephen Kolzak, this phrase “Say hello to the rest of your life” underscores Monette’s placing of Rog and his loss at the center of his personal and political exigencies. Indeed, after describing the terrible loss of Stephen to AIDS-related complications in the memoir’s opening, Monette writes, “I am the final gleam of Roger and Stephen as well, the two men I am surest of, who willed their stories to me” (4). Monette points to, in other words, the ethic of melancholia that always underpins his ethic of activism.

¹⁷³ Indeed, all of Monette’s major works after *Love Alone* discuss AIDS directly: two memoirs, *Borrowed Time: An Aids Memoir* (1988) and *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (1992); a collection of essays, *Last Watch of the Night: Essays Too Personal and Otherwise* (1994); two novels, *Afterlife* (1990) and *Halfway Home* (1991); *West of Yesterday, East of Summer: New and Selected Poems* (1994); and the posthumous novella, *Sanctuary* (1997).

¹⁷⁴ For more on the genocidal fantasy of killing off the gay male body, see this dissertation's introduction and second chapter.

¹⁷⁵ This formulation of "black gayness" is not my own but was created and proliferated by writers such as Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, and Marlon Riggs; I touch on in this formulation in the dissertation's introduction and explain it further in the third chapter.

¹⁷⁶ This type of logic regarding coalition building between gay men and women is reminiscent of Bersani's conclusion in his famed essay, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987). For more on how this essay relates to gay liberationism and queer theory, see my dissertation's introduction and second chapter.

¹⁷⁷ Indeed, Groff's claim that Monette always embraced a "fluidity of sexuality" in his writings might in fact be supported by the content of Monette's earlier novels which often trouble over the predications of "gay" sexuality even while embracing "gayness" as an identitarian category.

¹⁷⁸ To be sure, in his 1991 interview with Don Swaim during the *Halfway Home* book tour of 1991, while discussing the thematic of AIDS in his post-*Love Alone* literature, Monette claims—if a touch understatedly—that he merely "write[s] love stories" (<http://www.wiredforbooks.org/paulmonette/>, 20:30).

¹⁷⁹ The following poem and *Borrowed Time* recount the details of Roger's AIDS-related blindness in the last year of Roger's life.

¹⁸⁰ As previously mentioned, see Cameron and de Man for the way language marks difference and absence; also, consult Blasing for insight into lyric's attempt to return the self and other to a state of being before differentiation.

¹⁸¹ Political exigencies typically ask us to elide a *specific* sense of selfhood and alterity. Gay liberationism insists that gay men must act for the betterment of the marginalized gay community. As I argue in this dissertation's introduction, queer theory recognized, in large part in reaction to the AIDS crisis, the inadvertent inimical effects of this identitarian logic. In its ethical mission to deconstruct the often dangerous binaries of gay versus straight, us versus them, nation versus minority, etcetera, and thereby better the sociopolitical positions of primarily the abject and secondarily the subject, queer theory must not admit that there is a difference—or at least blur the socially constructed difference—between the self and other. Ultimately, in this latter model of identity politics (though I am oversimplifying in certain ways), the idea of the self and other paradoxically undermines the mission of bettering all selves and all others. See this chapter's introduction and Bersani in particular.

¹⁸² In *Love Alone*'s implicit moralization here, one might detect a condemnation of the "promiscuity" of 1970s and 80s gay culture. In *Love Alone*, Monette, who himself had a somewhat "open relationship" with Roger, might be expressing a kneejerk—even self-loathing—reaction here to this aspect of gay culture. However, I think *Love Alone*'s aim is not to express

“survivor’s guilt” alone, nor is it to espouse a “blame the victim” mentality; instead, it seeks to find the link between the severed-circuit of “love alone” and the love, or the responsibility at least, for the many.

Chapter Two:

¹⁸³ See my discussion of crimp in this dissertation’s introduction and first chapter as well as Crimp’s *Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (1988) and *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (2002).

¹⁸⁴ Put another way, AIDS poetry rejected a gay liberationist logic that prioritizes the good of the gay community over that of the gay individual, especially the gay individual who is already lost and therefore infinitely vulnerable. Nonetheless, this sense of private grief, early AIDS poets begin to notice, could lead back to a pre-Stonewall sense of privacy, or the refusal to bring gayness into the public sphere. In other words, containment approximates the closet (the difference is that in containment the self and other do not hide their bond but sequester it to protect it from the historicizing pull of socio-historic time). This notion disconcerts AIDS poets like Monette because it suggests that an ethics of melancholy not only can lead to inaction on the gay community’s part during the crisis, but also can undo gay liberation in its entirety. For instance, discussing the inaction of closeted public health officials during the onset of the AIDS crisis, Roger McFarlane, a former director of Gay Men’s Health Crisis, has said, “That [the] closet can kill other people and has. Before AIDS, we were concerned with privacy. After aids, that was collusion with genocide”; see minutes 26-27 of the documentary *Outrage* (2009).

¹⁸⁵ Helms expressed this sentiment in this specific formulation on CBS’ “Face the Nation,” June 14, 1987, as reported by United Press International on June 16, 1987. It is archived in the Chicago Tribune’s online database: <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1987-06-16/news/8702140384_1_aids-virus-sen-lowell-weicker-prison-inmates>. For information about Reagan’s first public address on HIV/AIDS and how he spoke “with approval of mandatory antibody testing” (57), see Treichler’s 1999 book-length study *To Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*. Also, it should be mentioned, the threat of quarantine for PWAs exacerbated controversies within the gay community over how much to trust the government and scientific community on the topic of public health. One only needs to look at the debates over government regulation of bathhouses raised and continued by Randy Shilts’ *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987) to gauge the high prevalence of this particular anxiety. AIDS poetry sidesteps this debate to some degree because lyric, generically speaking, is by and large expected to be monologic or, even, monogamous—that is, one self speaking to one other.

¹⁸⁶ Kramer argues that his vigilance, often called alarmism, prevented this genocidal outcome from happening. See *Reports from the Holocaust* 232.

¹⁸⁷ See Treichler’s “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” 66.

¹⁸⁸ See Shilts 522.

¹⁸⁹ See this dissertation's introduction for more on Sontag's use of the word "homosexual" in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*.

¹⁹⁰ Consult *Reports* 263. Kramer is keenly aware that most straight American Jews would not approve of this comparison.

¹⁹¹ *Reports* xvii.

¹⁹² *Reports* 46.

¹⁹³ While quoting lines from "Manifesto," Edelman insists that he does not wish to "condemn" the poem or its Holocaust rhetoric but critique its gendered rhetoric (24). In fact, he describes *Love Alone* as a "a powerful, emotionally gripping volume" (22).

¹⁹⁴ Bersani argues that the deconstructions of self-oriented binaries happen during the *jouissance* of sex and promiscuity. See 217.

¹⁹⁵ See Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989). Although she does not use the word "Holocaust" in the volume, it constantly links AIDS discourse to a tradition of apocalyptic thinking in American culture. Sontag argues that we should try to undo this link because it negatively impacts those living with HIV as well as more deeply entrenches cultural mores that worsen the crisis. It should also be added that Sedgwick, who was not (as this dissertation's introduction discusses) an AIDS theorist or activist per se, but a queer theorist who, like Edelman and Bersani, came out of the AIDS crisis, writes in the introduction to her pivotal *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) that, "AIDS, though it is used to proffer every single day to the news-consuming public the crystallized vision of a world after the homosexual, could never by itself bring about such a world [. . .] a medicalized dream of the prevention of gay bodies seems to be the less visible, far more respectable underside of the AIDS-fueled public dream of their extirpation" (43). Sedgwick did not feel the AIDS crisis was the premeditated medium by which the powers that be could eliminate the gay community, but that the crisis presented an opportunity for those powers, both institutional and ideological, to enact a genocidal fantasy that predated the crisis and grew out of a "nature/nurture" debate. She makes this claim in the middle of trying to explain why it is important for queer theorists and activists to be careful when parsing and applying terms like "nature/nurture" and "essentialism/constructivism," inasmuch as they can unwittingly support, from multiple directions, the sociopolitical fields of power that wish to eradicate gay bodies.

¹⁹⁶ Consult *The Normal Heart* 19-22.

¹⁹⁷ In *The Normal Heart*, the doctor character, who fights the (literally) offstage homophobia that slows medical responsiveness to the epidemic, demands that the Kramer's literary avatar, Ned, use his connections to the gay literary community to advocate for patients' rights in the dawning

AIDS era—a task that he implicitly commits to after the doctor (mock) marries him and the journalist figure. The novel *Facing It* depicts a heroic straight doctor tipping the journalist figure off about the biased lethal politics of the medical establishment, who, in turn, vows to fight these biases by writing about them publically. See the dissertation’s introduction for more on these two works of AIDS literature.

¹⁹⁸ The examples are manifold and permeate the entire memoir. One example that summarizes this point about Monette using his Hollywood connections to procure treatments for himself and Rog can be found nearly halfway through the book. He describes his acquaintanceship to a Hollywood art director named Bruce Weintraub, who Monette got to know while novelizing *Scarface* (144). Monette writes, “Bruce was the first person I ever heard mention AL-721, the immune-boosting agent at the Weizmann Institute in Israel. And later he fired the first shot in the battle for AZT, knowing about it before any of the doctors at UCLA, before the AIDS underground even. Because of Bruce, Roger and I started fighting for AZT early enough to get in [to the drug trial]. In that sense I owe Bruce the last ten months of Roger’s life” (145). Monette not only reinforces his faith in medical technology here, but he also creates a narrative in which his participation in literature, filmic representation, and celebrity afford him and Rog the fulfillment, at least in small part, of a Western promise of vitality. Even though Rog dies in the narrative, Monette interprets the experience as Western medicine extending, if begrudgingly, Rog’s quality of life and longevity for at least ten months longer than it would have been otherwise (hence the memoir’s title). This type of interpretation is not endemic to Monette’s AIDS poetry, as even “Manifesto” demonstrates; see the first chapter for how Monette’s volume of AIDS poetry resists participating in a utilitarian ethos.

¹⁹⁹ See, in particular, Thomas Lemke’s well-respected *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (2011) and Nikolas Rose’s much-praised *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (2007).

²⁰⁰ Consult Agamben’s influential studies *Homer Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1989) and *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1999). But, for a concise discussion of Agamben’s main conceits, please see the fourth chapter of Lemke’s *Biopolitics*, simply and aptly entitled “Sovereign Power and Bare Life: Giorgio Agamben.”

²⁰¹ Indeed, it may be no coincidence that Foucault’s off-handed coining of the term “biopolitics” flourished into a discourse of interdisciplinary reflection on the relationship of the West to “life itself” during the 1990s and in the new millennium. Tellingly, biopolitical theory rarely, if ever, dwells on the AIDS epidemic, only touching on it in passing. Either this epidemic does not seem central enough, for reasons of bias presumably, or it is *too* central and therefore too complex a site of trauma for a book on biopolitics to take up directly. A project outside the scope of this chapter, and dissertation, might be to trace how early AIDS theorist like Watney, Treichler, Sontag, Bersani, Crimp, and Kramer (as well as related AIDS writers) function as the link between Foucault’s notion of biopolitics and the later work by Thomas Lemke, Giorgio Agamben, and Nikolas Rose. This is to say, it may be historically accurate to think about how AIDS theory (and literature) helped to create the now prospering field of biopolitics even if its imprint, as in so many other avenues, has been quietly erased through politically charged and

socially biased omissions.

²⁰² A version of this quotation appears on Roger Lyons AIDS quilt portion, which is possibly one of the original portions of the quilt. Extraordinarily, his epitaph consists of his plea against how his “epitaph”—employing that very word “epitaph”—should read. Lyon’s epitaph points to what early AIDS poets like Timothy Liu (as is explored at this chapter’s end and the dissertation’s conclusion) suggest about the AIDS quilt in their AIDS poetry—that the monumentalizing of AIDS deaths accentuates their deaths and the very epitaphic nature, or deathly telos, of language and representation, rather than assisting the readjustment of the relationship between subjects and the progress narrative in hopes of fulfilling the narrative’s promises of vitality. I am indebted to Ryan Thill for informing me that this quotation appears on the AIDS quilt. The quotation also appears in *And the Band Plays On*.

²⁰³ Because Lynch’s editorial is difficult to get a hold of, I have copied this passage from Treichler’s “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” (40). Also see Ann Silversides *AIDS Activist: Michael Lynch and the Politics of Community* (2003), which directly refers to the editorial as well, among many of Lynch’s papers and writings. Also, in a rare exception of political engagement within AIDS poetry, Michael Lassel ambivalently echoes Lynch’s assessment here in his 1990 volume *Decade Dance*. The first stanza of his long poem “A Modest Proposal, Overtly Political,” situated two-thirds of the way through his book, reads:

I have a dream.
Well, there’s nothing unique in that:
we all have dreams—
or so the psychiatricks tell us,
but then those are the same KKKlowns
who wrote us all off as weirdosickoperverts
all those long years, so
maybe they don’t know their
asses from a Freudian phallus. (l.1-9; sic)

While the poem meshes together literary allusions (Jonathan Swift) and political ones (Martin Luther King Junior), implying that literature and political rhetoric may be able to intervene beneficially into the ongoing present, it primarily expresses anger at the current biopolitical situation surrounding AIDS. The poem is conflicted over whether or not a “dream” of political utopia is achievable. In this way, even though the AIDS poem is atypically political, it implies that AIDS poetry might not be able to change the deleterious and deathly course of the crisis, nor can political rhetoric or the medical establishment. In other words, the poem slips toward a thanapolitical viewpoint. Indeed, Silverside’s biography of Lynch, which—as its title suggests—positions him primarily as an activist rather than scholar or poet, often pivots on describing how and when Lynch turned his grief into activism, implying that doing so was a constant site of concern, if not difficulty, for Lynch.

²⁰⁴ Originally published in an online magazine called *Body Positive* (April 2000), “A Poetry of

Crisis, a Poetry of Witness” can only be accessed now at a website called *Body: The Complete HIV/AIDS Resource*—so it is impossible to cite a page number. But this passage comes from the middle section of the essay, titled “Witness.”

²⁰⁵ See the endnotes on page 93 of *These Waves of Dying Friends*. The title of the poem refers to the fact that police wore yellow kitchen gloves as prophylactics while handling gay men at a rally.

²⁰⁶ Gay literature of the 1980s frequently refers to Charles Ludlam and his New York “Ridiculous!” theatre company, often describing them as a beacon of campy or ironic satire of heteronormativity. To name two major examples, Andrew Holleran included an extended eulogy for Ludlam in his *Ground Zero*, declaring the performance artist’s flippant aesthetic as brilliant, and Monette seemingly includes an homage to Ludlam (or perhaps Tim Miller) in his 1991 novel *Halfway Home*. Monette’s semi-autobiographical protagonist works as a performance artist at a small black-box theatre he owns in Los Angeles and whose best known stage creation is a “queeny” version of Jesus. Ludlam also features prominently in Dlugos’ 1990 poem “Goodbye to Chrysis.” Although it is slightly outside the scope of this chapter and dissertation, it is important to note that at this time, the camp aesthetic becomes another collapsed avenue of meaning for AIDS poets prompted by the AIDS crisis putting focus on the intersection of the ethic of mourning and the ethic of militancy. For instance, although Holland—in “Sheridan Square”—does not wholesale dismiss the legacy and mode of camp to oppose homophobic narratives of national significance, he does, as do almost all AIDS writers, reworks Ludlam’s camp aesthetic into an explicitly political and serious mode of cultural work. Paradoxically for Holland, camp has serious work to do during the AIDS crisis, and this refiguring of camp’s implicit gay liberationism into explicit gay liberationism—the image of the theatre door, the entrance to a gay liberationist space, is reimagined as a candle-light vigil, which could be understood as the transformation of grief into public protest or agency—undoes the fragile essence of camp which, as Sontag argues in her 1964 “Notes on ‘Camp,’” is essentially anti-political or, as David Bergman argues in his introduction to the book he collected and organized in 1993 called *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, clandestinely deposits political dissent through the veneer of anti-political absurdity. Bergman even goes so far in his introduction to claim, without any evidence, it would seem that “It took AIDS and poststructuralist theory to make camp intellectually and politically respectable again” (9). Bergman might be conflating camp and drag here, pointing to Butler’s concurrent transforming of drag into a site of cultural parody or protest (see this dissertation’s introduction for more on drag). Most critics seem to agree however that camp is never explicitly political, that it indirectly, even coyly, gestures at political issues. It is remarkable, therefore, that at certain points in his volume, Holland—as Michael Lynch does throughout his 1988 volume, as discussed in the introduction—attempts to transform camp into militancy. For Holland, unlike Lynch, these few moments surround a sense of religiously-fueled homophobia. This is to say, despite Bergman’s odd unsupported claim in 1993 that AIDS has rejuvenated the camp aesthetic, most AIDS writings—such as Holleran’s eulogy on Ludlam (see this chapter’s endnote number 102), Dlugos’ 1990 poem “Goodbye to Chrysis” (see this chapter’s endnote number 93), and Holland’s poem “Sheridan Square”—seem to suggest what I might be termed “the death of camp” at the height of the AIDS crisis. In other words, camp becomes unseemly and inappropriate in early

AIDS writings because it does not explicitly ascribe to the ethic of mourning or the ethic of militancy. What is more, the camp aesthetic's nihilistic and irreverent attitude toward meaning, its topsy-turvy-dom, accentuate rather than alleviate the problem of signification at this time. Indeed, Bergman's comment in *Camp Grounds* only makes sense when thinking about how in the early- to mid-1990s poets and other thinkers start transforming gay liberationism into a queer poststructuralism. In this regard, the AIDS crisis does not prompt camp's rejuvenation, but it does prompt a universalizing tactic that leads to a deconstructive semi-poststructuralist identity politics—in this environment, camp can thrive, and the drag queen, who comes to embody the aesthetic, becomes a hero. But at the height of the AIDS crisis, camp seems to experience a momentary death as a viable route of meaning production.

²⁰⁷ For more on the epitaphic nature of this volume and poetry see this dissertation's introduction and first chapter. Unfortunately, within the scope of my dissertation, however, I have not had the ability to delve deeply into the rich and complex history of lyric poems speaking from the grave. As Helen Deutsch has generously pointed out to me in feedback on this chapter, the trope of the epitaphic poem dates to Greco-Roman poets and relates to the highly-theorized notion of "prosopopoeia." Indeed, even Boucheron attempts to locate his epitaphs in this tradition of grave poems while writing in his preface that he was inspired by *The Greek Anthology*, *Spoon River Anthology*, and, even , relatedly, Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*.

²⁰⁸ See the preface (which has no page numbers) to *Epitaphs for the Plague Dead*. Also see my discussion of the volume in both the dissertation's introduction and first chapter.

²⁰⁹ The small critical response extant on Boucheron agrees that his poems dwell in a homophobic self-loathing that reinscribes a detrimental religious plague narrative. For instance, in his 1992 essay "AIDS to Remembrance: The Uses of Elegy," collected in *AIDS: the Literary Response*, critic Gregory Woods says that Boucheron's volume "strikes [him] as a somewhat embittered collection, with a strong undertow of retrospective moralizing" (161). The word "moralizing" here certainly speaks to Boucheron's Becker-like ascription of sinfulness to gay sexual liberation and reading of the AIDS crisis as divine retribution. Woods provides the example of the poem "Epitaph for an Innocent" which describes a baby who dies from the epidemic because his father received the HIV virus from a transfusion and passed it on to the mother. Woods points out that this logic indicates that those who receive the virus from homosexual behavior are not "innocent" and therefore deserve their own deaths. I discuss this poem and criticism in both my dissertation's introduction and first chapter.

²¹⁰ What is more, like Boucheron, Becker relies heavily on the notion of rhyming quatrains for a sense of containment (or organization and therefore meaning). Becker's prosody is decidedly more irregular, as if he questions, like Gunn and Dlugos, the ability of this semblance of meaning to ameliorate a cosmic sense of inequity in the AIDS era.

²¹¹ The only two references I have found to Becker's book exist in Gregory Woods' 1992 essay "AIDS to Remembrance: The Uses of Elegy," in which Woods spends one brief paragraph to argue that Becker's speaker ultimately desires to live despite the devastating fallout of gay sexual liberation (read, "plague narrative"), though Woods only evidence seems to come from the

volume's title, and in J. Elizabeth Clark's 2000 dissertation, in which she lists it among other early books of AIDS poetry without any commentary on it (88). Books like *AIDS: The Literary Response* and *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis* do not include Becker in their extended and seemingly comprehensive annotated bibliographies.

²¹² Likewise, in his poem "28 Nov 84," Becker asserts that medical, psychiatric, and even literary establishments lead to the obverse of their promises:

The doctor reads
the textbook
Pointing out the pictures
Cauterizing lesions with Mercurochrome
Fanning hope
with unsubstantiated circumstance—

The shrink reads
the textbook
Pointing out the phrases
Flinching at the nerve ends
anesthetized by
the depth of resentment— [ll.1-12]

Even though Becker could not know that Mercurochrome was eventually ruled out as an unsafe anesthetic by the FDA thirteen years after his death, Becker's (prescient) sense here is that discursive realms of knowledge (the domain of learned books) lead to a quality of dehumanizing disinterestedness. Even though his poems do not self-condemn per se, they do not offer poetry as a remedy to a disillusionment with discourse, or "textbook" narrativity, and Western vitality as is. Ultimately, his poems articulate, without offering a conceit of intervention, a sense of abject isolationism and radical disillusionment with Western medicine and culture by and large.

²¹³ According to an article written by Nicholas E. Davies, MD, and published in *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, Becker died on April 1985, "in early middle age" and that he "was an art director in an advertising firm." See this URL on JAMA's website: <<http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/256/22/3163.1.extract>>.

²¹⁴ This closing line also might allude to Robert Browning's "Life Among the Ruins." If so, Becker makes the point that the AIDS crisis interrupts any romantic connection that poetry might find, as in Browning's poem, between the past and the present. The present, for Becker, is at once painfully isolated from socio-historic time and subject to a past-ward-ness of representation that always already codes the self and other as dead and abject. See *Robert Browning: Poems Selected by Douglas Dunn* (2004).

²¹⁵ Consult, in particular, Helen Vendler's *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery* (2007) and Glennis Byron's *Dramatic Monologue* (2003). As my first chapter discusses, the lyric mode categorically puts pressure on the boundaries between

monologue and dialogue as well as, correspondingly, absence and presence. See my endnote on Eliot in the dissertation's first chapter especially.

²¹⁶ See *A Fast Life: The Collected Poems of Tim Dlugos* (2011), edited by David Trinidad. Claims about the timing of Dlugos' poems in relationship to his biography throughout this chapter are primarily based, unless otherwise noted, on cross-referencing Trinidad's timeline of Dlugos' life (xi-xxi) and the volume's meticulous endnotes (539-572). Dlugos composed "Sleep Like Spoons" in the year of his death, 1990. Trinidad later used the title *Powerless* for the 1996 selected works, which included many of the proposed volume's poems, when no publishing offers for the proposed volume were forthcoming. See the endnotes to *A Fast Life* and the "Editor's Note" to *Powerless*, where Trinidad writes, "As accomplished and moving as Tim's writing is, it was impossible to establish the work of a dead poet in that commercial context" (xv), implying a certain publishing bias against not merely posthumous poetry, but posthumous AIDS poetry. Despite the selected poems' publishing date, the fact that it has not gone out of print since, the fact that the selected poem's includes a majority of the intended volume's poems, the fact that most of the rest of the poems had been placed in journals before Dlugos' death, and the fact that Dlugos' life and poems were highly influential to many other contemporary poets, allows me to include *Powerless*, in both its forms, in the list of AIDS poetry volume's of the time, inasmuch as it contributed to, altered, and participated in a general culture of early AIDS poetry volumes. It should be added that the resemblance between the two poems could be explained by the possibility that Dlugos read "The Hug" and was influenced by it prior to its appearance in *The Man with Night Sweats*, since Gunn had placed the poem in the *PN Review* as well as a gay poetry anthology entitled *Not Love Alone* in 1985. According to Jack W. C. Hagstrom and Joshua Odell's "Emendations to Thom Gunn: A Bibliography, 1940-1978, II" published in 1992, "The Hug" was first published in 1985 when it appeared in the British anthology of gay poetry *Not Love Alone*. The anthology, according to its publication page, first appeared in November. But Gunn's poem also appeared in the *PN Review* 45 (12.1), which first appeared in September of 1985. Most likely this is a simple error on Hagstrom and Odell's part. Either way, this dates "The Hug" to at least 5 years before the composition of "Sleep Like Spoons." However, "The Hug" did not start gaining prestige in print until its prominent placement in the 1992 *The Man with Night Sweats*, so it is difficult to say if Dlugos was familiar with Gunn's poem at the time he composed his own. Also, it should be noted that Gunn frequently published his poems in journals soon after he penned them (see Wendy Lesser's eulogy for Gunn in *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*). Therefore, it is a likely that "The Hug" was written no earlier than 1984, after the crisis was well under way in the San Francisco area, Gunn's home, though he was a British citizen.

²¹⁷ While neither poem makes it explicit that two men are embracing, rather than a man and a woman or two women, etcetera, the context of the two poet's work makes the "homoeeroticism" or same-sex dynamic overt. What is more, given both of the poets' biographies, these poems most likely address their male partners. Kleinzahler assumes as much in his introduction, when he writes that both "The Hug" and "To a Friend in Time of Trouble" address Mike Kitay (xii), Gunn's longtime significant other. In the endnote on "Sleep Like Spoons" in *A Fast Life*, Trinidad identifies the poem as taking place in the apartment of Dlugos' "lover Christopher Wiss" (570). Dlugos also significantly mentions Wiss in many of his final poems, such as "G-9,"

as will be discussed.

²¹⁸ Because Holland is not as well-known as the other AIDS poets and because he is still living, most of his biography remains generally unknown. His AIDS poems do not indicate if one significant other resides at the center of all of them, or if each AIDS poem locates its own specific object of address. Nevertheless, each poem gives the impression that it ethically focuses on one specific other (even if this specific other is not universal for the volume—indeed, the timespan of the volume would logically imply a multiplicity of specific lost others).

²¹⁹ The “dejection” of Gunn’s AIDS poetry over the implied past-ward-ness of literature highlighted by the AIDS crisis contrasts with his earlier work’s faith in the ongoing-ness of literary legacy. For instance, his much-lauded poem “My Sad Captains,” the title poem from his third volume in 1961, explicitly ponders, as Harold Bloom might put it, the anxiety of influence. Alluding to one of Whitman’s most famous poems, “O Captain! My Captain!,” an Elegy for Lincoln, in its title, Gunn’s poem begins, “One by one they appear in / the darkness: a few friends, and / a few historical / names” (ll.1-4). The poet-speaker thinks of death, then, as connecting friends with famous literary figures, who in this rendition still separate out as having the prestigious and therefore presently relevant moniker of “historical.” The poem ends by saying the famous literary figures “are not at rest yet [. . .] they withdraw to an orbit / and turn with disinterested / hard energy, like the stars” (ll.13-18). This is to say, while early Gunn views literary figures as organizing and presently relevant influences with agency, however celestial and removed, the Gunn of *The Man with Night Sweats* views the past-ward-ness of literary tradition as incontrovertible and foremost.

²²⁰ The poem alludes to Ralph William Williams, a commercial artist of ephemera from the early twentieth-century, as well as Theodore Dreiser and James Whitcomb Riley, Midwestern writers from the turn of the century.

²²¹ Such a framing of poetry is especially evocative when we think of Spenser’s *The Shepherds Calendar* and the pastoral tradition that informs it. While this tradition views time as cyclical and, therefore, poetry as recurrently pertinent, Gunn and his cohort of AIDS poets frame tradition itself as leading to a deathly or pastly telos.

²²² Openly gay poet Edgar Bowers constitutes a unique exception for this argument. Although he did not write an entire volume of poems about AIDS, many of his poems from this era seem to allude to the crisis and elegize friends. Before the crisis, Bowers was already dedicated to a New Formalist agenda, so his verse often seems fascinated with connecting the present with the past. See his *Collected Poems* (1997).

²²³ While this progression is evident in the chronologically organized *A FAST LIFE*, many of Dlugos’ friends and critics seem to realize it after the fact. For instance, in Eileen Myles oddly belated review of *Powerless: Selected Poems*, she writes about her realization that Dlugos came to write mostly in “iambes” (228). She also notes that his poems of the era felt “highly contained” as a result (228).

²²⁴ The sonnet's final couplet accentuates a sense of culture menace surrounding the comforts of ethical touch and isolationism. In his personal correspondence written around the same time he wrote the poem, Dlugos claims that "the most overwhelming expression of this horror [the Holocaust] is a little girl's bedroom" which acted as a "hiding place because the most powerful people in Europe hated and wanted to kill that little girl, and succeeded." Dlugos recognizes that the idea of containment simultaneously signifies the potential for safety for the oppressed as well as can lead to thanapolitical outcomes (as in Anne Frank's death at Auschwitz). Nevertheless, the poem and the poem's tight formal construction speak to Dlugos' need to retain the trace of the self and other through what might be called a containment aesthetic. Dlugos even suggests with "Anne Frank House" that a containment aesthetic, though casting its referents as emanations from the past, might succeed to a certain extent in preserving the trace of the lost other in the ongoing present, to the extent that a poem might function as a museum for the past.

²²⁵ Scholar Daniel Kane's 2004 article "Angel Hair Magazine, the Second-Generation New York School, and the Poetics of Sociability," as well as David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (1998), posits that one of the defining features of New York School poetry is a chatty specificity inflected with uncontextualized proper nouns and names not fully comprehensible to the reader. Indeed, both scholars frequently describe this school's aesthetic as reminiscent of name-dropping at a cocktail party. Poet Eileen Myles explains, in her 2003 review of Dlugos' work, "Tim: A Review," that "New York School poetry means chatty abstraction" (228). Kane explains that this type of poetry emphasizes "the intersocial text" or "poems drenched with the proper names of those writers in the 'scene'" (334). Both scholars single out Tim Dlugos as an heir to the second generation of this school. To be sure, Myles explicitly states, "Tim was part of the New York School" (227). Indeed, New York School poet Dennis Cooper concedes in his introduction to *Powerless: Selected Poems 1973-1990*, while asserting the uniqueness of Dlugos, that "If Tim can be categorized at all, it's as a post-New York School poet" (xi). Myles indicates some contention surrounding the pre-fix "post." She writes, "Dennis Cooper [. . .] called Tim Dlugos 'Post-New York School,' which is also true of course but probably easy to say if you're not including yourself. If Dennis agrees to be in it, too, then I totally accept the term" (227-28). Later on in the review, Myles writes, "Post-New York School, when I think about it, comes pretty close to meaning the generation of writers who stopped drinking and, in Tim Dlugos's case, died of AIDS" (230-31). What is more, as Trinidad's front matter in *A Fast Life* demonstrates, Dlugos took up the mantle of the St. Mark's Poetry Project, a poetry series historically associated with poets of the second generation of the New York School, like Anne Waldman and Lewis Warsh.

²²⁶ See, in particular, Timothy Steele's impressive book *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter* (1990), which argues that Modernism revolted against the romantic, mystical, and sing-song thematics of Victorian poetry that it mistakenly, according to Steele, associated with meter and rhyme. Advocating for a return to prosody, Steele insists that meter is one of poetry's oldest and defining traditions and conventions and does not have to be paired with Victorian themes. Although the AIDS poets were decoupling prosody from traditional thematics here, they seem to also work to uncouple prosody from tradition itself, focusing instead on the regularity of meter and rhyme and the way this regularity creates a semblance of control and containment. For instance, George Piggford asserts in his 200 essay "In Time of

Plague': AIDS and Its Signification in Herve Guibert, Tony Kushner, and Thom Gunn" that "*The Man with Night Sweats* might be read as an attempt to recontextualize AIDS discourse within an ordered structure [. . .]: the metered poem" (187). Although he focuses on Gunn's ordering of "a plague of discourses" via his prosody, Piggford also indicates that Gunn uses prosody primarily to wield a sense of control over the unwieldy topic and experience of AIDS. Indeed, Eileen Myles distinguishes Dlugos' poetry, even though she talks about his uses of prosody, from New Formalism, Steele and Edgar Bowers domain, which she derides as merely fashionable but nothing "new" in her review "Tim: A Review" (226). This is to say, for AIDS poets and their champions, their use of prosody has less to do with tradition than it has to do with formal mastery and control of the charged, traumatized, and traumatizing subject matter.

²²⁷ Kleinzahler sees this usage of prosody as a general trend in all of Gunn's work. He writes in the introduction to *The Man with Night Sweats* that "It was the poet's custom, when writing on subjects that challenged his emotional equilibrium, to contain the material through meter and rhyme" (viii).

²²⁸ See Tyler B. Hoffman's article "Representing AIDS: Thom Gunn and the Modalities of Verse" (2000). Just as his contemporary critics, Hoffman insists on reading AIDS poetry back into an ethic of activism.

²²⁹ Critics like Hoffman often quote Clive Wilmer's 1995 interview in which Gunn says that his AIDS poem "The Missing" is about "the gay community," which is "a phrase [he] always thought was bullshit, until the thing was vanishing" (26). They use this quotation to defend the viewpoint that during the AIDS crisis Gunn recognized in his verse the need for a gay liberationist logic. However, throughout this interview, Gunn expresses ambivalence and anxiety over connectedness within what is thought of as the gay community, saying in his often understated manner about his relationship to the gay community, "an embrace can be a wrestler's embrace or it can be the embrace of love" (158). Once again we see that Gunn thinks of contact and embrace during the AIDS crisis as dangerous, adversarial, comforting, and necessary all at once. What is more, Gunn frames the gay community as inevitably vanishing. The gay community, in this paradigm, mirrors the containment aesthetic's inevitable reduction of lyric touch to monologue, or the severed and absolute closed-circuit of grief, and then abjection and death.

²³⁰ Consult the transcribed interview, collected in a book entitled *Thom Gunn: In Conversation with James Campbell* (2000), from which page numbers in this paragraph are taken.

²³¹ Critic Timothy Materer, who mainly focuses on James Merrill legacy in his 2008 article "James Merrill's Late Poetry: AIDS and the 'Stripping Process,'" also notes that Gunn represents the notion of embracing in "The Missing" as leading to "a tragic outcome" (129). It should be added that Merrill is not included in the present study because, though he died of AIDS-complications, he did not write a large number of poems or an entire volume on the AIDS crisis. The handful of AIDS poems he did author—"Prose of Departure," "Investiture at Ceconni's," "Farewell Performance," "Tony: Ending the Life," "Key West Aquarium: The Sawfish," and "Vol. XLIV, No. 3," as well as some other highly-indirect poems like "Self-Portrait in Tyvek"

and “Oranges”—are published in his final two volumes *Inner Rooms* (1988) and the posthumous *A Scattering of Salts* (1995). It is interesting to note that poems like “Prose of Departure,” “Investiture at Ceconni’s,” and “A Farewell Performance” function as elegies, or anti-elegies, for gay literary critic David Kalstone. Adrienne Rich also wrote an elegy for Kalstone, entitled “In Memoriam,” later “In Memoriam: D.K.,” and first published in *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS* (1989). Materer claims that Merrill’s three elegies trace the subtle change in his late poetry from a lifelong dedication to a poetry of consolation to a poetry beyond consolation. Materer demonstrates that even though Merrill always sought consolatory endings for his poems, his handful of AIDS poems end on a note of grief “beyond consolation” (124)—or, put otherwise, prompted by the AIDS crisis, Merrill moved from elegy to anti-elegy. Merrill, too, broke with tradition at this time and formalism remained as the only element that “affirmed” (124), in a large abstract way, for him. Materer notes that Merrill claims in his 1964 poem “The Thousand and Second Night” that “Form’s what affirms,” perhaps because of its ability to organize pleasingly the essentially chaotic and uncontrollable. This is to say, Gunn, as well as Merrill, employs prosody during the AIDS crisis not as a through-line to tradition, but as a means of containing ethical touch that nevertheless diminishes to a severed closed-circuit of grief and then abjection.

²³² See “Thom Gunn: Kinesthetic Aesthetics,” especially page 199, in Burt’s *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry* (2009). An earlier version of the essay appeared as an article in *Southwest Review* in 1999.

²³³ See Whitman’s “To a Stranger” and “A Glimpse” in particular.

²³⁴ The excellent and informative 2008 documentary *The Universe of Keith Haring* about Haring’s life and art shows Haring turning toward, especially after his HIV diagnosis, a closed circuit of symbols that he had created throughout his career, as if he were attempting to sidestep inimical social scripts and reimagine the future entirely by creating a new primitivistic hieroglyphics of self-referential meaning. The radiant child, in this reading, becomes associated with a new future based on a *returning* to a time before individuation and the acquisition of pre-existing meaning. Haring works to overhaul and do away with heteronormative scripting entirely. Whether intentionally or not, Dlugos points out in his elegy the way the “radiant child” has been appropriated by a heteronormative culture, as represented by the figure of the niece in a “boom town” (l.2), or a town reproducing itself (as in “baby boom”), wearing the radiant child t-shirt. The symbol is divorced from a circuit of primitivistic new meanings and associated directly with the heteronormative figure of the child as future (see Edelman’s 2004 *No Future*). This is to say, through this allusion to the cultural and homophobic misprisioning of Haring’s AIDS-era work, Dlugos contradicts the New York School conviction that pop culture can preserve the specificity of the past through the mechanical reproduction of the present.

²³⁵ O’Hara’s poem, “The Day Lady Died,” depicts a lyric speaker obsessed with the passing of time and cultural ephemera, until a copy of the *New York Post* with Marilyn Monroe on the cover produces, at least for the lyric speaker, a collective release from the passing of time, or a collective a-historicity. The speaker throughout the poem, especially at the poem’s beginning, obsesses over timetables and schedules. The poem starts (see O’Hara’s 1964 *Lunch Poems*):

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
three days after Bastille day, yes
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner (ll.1-5)

The image of Marylyn Monroe on the cover of “THE NEW YORK POST” stops the speaker’s protensive motion through a busy schedule, leading to the poem’s conclusion:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing (ll.26-29)

O’Hara asserts that Monroe precipitates a collectively held breath on the razor’s edge of deathliness and historical exceptionalism. Also, see poet Wayne Koestenbaum’s biography *Andy Warhol* (2001) which argues in large part that Warhol’s art was motivated by a need to resist the linearity and therefore the deathly telos of time through pop images (or massively circulated images of ephemeral cultural touchstones). The end of the biography’s first paragraph reads, “Warhol distrusted language; he didn’t understand how grammar unfolded episodically in linear time, rather than in one violent atemporal explosion. Like the rest of us, he advanced chronologically from birth to death; meanwhile, through pictures, he schemed to kill, tease, and rearrange time” (1). While Warhol’s struggle with time’s deathly telos might seem removed from the concerns of the New York School of poetry, critic David Lehman persuasively argues in his definitive book *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (1998) that one of the defining features of this school of poetry was its intertextuality and genre-blending with the visual arts of pop culture and that this insistence on intertextuality grew out of a concern over time’s deathly telos.

²³⁶ See the front matter to *A Fast Life* as well as previous endnotes in this chapter.

²³⁷ As Trinidad notes in the chronology at the front of *A Fast Life*, Dlugos acquired his B.A. in stages, eventually receiving the degree from La Salle in 1988 when he was 37 (xix). Also, in 1988 he enrolled in Yale Divinity School with the intention of becoming a priest in the Episcopal Church (xix). During these years, the late 1980s, Dlugos wrote very little poetry but instead focused on becoming a priest. It was not until his final two years, when he first experienced AIDS-related health complications that he began to write poetry once more. Indeed, in the endnotes to *A Fast Life*, Trinidad only attributes four poems to the years of 1985-1987, one of which is rather long: “King of the Wood” circa 1982-1985, “Gerrit, Bagel and” and “Here Comes the Bride” in 1986, and “Destalinize the Sky” in 1987. Contrastingly, Trinidad attributes fifty-one poems to the last two and a half years of Dlugos’ life, 1988-1990, many of which are lengthy, like “G-9.”

²³⁸ In the introduction to *A Fast Life*, Trinidad writes: “In terms of selection, I gave myself only

one mandate: to include, without question, any poem that Tim had included in his own books and manuscripts. Other than that, my goal was merely to bring together his best and most interesting poems. I had at first thought that I would put in all 597 poems, but quickly came to see that a ‘collected’—rather than a ‘complete’—poems would better showcase Tim’s talent. It would have done him a disservice to publish his lesser efforts, no matter how useful they might be biographically, or in charting the evolution of his craft. Excluded were poems that, for one reason or another, fell short of their mark [. . .] This collection represents half of his extant poems” (vi).

²³⁹ In the introduction to *A Fast Life*, Trinidad explains that the poem is “a masterpiece” and that Dlugos knew it (viii). Also, in the volume’s endnotes, Trinidad highlights the fact that not only was the poem published in the prestigious *The Paris Review* (No. 115, summer 1990), but also “[i]n her final issue as poetry editor [. . .] Patricia Storace notes that ‘Tim Dlugos’s extraordinary AIDS poem’ was among the poems she was ‘particularly proud of publishing’” (566-67). It is probably Dlugos’ most reproduced poems as well, having been published in *Things Shaped in Passing: More “Poets for Life” Writing from the AIDS Pandemic* (1997), *Up Is Up, But So Is Down: New York’s Downtown Literary Scene, 1974-1992* (2006), and *EOAGH: A Journal of the Arts* (No. 3, 2007), as well as *The Paris Review* and *Powerless*, the selected poems. Trinidad also notes that in “1992, a wooden lectern with brass plate commemoration to [Tim Dlugos] was installed in the patient lounge on the G-9 (AIDS) ward at Roosevelt Hospital, and copies of [. . .] ‘G-9’ were made available to patients and visitors” (567). Indeed, almost every commemorative reading of Dlugos’s work involves all of or part of “G-9” and an informal survey of blogs shows how “G-9” is considered, at the very least, Dlugos’ major accomplishment.

²⁴⁰ The phrase “invisible listeners,” is taken from *Invisible Listeners*, wherein Vendler posits that essentially three non-present objects of apostrophe exist in poetic history—respectively, god, the future reader, and the figures of the past.

²⁴¹ The final word “place” rewrites Dlugos’ previous 1982 poem “Psalm,” the title of which invokes the historic and intimate relationship between prayer and poetry, that ends, “my soul / longs for You, Lord, for the vast amused amazement / of your grace, in this your Strong (and holy) Place” (ll.35-37). As *A Fast Life*’s “Chronology” informs us, Dlugos lived at this time on a street named “Strong Place” in Brooklyn. In *A Fast Life*’s “Chronology,” Trinidad writes that in 1981, the year before he composed “Psalm,” Dlugos moved into “his own apartment at 31 Strong Place in Cobble Hill section of Brooklyn, remarking that as he’d just turned thirty-one years old, he was in a ‘strong place’ in his life” (xvi). The implication is, of course, Dlugos makes a pun about God’s omnipresent at Dlugos’ spiritual and physical locations at the end of “Psalm.” This prayer-like address and devotion to religious meaning in the years leading up to Dlugos’ HIV diagnosis differs from the object-less pseudo-religious address in his later AIDS poems. While Dlugos’ poet-speaker at the beginning of the AIDS crisis feels comfortable translating the material plane as a typology of the immaterial and spiritual, the poet-speaker of “G-9” resists transforming his poem into prayer and instead imagines the afterlife in mostly secular and material terms. The word “place,” when used in “G-9,” does not transcend the physical, perhaps decidedly so.

²⁴² It should be added that the final passage of “G-9” alludes—via the words “angel” and “hair” on the same line—to the Second Wave New York School and avant-garde literary journal *Angel Hair*: a short lived but influential body of work (which I describe in an earlier endnote to this chapter). *Angel Hair* is often thought of as a bridge between the confessionalism and New York School styles and later Language poetry. For instance, critic Daniel Kane, in his article 2004 “*Angel Hair Magazine, the Second-Generation New York School, and the Poetics of Sensibility*,” asserts in his first paragraph that, “Poets associated with the Language writing phenomenon, spoken-word culture, and younger contemporary American innovative writers have all pointed to the poets and poetry scene of the second generation as especially significant” (331); it is a comment that critic David Lehman seconds in the conclusion of his book-length study 1999 *The Last Avant-Garde: the Making of the New York School of Poets* (359-79). Lehman even suggests that Dlugos himself is a disciple of this forward-looking collaborative school. In other words, near its end, “G-9” suggests that if a paradoxical tradition of innovation cannot project the poet-speaker and his referents into the future, then perhaps the poet-speaker can, at least, remove the trauma of his absence from the ongoing present.

²⁴³ As I discuss in an earlier endnote to this chapter, multiple pieces of evidence point to Dlugos’ pride in having written “G-9” as well as attest to its attending critical acclaim. In the last paragraph of his introduction to *A Fast Life*, Trinidad writes: “Personally, it was gratifying to witness the resurgence that Tim underwent when he was writing his last poems. I remember when he called from Roosevelt Hospital, in November of 1989, to tell me that he had put me in a poem he had just finished. He said it was too long to read over the phone (as was his custom), he would send it in the mail, but I could tell from the ebullience in his voice that he knew he’d written something important—a masterpiece, the poem of his life. [. . .] In a letter to his friend Joe Brainard, dated July 9, 1990, Tim wrote, ‘When I was in the hospital last Nov., I wrote a poem about a day in the hospital, and about having AIDS. Well, the Paris Review accepted it, and it’s going to be in the issue that comes out in August. I’m really happy about it, both to have the work ‘out there’ and to be able to incorporate AIDS into my poetry. It feels good when my writing is in the same place I am, & when that gets affirmed” (viii).

²⁴⁴ See Wendy Lesser’s essay Thom Gunn’s “Duncan,” collected in *At the Barriers* (2009), for a jointly personal and literary perspective on Gunn’s views on death; Lesser characterizes these views as “Lucretian”—that is, as weighing life and death as equally “good”—rather than agnostic or atheistic (285).

²⁴⁵ In David Gewanter’s *At the Barriers* essay, he calls “Lament” magnificent (266). In her essay “Thom Gunn’s ‘Duncan’” in *At the Barriers*, Wendy Lesser says that “‘Lament’ may be [Gunn’s] greatest poem” about death as experience (278). Kleinzahler opens his 2007 introduction to *The Man with Night Sweats* by referring to epidemiologist Andrew Moss’ 1993 assessment of the volume that focuses on the formal control of “Lament”—in this way, Kleinzahler highlights the importance of the poem. Critic Tyler B. Hoffman also focuses on the formal control exhibited in “Lament” in his 2000 article “Representing AIDS: Thom Gunn and the Modalities of Verse” (24-25). In Alfred Corn’s review of the volume, he calls “Lament” “the most harrowing and maybe the best poem” in *The Man with Night Sweats* (294). Many eulogists in *The Three Penny Review*’s “A Symposium on Thom Gunn” mention the power, control, and

beauty of “Lament.” Henri Cole also singles out the poem in his 1992 review of the book. Joyce Wilson’s 1993 review of the *The Man with Night Sweats* focuses on “Lament” exclusively, saying that the formal qualities of the poem are “oddly mesmeric” (184). Finally, and most impressively, Paula Treichler’s description of “Lament” (43) is one of her only allusions to AIDS poetry in her influential long 1987 article “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification.”

²⁴⁶ In his 2007 introduction to *The Man with Night Sweats*, poet August Kleinzahler writes: “The subject of ‘Lament’ was a man named Allan Noseworthy, a close friend of Gunn’s [. . .] Noseworthy died in 1986 of AIDS” (viii-xi). In the volume’s “Acknowledgements and Notes,” Gunn writes: “‘The Reassurance’ and ‘Lament’ are about Allan Noseworthy” (87-88).

²⁴⁷ As suggested to me, the resonance between the word “hospital” and “hospitable” also points to the biblical story of “Sodom and Gomorrah,” which is explicitly alluded to in Liu’s poem of the same title, as discussed in this chapter’s end, and implicitly alluded to in Gunn’s poem “Philemon and Baucis.” To say the very least about this complex of resonances (at this moment in time), they seem to relate to the AIDS poets’ interest as a whole in the treacherous intersection between an ethics of social customs and an ethics of privacy.

²⁴⁸ Indeed, Gunn’s grief at the end of “Lament” is reminiscent of Orpheus’ grief at losing Eurydice again; however, Gunn also codes grief, in “Lament,” rather than death itself, as the most painful aspect of being, as I discuss shortly.

²⁴⁹ Consult Chapter 4 of Hank Lazer’s study *Opposing Poetries: Volume One: Issues and Institutions* (1996) in particular.

²⁵⁰ Critics often claim that Gunn’s poems never speak from a confessional or autobiographical perspective. Even poet August Kleinzahler’s 2007 introduction to *The Man with Night Sweats* claims that Gunn’s AIDS-era poems are “detached, impersonal” (x). However true this assessment of tone may be, Gunn dedicates many of his AIDS poems to specific others and composes them from the vantage of a speaker living in Gunn’s exact time and place. See the 2007 edition’s endnotes (87-88) for instance. In other words, Gunn’s early involvement with dramatic monologue transforms in his AIDS poems into an involvement with earnest first-person anti-elegiac lyric address, as in “Lament.” In his introduction to *A Fast Life*, Trinidad recounts his realization that Dlugos’ poetry has a confessionalistic impulse running through it as well as the fact that in his later years Dlugos hid this earnest side less and less from his readers: “In the year it took me to type the poems [. . .] an intimate portrait of Tim gradually emerged. By running, as it were, his entire artistic output through my head, I got to know Tim far better than I knew him in life. Those who were as taken as I was with Tim’s ingratiatingly clever public persona may be surprised by the strong autobiographical impulse that propels the poems, and by the quasi-diaristic story they collectively tell. Tim chose not to publish his most confessional poems (at least not until the end; it’s hard to imagine a more revealing poem than ‘G-9’), but he saved them nonetheless. Particularly in his New York years, he got great satisfaction from straddling the line between literary camouflage and explicitness” (vi).

²⁵¹ See the “Acknowledgements and Notes” section at the back of *The Man with Night Sweats* 87-88.

²⁵² Seven poems in the volume’s third section focus on the strange otherness of animals (a mocking bird, an otter, a shark, a dolphin, a moray eel, a seely fly, a pig) and at least two of the section’s poems focus on the alterity of plants (a yellow pitcher plant, sundry seasonings, like leeks, peppers, thyme, rosemary, and nasturtium) without offering any anthropomorphic interpretations, at least not overtly.

²⁵³ The comparisons between birds and poets are standard fare for poetry and these comparisons have been discoursed on at length. See critic Eleanor Cook’s excellent 1987 article “Birds in Paradise: Uses of Allusion in Milton, Keats, Whitman, Stevens and Ammons” for a concise and yet in depth analysis of these comparisons. Cook contends that such comparisons typically function as trans-historical cross-references for poets throughout the Western poetic tradition.

²⁵⁴ See in particular Gun’s poems “Outside the Diner,” “Improvisation,” “Old Meg,” “Cafeteria in Boston,” “Well Dennis O’Grady,” “Tenderloin,” and “Looks.”

²⁵⁵ This motif of reducing racialized others in a sensual manner to the stereotypes attributed to them can be observed throughout gay male literature of the late-twentieth century (such a reduction relates perhaps to a racist and romantic “orientalism” in “occidental” literary traditions). Observe works by Violet Quill writers, such as Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance* (1978). See David Bergman’s *The Violet Hour* (2004) for more on this group and these motifs. This subtle means of reducing black gay men to their sexuality, thereby eliding their interiority and sense of subjectivity, can also be observed in Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography; early black gay AIDS poet Essex Hemphill comments on this phenomenon in his collection *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (1992). I discuss Hemphill’s incisive commentary in the next chapter.

²⁵⁶ It should be added that Howard’s full comment on the subject in his introduction to Liu’s book reads, “In Liu’s text the ascent, the ecstatic apprehension of the divine (he is a religious poet, there are no two ways about it, though perhaps there are twenty) can be effected only by a demonic insistence upon abjection, upon the descent (‘that swan song in our throats / a falling cloud of ash’)” (x). While his assertion that Liu is a religious poet rings true to, inasmuch as Liu operates, as this chapter notes, under the duress of that avenue’s inability to create meaning for the gay AIDS poet-speaker, Howard’s opposition between ascent and descent seems more complimentary (or even convenient) than supportable. Indeed, Howard only finds a quotation to support the descent portion of this rhetorical structure. Howard’s comment seems mostly geared toward finding a theistic silver-lining that the text itself does not seem to claim or even want to claim. Liu’s text suggests, rather, perhaps fearful, perhaps disinterestedly, that religious meaning production may be defunct in the age of AIDS.

²⁵⁷ It might be added that the title of the volume and poem, “Vox Angelica,” also refers to the stops of a pipe organ that can produce a tremulous effect—the title subtly interlinks in multiple ways art and religion while the poem discusses the collapse of their promises to create and

sustain meaning for the gay male lyric speaker in the AIDS era.

²⁵⁸ This inability of literature and religion to stave off historicity becomes a recurrent theme throughout the volume, as in the poem “Awaiting Translation,” in which the poet-speaker declares, “The ink and paper would save me, not because / words can save any more than the Ark / or the City of Enoch (all saved in the Bible) / but because words must come to an end” (ll.15-18) and, “I wish / I could [. . .] somehow keep myself / alive, leave the last word unfinished” (ll.22-24). Lui’s speaker equates writing with life and, thereby, publishing or the finishing of writing with death while proclaiming that a biblical notion of redemption has grown defunct. What is more, Liu’s speakers put forward these equations in a nearly hopeless, or at least disinterested, tone throughout his volume. When other AIDS writers like Whitmore, or even Gunn, Dlugos, or Monette, touch on the same fear of literature’s epitaphic nature, for instance, as previously explored, they often do so while attempting to discover meaningful, if non-utilitarian, alternatives to the past-ward telos of language and literature.

²⁵⁹ Not only do Lynch and Holland *attempt* to engage with politics in their AIDS poetry at times, but also the final section of Holland’s *A Journal of the Plague Years* does not fit into “official verse culture.” Even though the rest of his volume speaks earnestly with a unified lyric I, the poems in the final section are experimental and often cannot be read linearly. These changes in style and purposes (perhaps) might be attributed to his burgeoning associations with other AIDS poets, especially early black gay AIDS poets like Assotto Saint and Essex Hemphill in the late 1980s and early 90s. Indeed, in “A Poetry of Crisis, A Poetry of Witness,” Holland asserts that he was on personal terms with many of the most influential AIDS poets, such as Assotto Saint, Melvin Dixon, Essex Hemphill, Paul Monette, Mark Doty, and Richard McCann. This is to say, although Holland’s verse falls in line for the most part with the practices of “official verse culture,” practices he returns to in his subsequent work (see *Circuit* [2010], for instance), he seems to question, at least momentarily, many of these practices in a fashion similar to that of early black gay AIDS poets. To be sure, many of his poems that problematize the notion of the lyric self also explicitly engage with contemporaneous sociopolitical debates and an ethic of activism (“Helms” functions as a particularly good example); for more on this correlative (between problematized lyric selves and an ethic of activism) and for more on the influential works of black gay AIDS poets, see this dissertation’s third chapter.

Chapter Three:

²⁶⁰ In the second paragraph of her article “Memory, Community, Voice,” Alexander writes, “I originally called this paper ‘Black Poetry in the Age of AIDS’” (408). Alexander was made famous, of course, by reciting her poem “Praise Song for the Day” at Barak Obama’s 2009 inauguration.

²⁶¹ I am employing the formulation “black gay” established by Beam in the anthology *In the Life*, which also opens with a quotation by Sylvester: “Begin first black and then gay, these words express things that I have experienced, things found in the black gay culture that are unknown to many.”

²⁶² Hemphill's early chapbooks *Earth Life* (1985) and *Conditions* (1986) were self-published and had very little, if any, distribution. This lack of access to mainstream publishing supports, of course, Alexander's point that if it were not for surrounding sociopolitical circumstances, there would have been considerably more poetry volumes by individual authors. Hemphill, nevertheless, as I explore throughout this chapter, promotes writing within a communal, anthologized, and multi-genre milieu.

²⁶³ At least three of the five poets included in this slim volume died from AIDS-related complications. I am not certain what happened to the remaining two contributors: Aaab-Richards and Jackson.

²⁶⁴ I have selected these years based on the appearances of *In the Life* and *Ceremonies*. Dixon's volume, it should be added, technically appears after the end of this period, but these posthumous poems were written within it. Although Dixon's voice can often be earnest and plainspoken just like the voices of official verse culture, his poems mostly, as I explore, support the objectives of early black gay AIDS poetry.

²⁶⁵ As I discuss near the end of this chapter, Saint is a borderline figure between these two periods aesthetically and conceptually, if not historically. Gary Fisher, whose posthumous volume, *Gary in Your Pocket* (1996), edited and arranged by Eve Sedgwick, only vaguely alludes to AIDS at times. But its mixture of journals, stories, and poems, as well as its philosophical questions concerning the coherence of the self and intimate voice makes it another borderline case between these two periods. Because of its lack of relevance to AIDS poetry directly, however, I do not discuss it in this chapter. It has been considered, though, while framing my arguments.

²⁶⁶ Also, the title for Beam's valedictory essay in *In the Life*, "Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart," becomes the title for the subsequent anthology completed by Hemphill. As I discuss throughout, concepts like "going home" and "black men loving black men" function as organizing principles for much of early black gay AIDS cultural production.

²⁶⁷ On the penultimate page of *Orpheus in the Bronx*, Shepherd quotes Eliot: "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experiences; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes" (196). Although Shepherd adds that this poetic state of receptivity is imperfect and that the "self" can only be approached asymptotically (196), he concurs that "The difference [between everyday life and poetry] is what [the poet] makes of those fragments of experience, what and what kind of order, however tenuous and contingent, one brings to the chaos of quotidian life" (196-97).

²⁶⁸ See *Orpheus in the Bronx* 190.

²⁶⁹ See Johnson's *The Idea of Lyric* for descriptions of the choral and public origins of lyric in ancient Greece.

²⁷⁰ It could be added that the charged words "aim" and "needle," which align ejaculation, drawing blood, drug use, firearms, and sewing, create tonal misgivings about militancy in the age of AIDS, while the speaker nevertheless explicitly campaigns for it.

²⁷¹ Consult *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989).

²⁷² Alexander published *Love's Instruments* in the order in which Dixon left his manuscript. See *Love's Instruments* 7.

²⁷³ The poem, which names fourteen individuals (including the poet), previously appeared in the *Kenyon Review*. It must have appeared there in an extended form because in his OutWrite speech he says of the earlier version, "I'm sorry to report that of the twenty people mentioned in the poem, only two are presently alive" (76). One of these "presently alive" individuals was most likely the poet himself. Also, the modifier "presently" is telling here, inasmuch as Dixon feels inclined when speaking of his poetry to make a distinction between being alive in general (whether in the past, in the future, or as a trace in the present) and being alive in the present.

²⁷⁴ Speaking of various urban populations and cultures of gay men, Beam writers, "None of them spoke to me as a Black gay man" (13); in this way, he points to the feeling that the gay community in general is inhospitable to black gay men.

²⁷⁵ This is to say, Beam and other early black gay writers call attention to the fact that the Post-Stonewall gay (literary) community inherently relies on and organizes itself around the remnant traces of white privilege at the height of the AIDS crisis.

²⁷⁶ For more on the biases of gay culture against black gay men, see Charles Nero's later introduction (2000) to *Ceremonies*.

²⁷⁷ See in particular the section "Baraka's Dilemma" (217-221) in Simmons' essay.

²⁷⁸ This volume seems closely aligned with Sanchez's personal biography; she lost a gay brother to AIDS-related complications.

²⁷⁹ Consult the introduction to *Are We Not Men?* in particular, where Harper uses Magic Johnson's announcement of his seropositivity as a touchstone for discussing anxieties surrounding African-American masculinity.

²⁸⁰ I cite lines from "Heavy Breathing" by page number throughout because of its lengthiness.

²⁸¹ Hemphill quotes the *Washington Post*'s description of the gang rape in *Ceremonies*' endnotes (189).

²⁸² See *Ceremonies* 15.

²⁸³ See Beam's essay "Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart" in *In the life* (240).

²⁸⁴ Monette's *Love Alone* also features a poem entitled "Gardenias"; however, the two poems do not seem to be in conversation, only inasmuch as Monette attempts to transform Roger's loss into a collective intentional object, while Hemphill's attempts to transform a Black (Gay) Nationalism into one.

²⁸⁵ Consult Harper and Walton's introduction to *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry* for a concise description of the controversial aesthetics of "adopt and adapt" and "dialect poetry" in the African-American tradition.

²⁸⁶ See the introduction to Woubshet.

²⁸⁷ In addition to Johnson, also see Dubrow's *The Challenges of Orpheus*.

²⁸⁸ See *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry* xxix.

²⁸⁹ It should be noted that there is a possible historical link between early black gay AIDS poetry and the emergence of the phenomenon of "Slam Poetry," which literally transforms lyric into a performance art. I will touch on this possible connection, which can only be speculative for lack of documented source material at present, in my next chapter.

²⁹⁰ As with "Heavy Breathing," I cite page—rather than line—numbers for "The Tomb of Sorrows" because of its lengthiness.

²⁹¹ The performance of Anglo-Saxon verse, for instance, was said to feature a lyre. See Fussell's description of accentual verse in *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*.

²⁹² Consult my explication of Browning's dramatic monologues in chapter one, in which I argue that dramatic monologue critiques the lyric's fantasy of escaping history by featuring its speakers conversing in implied socio-historic circumstances. As part of this critique, Browning's dramatic monologues also frequently feature psychotic speakers obsessed with preserving their others outside of time and speakers who come to typify certain social positions defined along lines of gender and class.

²⁹⁴ See the anthology *Tongues Untied* 56.

²⁹⁵ Consult Harper's introduction to *Are We Not Men?*

²⁹⁶ For more on the relationship between queer theory, AIDS poetry, and the notion of deconstruction see this dissertation's introduction and fourth chapter.

²⁹⁷ See the last poem in Lynch's *These Waves of Dying Friends* (1988) in which the poet-speaker

describes participating in a protest against police insensitivity and brutality during the height of the AIDS epidemic. I discuss this poem in my introduction and second chapter.

²⁹⁸ First published in *Poets for Life* (1989).

²⁹⁹ Indeed, I touch on the disappearance of humor in my dissertation's introduction as well as in its first and second chapters. While humor, camp especially, disappears from AIDS literature throughout the height of the crisis, it eventually reemerges. AIDS poetry from this early period especially lacks humor. The major exception, as previously noted, is Robert Bucheron's *Epitaphs for the Plague Dead* (1985) in which dead types of gay men speak from the grave in terse epigrammatic (and epitaphic) quatrains. This early (tasteless) volume presents a test case for most AIDS poetry critics for how camp clashes with lyric poetry's central melancholic imperative of retaining specificity.

³⁰⁰ Hemphill describes both of these women's stories in the endnotes to *Ceremonies* (190-91).

³⁰¹ First published in *In the Life*.

³⁰² Most of the lyric address in Hemphill's poems teeter on the edge of oratory. For instance, "Family Jewels," included near the end of *Ceremonies*, and performed at Washington D.C.'s annual arts award program (as Hemphill explains in his essay "Miss Emily's Grandson Won't Hush His Mouth") features the refrain, "I live in a town / where everyone is afraid / of the dark" (ll.23-24). Because of its musical structure of refrain and the fact that it was staged, "Family Jewels" pushes its speaker toward explicitly speaking to an audience in a quasi-didactic fashion.

³⁰³ Jackson and Harris appear in *Tongues Untied*. Harris also appears with Woods in *In the Life*. All three appear in *Brother to Brother*.

³⁰⁴ In this formulation, narrative is protensive and promotes a violent end and the term "poetic" stands in for the desire to disrupt this or any telos. I explore the idea that lyric is often conceptually aligned with photography and that narrative is often aligned with film in my discussion of Sontag and Barthes in my first chapter.

³⁰⁵ Jones, in this way, at once echoes the pluralist identitarianism of this school of AIDS poetry while also expanding it a degree toward post-structural identity politics.

³⁰⁶ See minute 41 of the Jones-Moyers interview.

³⁰⁷ Consult Roman's "Pomo Afro Homos' Fierce Love" as collected in *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (1998).

³⁰⁸ See Roman 170.

³⁰⁹ Consult in particular Wojnarowicz's paintings collected in *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz*. Many of his paintings, especially those dating after he discovered his

seropositivity, feature personal texts addressing specific others overlaying collages and newsprint. In this way, Wojnarwicz interlinks a sense of specific self and other with a complex network of symbols and images that engage the collective present. In addition to creating a lexicon of images aimed at returning the self and other to a pre-mirror stage un-individuation, Haring also illustrates stories about cultural abjection (see his work with Burroughs in particular) in order to force his viewer into acts of interpretation geared at resuscitating represented, and therefore always already lost, referents. I discuss both of these AIDS visual artists in the endnotes to preceding chapters.

³¹⁰ See *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1991), pages 28-30 in particular.

³¹¹ See Shepherd's interview with Rowell.

³¹² For more on how lyric attempts to bridge the gap between the self and other created by the confluence of the mirror-stage and language acquisition via emphasizing language's pre-discursive sounds, consult Blasing's *Lyric Poetry*.

³¹³ Indeed, as my dissertation argues, lyric constantly investigates the border between the self and the other, asking what the self's obligation to the other is (as in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice) while also fearing that the other might in fact be a narcissistic projection of the self (as in the myth of Narcissus). Shepherd's point is, so it seems, that there is little difference between these two myths, that within the melancholic economy of lyric, the self's primary ethical obligation is to the self because all alterity always already emanates from the self. For more on the relationship between these two particular myths and lyric, see Dubrow in particular as well as Waters' *Lyric Touch*.

³¹⁴ Both Culler and Waters refer to Keats' poem in their discussions of apostrophe and lyric touch, respectively.

³¹⁵ It should be added that there is a tangible link between Shepherd and the early black gay AIDS poets. Not only does he discuss his feelings about Hemphill in his 1998 interview, as I am about to discuss, but also Shepherd's first published essay appears in *In the Life*: "On Not Being White" (46-57). The tone of the essay very much stands out from the rest of the anthology. While the anthology, especially the poetry contained within, is oratory, proscriptive, politically-engaged, and didactic, as I have been implying throughout this chapter, Shepherd's essay is very much interested in speaking out of specific experiences and philosophizing without reaching conclusions about anyone other than himself (or, at least, his conclusions are not utilitarian and socially-engaged, but broad and abstract). Indeed, although the essay, as its title suggests, parses the social categories of *black* and *gay*, as well as the effect of those categories on his life, his essay ends by articulating what comes to be his lifelong focus on the continual creation of the integral lyric self. He writes, "My dream? Finally to be 'myself,' relieved of the baggage of my history both as an individual and as a member of an oppressed race and caste [. . .] The catch is that 'myself' is a product of that history both general and very particular. I just want to be me, but who would that be?" (56-57). Much could be made of this essay and its relationship to later themes he explores as well as how it relates to early black gay AIDS poetry; for instance, while

early black gay AIDS poets vehemently proscribe that black gay men should love other black gay men (that is, they use literature to help reshape socio-political dynamics), Shepherd focuses his literary energies on trying to understand his impulse to obsess, sexually and romantically, over white men. But Shepherd later disowns this essay (see Rowell 295); also, it predates his AIDS poetry, written as it was when he was twenty-two. It suffices to say that this link between Shepherd and the early black gay AIDS poets points to the way he responds almost directly to their call for using poetry to reorganize social categories. Shepherd suggests here and later on that the primary philosophical and sociopolitical task of literature, especially poetry, is to shape and reshape the specific self in relationship to alterity.

³¹⁶ See the second essay “The Other’s Other” in *Orpheus in the Bronx*. I will discuss this essay shortly.

³¹⁷ See Shepherd’s interview with Rowell 295.

³¹⁸ For Shepherd’s thoughts on his relationship to Western myths, consult in particular the first essay of *Orpheus in the Bronx*: “To Make Me Who I Am.”

³¹⁹ As my second chapter indicates, both Trinidad and Dlugos make use of this phrase as well later on.

³²⁰ The conclusion of the second chapter discusses Liu as well as his AIDS quilt poem.

³²¹ See Saint’s “Author’s Note” in *In the Life* (243).

Chapter Four:

³²² For a close reading of Adrienne Rich’s poem “In Memoriam,” see the endnotes to my dissertation’s introduction and second chapter. I also discuss *Poets for Life* in this dissertation’s introduction.

³²³ See my third chapter as well as Alexander’s *Body of Life* (1997) and Sanchez’s *Does Your House Have Lions?* (1997).

³²⁴ Larry Kramer co-founded ACT UP in 1987 to correct what he saw as the apolitical tenor and myopic focus of the AIDS activist organization Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) which he founded in 1982. For more on Kramer, see Shilts’ *And the Band Played On* (1987).

³²⁵ “Jade,” like many poems referred to in this chapter, is too long to cite by line number(s). As a result, I will cite quotations from lengthy poems by page, rather than line, number.

³²⁶ Consult Bersani 212-216, where Bersani summarizes Dworkin’s perspective.

³²⁷ For more on this essay, see this dissertation’s second chapter and introduction.

³²⁸ Consult Johnson's monograph *The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry* (1982) and Dubrow's *The Challenges of Orpheus: Lyric Poetry and Early Modern Poetry* (2008). Also, see this dissertation's first chapter, in which I discuss the lyric theories of Culler, Water, Cameron, Brewster, Barbara Johnson and others in regards to how they treat lyric's joint monologic and dialogic nature.

³²⁹ Sedgwick's work also owes a debt to Treichler and Sontag. For more on the relationship between these theorists and the AIDS crisis, see my dissertation's introduction.

³³⁰ For more on Sedgwick, see this dissertation's introduction. For more on the relationship between Sedgwick, Doty, and Campo, consult Rendell. Gary Fisher was Sedgwick's graduate student at CUNY. After his death, Sedgwick edited and published his short stories and poems in one volume.

³³¹ The slightly later constellation of AIDS poets I discuss in this chapter also address the problematic relationship between touch and quarantine. See, for instance, Doty's powerful poem, "The Embrace," which is reminiscent of Monette's "Dreaming of You" and Gunn's "The Hug." Doty collected this poem in *Sweet Machine* (1998).

³³² I touch on this concurrence in the conclusion to this chapter as well as this dissertation's introduction.

³³³ Theorists such as Treichler and Edelman point to the frequency with which the media and national political discourse in the 1980s and 90s employed this phrase, effectively excluding gay men and PWAs (who were thereby seen as the same thing) from subjectivity and citizenship.

³³⁴ Consult the conclusion to Bersani.

³³⁵ For a discussion of this point, see my first chapter or consult Brewster's *Lyric* and Glennis' *Dramatic Monologue*.

³³⁶ Moreover, the poem locates a sense of alterity and interiority in the city landscape itself, as when it notes that the city's windows at night glow like "a second city // lit from within" (ll.24-25). This chapter will explore this cohort's notion of nonhuman alterity shortly.

³³⁷ For a prime example, see Gunn's poem "Cafeteria in Boston" or consult the conclusion to my second chapter.

³³⁸ In his 2007 memoir, *Dog Years*, which I will discuss momentarily, Doty comments that drag queens, "seem now a little historical," and that, "drag's moment of cultural visibility has passed" (169). Doty has consistently demonstrated an awareness of the role drag plays in our cultural milieu. He also indicates that its sociopolitical import and significance to cultural theory was at its height in the early 1990s.

³³⁹ See Rendell 90 and 95. Also, see this dissertation's introduction for more on the relationship between queer theory and AIDS poetry.

³⁴⁰ See Campo's volume *What the Body Told* (1996) in particular. For instance, the long poem "Cancion de las Mujeres" is dedicated to Sedgwick and features movements titled, "Her Final Show" and "Imagining Drag."

³⁴¹ For more on black gay AIDS poetry, see this dissertation's third chapter.

³⁴² Not only the shoreline but also seals become symbols in *Heaven's Coast* of the shifting boundary between the self and other, presence and absence, and life and death as well as symbols of the pervasiveness and yet ultimate inaccessibility of alterity, as this chapter will explore in relationship to Doty's poetry shortly.

³⁴³ I am thinking, of course, of Dickinson's famous poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" which expresses an implicit fear of invisibility as well as a hunger for it and bravery in the face of it. That poem's speaker also links the abjection of individuals into a greater whole. As seen with Dent's allusions to Whitman, this cohort of AIDS poets work to employ the techniques of lyric queerness they retrospectively glean from American poetic history without explicitly weighing their poems down in tradition and therefore historicity. For more on this topic, please see this dissertation's introduction as well as first and chapter (indeed, I discuss the problem of historical precedent throughout the entire dissertation).

³⁴⁴ To be sure, indicative of this poststructuralist blending, the words "blur" and "fog" appear frequently in Doty's poems. See, for example, "Nocturne in Black and Gold," "Beach Roses," "Fog Suite," and "Fog."

³⁴⁵ For example, of which there are many, "Nights of 1990," "Fragments from an Explanation," and "After You Died"—all of which this chapter discusses—feature a poet-speaker addressing a lost significant other.

³⁴⁶ See, for example, the sequence's third sonnet, "The Cure for Cancer" (33).

³⁴⁷ *What the Body Told* (1996) features many poems about and addressed to Campo's patients. Campo has also been a vocal advocate for using poetry therapeutically; see especially his article, "AIDS and The Poetry of Healing" (1993) and his book of essays, *The Poetry of Healing* (1997).

³⁴⁸ In his greatest departure from the volume's nevertheless predominately gay male lyric voice, Cuadros narrates the short story "Baptism" from the first-person perspective of a young lesbian.

³⁴⁹ As already mentioned, see Brewster and Glennis, but also see W. R. Johnson and Dubrow.

³⁵⁰ The end of "Let," which prays secularly, inasmuch as the grammatical imperatives do not apostrophize a divine power, also adheres in this regard to Dlugos' model. However, throughout the lengthy poem, the poet-speaker also follows Whitman's model of using the lyric I to collect,

juxtapose, and blend a variety of perspectives. Indeed, Whitman's lyrics (such as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry") could be called prototypes of anti-elegiac lyric queerness, inasmuch as they attempt to bridge the divide between the self and other by nesting both inside of each other in multiple and conflicting ways. Whitman, like Dent, also imagines fictional others and then swaps his identity with theirs: in "Song of Myself," for instance, Whitman declares that he is a slave, a bride, a bridegroom, a squaw, and a general.

³⁵¹ For more on Gunn and alien alterity, consult my dissertation's second chapter as well as the third section of *The Man with Night Sweats*.

³⁵² See especially Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (2012). Also consult Graham Harman's foundational work in object-oriented ontology.

³⁵³ I am referring especially to Keats' "This Living Hand" as well as Waters' close reading of that poem in his monograph *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (2003). Culler's also discusses Keats' poem in his foundational work on apostrophe. I discuss this poem in the third chapter. I am also thinking about Sherwood Anderson's persistent descriptions of hands and arms in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919).

³⁵⁴ For further example of Doty's engagement with alien alterity see Doty's poem "Migratory," from *Atlantis*, which contradicts Gunn's implicit assertion that the poet and animal have discretely separate lives. Doty's poem also describes the way animal phenomenology points to the simultaneity of presence and absence for his self. Imagining that he is flying alongside a gaggle of geese he is also observing overhead, the speaker admits that he isn't "with them" (l.36) and yet is not where he is either: "I was so full of longing," (l.44), he says, "I seemed to be nowhere at all" (l.47). His speaker takes and lends agency to the geese while revealing an overarching sense of abject isolationism in the gesture.

³⁵⁵ Consult my dissertation's first chapter and Waters.

³⁵⁶ As I mention in a previous endnote, the full title of Bogost's book is *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*.

³⁵⁷ See the second chapter of *Alien Phenomenology*, entitled, "Ontography."

³⁵⁸ For an extended discussion of "G-9," see my dissertation's second chapter.

³⁵⁹ Cole's work also possesses a much-commented-on association with Japanese culture and aesthetics. He was born in Japan to a (white) American military family. Despite this Japanese influence throughout his oeuvre, the lyric speaker of the *The Look of Things* demonstrates an overriding thematic interest in ancient Greco-Roman culture.

³⁶⁰ See Harman especially. Bogost summarizes Harman's positions throughout his book *Alien Phenomenology*.

³⁶¹ See Johnson's study *The Idea of Lyric*. In the first pages of the first chapter, he explores T. S. Eliot's supposition in his essay "The Three Voices of Poetry" that Modern lyric is constituted primarily by "meditative verse," in which the speaker expresses, "his own thoughts and sentiments to himself or to no one" (1). Johnson persuasively argues that this meditative mode is not the foundational definition of lyric but a modern outgrowth of lyric's choric roots and its proclivity for direct address.

³⁶² For more on Gunn's AIDS poems in regards to images of embrace and containment, see my dissertation's second chapter.

³⁶³ Cole's review of *The Man with Night Sweats* is entitled "Sketches of the Great Epidemic" and appeared in *The Nation* in 1992.

³⁶⁴ The appearance of the word "symptomatic" in Lazer's work also points to a type of psychoanalytic and Marxist reading that became fashionable during the 1980s. See Best and Marcus' recent and influential article "Surface Reading: An Introduction" (2009) for how Fredric Jameson inaugurated this era of "symptomatic reading" with his seminal book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). My dissertation suggests—perhaps in the vein of symptomatic reading—that Jameson's notion of cultural texts possessing a repressed meaning might have found purchase in the 1980s because of, at least in part, the AIDS epidemic. This is to say, the epistemological site of cultural trauma and abjection produced by the crisis may have led to indirection in both literature and criticism. The AIDS poetry I read throughout this dissertation at once participates in this indirection and constitutes a notable exception to it.

³⁶⁵ Please consult Burt's book-length study *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry* (2009) for a reprinting of this essay and a 2004 postscript. Burt also comments on the 1999 essay in the introduction to *Close Calls with Nonsense*.

³⁶⁶ For instance, Wright's *Deepstep Come Shining* (1989) recurrently refers to AIDS, cancer, and syphilis in direct and indirect ways, mentioning each by name at least once.

³⁶⁷ See *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (Vintage 1990).

³⁶⁸ See <http://www.amletters.org/Issues/issue11.html>.

³⁶⁹ In his 2004 postscript to his 1999 essay, both of which are printed in *Close Calls with Nonsense*, Burt claims he should have claimed Powell as an Elliptical Poet more firmly in his original essay (355).

³⁷⁰ Another contributing factor to the rise of Slam Poetry was the prevalence of performance art in the 1980s that responded to the AIDS crisis, such as the works of Tim Miller and Diamanda Galás. This performance art, representative of the so-called "culture wars" of the late 1980s and early 1990s, shared aesthetic and political sympathies with the work of early black gay AIDS poets and artists, such as Essex Hemphill and Marlon Riggs. The emergence of Slam Poetry also owes a huge debt, of course, to the popularity of Hip Hop, which in turn grew out of the disco-

era, sexual-revolution, club scene. For more on the origins of Slam Poetry, also consult *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam* (2008).

³⁷¹ See Chin's 1997 poetry volume *Bite Hard* and his 2001 volume *Harmless Medicine*, both of which focus on the AIDS biomedical crisis as well as issues relating to race and sexuality. Chin's poetry adopts many performance techniques (such as the frequent employment of an oratory tone) that I discuss regarding early black gay AIDS poets in my dissertation's third chapter.

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