

GENERATING LITERACIES:
READING GAY CULTURE AND THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

by

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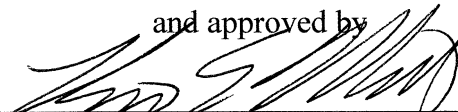
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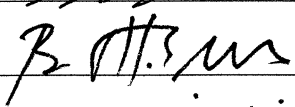
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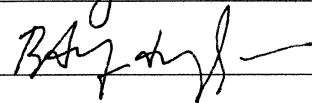
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Generating Literacies:

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Professor Richard E. Miller

This dissertation theorizes the crucial role that reading plays in the lives of gay men. Through their encounters with diverse texts and archives, gay male readers seek to become literate with different bodies of knowledge and, in the process, to gain a sense of self and a sense of belonging to a larger collectivity. However, because gay male culture lacks formalized or default institutions of world-making—namely, of learning, remembering, and inheriting—gay male readers (and writers) must constantly struggle to acquire, preserve, and transmit across the generations their literary-aesthetic and cultural traditions. Their struggle with the problem of generational transmission has been exacerbated in the last three decades by the AIDS epidemic.

The dissertation's introductory chapter provides a preliminary history of gay male readers and their literate practices. In each of the dissertation's four main chapters, I examine the interrelations between the problem of generationality and the problem of different forms of cultural literacy. Chapter One reframes the debate about the "gay generation gap" in relation to issues of "gay cultural literacy." Chapter Two explores the

interimplications of acquiring and transmitting print-based and oral-based cultural literacies in the work of British author, playwright, and performance artist Neil Bartlett. Chapter Three, focusing on the short fiction of American author Allen Barnett, considers the interplay of high-cultural literacy and “AIDS literacy,” a body of knowledge that combines familiarity with biomedical discourse, awareness of cultural debates, and sensitivity to how sexual subjects negotiate desire and risk. In Chapter Four, I investigate the curious prevalence of ghosts in AIDS narratives and suggest that these texts invite readers to cultivate a “spectral literacy” as a strategy for remembering the consequences of the AIDS epidemic. The dissertation’s epilogue juxtaposes my own literacy narrative—specifically, my past experience of learning ESL, or the acculturation process I name “English as a shaming language”—with my later encounters with the work of gay Chinese American writers and artists such as Justin Chin and Frank Liu.

DEDICATION

For Winston and Rex

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Since returning to college in 1991, following a three-year hiatus, I have had the honor and pleasure of learning from a number of teachers. At the University of Alberta, where my scholarly interest in gay literature and queer theory first took shape, I thank Glenn Burger, Dianne Chisholm, and Heather Zwicker for inspiring and guiding me during those formative years, and for encouraging me to pursue the doctorate. At Rutgers University, I benefited enormously from taking courses with Derek Attridge, Emily Bartels, Ed Cohen, John McClure, Michael McKeon, Richard Miller, Bruce Robbins, Cheryl Wall, Michael Warner, and Carolyn Williams. Among this group, I'm especially grateful to John for his enthusiastic response to a paper I wrote on ghosts in AIDS narratives, which I submitted for his "Postmodern/Postsecular" seminar in spring 1998; as well as to Richard for providing a safe intellectual space in his "Teaching of Writing" seminar in fall 1998, which prompted me to reflect upon and write about my own literacy narrative. Unbeknownst to me at that time, the ideas presented in both of those seminar papers would continue to guide my thinking for the next decade during the research and writing of this dissertation.

Words are inadequate for expressing the gratitude I owe to Richard Miller, who readily agreed to direct the dissertation midway through the project and pledged himself to see it through completion. I'm thankful to have him as a mentor, a friend, and a model of the kind of academic I did not have the foresight to imagine when I began graduate school—someone who gains pleasure from being, in combination, a teacher, a researcher, and an administrator.

I'm also deeply indebted to the members of my dissertation committee. From the time I began graduate school at Rutgers, Carolyn Williams has provided me with intellectual guidance and emotional support; oftentimes, I was reminded to believe in myself in large part because she believed in my ability to succeed. Brent Edwards has prompted and helped me to think through the stakes and parameters of my project; I have benefited from the conversations we shared during the preparation for my comprehensive exams and, subsequently, during the earlier incarnations of this project. Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui generously consented to serve as my outside reader and offered insightful comments and suggestions.

I would like to convey my thanks to a number of other readers who played a less formal, but no less significant, role throughout this project. I'm obliged to John Plews for inviting me to submit my work on "Generation Trouble" to *torquere: Journal of the Lesbian and Gay Studies Association*, and to Martin Joseph Ponce and Raymond Ricketts for their help with this article. Tanya Agathocleous and Vincent Lankewish took the time to read and offer comments to an embryonic draft of the Neil Bartlett chapter. During a crucial transition period of the project, as I began to immerse myself in the study of book history, Kate Flint, Paula McDowell, and Meredith McGill gave perceptive and enthusiastic responses to an earlier draft of the Allan Barnett chapter; their endorsement convinced me to expand my project to include an introductory chapter on gay readers. At Rutgers, I've had the fortune of enrolling in several dissertation writing seminars, and I appreciate my graduate student colleagues for reading and commenting on my work, and for sharing their work with me. I continue to cherish memories of the dissertation group I shared with Joe Ponce, James Mulholland, and Hillary Chute; those conversations not

only generated ideas and new directions for the project, but also secured for me a genuine sense of belonging within an intellectual community. I'm especially glad that Joe has remained a steadfast friend and an intellectual interlocutor.

I'm reminded on a fairly regular basis about how lucky I am to be part of such a vibrant and collegial community—and I would like to express my gratitude to the people at Rutgers who have enriched my life in different ways during the past dozen years. In addition to the ones already acknowledged above, I'm grateful to the entire faculty of the Department of English for their support and guidance—especially to those who regularly inquired about the progress of my dissertation (you know who you are!), and who, when the time finally arrived, helped me celebrate crossing the finish line. I have benefited from the patience, good humor, and assistance of the Graduate Program Office support staff: my thanks go to John Konvalinka, Nancy Miller, Candace Walcott-Shepherd, and especially to Courtney Borack, Eileen Faherty, and Cheryl Robinson. For the past several years, I have had the good fortune to have Karen Stubaus “on my side.”

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for hiring me in 1998 as her research assistant during her tenure as departmental chairperson, and to Richard Miller for keeping me on when he assumed that post in 2003; it has been an honor and a pleasure to assist them both.

For his instrumental role in advising me on different graduate schools in the U.S., Henry Abelow continues to earn my thanks. Joseph Wittreich and Stuart Curran also deserve my gratitude, not only for encouraging me to attend a conference in 2005 at UCLA celebrating the life and work of Paul Monette, but also for frequently including me in their fabulous dinner parties. I am fortunate to receive indispensable advice from Barry Qualls on a regular basis. By sharing their stories, these men model ways of intergenerational transmission for me.

A number of friends have accompanied me during this venture—and I’m grateful to them for welcoming me into their lives and for making me feel at home in the U.S. during the past dozen years: Tanya Agathocleous, Sarah Alexander, Sean Barry, Sarah Goldfarb, Devin Griffiths, Ricky Haberstroh, Jessica Hedges, Patrick Herron, Aleksey Kasavin, Sarah Kennedy, Vincent Lankewish, Jim Lin, Vanessa Manhire, Raymond Ricketts, Michael Rubenstein, Jason Rudy, and Purvi Shah. I am grateful to my brother, Rudy Lee, and to my sister-in-law, Berney Joseph, for their support and for their hospitality in the spring of 2006. Finally, I would like to acknowledge Winston and Rex, my canine companions for the last decade, and thank them for giving me their unconditional love. I dedicate the following pages to them—and, in particular, to Winston, whose untimely passing coincided, sadly, with the completion of this project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	1
Scenes of Reading: A Preliminary History of Gay Male Readers and Cultural Literacy	
Chapter One	31
Generation Trouble: Reflections on Gay Male Identity, Generational Consciousness, and Social Belonging	
Chapter Two	73
Neil Bartlett's Generation Cues	
Chapter Three	124
AIDS Literacy in Allen Barnett's Short Fiction	
Chapter Four	165
The Ghosts of AIDS	
Epilogue	242
ESL: English as a Shaming Language and the Search for Gay Asian Readers	
Curriculum Vita	267

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Frank Liu, <i>Bert and Ernie</i> (2001)	251
Figure 2: Frank Liu, <i>Taking Me Higher</i> (2001)	251
Figure 3: Frank Liu, <i>Bound</i> (2001)	252
Figure 4: Frank Liu, <i>Mr. Lonely</i> (2001)	252
Figure 5: Frank Liu, <i>Ernie</i> (2001)	253

Introduction

Scenes of Reading:

A Preliminary History of Gay Male Readers and Cultural Literacy

Nobody told us that some of the authors we read in high school were gay, that some of the music we heard was written by gay men. I feel like I was cheated out of a whole culture. At college I was able to get a better connection with it, and when I moved to Washington, D.C., I really saw there was a culture, it wasn't just a bunch of men having sex. We had art, we had history, we had music. It seemed like I found a home. There's so much about gay culture that I like. It's fun, it's creative. It's also catty and vicious, but it's just so colorful. I wish you could inspire young kids who are coming out to look at what's available to them.

—Joe Shulka¹

In “Self-Portrait of a Gay Reader,” an essay that introduces the photographs collected in his book *Particular Voices: Portraits of Gay and Lesbian Writers*, photographer Robert Giard describes a significant scene of reading from his childhood. “When I was ten years old,” Giard recalls, “I looked up the word ‘homosexual’ in the family dictionary. Symbolic act: I’ve been a gay reader ever since.”² This symbolic act can also be read in literal terms, of course, for the child reader, we’re led to infer, looks to the dictionary to locate a definition of himself—or, more precisely, a definition of a category of personhood—that would help him come to terms with his emergent consciousness of his homosexuality. When recollecting this childhood experience as an adult, Giard not only posits an explicit connection between reading and gay identity but,

¹ Joe Shulka, interview by Will Fellows, in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed. Will Fellows (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 299.

² Robert Giard, “Self-Portrait of a Gay Reader,” in *Particular Voices: Portraits of Gay and Lesbian Writers*, ed. Robert Giard (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), xviii.

even more specifically, ascribes his “gayness” to this scene of reading. “I’ve been a gay reader *ever since*,” he contends, thus suggesting the transformative, pedagogical function of reading in helping him recognize and claim his gay identity.³

Giard’s experience is not uncommon among gay male readers, many of whom describe having had similarly transformative reading experiences with a diverse range of texts, and at different stages of their lives. For instance, Joe Shulka, whose oral history is included in Will Fellows’s edited collection *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, recalls “learn[ing] about sex from the *World Book Encyclopedia* in the sixth grade” (299). An entire chapter in sociologist Jeffrey Escoffier’s book, *American Homo: Community and Perversity*, is devoted to the author’s recollections about how reading popular sociology books as an adolescent and young adult in the 1950s and 1960s helped him come to terms with his homosexuality and, subsequently, led him to pursue a career as a sociologist.⁴ “I embarked on a rather prolix process of learning to identify myself as homosexual. I started this process by reading,” Escoffier recalls, “by searching through the available discourses for the knowledge I needed” (80). Literary critic and editor David Bergman likewise attributes his self-acceptance of his queer identity to a singular encounter during childhood with reading Krafft-Ebing’s sexological treatise. He

describes this experience in the introduction to his study, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-*

³ It’s worth clarifying that, unless otherwise noted, I will be using the designation “gay reader” throughout this dissertation to refer to gay male readers specifically. For discussions of lesbian readers, see Christopher Nealon, “The Ambivalence of Lesbian Pulp Fiction,” in *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 141-75; Joan Nestle, “‘I Wanted to Live Long Enough to Kiss a Woman’: The Life of Lesbian Literature,” in *Particular Voices: Portraits of Gay and Lesbian Writers*, ed. Robert Giard (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), xviii-xxv. For literary treatments of lesbian readers and their acquisition of cultural literacy, see Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); and Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1982).

⁴ Jeffrey Escoffier, “Homosexuality and the Sociological Imagination: Hegemonic Discourses, the Circulation of Ideas, and the Process of Reading in the 1950s and 1960s,” in *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 79-98.

Representation in American Literature: “I first came to know about homosexuality from the yellowed pages of a copy of Krafft-Ebing my parents kept in their bookcase. [. . .] I learned to be queer through the legendary work of Krafft-Ebing.”⁵

It’s striking that Giard, Shulka, Escoffier, and Bergman, each draw an explicit connection between the act of reading and the process of *learning* how to become gay. An early study by sociologist Barry M. Dank provides preliminary but revealing evidence of the crucial role of reading in gay men’s lives. In 1971, Dank interviewed fifty-five urban gay men about how they came to recognize themselves as gay: while over half of the surveyed subjects said they came to this realization after socializing with other gay men, 15 percent said their understanding came from their reading.⁶ Referencing Dank’s study in *Gaiety Transfigured*, Bergman points out that, “[i]f one considers how little Americans read, the figure is quite astounding, showing both the importance of literature for developing gay identity, and how rare such discussions have been” (6-7). While the subjects interviewed in Dank’s study did not specify the texts they read, the evidence presented in this introductory chapter will illustrate that gay readers engaged with a range of printed materials. In fact, gay readers’ varied encounters with a diverse set of texts—ranging from reference books to works of literature—underscore novelist Christopher Bram’s assertion that, “[f]or the longest time, gay men [. . .] seemed to be a community of the book, at least on weeknights when we weren’t a community of the bar. With all

⁵ David Bergman, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 5-6. It’s worth noting Bergman’s role as a literary editor in the promotion and publishing of gay male literature. He has edited the last three volumes of the *Men on Men* anthologies, a task he inherited after the death of George Stambolian. Stambolian’s and Bergman’s contributions are matched only by the efforts of editor Michael Denny at St. Martin’s Press.

⁶ Barry M. Dank, “Coming Out in the Gay World,” in *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader*, eds. Peter M. Nardi and Beth E. Schneider (London: Routledge, 1998), 233.

other public forums closed to us, we searched the libraries for titles that would tell us a simple truth: You are not alone.” Bram emphasizes the fact that many gay readers turn to books to assuage their sense of isolation, and in effect to imagine themselves as part of an already existing community of other gay readers. For Bram, the existence of other likeminded individuals is an absolute certainty, leading him to suggest that “[w]e need a history of [gay] readers as well as authors.”⁷



But what, exactly, does the designation “gay reader” signify? And what would a history of gay readership look like? Moreover, what and how do gay readers read? And what are the consequences of what and how they read? These are some of the central questions that will guide my attempt, in this introductory chapter, to historicize the figure of the gay reader, as well as the literate practices he deploys in an effort to acquire, disseminate, and transmit what I will be calling “gay cultural literacy” across the generations.⁸

⁷ Christopher Bram, “Mapping the Territory: Gay Men’s Writing,” in *Particular Voices: Portraits of Gay and Lesbian Writers*, ed. Robert Giard (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), xxvii. In *A Road to Stonewall: Male Homosexuality and Homophobia in English and American Literature, 1750-1969* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), Byrne R. S. Fone likewise argues for the need to excavate a history of homosexual and gay readership. Before the Stonewall Riots of 1969, an event that is considered to have inaugurated the modern gay and lesbian rights movement, Fone explains, “there were no marches, few political initiatives, and only a handful of organized groups. The text is what dominates—books examining aspects of homosexuality in, say, literary history or social structures, written arguments for social equality or novelistic portrayals of homosexual lives. In a very exclusive and particular way the pre-Stonewall history of men who love men is the history of the word, though a word ever yearning to be made flesh” (xvi). For a discussion of the library and gay readerships, see Paulette Rothbauer, “Locating the Library as Place among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Patrons,” in *The Library as Place: History, Community, and Culture*, eds. John E. Buschman and Gloria J. Leckie (Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2006), 101-15.

⁸ In *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), John Guillory offers the useful reminder that “literacy is not a simple matter of knowing how to read

To begin with, we can simply define a gay reader, on a basic level, simply as a gay person who reads—or, conversely, as a reader who happens to be gay or who will eventually accept himself as gay. On another, more complex level, though, a gay reader represents a particular kind of reader—one who encounters, interacts, and responds to texts in different ways than the nongay reader. Unlike other kinds of minoritized subjects, gay readers lack formalized institutions and methods of learning to facilitate their reading habits, their acquisition of knowledge, and their socialization into a community of other gay readers. In other words, gay readers encounter texts in contexts outside the purview or influence of the family, the school, or the church. As book historians have shown, these institutions typically mediate readers' formal and informal education during childhood and adolescence and, in effect, inform their relationship to books, cultural literacy, and print culture.⁹

It's telling that Giard should specify consulting the *family* dictionary rather than just any dictionary—say, the one at school or at the library—and equally telling that Bergman should specify that he consulted a copy of Krafft-Ebing's sexological treatise that was kept in his parents' bookcase. The material texts in these scenes of reading metonymically signify the institution of the family: though parents are absent from the child reader's formative textual encounter, they are present in the sense that they exert force on what counts as permissible knowledge. In other words, finding it impossible to turn to his or her parents or teachers for guidance, the protogay child reader instead turns to books to find information about homosexuality. Indeed, books feature so significantly

and write, but refers to the entire system by which reading and writing are regulated as social practices in a given society" (77).

⁹ For a useful discussion reviewing the debates within the study of the history of books and reading, see Leah Price, "Reading: The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 7 (2004): 303-20.

in the lives of protogay children because, as novelist and critic Michael Bronski explains, “[n]o one is brought up to be gay, [and because] hardly anyone (even now) comes from a ‘gay family.’” Writing specifically about gay male pulp fiction, Bronski notes that “[t]hese books were the maps and the signposts, the etiquette manuals and the foreign-phrase books, for gay men entering the half-hidden world of homosexuality.”¹⁰

Bergman explains the consequences of lacking institutions of learning for protogay children in the following way:

The child who will become gay conceives his sexual self in isolation. I cannot think of another minority that is without cultural support in childhood. Jewish children, for example, from infancy are brought up with a looming sense of their religious identity just as black children from birth develop a sense of racial identity, or baby girls soon find what it means to be female. But gay children—who have a keen sense of being different—often have nothing and no one to show them what the difference consists of, or how one might integrate that difference into a way of life. (5)

Feeling isolated, and often confused about their emerging sexual identity, protogay children and adolescents need to become especially resourceful in order to learn—or, more precisely, in order to teach themselves—how to become gay.

In an essay entitled “Pedagogy and Sexuality,” Joseph Litvak shares an anecdote that echoes Bergman’s claims about the feelings of isolation experienced by protogay children when they begin to recognize their difference from the heterosexual norm. More significantly, for my purposes, Litvak’s anecdote draws an explicit connection between cultural literacy and sexual literacy. Recalling his fascination with his junior high school French teacher, Mr. Boyer, Litvak writes: “It was becoming clear to me [. . .] that acquiring *cultural* literacy—as one is supposed to do in school—meant, to no small

¹⁰ Michael Bronski, introduction to *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2003), 9.

degree, acquiring *sexual* literacy, not learning how to exclude the private from the public but learning how to read the private as it is everywhere obliged to manifest itself in public.”¹¹ Protogay children thus lacked not only recourse to formalized methods of learning how to become gay, but they also lacked access to established networks of communication and systematized modes of transmission to acquire, share, and transmit what I’ll be calling a gay cultural literacy across the generations. Proposing another angle to this problem, David M. Halperin argues that “[t]he process of learning how to be gay continues to include, now as in the days before Stonewall, a process of learning how to re-code heterosexual codes so as to make them serve the purposes of gay self-representation.” Halperin has even gone so far as to offer a course entitled “How to be Gay: Male Homosexuality and Initiation” at the University of Michigan, where he teaches. “The course,” he explains, “attempted to approach male homosexuality from the perspective not of gay identity but of gay identification, not by asking who or what gay men are but by asking what gay men do and what gay men like—what cultural practices they engage in and what cultural objects they connect with.”¹²



The concept of gay cultural literacy, as I am using it, refers to the subject’s ability to recognize and comprehend, from an informed perspective, a body of shared knowledge made up of texts and cultural practices associated with and/or claimed by gay culture—

¹¹ Joseph Litvak, “Pedagogy and Sexuality,” in *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*, eds. George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman (New York: MLA, 1995), 20 (original emphasis).

¹² David M. Halperin, “Homosexuality’s Closet,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 41, no. 1 (2002): 31, 32.

including, but certainly not limited to, books, TV and film, performance, opera, dance, and musical theater.¹³ Judging by the titles produced by Alyson Books, a prominent LGBT trade press, it seems that gay cultural literacy can be acquired, fairly easily, simply by perusing *The Gay Book of Lists* (now in its third edition!) or the many volumes in its newly established The Portable Queer Series, with titles such as: *Homo History: A Compilation of Events that Shook and Shaped the Gay World*; *Out of the Mouths of Queers: A Compilation of Bon Mots, Words of Wisdom and Sassy Sayings*; *A Gay in the Life: A Compilation of Saints and Sinners in Gay History*; and *Secrets and Scandals: A Compilation of Events that Rocked the Gay World*. A cursory glance at these publications reveals their attempt to delineate a history which provides, to borrow from the subtitle of Martin Greif's *The Gay Book of Days, An Evocative Illustrated Who's Who of Who Is, Was, May Have Been, Probably Was, and Almost Certainly Seems to Have Been Gay during the Past 5,000 Years*.

In a more earnest vein, *Out* magazine regularly recommends canonical literature, film, and music to its readers in its "Syllabus: Books," "Syllabus: Film," and "Syllabus: Music" sections, suggesting that gay cultural literacy requires a passing familiarity with, as the recent titles featured in the magazine demonstrate, James Baldwin's *Another Country*, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, John Cromwell's *Caged*, Judy Garland's *Live at Carnegie Hall*, and Nella Larsen's *Passing*.

¹³ For notable discussions of the significance of these artistic practices in gay culture, see Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, "'Ah, Yes, I Remember It Well': Memory and Queer Culture in *Will and Grace*," *Cultural Critique* 56 (2004): 158-88; Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage, 1994); D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and David Román, "Dance Liberation," *Theatre Journal* 55, no.3 (2003): vii-xxiv.

Though Alyson Books and *Out* magazine have usefully attempted to foreground the acquisition of gay cultural literacy as a necessary aspiration for gay subjects, the kinds of cultural literacy I am most interested in extend beyond mere familiarity or competency. As I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, and most specifically in the next chapter, “Generation Trouble,” the subjects who possess gay cultural literacy, as I define it, also possess a critical consciousness of the formation of gay culture and its literary-aesthetic traditions as a historical phenomenon.¹⁴



In his study, *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, historian George Chauncey provides evidence of the relationship between the reading of

¹⁴ In the last three decades, a number of scholars and writers have produced work on gay male literary traditions that, by implication, suggests the centrality of reading in gay men’s lives. These works can be grouped broadly in three general categories: the academic study, the reference guide, and the autobiographical rumination. In the category of the academic study, two early works deserve mention on their own: Roger Austin, *Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977) and Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979). Subsequent titles in this category include: Byrne R. S. Fone, *A Road to Stonewall: Male Homosexuality and Homophobia in English and American Literature, 1750-1969* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995); James Gifford, *Dayneford’s Library: American Homosexual Writing, 1900-1913* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); James Levin, *The Gay Novel in America* (New York: Garland, 1991); Mark Lilly, *Gay Men’s Literature in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1993); Robert McRuer, *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Reed Woodhouse, *Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); and Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Several reference guides provide invaluable information, both general and focused on specific genres: Michael Bronski, ed., *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2003); Mark Mitchell and David Leavitt, eds., *Pages Passed from Hand to Hand: The Hidden Tradition of Homosexual Literature in English from 1748 to 1914* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); and Anthony Slide, *Lost Gay Novels: A Reference Guide to Fifty Works from the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harrington Park, 2003). In the category of the autobiographical rumination, see Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988); Colm Tóibín, *Love in a Dark Time: And Other Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature* (New York, Scribner, 2001); and Rick Whitaker, *The First Time I Met Frank O’Hara: Reading Gay American Writers* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003).

texts and the subsequent oral transmission of cultural literacy as a form of folkloric knowledge in New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

According to Chauncey, “the project of historical reclamation was a difficult one for gay men,” in large measure because

the history of homosexuality was omitted in formal history instruction and had no place in the family-centered oral traditions available to other disenfranchised groups. Having no access to a formal body of scholarship, gay men needed to invent—and constantly reinvent—a tradition on the basis of individual and idiosyncratic readings of texts. They also had to embed its transmission in the day-to-day social organization of their world. The folklore was typically passed on in bars and at cocktail parties, from friend to friend, from lover to lover, and from older men serving as mentors to younger men just beginning to identify themselves as gay.¹⁵

Lacking formal institutions for acquiring and transmitting knowledge, homosexual readers have had to be especially resourceful and persistent in their search for—and in their transmission of—textual representations. In the process, they have had to develop and deploy particular reading strategies—such as decoding hidden or implicit references in texts—not only to locate positive portrayals that would affirm their identity, or in some cases to guarantee their safety, but also to imagine a community of other gay men and secure their own membership within that community. According to Chauncey, homosexual readers during the 1920s and 1930s “learned to read the paper for news of gay men murdered by the tough young men they had picked up,” as well as learned to decode “carefully coded classified ads in newspapers and magazines in order to contact other gay men” (287-88). Through their reading, gay readers succeeded in imagining themselves within a specific interpretive community and thus gaining their membership within a social collectivity.

¹⁵ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 283.

The yearning for social membership within a reading community occurs not only during childhood or adolescence, but also, as Chauncey's examples imply, during adulthood. One of the most curious and poignant examples I've come across in my research concerns a man named Harry Beckner, whose oral history also appears in *Farm Boys*. "In the sixties," Beckner recalls, "*Life* magazine had a story on the gay life of San Francisco. It showed guys leaning up against lightposts and trees, waiting to get a trick. I dang near wore it out reading it, thinking oh god, I wish I was in San Francisco."¹⁶ The article in question, entitled "Homosexuality in America: The 'Gay' World Takes to the City Streets," was written by Paul Welch and Ernest Havemann, and appeared in the June 26, 1964, issue of *Life*. According to Martin Meeker, the *Life* magazine article was "[r]ecognized by homophile activists at the time and by historians subsequently as a watershed event in the representation of homosexuality in the mass media," and its publication "at once symbolized the end of the conspiracy of silence and marked a real milestone in the content and scope of media coverage about the subject."¹⁷ For someone like Beckner, who was living in rural Nebraska, "Homosexuality in America" offered an aspirational lifeline to an alternate world. Beckner's recollection of reading this article highlights the profound, and painfully poignant, ways in which readers aspire to gain

¹⁶ Harry Beckner, interview by Will Fellows, in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed. Will Fellows (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 68.

¹⁷ Martin Meeker, "Publicizing the Gay Life," in *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 152. In *Growing Up Before Stonewall: Life Stories of Some Gay Men* (London: Routledge, 1994), Peter M. Nardi, David Sanders, and Judd Marmor also note the significance of this *Life* magazine article: Although it contained "images, stereotypes, and the media's interpretation of gay life in America in the early 1960s," "the appearance of this article and other newspaper accounts had the effect of introducing the existence of a gay subculture to many, both gay and straight, who had not heard of it. A more public view of gay life was occurring, contributing to an evolving sense of self and of community" (12).

social membership within a community of other gay men through their reading experiences.

The readers I've been discussing thus far have underscored how they learned about homosexuality from their encounters with diverse non-literary texts—ranging from dictionaries and other reference books to popular periodicals and newspapers. Meanwhile, other readers describe equally transformational encounters with specifically literary texts. In “Out of the Closet, on to the Bookshelf,” an article published in *The New York Times Magazine* in June 1991 to commemorate “Gay Book Month,” esteemed author Edmund White reflects: “As a young teenager, I looked desperately for things to read that might excite me or assure me I wasn’t the only one, that might confirm an identity I was unhappily piecing together.” Yet, for the adolescent White, growing up in the 1950s in Evanston, Illinois, all that was available to him at the public library was “Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (which suggested that homosexuality was fetid, platonic and death-dealing).” Only a decade later, after graduating from college, was he “lucky enough to discover *A Single Man* by Christopher Isherwood,” a novel in which “[t]he protagonist [. . .] is not presented as damned in ways supposedly peculiar to homosexuals.”¹⁸

The contrast between White’s reading experiences during adolescence and adulthood demonstrate that it’s impossible to anticipate the consequences of our reading practices. It’s partially true that the gay reader, as Wayne Koestenbaum argues, “reads resistantly for inscriptions of his condition, for texts that will confirm a social and private

¹⁸ Edmund White, “Out of the Closet, on to the Bookshelf,” in *The Burning Library: Essays*, ed. David Bergman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 275. For another account of a protogay child reader’s encounter with literature, see Ed Cohen, “Constructing Gender,” in *The Columbia History of the Novel*, ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press), 542-557.

identity founded on a desire for other men—an urge strong enough that it seems a vocation and defines him and his kind as a separate world.”¹⁹ At the same time, however, childhood or adolescent reading experiences, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us, do not always “begin from or move toward sites of same-sex, interpersonal eroticism,” for the protogay child or adolescent reader’s “sense of personal queerness may or may not (*yet?*) have resolved into a sexual specificity of proscribed object choice, aim, site, or identification. Such a child [or adolescent]—if she reads at all—is reading for important news about herself, without knowing what form that news will take; with only the patchiest familiarity with its codes; without, even, more than hungrily hypothesizing to what questions this news may proffer an answer.”²⁰

Through his encounters with these literary texts, White is introduced to contradictory portrayals of homosexuality and learns to become not only a gay reader but, more specifically, a *discerning* gay reader. Because the majority of writing produced prior to the gay liberation movement of the 1970s and the subsequent burgeoning of gay and AIDS literature in the 1980s and 1990s often contained portraits of unrequited homosexual love and unfulfilled gay lives, such books played a paradoxical role in the construction of gay selfhood. As Bergman points out: “On the one hand, such literature was a principal way gay men came to understand themselves. On the other hand, gay authors’ public statements were written in a language at once guarded and false, screening out what was particularly good about gay life even as it tried to make that life

¹⁹ Wayne Koestenbaum, “Wilde’s Hard Labor and the Birth of Gay Reading,” in *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, eds. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden (New York: Routledge, 1990), 176-77.

²⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 2-3 (original emphasis).

comprehensible and acceptable to a heterosexual readership” (8). Thus, gay readers’ ability to decode, discern, and differentiate the content of texts informs and shapes their self-education *as* gay readers.

Autodidacticism and self-learning are part and parcel of gay readers’ education, their acquisition of cultural literacy, and their understanding of homosexuality. Giard, a self-proclaimed “autodidact” (xv), addresses this issue explicitly in “Self-Portrait of a Gay Reader.” “I have always turned to books, seeking through them to gain perspective on experience,” he confides, before going on to offer the following admission:

There were of course the classics which formed a part of my general education—books by Whitman and Cather, Stein and Proust, Wilde, Collette, Forster, Gide, and Mann. But the first books which in the sixties I deliberately sought out because I knew them to be written with specifically gay content or by homosexuals were by Vidal, Baldwin, Isherwood, Matt Crowley, and Isabel Miller. These were followed in the early seventies by novels by Rita Mae Brown and Patricia Nell Warren. (xiii)

Like White, Giard teaches himself to become a discerning gay reader, one able to recognize and differentiate between the texts he was taught at school as part of his “general education” and those he “deliberately sought out” for their “gay content.”

Unlike these others, Robert Drake tells a different kind of story about becoming a gay reader, admitting that he came to appreciate the gay literature he had discovered on his own *only after* having been introduced to, and taught the significance of, the literary canon of Western civilization at St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland, where he completed his master’s degree. In the introduction to his anthology, *The Gay Canon: Great Books Every Gay Man Should Read*, Drake writes:

I had been an avid reader all my life, but in the late 1970s and early 80s, as an increasingly miserable student, I channeled my teenage energy away from intellectual pursuits and into figuring out my sexuality. A part of this self-determination involved the devouring of literature written by or about gay men,

and I think I hit all the high notes of the period: *Dancer from the Dance*, *Faggots*, *A Boy's Own Story*, etc. But it all jumbled up inside me; I had no structure through which I might better understand the works in relation to each other, in relation to new things I read. Or more important, in relation to my life, the meaningful life I was trying to forge and comprehend.²¹

Unlike the autodidact Giard, Drake benefits from the scenes of learning and instruction afforded by graduate school. "As the first semester [at St. John's] wore on," he continues, "I found myself referring to texts from one class during discussions in another class. Suddenly, I understood context. I began to see patterns emerging, traces of influence shared among Great Works. And as a gay man, as a writer, I began to seek *my* Great Books. *My* cultural challenges" (xix; original emphases). In assembling *The Gay Canon*, Drake seeks to transmit his own understanding of literary traditions in a volume that "provide[s] gay readers in general with a user-friendly tool through which to understand and consider their culture" (xx). In addition to including a diverse set of authors and texts ranging from Homer and Aristotle to Gore Vidal and Paul Monette, Drake concludes the volume with a chapter on "How to Use This Book" (xxiii-xxx) and an appendix with a suggested schedule for readers' groups (469-74).



In assembling a set of texts into his volume, Drake seeks to create and transmit what he considers to be "*the* gay canon." Needless to say, he is not the first to have yielded to such a desire, for homosexual and gay readers have sought, since the eighteenth century, to locate textual representations of male-male desire and, in the

²¹ Robert Drake, *The Gay Canon: Great Books Every Gay Man Should Read* (New York: Anchor, 1998), xviii-xix.

process, to invent a literary-aesthetic tradition. According to Mark Mitchell and David Leavitt in the introduction to their anthology, *Pages Passed from Hand to Hand: The Hidden Tradition of Homosexual Literature in English from 1748 to 1914*:

Since the eighteenth century, men who were sexually attracted to other men—sodomites, pederasts, urnings, Uranians, similisexualists, queers—have constituted a distinct and numerous reading class. Indeed, long before many bookstores in the English-speaking world sponsored ‘gay and lesbian studies’ sections, such readers displayed an astonishing tenacity in locating those poems, stories, novels, essays, and even individual sentences in which references to homosexuality might be found. [. . .] The merest allusion could be enough to clue the reader: to Hadrian and Antinoüs, to David and Jonathan [. . .]. And the works in which such content lay—nascent, unbudded—these readers passed on to one another. Word-of-mouth dissemination: *read this*.²²

Mitchell and Leavitt make an appropriate conflation between the circulation of texts and the diffusion of ideas through oral transmission and the invitation to “read.” Thus, although some homosexual and gay readers—such as Harry Beckner and his encounter with *Life* magazine, or Edmund White and his desire to find literary representations in Mann and Isherwood—longed for affiliation with other likeminded readers, Mitchell and Leavitt’s description reminds us that other homosexual and gay readers were *already* part of a “distinct and numerous reading class.” In other words, such readers were already familiar with other men to whom they could invite to read particular texts. The oral invitation to “read this” suggests a fundamental face-to-face interaction between (at least) two persons, that is, two fellow-readers. Such interactions make material and concretize for the interlocutor/reader the physical existence of other readers he had previously only imagined. Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

²² Mark Mitchell and David Leavitt, introduction to *Pages Passed from Hand to Hand: The Hidden Tradition of Homosexual Literature in English from 1748 to 1914* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), xiv (original emphasis). For discussions of the invention of traditions, see the essays collected in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

(1890/1891) provides perhaps one of the best known fictional examples of such an exchange; I'm thinking especially of Wilde's description of Lord Henry Wotton giving the "yellow book" to Dorian to read (end of Chapter 10) and its subsequent effect on the protagonist (beginning of Chapter 11).

Drake's *The Gay Canon* and Mitchell and Leavitt's *Pages Passed from Hand to Hand* are anthologies that hark back to *Ioläus: An Anthology of Friendship* (1902), edited and compiled by sexologist Edward Carpenter. Carpenter's volume played an essential role in establishing and educating readers about a homosexual literary-aesthetic tradition. In *Ioläus*—a publication that booksellers reportedly named "the bugger's bible" (Chauncey 284)—Carpenter included selections by Augustine, Shakespeare, Whitman, Goethe, Tennyson, and Byron, as well as selections from Classical literature. The anthology's five sections were entitled "Friendship Customs in the Pagan and Early World," "The Place of Friendship in Greek Life and Thought," "Poetry of Friendship among Greeks and Romans," "Friendship in Early Christian and Medieval Times," and "The Renaissance and Modern Times." According to Chauncey, "[t]he anthology's depiction of the nobility of male affection and love helped readers affirm their own love for men by encouraging them to identify it—and themselves—as part of an honorable tradition" (284). But the success of anthologies such as *Ioläus* extends beyond providing readers with a list of texts or modes of identification. As literary critic Gregory Woods points out, "anthologies have played a central role in the establishing of canons of homosexual literature," and "since the late nineteenth century they have actually provided

homosexual readers with a broad kind of gay cultural education [. . .]. Such collections furnished extracts from a complete curriculum for the diligent, homosexual autodidact.”²³

One of the most memorable examples illustrating the influence of Carpenter’s anthology occurs in an exchange between Howard University philosophy professor Alain Locke and Countee Cullen, to whom he served as a mentor. Locke verbally recommended *Ioläus* to Cullen soon after they met (Chauncey 284). In a letter to Locke, Cullen shares his reading experience of the anthology and his gratitude to Locke:

I secured Carpenter’s “Ioläus” from the library. I read it through at one sitting, and steeped myself in its charming and comprehending atmosphere. It opened up for me soul windows which had been closed; it threw a noble and evident light on what I had begun to believe, because of what the world believes, ignoble and unnatural. I loved myself in it, and thanked you a thousand times as many delightful examples appeared, for recommending it to me.²⁴

The exchange between Locke and Cullen demonstrates the interrelations between oral and written forms of transmission, as well as the transmission of knowledge and traditions across generations.

But such a tradition as it is delineated in *Ioläus* exists only as a recent invention on the part of Carpenter’s devising, and whose existence is “made real” by virtue of its being read and accepted as an already existing and long-standing tradition. That is to say, in its invention of a literary-aesthetic tradition, Carpenter’s anthology not only offers to its readers particular ways of reading (i.e., of decoding or interpreting “friendship” as potentially charged with homosexual desire), but also promotes, in effect, a particular kind of gay cultural literacy. Indeed, as Mitchell and Leavitt rightly insist, *Ioläus* “is less

²³ Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 7.

²⁴ Countee Cullen to Alain Locke, 3 March 1923, as qtd. in Alden Reimonenq, “Countee Cullen’s Uranian ‘Soul Windows,’” *Journal of Homosexuality* 26 (1993): 144.

a collection of homosexually themed writing than of homosexually themed reading” (xiii).



Homosexual and gay readers learned about their aesthetic-literary tradition not only through their encounters with anthologies, but also through encounters with novels and short stories containing lists of authors and texts. A number of critics reference an obscure short story by Edward Irenaeus Prime-Stevenson entitled “Out of the Sun,” published via an English vanity press in Italy in 1913, and reprinted in Mitchell and Leavitt’s *Pages Passed from Hand to Hand*. The short story’s protagonist has spent his entire life accumulating an eclectic collection of books that contain implicit and explicit references to homosexuality. The passage is worth quoting at length:

Ah, his books! The library of almost every man of like making-up, whose life has been largely solitary, so concentrated from the inside, is companioned from youth up by innermost literary sympathies of his type. Dayneford now stood before his bookcase, reading over mechanically the titles of a special group of volumes—mostly small ones. They were crowded into a few lower shelves, as if they sought to avoid other literary society, to keep themselves to themselves, to shun all unsympathetic observation. Tibullus, Propertius and the Greek Antologists [*sic*] pressed against Al Nafsaweh and Chakani and Hafiz. A little further along stood Shakespeare’s Sonnets, and those by Buonarrotti; along with Tennyson’s “In Memoriam,” Woodberry’s “The North-Shore Watch,” and Walt Whitman. Back of Platen’s bulky “Tagebuch” lay his poems. Next to them came Wilbrandt’s “Fridolilns Heimliche Ehe,” beside Rachilde’s “Les Hors-Nature;” then Pernauhm’s “Die Infamen,” Emil Vacano’s “Humbug,” and a group of psychologic works by Krafft-Ebing and Ellis and Moll. There was a thin book in which were bound together, in a richly decorated arabesque cover, some six or seven stories from Mardrus’ French translation of “The Thousand Nights And A Night”—remorsely separated from their original companions. On a lower shelf, rested David Christie Murray’s “Val Strange” and one or two other old novels; along with Dickens’ “David Copperfield,” the anonymous “Tim,” and Vachell’s

“The Hill,” companioned by Mayne’s “Intersexes,” “Imre” and “Sebastian au Plus Bel Age.”²⁵

What is most striking about this list, to my mind, is its transhistorical, transnational, and multigeneric scope. Indeed, as James Gifford argues in his study, *Dayneford’s Library: American Homosexual Writing, 1900-1913*, the list represents “a most singular mine of information into the reading habits of turn-of-the-century homosexuals, as well as the discourses available to them in literature.”²⁶ Moreover, it comes as no surprise that “Dayneford’s library,” as Mitchell and Leavitt point out, “contains some of the same volumes that Carpenter excerpted in *Ioläus*”: “Dayneford’s library, like Carpenter’s, has an ideology. For him, the quasi-scholarly excision of literary fragments—taking them literally out of context—is not so much a trick as a necessary, if ruthless, step in the effort to invent, through reading, a *new* context in which homosexual bonds, instead of being vilified, are glorified” (xv; original emphasis). Homosexual and gay authors whose works include lists of authors and texts are therefore deploying the twin strategies of decontextualization and recontextualization for their readers. That is to say, they deliberately situate disparate texts within a “unified” context to invent a homosexual literary-aesthetic tradition. Thus active invention becomes a literate practice that accompanies acts of writing and reading and the acquisition of gay cultural literacy.

Another notable literary example of a list occurs in Richard Meeker’s novel, *Better Angel*, published in 1933, and considered by many to be the first novel published in the United States to offer a positive portrayal of male homosexuality. When asked by

²⁵ Edward Irenaeus Prime-Stevenson, “Out of the Sun” (1913), in *Pages Passed from Hand to Hand: The Hidden Tradition of Homosexual Literature in English from 1748 to 1914*, eds. Mark Mitchell and David Leavitt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 395-396.

²⁶ James Gifford, *Dayneford’s Library: American Homosexual Writing, 1900-1913* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 3.

Kurt Gray, the novel's protagonist, about the novel he is writing, David, his special friend, explains:

“Oh, it sounds high-hat, but it's got to be a sort of vindication of our kind of loving, you see. A vindication to the world. Nobody's ever done it, really. Shakespeare's sonnets are, gloriously, but nobody seems to dare admit it. The professors, the fools, get all tangled up in explaining what's as obvious as two plus two. Shakespeare loved the boy actor, and he celebrated his love in the finest, cleanest, highest poetry of his whole career, and did it without shame. And now they manufacture all sorts of shifts and silly dodges to avoid calling Shakespeare an invert. O hell! All I want is to show people we're not monsters any more than Shakespeare was, that's all. Oh, I know the continentals have had a hand in it—Proust, and Mann, and Gide, and Wedekind; but it's America I want in my book—New York and Philadelphia and Hollywood and St. Louis and New Haven and all the rest.”²⁷

David aspires to write a novel of male same-sex desire in America that would establish and reclaim a literary-aesthetic tradition that has been denied to him and other homosexual readers. Such a literary project of “vindication to the world” would debunk the lessons that had been taught by “[t]he professors, the fools.” Whereas Meeker's protagonist seeks to write the definitive American novel centering on same-sex male desire, the protagonist of Blair Niles's 1931 novel, *Strange Brother*, is described to have discovered a set of texts to read, including Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Carpenter's *Coming of Age*, Plato's *Symposium*, and Ellis's *Psychology of Sex* volumes. Niles further identified Caesar, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, and James I of England, among other historical figures, as homosexual (Chauncey 285; Norton 224). By including such lists in her novel, Niles in effect teaches readers of *Strange Brother* to seek out these authors and texts for themselves. “The regular appearance of such comments in the novels of the 1930s,” Chauncey argues, “suggests both the currency of such ideas among gay intellectuals and their allies and their

²⁷ Richard Meeker, *Better Angel* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 228.

determination to disseminate them among gay readers” (285). Whether cited in novels or short stories, or collected in anthologies, such lists of homosexual authors and texts perform a double function: they create a literary-aesthetic and historical tradition at the same time that they educate readers with that very tradition and thus shore up that project of creating tradition.

The practice of listing functions in ways that go beyond the creation of a homosexual literary-aesthetic tradition. In works produced in response to the AIDS epidemic, for example, the list has come to be used, additionally, as a practice for political critique. Such a practice, I would argue, plays an important role in the cultivation and circulation of gay cultural literacy and AIDS literacy. In *The Normal Heart* (1985), Larry Kramer’s thinly veiled autobiographical play about the early years of the AIDS epidemic, the play’s narrator, Ned Weeks, delivers the following speech when he learns from a friend that he has been removed from the Board of Directors of the play’s fictional version of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis:

I belong to a culture that includes Proust, Henry James, Tchaikovsky, Cole Porter, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Christopher Marlowe, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Tennessee Williams, Byron, E. M. Forster, Lorca, Auden, Francis Bacon, James Baldwin, Harry Stack Sullivan, John Maynard Keynes, Dag Hammarskjöld. [. . .] These were not invisible men.²⁸

Within the historical context of the play’s setting and actions, the inclusion of this list serves to establish and reinforce its protagonist’s sense of cultural belonging during a perilous historical moment when the continuity of gay culture was under threat of becoming extinct due to the sheer number of AIDS-related deaths. And in *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, David Wojnarowicz includes a list in a chapter

²⁸ Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart* (New York: New American Library, 1985), 114.

entitled “The Seven Deadly Sins Fact Sheet.” In it, he names the seven men who, as a consequence of their homophobic neglect, contributed to the spread of AIDS: New York City mayor Edward Koch; Cardinal John O’Connor of the Archdiocese of New York; William Dannemeyer, the Republican Representative from California; New York City Health Commissioner Stephen Joseph; Jesse Helms, the Republican Senator from North Carolina; New York Senator Alfonse D’Amato; and FDA Commissioner Frank Young. In providing this list, Wojnarowicz educates his readers with “AIDS literacy,” by which I mean to indicate a body of knowledge that combines a familiarity with biomedical discourse, an awareness of cultural debates, and a sensitivity to how sexual beings negotiate desire and risk. In a later chapter on Allan Barnett, I will elaborate on the idea of AIDS literacy. For the remainder of this chapter, though, I would like to examine the ways in which reading and literacy figure in the lives of gay men since the advent of the AIDS epidemic.



The story of gay men and the AIDS epidemic is, among other things, a story about the mediation of identity through print and the representation of identity in print. In 1981, the gay publication the *New York Native* was the first to report, in its May 18th edition, an article about what would later be known as AIDS. A couple of weeks later, the June 5th edition of the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, published by the Centers for Disease Control, contained a piece reporting a bizarre outbreak of pneumonia in five otherwise healthy gay men. A month later, on Friday, July 3rd, buried in the back of its

national section, on page A20, the *New York Times* ran a column-length story, entitled “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.”

Norman Rene’s 1990 film *Longtime Companion*, the first mainstream movie to depict the AIDS epidemic and its impact on gay male culture, in fact opens with several intercutting scenes of reading, in which its characters, located in both Manhattan and the Fire Island Pines, are shown calling each other on the phone to discuss an article about the strange “gay cancer” that had been reported in that day’s *New York Times*. The opening scenes of *Longtime Companion* foreground at least two main issues about gay male readers and their reading habits at the very start of the epidemic. First, reading is portrayed in the film not as a solitary activity but, rather, as a collective endeavor among friends (that involves reading out loud, listening, and debating). Second, and equally importantly, reading is inextricably linked to the oral transmission of knowledge and ideas and thus to the formation of epistemological and folkloric discourses. During the height of the epidemic, from 1981 to 1996, reading became a communal enterprise that involved the search for accurate treatment information, informed media representation, the decoding of obituaries, and the sharing of information through oral transmission. Reading became a practice of everyday life with life-and-death consequences.²⁹

²⁹ Other evidence confirms that this *Times* article indeed caused quite a sensation. In an oral history project recounting the AIDS crisis in San Francisco, a man named Peter Groubert recalls: “I first heard about this strange affliction that affected homosexuals by reading the newspaper on that April [*sic*] day in 1981 when it first came out in the *New York Times*. The [*San Francisco*] *Chronicle* picked it up off the AP and then they printed it in our paper. They talked about this cluster of homosexuals that came down with this strange disease and it kind of said that they weren’t sure how it was spread. The article said that they didn’t think it was sexually transmitted, but they were not sure. It definitely caught my attention.” Although Groubert misremembers the actual date of the *New York Times* article, he nonetheless remembers that the news of a “strange disease” affecting homosexuals “definitely caught [his] attention.” Groubert’s recollections are quoted in Benjamin Helm Shepard, *White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic* (London: Cassell, 1997), 58. David Román provides a very lucid reading of this *New York Times* article and its textual placement next to an ad celebrating the 4th of July weekend. See his *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), especially pp. 1-7. For a history of the mainstream media’s reporting of the AIDS epidemic, see Randy

In an essay entitled “Reading and Writing,” novelist Andrew Holleran sums up how AIDS has transformed gay men’s engagement with these literate practices. “As admirable as the writing or publishing of books about AIDS may be,” he observes, “I really don’t know who reads them with pleasure—because I suspect there is one thing and one thing only everyone wants to read, and that is the headline CURE FOUND.”³⁰ Holleran fears that reading has the potential to be perceived as a superfluous activity during the AIDS crisis, not only because the act itself cannot furnish a cure, but also because “the only work that mattered was that of the men organizing social services, taking care of friends, [and] trying to find a microbiological solution to a microbiological horror” (15). Yet, despite his reservation, Holleran continues to integrate reading in his life and advocates that others do so as well. He is motivated to read in order to gain vital new information and, in effect, to acquire ever more advanced forms of AIDS literacy. He also reads in order to explore the interrelationship between AIDS literacy and cultural literacy. In his attempt to come to terms with the devastating consequences of the AIDS crisis, Holleran confides that he read, and reread, among other texts, Boccaccio’s account of the Black Death in *The Decameron* and Henry James’s story of truncated life and untimely death in *The Golden Bowl* (15, 16). Finally, Holleran is compelled to read because he understands that the bulk of the writing on AIDS “is addressed to two sorts of people: those with AIDS and those caring for people with AIDS,” and that “the line between these categories is a thin and shifting one, and merely the passage of time can

Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987); and James Kinsella, *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

³⁰ Andrew Holleran, “Reading and Writing,” in *Ground Zero* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 12.

put one on the other side of it” (11). In the end, Holleran makes no secret of his deep ambivalence about writing during the early years of the crisis: “so now the act of writing seemed of no help whatsoever, for a simple reason: Writing could not produce a cure. That was all that mattered and all that anyone wanted. One couldn’t, therefore, write about It—and yet one couldn’t not” (16).

Since the consolidation of contemporary gay male literature in the U.S. in the late 1970s, and the subsequent emergence of AIDS literature in the 1980s and early 1990s, reading has come to play an increasingly dominant and significant role in the lives of gay men and, as numerous critics have illustrated, in the constitution of gay male culture. In fact, one could argue that one “positive” result of the AIDS crisis has been the sheer explosion in gay publishing during the 1980s to early 1990s that contributed both to sustaining gay culture and to cultivating AIDS literacy.

In an essay entitled “AIDS Writing and the Creation of a Gay Culture,” Michael Denneny, the editor at St. Martin’s Press, argues that the “body of work defining the face of AIDS” and “limning it in our public and collective imagination” signifies “more than a literary accomplishment.” As “individual acts of language performed in the full light of the community’s crisis,” these literary texts, Denneny suggests, constitute “the primary discourses of AIDS, a public dialogue that articulates the experience of the community and constitutes, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the creation of a culture.”³¹ One effect of

³¹ Michael Denneny, “AIDS Writing and the Creation of a Gay Culture,” in *Confronting AIDS through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation*, ed. Judith Laurence Pastore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 43. For a general study on the sociology of reading and storytelling, see Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995). According to Plummer, there exists “a parallel development between the biographical history of a gay identity and the social history of a gay culture. Both the development of a gay personhood and a gay culture proceed incrementally, in tandem and feeding upon each other. As gay persons create [through their textual encounters] a gay culture cluttered with stories of gay life, gay history and gay politics, so that very culture

the AIDS epidemic, then, has been the explosion in gay publishing and the multiplication of titles and sites for the creation, and the continuation, of gay culture. In order to appreciate more fully the extent to which AIDS literature functions as primary discourses—and, I would add, as aesthetic objects—it is necessary to examine the interrelationship between AIDS literacy and cultural literacy.³²



In the remainder of this dissertation, I will provide ample evidence demonstrating how gay men become acculturated to gay male culture, literature, and history through their encounters with texts. In Chapter One, “Generation Trouble,” I show that the debate surrounding the so-called “gay generation gap” results not only from older and younger gay men’s respective preferences for the terms “gay” and “queer,” but, more strikingly,

helps to define a reality that makes gay personhood tighter and ever more plausible. And this in turn strengthens the culture and the politics” (87; original emphases).

³² I am suggesting approaching AIDS literature as aesthetic objects in part to redress the critical neglect of this writing in literary studies and, more pointedly, to address Denny’s suggestion that, because of the circumstances that produced this archive, AIDS writing cannot be read simply for aesthetic reasons. Denny argues that “the writers’ intention” and “the unique situation in which the act of writing occurs” are two reasons that make AIDS writing different from “other literary production in our time.” He goes so far as to propose that there is “no good parallel for this [kind of writing] in literary history.” “As far as I know,” he elaborates, “most of the writing done about the Holocaust was published after 1945, when the nightmare was over in reality and began to haunt the imagination. And while the closest parallel might be the poetry that came out of the trenches in the first World War, the bulk of that writing was published, reviewed and read after the war; whereas this AIDS writing is not only being produced in the trenches, as it were, but is being published, read by its public and evaluated by the critics in the midst of the crisis. It is as if Sassoon’s poetry were being mimeographed in the trenches and distributed to be read by men under fire—the immediacy of these circumstances precludes the possibility of this being a merely aesthetic enterprise. The aesthetic requires distance and the distance is not available, not to the writer, not to the reader” (46). More than two decades have since passed since the publication of Denny’s essay and the bulk of the AIDS writing it reviews. This temporal distance—as well as the fact that AIDS consciousness is fast diminishing—makes it all the more necessary to revisit and reread AIDS writing for both its politics and its aesthetics. In Chapter Four, “The Ghosts of AIDS,” I will return to Denny’s argument and suggest the aesthetic connections between AIDS literature and the slave narrative, a genre of testimonial writing produced during an earlier period of historical trauma.

from their very different understandings of the generation concept itself. The chapter examines the competing deployments of generational categories in essays that have appeared in academic and popular periodicals in the last fifteen years, including Arnie Kantrowitz's "Letter to the Queer Generation," Justin Chin's "Q-Punk Grammar," Steve Weinstein's "The Gay Generation Gap," and Mike Glatze and Benjie Nycum's "Youthquake." Reframing the problem of generation in relation to the notion of literacy foregrounds the role of language in determining not only gay men's vocabularies of self-definition but also their sense of social belonging.

In Chapter Two, I consider the work of British playwright, novelist, and performance artist Neil Bartlett. "Neil Bartlett's Generation Cues" argues that Bartlett at once privileges and challenges the role of reading in the constitution of gay male identity. While Bartlett recognizes that print-based archives provide evidence of a queer literary-aesthetic tradition, he also pays attention to the possibility that there might have been a language spoken between men in the past, one that, though unrecorded, might have been successfully transmitted orally across the generations. Bartlett probes the interimplications between print-based and oral-based cultural literacies in his experimental narrative *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*, as well as in his performance pieces, *Night After Night* and *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*.

The debate over the "gay generation gap" suggests how popular periodicals mediate the formation and negotiation of gay male identities. I consider yet another example of this in Chapter Three, "AIDS Literacy in Allen Barnett's Short Fiction." In two short stories, "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" and "The *Times* As It Knows Us," Barnett represents reading—especially the reading of AIDS obituaries—as an everyday, habitual

practice that enables gay men to confront, cope with, and commemorate the losses wrought by HIV and AIDS. These stories juxtapose a particular kind of high-cultural literacy, made evident by their numerous literary and philosophical allusions, with what I term as “AIDS literacy,” a new body of knowledge that combines familiarity with biomedical discourse, awareness of cultural debates and prejudices, and sensitivity to the negotiation of risk, desire, and behavior.

In Chapter Four, “The Ghosts of AIDS,” I turn my attention to the prevalence of ghosts in AIDS narratives as a way to thematize and create a literary-aesthetic tradition. I interpret a wide-ranging set of texts that contain representations of gay men who, in the process of mourning and remembering their loved ones, end up conjuring, seeing, or being visited by their ghosts. The presence of ghosts in AIDS narratives ranges across genres and media: Paul Monette’s autobiography *Becoming a Man*, Mark Doty’s memoir *Heaven’s Coast*, Edmund White’s short story “An Oracle,” Norman René’s film *Longtime Companion*, and Steve Kammon’s short story “A Ghost Story.” These narratives highlight the enormous pressures AIDS exerts on the art of storytelling, and in the process foreground the need to develop new ways of reading. I suggest that these texts invite readers to cultivate a “spectral literacy,” one that would lead to the recognition that ghosts in AIDS narratives serve both as literal reminders of the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic and as metaphors for alternative forms of memory roused by grief, mourning, and the determination to forge a connection between present and past generations.

I conclude my dissertation with an epilogue, “ESL: English as a Shaming Language and the Search for Gay Asian Readers.” In it, I present a personal critical

reflection on my own literacy narrative and discuss the role of reading in helping me negotiate my sexual and racial identity. I reminisce about my learning of the English language as an ESL student, and juxtapose those scenes of reading with my later encounters with the work of gay authors and artists of Chinese descent, such as Justin Chin and Frank Liu. The epilogue's discussion of the figure of the gay *Asian* reader synthesizes, but also complicates, some of the dissertation's earlier arguments concerning the acquisition and transmission of gay cultural literacy.

Chapter One

Generation Trouble: Reflections on Gay Male Identity, Generational Consciousness, and Social Belonging¹

[Generation's] important development has been towards social and historical uses, beyond the specific biological reference.

—Raymond Williams²

The phenomenon of generations is one of the basic factors contributing to the genesis of the dynamic of historical development.

—Karl Mannheim³

[T]o ask ourselves to which generation we belong is, in large measure, to ask *who* we are.

—Julián Marías⁴

“Is There a Gay Generation Gap?” muses *Out* magazine in a headline on the cover of its October 2001 issue. What at first appears as a genuine question, however, turns out to be merely rhetorical. For the headline leads to two articles that differ not only in focus, but, more revealingly, in their *uses* of the generation concept. In “Youthquake,” Mike

¹ A version of this chapter has been published in *torquere: Journal of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Studies Association* 4-5 (2002/2003): 1-37.

² Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 140.

³ Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” in *From Karl Mannheim*, ed. Kurt Wolff (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993), 395.

⁴ Julián Marías, *Generations: A Historical Method*, trans. Harold C. Raley (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1970), 106 (original emphasis).

Glatze and Benjie Nycum approach the concept as a demographic term to consider the emotional and physical isolation of gay youths in rural areas in the U.S. and Canada. In “The Gay Generation Gap,” Steve Weinstein draws upon the concept’s genealogical dimension to consider the absence of historical memory in urban gay male culture.⁵ The difference between the authors’ perspectives is more than a matter of geography; by their own admissions, it is also a matter of age: “we’re in our 20s ourselves,” admit Glatze and Nycum (54); “I just turned 49,” confesses Weinstein (91). Juxtaposing two articles that differ both in their object of study and in their method of inquiry, *Out* magazine succeeds in showing that there is indeed a “gay generation gap.” By the same token, however, the magazine fails to engage in a more meaningful fashion with the debate it aims to set up.

These two *Out* articles illustrate a larger phenomenon in gay male culture that I call “generation trouble.” By trouble, I mean specifically the ways in which the generation concept has come to dominate and saturate—through often competing and contradictory claims—our vocabularies of self-definition and our taxonomies of public collectivity and social belonging.⁶ Especially in the last two decades the concept has

⁵ Mike Glatze and Benjie Nycum, “Youthquake,” *Out* (October 2001): 54, 56, 60, 62. Steve Weinstein, “The Gay Generation Gap,” *Out* (October 2001): 91, 108-109.

⁶ At the risk of “situat[ing] lesbianism as a footnote to gay male history” (Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* [New York: Routledge, 1989], 110), I would like to make the following admission. Although some of what I have to say relates to lesbian culture as well, I also want to keep in mind that the generation concept functions in markedly different ways for lesbians. The uses of the generation concept in lesbian culture are evident in the ways that lesbians negotiate their relationships to, among other things, histories of feminism, the “sex wars” of the 1980s, butch-femme aesthetics, and reproductive culture. See Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” *New Literary History* 31 (2000): 727-44; Corinne P. Hayden, “Gender, Genetics, and Generation: Reformulating Biology in Lesbian Kinship,” *Cultural Anthropology* 10 (1995): 41-63; Dana Heller, “The Anxiety of Affluence: Movements, Markets, and Lesbian Feminist Generation(s),” in *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, eds. Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 309-26; Paula Martinez, “The Gay Generation Gap,” *PlanetOut*, <http://www.planetout.com/news/feature.html?sernum=390>; Judith Roof, “Generational Difficulties; or, The Fear of a Barren History,” in *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, eds. Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 69-87; Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility*:

appeared with increasing frequency as an analytic and experiential category in discussions of gay male identity across a range of gay publics—in the academy and in cyberspace,⁷ as well as in local weeklies and in national magazines. For example, in “The Problems and Promise of Gay Youth,” one of the articles featured in the *Advocate*’s “Young and Gay” issue on 16 September 1986, Mike Hippler announced that “there is a new gay generation emerging—whose experiences, priorities, and prospects differ significantly in many respects from those of previous generations. It is a different world they face in 1986. It may be a different future they face as well.”⁸ The future Hippler speaks of has come and gone, and the “new gay generation” he refers to has since acquired the name of Generation Q, a youth cohort that came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s whose members resist a celebratory form of gay male identity in favor of a postgay and post-AIDS identity.⁹ The shift from the “promise of gay youth” in the pages of the *Advocate* in 1986 to worries about the “gay generation gap” in the pages of *Out* in 2001 is striking and deserves critical attention. On the one hand, the current debates about the generation gap in contemporary gay male culture articulate a familiar narrative of

Stories of a Lesbian Generation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Robyn Wiegman, “Feminism’s Apocalyptic Futures,” *New Literary History* 31 (2000): 805-25.

⁷ In August 2001, for example, there was a lively and heated discussion about ageism and generational difference in the circuit party scene on the now defunct Circuit Party Insanity listserv; the discussion was later resumed in April and May 2002.

⁸ Mike Hippler, “The Problems and Promise of Gay Youth,” *Advocate* (16 September 1986): 42-43.

⁹ To the best of my knowledge, the term Generation Q gained currency in the mid 1990s. See, for example, the four-part documentary *The Question of Equality*, produced in 1995 by Testing the Limits and Channel 4/U.K. for the Independent Television Service, and, in particular, its last installment entitled *Generation Q*, directed by Robert Byrd. In 1996, Robin Bernstein and Seth Clark Silberman edited the anthology *Generation Q: Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals Born around 1969’s Stonewall Riots Tell Their Stories of Growing Up in the Age of Information* (Los Angeles: Alyson, 1996). In the summer of 1997, the *Advocate* published a special double issue on Generation Q entitled “Generations of Trailblazers,” which featured profiles of younger gay men and lesbians in politics, sports, the arts, society, and science and technology. For a summary of crucial events that have culminated in post-AIDS discourse, see David Román, “Not-about-AIDS,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6 (2000): 1-28; on postgay identity, see Michelangelo Signorile, “What Happened to Gay?,” *Advocate* (19 January 1999): 71-81.

generational difference that reflects the disparate ideologies of different cohorts. On the other hand, today's version also differs from earlier versions of this narrative for at least two reasons: first, the increased visibility of gay youths and elderly gays as social constituencies—unprecedented in the modern history of homosexuality—has demanded far more expansive visions of the needs of diverse gay male subjects; second, the AIDS epidemic has interrupted vital processes of generational transmission in gay male culture. With some important qualifications, the question of whether there *might be* a “gay generation gap” is certainly worth asking. But we must do so by posing a different set of questions. What constitutes either a gay male generation or a queer generation? More importantly, are the two different in kind or only in degree?

I raise these questions to make two related arguments in this chapter. First, gay men of different ages *use* and, in effect, *understand* the generation concept in different and sometimes competing ways. Second, and concurrently, the generation concept remains at once problematic and productive for gay male identity formations. That the concept can be used and understood as both stems from the fact that it signifies, on the one hand, a normative principle of familial succession and kinship descent, and, on the other, a viable social practice of affiliation among cohorts belonging to different historical generations. Because we often use the two versions of the generation concept interchangeably, we need to be attentive both to its biological-genealogical dimension and to its sociohistorical dimension. Ultimately, I want to propose a theory of the *conditional uses* of the generation concept, a theory that would at once critique the normative dimension of the concept without necessarily sacrificing its inherent value as

an analytic and experiential category that makes possible gay men's self-definition and sense of social belonging.

I've coined the term generation trouble to underscore the generation concept's multiple functions in gay male culture—the ways in which it shapes processes of identity formation; secures or fails to secure social belonging; and measures the shifts in collective consciousness about historical events such as the Stonewall riots and the AIDS epidemic. As we will see, the competing understandings of the generation concept among members of the post-Stonewall generation and Generation Q, as well as each cohort group's preference to identify as either “gay” or “queer,” have contributed to the problem of gay male generation trouble in contemporary U.S. gay male culture. This problem is intimately linked to the issue of gay cultural literacy, inasmuch as it underscores the lack of institutions of learning and of remembering in gay culture that would otherwise help secure and promote the sharing of a common, if contested, repertoire of cultural and historical references among older and younger gay men, as well as the transmission of such a repertoire across the generations.

My term generation trouble evokes and is indebted to Judith Butler's groundbreaking work on gender as a necessary but troubling category of identity. In the preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler invites us to consider the ways in which “trouble need not carry [. . .] a negative valence.”¹⁰ She puts the matter even more pointedly in her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” where she states: “I'm permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), vii.

understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary trouble.”¹¹ Following Butler’s example, and drawing from the foundational works of generation theorists Karl Mannheim, José Ortega y Gasset, and Julián Marías, I wish to promote the identity category of generation as a site of necessary trouble. In different ways, these critics and theorists have been acutely attentive to the problems of meaning that accrue historically to terms that are integral to “the vocabulary we share with others [. . .] when we wish to discuss many of the central processes of our common life” (Williams 14). The uses of the generation concept in contemporary gay male culture demonstrate both a “politics of nominalization”¹² and a “politics of assertion.”¹³ That is to say, gay male generation trouble describes a struggle over representation as well as a crisis in epistemology concerning different forms of social relations in gay male culture: it is a phenomenon that at once challenges, modifies, and validates the meanings and values of gay male identity formations and social belonging.

In what follows, I first provide a history of the generation concept, before situating it within the context of contemporary gay male culture. I then rehearse and evaluate two essays that, in addition to the two recent *Out* articles, illuminate the shift in gay men’s uses and understandings of the generation concept in the last fifteen years: Arnie Kantrowitz’s “Letter to the Queer Generation” and Justin Chin’s “Q-Punk Grammar.” Throughout, I also examine a wide range of other sources, drawn from both academic and popular literature, as evidence of gay male generation trouble. The

¹¹ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 14.

¹² Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Uses of Diaspora,” *Social Text* 19, no. 1 (2001): 46.

¹³ Nayan Shah, “Sexuality, Identity, and the Uses of History,” in *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader*, eds. Peter M. Nardi and Beth E. Schneider (London: Routledge, 1998), 481.

definitional and usage problems of the generation concept in these texts illustrate not only its ubiquity in the gay cultural imagination; they also reveal its profound yet troubling influence in shaping gay men's negotiations of their identity formations and their perceptions of Stonewall, AIDS, and the coming-out process—all of which, in turn, contribute to their sense of belonging, or not belonging, to gay male culture. Because the concept increasingly organizes our ways of thinking and modes of being, we need to think carefully about our uses and understandings of the generation phenomenon in gay male culture. In short, we need to examine the concept's very *usefulness* as a descriptive and analytical term that registers the range of our experiences. As gay men, we have a stake in recognizing that our uses of the concept will affect its meaning and value for succeeding gay generations in the future.



Before situating the generation concept in relation to gay male culture, I want to sketch out its history and context. In Indo-European languages, the etymology of the term derives from the Greek root of the word *genos* (*gen-*), meaning “to come or bring into being” or “to come into existence,”¹⁴ and from the Latin *generare*, meaning “to reproduce one's own kind” (Williams 140). The concept is a defining characteristic of Classical literature—in Homer's account of the Trojan War in the *Iliad*, as well as in Hesiod's explanations of the genealogy of the gods in *Theogony* and of the five ages of

¹⁴ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584-2069* (New York: Morrow, 1991), 433.

man in *Works and Days*.¹⁵ It is also a defining characteristic of Judeo-Christian traditions and their various genealogical narratives in both Old and New Testaments (Strauss and Howe 433-34). The generation concept began to be developed as a secular idea in the West in the nineteenth century, when the formation of social classes and the rapid industrialization of Europe contributed to the stratification of age groups¹⁶ and to the elaboration of an ideology of youth.¹⁷ Since then, it has come to occupy an increasingly important place in the Western cultural imagination, generating much debate both in popular and in academic discourses about its meanings and coherence. The concept has several distinct but overlapping meanings: a principle of familial succession and kinship structure; a social practice of affiliation among cohorts; a phase or stage of the life course; and an index of historical periods.¹⁸ Moreover, with technological advances and increased consumerism, it has frequently come to be used to describe successive types of manufactured products (Williams 141).

Increasingly, the generation concept appears in a range of contexts that reflects this spectrum of meanings. Within the academy, for example, it is used to structure discussions between feminists or between literary critics about shifts in disciplinary methods, objects of study, and political ideologies.¹⁹ It is also used, in more empirical fashion, to structure discussions between social scientists, for whom the term remains a

¹⁵ Laura L. Nash, "Concepts of Existence: Greek Origins of Generational Thought," *Dædalus* 107, no. 4 (1978): 1-21.

¹⁶ Hans Jaeger, "Generations in History: Reflections on a Controversial Concept," *History and Theory* 24 (1985): 275-76.

¹⁷ Annie Kriegel, "Generational Difference: The History of an Idea," *Dædalus* 107, no. 4 (1978): 26-27.

¹⁸ David I. Kertzer, "Generation as a Sociological Problem," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 126.

¹⁹ See Peter C. Herman, ed., *Day Late, Dollar Short: The New Generation and the New Academy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); and Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan, eds., *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

primary analytic category for research in the fields of demography, political science, and social policy. Within popular culture, it is used to market products to consumers, from soft drinks and dolls to denim jeans and luxury cars, in each case suggesting not only new consumer demographics but also new products (e.g., “the Pepsi generation”; “the Generation Girls,” Barbie’s new friends from Mattel; the retailer GAP markets its clothing “for every generation”; “the new Jag generation”). And most familiar to us, it is used in popular culture to describe the emergence of new social types in an ever-changing and ephemeral youth culture—from “Generation X,” the adolescents and young adults of the 1990s, to their twenty-first century cohorts, the “Millennials,” to the “Organization Kid,” a new breed that ostensibly belongs to both generations.²⁰ Given these rich possibilities, the generation concept deserves its status as one of the keywords that helps to define and make intelligible modern culture and society (Williams 140-42).

The generation concept also functions as a keyword in gay male culture, where it is used to reference just as many of its possible meanings. Consider the two *Out* articles with which I began my reflections on gay male generation trouble. In “Youthquake,” Glatze and Nycum use the generation concept as a strategy to claim solidarity with other gay youths and to discuss issues that confront them as a demographic constituency—such as their sense of isolation within and outside the gay community, the violence they

²⁰ See David Brooks, “The Organization Kid,” *Atlantic* (April 2001): 40-46, 48-54; Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991); and Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000). Interestingly, what Coupland calls in his novel “mid-twenties breakdown” (27) has since become a distinctly postmodern phenomenon, with the recent publication of a self-help book by Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner entitled *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2001). The book stands as one of the most striking, if bizarre, confluences of the generation concept being used both as a marketing tool and as a descriptive category—in this case, the introduction of “quarterlife crisis,” a new stage of the life course that supposedly precedes “midlife crisis,” its later counterpart. On a different note, the tragic events of 9-11 have introduced what Barbara Kantrowitz and Keith Naughton call “Generation 9-11,” in an article of the same title published in *Newsweek*, 12 November 2001, 46-48, 49-54, 56.

encounter in school, and the high rate of gay teen and youth suicides. In their article, they describe their travels across the United States and to Halifax, Canada, in search of “Young Gay America.” “Our goal,” they explain, “is not only to prove that gay teens exist and are thriving everywhere but also to give them a better way to express themselves, feel less isolated, learn from each other’s experiences, and come to understand their importance in the world” (56). In the process, they address what they see as “the institutionalized gay indifference to youth issues” in gay culture. “It’s up to youths themselves and compassionate parents to fight a battle that probably should be on the top of the gay community’s list. Is it really more important,” they ask provocatively, “to recognize gay spouses than it is to stop violence in schools?” (62). For Glatze and Nycum, the generation concept affords them the opportunity not only to speak on behalf of gay youths in “Young Gay America,” a vibrant yet neglected social constituency that in part makes up contemporary gay male culture, but also to call into question what they see as the misdirected energies of activists who support the normative and assimilationist political agenda of gay marriage.

In “The Gay Generation Gap,” the other article featured in the October 2001 issue of *Out* magazine, Weinstein uses the generation concept to answer the question, posed as the subtitle of his article: “Why can’t over-40 and under-35 gay men communicate?” (10). In doing so, he raises important questions about cultural memory and processes of generational transmission in gay culture. According to Weinstein, “Before Stonewall, secret codes—like touching your nose with your index finger, a red tie, or a nosegay in a lapel, even the location of bars—were part of gay lore passed down to newcomers [. . .]. With the mainstreaming of gay culture, there’s no need for a secret set of shared

references. All of which makes it harder for gay men to communicate. If there are fewer and fewer common touchstones,” wonders Weinstein only half facetiously, “what is there to talk about over cocktails?” (91). That “gay lore” is prevented from being transmitted across the generations, according to him, contributes to and is a direct consequence of “our [culture’s] lack of an institutional memory.” “You don’t study gay rights in school, and you don’t learn to be gay in college,” Weinstein concludes. “Such things are passed down, one generation to the next, and if the generations aren’t mixing, everything we had will be lost” (109). Although Weinstein’s differentiation between “over-40” and “under-35” gay men suggests that he, like his younger counterparts Glatze and Nycum, aims to speak on behalf of a particular constituency, he is more interested in using the generation concept to underscore the difficulties of forging and sustaining forms of generational consciousness in contemporary urban gay male culture.²¹

Reading these two *Out* articles side by side shows not only that younger and older gay men use the generation concept differently, but that they understand its purpose and value differently as well. While Glatze and Nycum want younger gay men to “learn from each other’s experiences,” Weinstein wants them also to learn from the experiences of older gay men. While Glatze and Nycum stress “the institutionalized gay indifference to youth issues” in gay culture, Weinstein worries about its “lack of an institutional

²¹ Weinstein’s worry that there is a lack of communication and interaction between older and younger gay men implicitly touches upon the relationship between mentorship, friendship, and inter- or crossgenerational social relations in gay male culture. For various critical approaches to and discussions of this topic, see Barry Adam, “Age Preferences Among Gay and Bisexual Men,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6 (2000): 413-33; David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), especially pp. 26-40; David Halperin, “How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6 (2000): 87-123; David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Joseph Litvak, “Pedagogy and Sexuality,” in *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*, eds. George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman (New York: MLA, 1995), 19-30; and Peter M. Nardi, *Gay Men’s Friendships: Invincible Communities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For fictional and autobiographical treatments, see Neil Bartlett, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (New York: Plume, 1992) and Jay Quinn, *The Mentor: A Memoir of Friendship and Gay Identity* (New York: Haworth, 2000).

memory.” Glatze and Nycum use the generation concept as a strategy to understand the present; Weinstein uses it as a strategy to understand the present’s relation to the past. Although both articles’ uses of the generation concept are valid—and even predictable given the range of overlapping meanings that the concept encompasses—they also need to be understood *as* different. Gay men use the generation concept as a register of their age-specific needs and experiences, one that deeply structures not only their negotiations of their personal identity but also their definitions of what it means to belong to a public collectivity. The generation concept remains an effective category because it provides gay men with empowering modes of affiliation and identification with others situated in similar generation locations—and, as the two *Out* articles also imply, with equally effective modes of disaffiliation and disidentification with others belonging to other generations.

How readers of these articles interpret the generation concept is also worth noting. For example, the December 2001 issue of *Out* reprints a letter by Mark Morale of Los Angeles in response to Weinstein’s “The Gay Generation Gap.” “Steve Weinstein,” Morale writes, “takes a condition that is prevalent throughout humanity and tries to make it a gay issue. The way I see it, there’s no difference between a generation gap among gays and one among Mexican-Americans, Republicans, or people who wear blue jeans [. . .]. I don’t need Judy Garland lore passed down to me to know how to love another man intimately” (10). Morale astutely challenges Weinstein’s proscriptive vision of what should or should not count as cultural references, what should or should not constitute part of “our” institutional memory. But to base such a challenge, as Morale does, on the false assumption that the generation phenomenon is “a condition [. . .] prevalent

throughout humanity” and thus not a “gay issue” is to miss the point entirely. The generation concept is *not* a human universal category, as Morale would lead us to believe; on the contrary, it is definitively a *cultural* category and an *ideological* category whose specific functions in gay male culture invite critical and theoretical elaboration. As a result, we need to interrogate the generation concept in order to broaden and deepen our understanding of its profound, if problematic, impact in structuring the gay social world.



We need to make generation a gay issue because there are consequences in the choices we make about our generational identifications and affiliations. As generation theorist Julián Marías puts it, “to ask ourselves to which generation we belong is, in large measure, to ask *who* we are.” Who we are is up for debate, of course—are gay male and queer generations different in kind or only in degree? Social scientists working in lesbian and gay studies, who focus on the intersection between gender, sexuality, age, and generation, have begun to provide some answers to this question. In their study of the Horizons youth group in Chicago, for example, anthropologist Gilbert Herdt and psychologist Andrew Boxer propose a cohort system of four historical age-groupings that constitute the gay and lesbian generations that came of age in the twentieth century: Cohort One, after World War I; Cohort Two, during or after World War II; Cohort Three, after the Stonewall riots in 1969 and the advent of gay liberation in the 1970s; and Cohort Four, during the age of AIDS.²² Situating these different cohort groups within their

²² Gilbert H. Herdt and Andrew Boxer, *Children of Horizons: How Gay and Lesbian Teens Are Leading a New Way Out of the Closet* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 6-13.

specific historical contexts, Herdt and Boxer show that gay and lesbian generations, like other types of historical generations, emerge and are made intelligible through the occurrence of particular historical and social events. “The individual does not invent these grand historical events or create the relevant cultural categories,” they explain, “but through social development the individual participates in collectively shared experiences, linking himself or herself to other persons of similar status, according to where they were at the time and what they did in relation to the historical events” (8). Herdt and Boxer stress the importance of our approaches to and interpretations of historical events—that is, what we do in relation to them. I would suggest that Generation Q’s view, which would most likely claim that gay male and queer generations are different *in kind*, is misguided and ultimately self-defeating, since it both stems from and is a reflection of a distressing lack of historical knowledge about contemporary gay male culture.

The Stonewall riots and the AIDS epidemic are significant not only as historical markers that remain integral to an understanding of gay cultural literacy, but also because they have transformed, in different and profound ways, gay men’s relation to the generation concept. Stonewall created new scenes of extrafamilial sociability for gay men, and introduced, with those scenes, empowering modes of affiliation and identification by which individuals could locate themselves in relation to the collective within history. In the 1970s and 1980s, many urban gay men in the United States and elsewhere viewed Stonewall as a pivotal frame of reference in the creation of an emergent cultural consciousness, as well as a strategy to distinguish between gay male generations: pre-Stonewall, Stonewall, and post-Stonewall. As a result of Stonewall and the ensuing gay liberation movement, gay men were empowered to “come out of the

closet,” an experience that was seen not only as a personal choice or an individual rite of passage, but also as part of a larger political project to claim a collective identity based on fighting homophobia and sexual oppression. During the last two decades, the AIDS epidemic completely altered gay men’s positioning of themselves in discourses of generation—especially in the context of the concept’s definition as a stage or phase in the trajectory of the life course. Witnessing the deaths of lovers, friends, and numerous others as a result of HIV/AIDS, and facing the possible truncation of their own lives, gay men were forced to confront the intimate connections between their desires and mortality.

Stonewall and AIDS figure prominently in Arnie Kantrowitz’s “Letter to the Queer Generation” and Justin Chin’s “Q-Punk Grammar,” two essays that explicitly use the generation concept as a framework for discussing gay male identity formations. Appearing in the New York City weekly *NYQ* in 1992, “Letter to the Queer Generation” was written in response to the irreverent views made by the editors of the Toronto-based queer zine *Bimbox* following the death of film critic and AIDS activist Vito Russo.²³ To illustrate the multiple shifts in Kantrowitz’s uses of the generation concept, I quote at length his explanation to the *Bimbox* editors and, more generally, the readers of their zine who belong to the queer generation:

²³ Arnie Kantrowitz, “Letter to the Queer Generation,” in *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, eds. Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (New York: Routledge, 1997), 812-17. In their headnote to Kantrowitz’s letter, Blasius and Phelan explain that the *Bimbox* editors, “Johnny Noxema” and “Rex Boy,” had launched an “inning” campaign of prominent gays and lesbians that, in their view, “defile[d] the good name of our people.” When a reader wrote back to protest the inclusion of Vito Russo on the “inning” list, the *Bimbox* editors responded with: “Just ‘cause someone has AIDS doesn’t mean they’re exempt from being labeled an asshole. Russo is/was/and will remain one of the most miserable disgusting insufferable clones ever to enter the public eye. Honey, rest assured that we were well aware of his medical condition at the time our inning list was [put] together, and to be honest, we’re elated he’s off the planet . . . Oh sure, Vito’s finally dead and we got our wish and we should just drop the whole thing, but we won’t be satisfied until we dig him up and drive a stake through his filthy film queen heart” (qtd. in Blasius and Phelan 812).

We don't come from nowhere. When Larry Kramer and Vito Russo watched Vito's last Gay Pride March in 1990, thousands of ACT UP activists shouted up the balcony, "We love you, Vito!" (Take that, *Bimbox*! You'll never hear the like.) My lover, Larry Mass, heard Larry Kramer say to Vito, "These are our children." Queer Nation is the child of ACT UP, which is the stepchild of GMHC [Gay Men's Health Crisis]. GAA [Gay Activists Alliance] gave birth to the Gay Teachers Association, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and a host of other groups. GAA in its turn was the child of its forebears, the Gay Liberation Front, the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, the Society for Individual Rights, even Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science in pre-Nazi Germany. Queer people are not newly born, only newly named. You have a history, and you should not only be proud of it, you should learn from it.

I know that oedipal rebellion against our predecessors is an important step, as is reinventing ourselves in each generation, but reinventing the wheel as well is a waste of valuable energy and time. My gay generation rebelled against the Mattachine Society because we considered it too obsequious and against the Gay Liberation Front because we found it too doctrinaire, but we learned things from their experience, as you should learn from ours. [. . .]

The "gay" generation is in the process of its mid-life crisis. After fomenting amazing changes in our culture, we suddenly find ourselves uncomfortable with more change—a sign that our day is drawing to a close. It is a reminder that we are all one step closer to death (as if a generation traumatized by the grim spectacle of AIDS needed any reminders).

I thought I had come from the best era of all. I had survived the oppression of the '50s, participated in the social experiments of the '60s, and emerged from the closet into the sunlight of the '70s, managing to have a great deal of fun and fulfillment before the plague years of the '80s. [. . .]

Good luck being queer. I hope you really have fun, and I hope you make us proud of you. (816-17)

Kantrowitz's "Letter to the Queer Generation" can be read in at least two ways.

The author displays a remarkable ability in manipulating the generation concept, maneuvering, as he does, through each of the concept's common definitions: as biological-genealogical phenomenon ("Queer Nation is the child of ACT UP"); as sociohistorical phenomenon ("Queer people are not newly born, only newly named"); as a description of a phase or stage of the life course ("The 'gay' generation is in the process of its mid-life crisis"); and, finally, as an index of historical periods ("I thought I had come from the best era of all"). At the same time and despite such maneuverings,

Kantrowitz fails to disguise his genuine struggle to make sense of the *normative* dimensions inherent in the generation concept. His chronological account of postwar gay history articulates a familiar narrative of generational difference between cohorts during various historical moments. Yet for Kantrowitz to claim successfully that same-sex social identities are variable and historically contingent, he must also rely on the language of reproduction and procreation (e.g., “stepchild,” “gave birth to,” “child of its forebears,” etc.). For him to contextualize the existence of homosexual/homophilic, gay, and queer generations within the framework of the social and the historical—that they constitute different cohort groups and, thus, distinct collective entities—he must also position them within the framework of the biological and the familial. In short, for him to argue for these various same-sex generations as sociohistorical phenomena, he must simultaneously argue for their existence as biological-genealogical phenomena. Even his important qualification that “Queer people are not newly born, only newly named” gets deflated when he once again situates his critique within the genre of the family romance and “oedipal rebellion.” That Kantrowitz is unable to make his claim without recourse to the language of procreation foregrounds the extent to which reproductive sex, as Michael Warner shows in a different context, “has become an even more pervasive measure of value in modernity. [. . .] Whether we bear children or not, our lives converge on a future that continues to be imagined not as the activity of other adults like ourselves, but as the inheritance of children—our donatees, our surrogates, our redeemers, our alibi.”²⁴ The projected future proposed by Kantrowitz is teleological, one inhabited by imaginary children who will correct, or even redeem, the mistakes of the past: “we learned things

²⁴ Michael Warner, “Irving’s Posterity,” *ELH: English Literary History* 67 (fall 2000): 776.

from their experience,” he writes of the pre-Stonewall generation in his admonishment to Generation Q, “as you should learn from ours.”

Kantrowitz is not alone in confusing, whether strategically or not, generation as a biological-genealogical phenomenon and generation as a sociohistorical phenomenon. Performance artist Justin Chin also uses the generation concept to frame his discussion of gay male identity in “Q-Punk Grammar,” an essay that first appeared in the anthology *Generation Q* (1996), and was later included in Chin’s own collection *Mongrel* (1999). “Q-Punk Grammar” presents further evidence of the ways in which the language of reproduction and procreation shapes, both implicitly and explicitly, gay men’s relation to and understanding of the generation concept. “The gay community is experiencing a great generational gap,” Chin notes,

It’s a vicious cycle; each generation feels it has cornered the market on what it’s like to be gay. The older generation tells us what it was like to be really gay *back then*, when they had:

- Donna Summer, when she meant something; [. . .]
- sex without condoms;
- venereal diseases that didn’t outright kill you; and
- those insidious little homosexual mustaches.

My generation tells the younger queer brats what it was like to be queer *back then*, and how they will never know what it was like:

- to sit in a room of sixty people on a Wednesday night and try to reach consensus on something; [. . .]
- to be at a kiss-in when a kiss-in meant something;
- to be so filled with anger and a strange hope at an AIDS demonstration; [and]
- having to defend using the word *queer* [. . .].

I look in my closet and I see that I have inherited a gaggle of colored drag queens tossing bricks at cops who look suspiciously like uniformed queens in a leather bar ten or twenty years later [. . .] I have inherited a virus, a wrecked

community, memorials and Names Quilts, clinical trials and the AIDS industry as a viable and “noble” career choice.²⁵

Like Kantrowitz, Chin must resort to the language of life course—that is, the structuring of life as a narrative, whose intelligibility must adhere to categories such as age, career, maturity, inheritance—to make his claim that the “gay community is experiencing a great generational gap.” In the end, Chin, while aiming to dislodge the normative structures that, in his view, contribute to the cyclical nature of generations, nevertheless recycles and recirculates the logic of reproduction and inheritance. Although this maneuver dulls Chin’s otherwise sharp critique, it succeeds in underscoring the inherent difficulties of using the generation concept without succumbing to vocabularies of life course and reproduction. No doubt Chin himself recognizes these seemingly insurmountable challenges; perhaps they are the reasons that lead him to declare, in the conclusion of “Q-Punk Grammar,” his disenchantment with identity politics: “Let the young ones be queer the way they want to be queer, as long as they are queer, as long as they find among themselves each other to love.” Chin ends with the remark: “I’ve given up the dream of the Queer Nation. Race, class, gender, ideologies, and values will always divide us [. . .]. I have no idea what it is to be gay or queer anymore; nor do I care. I am so over being queer, and I don’t care what I call myself or what anyone else calls me; it’s all a matter of convenience these days” (34). I would suggest that Chin’s disenchantment indicates less a refusal to claim a sexual identity, and more an attempt to underscore the complex intersection of sexuality with class and, specifically, with race and ethnicity. As I will discuss in my epilogue, gay men of color recognize that their refusal of heterosexuality often puts them at greater risk of becoming estranged from their own familial and cultural

²⁵ Justin Chin, “Q-Punk Grammar,” in *Mongrel: Essays, Diatribes, and Pranks* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 32-34.

traditions. In “Q-Punk Grammar,” Chin proposes a new lexicon by which to reconceptualize the possibilities, conditions, and limitations of various kinds of identity—not as identities per se, but, rather, where appropriate and necessary, as matters of convenience.

Both Kantrowitz and Chin attempt to illustrate that the generation phenomenon in gay male culture is a product of social and historical events. Both, however, must rely on the language of reproduction and procreation to do so. Their respective reflections articulate not only a struggle over representation concerning kinship and other forms of social relations in gay male culture, but also how those collectivities are conceptualized in the first place. Social scientists and queer theorists have shown the ways in which nonheterosexuals have succeeded in expanding traditional and familiar notions of the family. In *Families We Choose*, anthropologist Kath Weston poses a set of intriguing questions that are relevant to gay male generation trouble. “What is all this talk about gay families?” she wonders. “Where did those families come from, and why should they appear now? [. . .] Are gay families inherently assimilationist, or do they represent a radical departure from more conventional understandings of kinship? Will gay families have any effect on kinship relations and social relations [. . .] ?”²⁶ In a similar manner, Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy, and Catherine Donovan, in their study *Same-Sex Intimacies*, observe that “[i]t is surprising [. . .] that the growing recognition of relational rights for non-heterosexuals should be expressed in the language of the family. What significance can we read into this?” According to them, “The appropriation of the language of the family by many non-heterosexuals can [. . .] be seen as a battle over

²⁶ Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 2.

meaning, one important way in which the sexually marginal are struggling to assert the validity of their own way of life.”²⁷ These scholars have contributed much to our understanding of nonheterosexuals’ reconfigurations of family and kinship. With these studies in mind, I propose that Kantrowitz and Chin struggle, in their respective essays, to *appropriate* and *denaturalize* the generation concept in the context of gay male social and sexual identity formations. I value their attempts because both men possess a deep understanding of the historical events that have led them to reflect on the generation concept.



The slippages that characterize Kantrowitz’s and Chin’s uses of the generation concept are pervasive not only in gay popular culture but also in the work of social scientists, who “also fall into the tendency, characteristic of generational studies, of a slippery, ambiguous usage that blurs distinctions that should be clarified.”²⁸ An understanding of generations as sociohistorical phenomena depends upon—indeed, remains deeply embedded within—an understanding of generations as biological-genealogical phenomena. In other words, although the generation concept is still used to measure time and historical progress and to organize the life course into a sequence of life phases, it is more often used *interchangeably*, to signify, on the one hand, familial succession and kinship descent, and, on the other, extrafamilial affiliations among cohorts

²⁷ Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy, and Catherine Donovan, *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments* (London: Routledge, 2001), 15, 17.

²⁸ Alan B. Spitzer, “The Historical Problem of Generations,” *The American Historical Review* 78 (1973): 1354.

or coevals. Even the most careful of theorists struggle to dislodge fully the conflation between generations as biological-genealogical phenomena and generations as sociohistorical phenomena. Hans Jaeger, for example, suggests that the “concept ‘generation’ is used in different ways”:

The naïve and original meaning of generation is without a doubt a biological-genealogical one. It indicates that descendants of a common ancestor take on average about thirty years to marry and have children. This is not only the natural conception today; it is also the conception of the classical tradition, as, for example, of the Old Testament and of Greek poetry and historiography. The historical notion of generation [. . .] originates out of the biological-genealogical concept with an additional assumption, namely that there exists a connection between the continuing process of the succession between fathers and sons and the discontinuous process of social and cultural changes. (274)

Using the language of origins and reproduction—“natural conception,” “originates,” “succession”—Jaeger assumes that sexuality is always normative and reproductive. Given the term’s etymology, it’s hardly surprising that the generation concept inheres most insistently in its relation to the ideology of reproduction. I isolate Jaeger’s explanation, however, because it is evidence of the difficulties involved in—and of the need for—interrogating and *denaturalizing* the generation concept within the context of nonnormative and nonreproductive sexualities. Put another way, although generation now more frequently refers to age cohorts rather than to family and kinship, such a discursive and epistemological shift still secures the status of normative heterosexuality.

It has been my intention thus far to encourage the denaturalization of the generation concept. But, at the same time, my readings of the two *Out* articles and of Kantrowitz’s and Chin’s essays also demonstrate that gay men’s engagement with cultural generativity cannot be guaranteed in advance. The inextricable connection between the generation concept’s two main definitions—as biological-genealogical

phenomena and as sociohistorical phenomena—presents the most trouble to gay men and their uses of the idea. Since biological and genealogical reproduction are inseparable, gay men struggle in securing cultural generativity—the production, transmission, and reception of values and practices across generations—because they tend not to have recourse to biological generativity.²⁹ For any historical generation to survive and evolve, it must succeed in transmitting its values and practices to members of the next generation, who in turn participate in the reception of those values and practices—by embracing, modifying, or rejecting them. Unlike heterosexuals and even lesbians, most gay men have had to create and improvise different strategies through which to engage in and secure cultural generativity, mainly because of their nonparticipation in biological reproduction and child-rearing, and, in the last two decades, because of the AIDS epidemic.

That the generation concept remains firmly rooted in the ideology of reproduction signifies that it is inextricably connected to “heteronormativity,” a term that Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant use to describe the wide and diffuse range of “institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent [. . .] but also privileged.”³⁰ Heteronormativity prevents gay men from creating and sustaining institutions for common memory and, in the process, interrupts and forecloses the possibility of generational transmission. While the slippages in Kantrowitz’s and Chin’s uses of the generation concept recirculate and shore up the logic of heterosexuality and the intelligibility of the reproduction narrative, they also show that the generation concept, despite or, rather, because of its multivalent capaciousness,

²⁹ For discussions on the concept of generativity, see Eric H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1993), especially pp. 266-68; and John Kotre, *Outliving the Self: Generativity and the Interpretation of Lives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

³⁰ Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (winter 1998): 548n2.

remains useful as an analytic and experiential category for many gay men. That the concept has appeared with increasing frequency in discussions across a range of reading publics strongly emphasizes its importance and relevance to gay men's negotiations of their identities and sense of social belonging (or not belonging) to gay male culture and history. That it has been used, at the same time, in radically different ways just as strongly points to the existence of generation trouble in gay male culture. Our goal, therefore, is not to refrain ourselves from using the generation concept. On the contrary, we need to continue, as Raymond Williams persuasively suggests, to commit ourselves to the task of "contribut[ing] to certain kinds of awareness and certain more limited kinds of clarification by taking certain words at the level at which they are generally used" in everyday life (24).



Given the difficulties of thinking about the generation concept outside the framework of reproductive culture, and given that it can be used as a strategy of simultaneous identification and disidentification, can it be used effectively to theorize the formation and transformation of gay male social and sexual identities? Yes and no. Within the context of what Karl Mannheim calls "the sociology of knowledge," the generation concept represents "one of the indispensable guides to an understanding of the structure of social and intellectual movements" (361-62). In his groundbreaking essay "The Problem of Generations," Mannheim radically reconceptualizes generations as social and historical phenomena rather than as biological and genealogical phenomena. He finds equally inadequate the liberal-positivist tradition and its quantitative approach to

generations as an “objective measure of unilinear progress,” as well as the romantic-historicist tradition and its qualitative approach to generations as articulating an “interior time that cannot be measured but only experienced” (356). In his view, both schools of thought fall short of fully addressing the problem because each, in its own way, conceives of generations as intelligible only in relation to a biological rhythm that must adhere either to the patterns of the life course or to the process of familial succession. According to Mannheim, “It is a complete misconception to suppose, as do most investigators, that a real problem of generations exists only in so far as a rhythm of generations, recurring at unchanging intervals, can be established. Any biological rhythm,” he argues, “must work itself out through the medium of social events” (361). Reframing the problem of generations in relation to the social rather than to the biological, Mannheim conceives of generations as consisting of groups of individuals of roughly the same age, whose experiences of events during particular historical moments bind them to their cohorts, coevals, and peers, and, at the same time, differentiate them from their contemporaries in other age groups and from members of previous and later generations. “Were it not for the existence of social interaction between human beings,” Mannheim maintains, “the generation would not exist as a social location phenomenon; there would merely be birth, ageing, and death. The *sociological* problem of generations therefore begins at that point where the sociological relevance of these biological factors is discovered” (366; original emphasis). By underscoring the primacy of social interaction and, in effect, proposing a theory of human relationality, Mannheim illustrates that the generation concept fundamentally shapes processes of identity formation. That is, the concept endows individuals within the same or proximate generation locations with empowering and

expressive modes of *extrafamilial* affiliation and identification with their cohorts, coevals, and peers.

That the generation concept makes available to cohorts a means with which to define their identity in relation to others belonging to similar generation locations vitally suggests its potential applicability to analyses of gay male culture and identity. In many respects, the concept is ideal because it makes possible an understanding of the emergence of gay male culture as a social entity and, in turn, the existence of its constituent members as social actors. Moreover, because gay men share as their common frame of reference their same-sex desires, their daily struggles with homophobia and AIDS, and their exclusion from normative reproductive culture, many find appealing the scene of extrafamilial sociability and the forms of affiliation and identification that the generation concept makes available and sustains.

Notwithstanding its potential applicability to analyses of gay male identity and culture, the generation concept also presents particular challenges and limitations that need addressing. According to Mannheim, there is “a tendency ‘inherent’ in every social location,” whether it be class-based or generation-based, meaning that “the experiential, intellectual, and emotional data which are available to the members of a certain society are not uniformly ‘given’ to all of them” (366). In his view, “even where the [experiential, emotional, and] intellectual material is more or less uniform or at least uniformly accessible to all, the approach to the material, the way in which it is assimilated and applied, is determined in its direction by social factors” (366-67). Consider, for example, the Stonewall riots and the coming-out process—two important touchstones that are, arguably, part and parcel of the intellectual, experiential, and

emotional data or material accessible to most, if not all, gay men. Yet, depending on our generation location, we view and approach that archive differently. “‘Stonewall’ is the emblematic event in modern lesbian and gay history,” writes historian Martin Duberman in his preface to *Stonewall*, and “has become synonymous over the years with gay resistance to oppression.”³¹ Historian John D’Emilio makes a similar argument by suggesting that gay men and lesbians, in coming out en masse during the early period of the gay rights movement, participated in demonstrating the inextricable connection between the personal and the political.³² The coming-out process secures not only an individual’s sexual identity but also his social identity. As a ritual that marks an individual’s entry into the gay social world, the coming-out experience signifies a defining moment in gay male identity formations (Herdt and Boxer 14).

But our expectations of what fulfills our entry into and sense of belonging to gay male culture have changed significantly, and, in the process, so has our repertoire of shared cultural references and the meaning of what counts as cultural literacy. Many now view differently the primacy of Stonewall and the act of coming out, and, consequently, their respective functions as a historical marker and a rite of passage. For example, Robin Bernstein and Seth Clark Silberman propose, in their introduction to the anthology *Generation Q*, that for members of Generation Q, “The closet has become a temporary convenience, a practical safety measure, a tool to use in particular circumstances, a toy to play with, rather than a constant, coercive presence. As the closet becomes less rigid, more permeable, and less central, so too does the initial act of coming out”; “coming

³¹ Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Plume, 1993), xvii.

³² John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 235.

out,” they conclude, “is no longer necessarily the primary rite of passage for queer youth.”³³ We certainly need to recognize that some if not many gay youths find valuable the performative nature of identities. But we need also to consider that gay people claim their sexual identity not only during their teens and twenties but also *later in life*. For these countless others, the process of coming out is still a necessary and empowering rite of passage that marks and secures their entry into the gay social world. In short, it is not quite enough for members of Generation Q to note or to perform the changes in the meanings of the closet, without also recognizing that some may find the notion of identity-as-performance anathema.

Ultimately, we need to keep in mind—lest we forget—the pervasiveness of the closet as a deeply entrenched epistemology and way of life in modern Western culture.³⁴ For this reason, we need to struggle to change the culture in which coming out of the closet continues to be perceived as a necessary experience for the constitution of gay male identities. Paradoxically, such a radical transformation of the meanings of the closet can only occur if we take the preliminary step of accepting the generation concept’s intimate connection to the act of coming out. For many of us, our sense of generational belonging is secured in relation not to our age, but, rather, in relation to when we came out of the closet to claim our social and sexual identities. As sociologist Jeffrey Escoffier reminds us, “people belong to certain generations in lesbian and gay life depending on

³³ Robin Bernstein and Seth Clark Silberman, introduction to *Generation Q: Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals Born around 1969’s Stonewall Riots Tell Their Stories of Growing Up in the Age of Information* (Los Angeles: Alyson, 1996), xvi.

³⁴ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

when they came out, rather than how old they are.”³⁵ To the extent that generation signifies, among its four common definitions, a stage or phase of the life course, and to the extent that coming out secures our sense of social (read: generational) belonging, we need to recognize their interrelationship as one of the conditional uses of the generation concept. Doing so would allow us to critique the normative dimension of the generation concept, along with mainstream culture’s expectation that coming out must remain the *sine qua non* of our identity constitution, and, at the same time, allow us to retain the concept’s inherent value as an analytic and experiential category that makes possible gay men’s self-definition and sense of social belonging.

I see the generation concept’s connection to the process of coming out as an opportunity for exploring the *commonalities* gay men share with members of Generation Q, and vice versa. Bernstein and Silberman, however, use the concept as an occasion to differentiate themselves and their cohorts from previous gay and lesbian generations.

They write in their introduction to *Generation Q*:

As the post-Stonewall generation comes out, we often find a chasm between our experiences and perspectives and those of the lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people who came before us. We are members of the so-called Generation X. [. . .]

As young lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people, however, we differ from not only our gay forebears but also our straight peers. We are not just “X” but “Q”—*Queer*, a word embraced by our generation. (xv)

To my earlier question about whether gay male and queer generations are different in kind or only in degree, Bernstein and Silberman would probably answer *in kind*. I would not begrudge them this view: I, too, recognize that there are significant differences between, on the one hand, the experiences and perspectives of the post-Stonewall

³⁵ Jeffrey Escoffier, *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 121.

generation or Generation Q and, on the other, “those of the lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people who came before [them].” At the same time, however, I suggest that the differences are not those in kind but in degree—and, to borrow their metaphor, that “the chasm” separating the generations is not as deep as they imagine it to be. In saying this, I have in mind D’Emilio’s argument that “radical gay liberation [during the 1970s] transformed the meaning of ‘coming out.’ Before Stonewall, the phrase had signified the acknowledgment of one’s sexuality to others in the gay world; after Stonewall, it meant the public affirmation of homosexual identity.”³⁶ Bernstein and Silberman’s explanation strongly suggests a desire for the public affirmation of their absolute difference from their “straight peers,” and, more problematically, from their “gay forebears” *tout court*. Put another way, I sense on their part a need to seek the public affirmation of their identity from mainstream culture, without, unfortunately, also expressing an equally important need to seek the acknowledgement of their identity from others in the gay social world.

I propose an attempt to recuperate the pre-Stonewall definition of coming out as the acknowledgement of one’s identity *to others within gay male culture*. My proposal should not be interpreted as wistful nostalgia, but, rather, as a genuine strategy for gay men and members of Generation Q alike to regain a sense of our historicity. We need to consider the act of “coming out” also as an act of “going in,” a felicitous redefinition of the closet I borrow from author and playwright Neil Bartlett. In his experimental first-person narrative, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*, Bartlett describes his move to London in the 1980s, and recalls his amazement at discovering that he is able

³⁶ John D’Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 244.

to claim *his* gay identity largely because *others* before him had done so already throughout the last century. He explains his life-transforming epiphany: “Perhaps my life in this city is not so much individual and natural as collective and determined. [. . .] I find myself in a library of other texts, the world of other men. I didn’t so much ‘come out’ as ‘go in,’ since at the very moment at which we come out, declare our difference from the world, we immerse ourselves in [. . .] gay society.”³⁷ In reimagining “coming out” simultaneously as “going in,” Bartlett reveals a deep understanding of the historicity of the closet. For him, coming out enables him not only to declare his “difference from the world” of heterosexuals, but also to immerse himself in—through the acknowledgment of—an already existing gay culture. Unlike Bernstein and Silberman, Bartlett views the past neither as a distant memory, nor as an unreachable distant shore. On the contrary, he values the experiences and the perspectives of others who came before him, recognizing that his present-day gay male identity has been profoundly shaped by, and continues to be deeply embedded in, the history of homosexuality. Moreover, unlike Kantrowitz in his “Letter to the Queer Generation,” Bartlett reconceptualizes history not as the past per se, nor as something to be superceded. Instead, he searches the past for models to emulate rather than to rebel against. I will have more to say about Bartlett in my conclusion to this chapter, and, more specifically, about his innovative use of the generation concept in *Who Was That Man?* For the moment, however, I return to the ways in which the language of generations not only informs the shifts in consciousness about the meaning and value of the coming-out process, but also the shifts in the cultural perception of Stonewall.

³⁷ Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988), 206. I borrow the classification of Bartlett’s *Who Was That Man?* as an “experimental first-person narrative” from Dianne Chisholm; see her “City of Collective Memory,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7, no. 2 (2001): 195-243.



Each year, we are reminded of these shifts as we witness the transformation of Stonewall into commercial spectacles at Pride celebrations. For example, during the 25th anniversary celebrations commemorating the event, in New York City in June 1994, *Out* magazine sold T-shirts bearing the slogan “Stonewall 25: New and Improved for the 90s,” a prime example of cultural amnesia that led many in attendance to join a countermarch, organized by the New York Chapter of ACT UP, as “a challenge to the rainbow-drenched official Stonewall parade” and “to protest not only the ongoing and deadly inattention to AIDS, but also, and more pointedly, the commercialization of this historical marker as a rather cynical improvement on the original.”³⁸ In a different manner, our perceptions of Stonewall have also changed because we have been encouraged to consider it as one of many defining moments, rather than as *the* sole defining moment of gay liberation. Novelist John Rechy, among others, has rightly called our attention to the fallacy of “the arbitrary demarcation of generations that emerged out of the emphasis on the Stonewall riots—before it, all repressed; after it, all liberated.” There were “many other ‘riots’ before Stonewall” (including the Black Cat raids in San Francisco in the 1950s), Rechy explains, and the “emphasis on that one admittedly important event to the exclusion of others contributes to the sense of separation between generations.”³⁹ That the critically-challenged *Out* magazine and the critically-savvy

³⁸ Eric O. Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 47-48.

³⁹ Qtd. in Tania Modleski, “The Final Frontier: A Roundtable Discussion,” in *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, eds. Joseph A. Boone, Martin Dupuis, Martin Meeker, Karin Quimby, Cindy Sarver, Debra Silverman, and Rosemary Weatherston (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 325.

Rechy frame their separate claims about Stonewall in the language of generations—the former, implicitly; the latter, explicitly—again illustrates the complete saturation of the generation concept in contemporary gay male culture. In short, the concept remains deeply embedded within—indeed, structures—our consciousness of the gay social world. No longer an undisputed signifier, Stonewall remains a common frame of reference only because gay men no longer share a common view of it: for those at *Out* magazine, a misguided occasion to mark their disaffiliation from the past; for Rechy, a serious invitation to consider other watershed moments in the gay liberation movement. The generation concept profoundly shapes gay men’s different valuations of Stonewall because it continues to represent an emblematic “queer fiction of the past.”⁴⁰ These shifts in consciousness concerning Stonewall illustrate that, depending on their generation location, gay men approach in different and competing ways the material and data that make up the gay male cultural archive.

To the extent that the Stonewall riots made available forms of historical consciousness to gay men in the 1970s and 1980s, the human toll of the AIDS epidemic in the last three decades threatened to obliterate them with equal force. From the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, the AIDS epidemic radically changed gay men’s relation to discourses of generation. In a variety of genres, from memoir and autobiography to cultural criticism and theory, many have written eloquently about the inextricable connection between the AIDS epidemic and the generation concept. For example, Paul Monette begins *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* with the following confession: “The magic circle my generation is trying to stay within the borders of is only as real as the

⁴⁰ Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially pp. 68-96.

random past. Perhaps the young can live in the magic circle, but only if those of us who are ticking will tell our story. Otherwise it goes on being *us* and *them* forever, built like a wall higher and higher, till you no longer think to wonder if you are walling it out or in.”⁴¹ The late cultural critic Thomas Yingling also expressed his views about the disproportionate but all too real effects of HIV/AIDS on different generations of gay men, writing, in 1991: “It remains to be seen whether the numbers of younger gay men [. . .] who have joined the battle against AIDS will continue their political work [into the future]. Certainly they, too, know people infected and dying, dead or at risk, but *as a generation* they could choose to avoid AIDS, to see it as the issue of an older generation of gay men.”⁴² Born only five years apart, Monette (b. 1945) and Yingling (b. 1950) would undoubtedly claim their membership in the Stonewall generation—the first to have experienced the triumphant joys of the gay rights movement in the 1970s, and also the first to have experienced the devastating losses of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. Their self-reflexive sense of historicity leads them to worry not only that the generation gap in gay male culture will widen as a direct result of the AIDS epidemic, but, even more terrifying, that HIV/AIDS, in decimating the pre-Stonewall and Stonewall generations, will render moot the idea of a generation gap. The intelligibility of the “gay generation gap”—whether in the present or in the past—ultimately depends upon the existence of more than one cohort group at any historical moment.

That AIDS has been all but evacuated from mainstream and gay male public consciousness attests, unfortunately, to the uncanny prescience of Monette’s and

⁴¹ Paul Monette, *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (New York: Avon, 1988), 6 (original emphases).

⁴² Thomas Yingling, “AIDS in America: Postmodern Governance, Identity, and Experience,” in *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 294 (original emphasis).

Yingling's observations: what was once termed an "epidemic of signification" has since been transformed into what is being termed the "end-of-AIDS" or "post-AIDS" discourse.⁴³ The absence of historical memory concerning the AIDS epidemic is most prevalent among members of Generation Q who resist gay male identity in favor of a postgay identity, and, since the introduction of protease inhibitors as viable drug treatments for HIV/AIDS, of a post-AIDS identity. Generation Q's resistance to gay male identity in itself does not adequately explain the rise in recent years of HIV-infection and unsafe sexual practices among its constituency. Members of Generation Q offer conflicting reasons for this phenomenon. According to Bernstein and Silberman, "Generation Q is the first with no memory of sex before AIDS. We came out in the mid eighties or later, after Rock Hudson became ill and AIDS hit the mainstream media. For us, sex, love, queerness, and AIDS have been inextricably linked from the very beginning" (xvi). Others situated within the same generation location, however, reject what they see as the equation between gayness, sexual liberationism, and promiscuity: "It has finally occurred to Generation Q that [in order] to make any significant progress in our own lives (call it greedy, if you like) it's time for gay men to stop thinking with their dicks (excuse the expression) and start thinking about the future. The buzzword, so to speak, of Generation Q has been POST GAY."⁴⁴ These different views serve as useful reminders that members of similar generation locations are not—nor should we expect them to be—homogenous. More importantly, these views strongly suggest that members

⁴³ See Paula A. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 31-70.

⁴⁴ Qtd. in Christopher Castiglia, "Sex Panics, Sex Publics, Sex Memories," *boundary 2* 27, no. 2 (2000): 152.

of Generation Q have a uniquely paradoxical relationship to the AIDS epidemic. It's certainly true that, in the last two decades, younger gay men's recognition and acceptance of their same-sex desires have been shaped by the fear of sexual risk of HIV. But it's equally true that since protease inhibitors began extending lives, a generation of younger gay men have come of age with the misguided perception of the AIDS epidemic as a chronic, manageable problem, rather than as an enduring health and social crisis that demands our unwavering attention. Generation Q's consciousness of the AIDS epidemic remains radically different from that of previous generations' because devastating loss and mourning have not directly and intimately shaped its members' awareness of HIV/AIDS.

The AIDS epidemic has prevented gay men from creating and sustaining a viable intergenerational culture. While the last two decades have certainly heightened our awareness of the need to preserve a sense of collective memory and identity, they have also heightened our awareness of the difficulties of doing so. In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner explains the problem of queer generations in the following way:

One reason why we have not learned more from [the history of AIDS and AIDS activism] is that queers do not have the institutions for common memory and generational transmission around which straight culture is built. Every new wave of queer youth picks up something from its predecessors but also invents itself from scratch. Many are convinced that they have nothing to learn from the old dykes and clones and trolls, and no institutions—neither households nor schools nor churches nor political groups—ensure that this will happen. And since the most painfully instructed generation has been decimated by death, the queer culture of the present faces more than the usual shortfall in memory. Now younger queers are told all too often that a principled defense of nonnormative sex is just a relic of bygone “liberationism.” This story is given out in bland confidence, since so many of the people who would have contradicted it have died.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 51-52.

That gay male culture struggles to create and sustain viable forms of generational consciousness further complicates the transmission of “sexual lifeways,” which Andrew Hostetler and Gilbert Herdt define as “the culturally specific erotic ideas and emotions, sexual/gender categories and roles, and theories of being and becoming a full social person that together constitute life-course development within a particular *sexual culture*.”⁴⁶ For these reasons, gay men need to commit themselves to struggles over patterns of cultural continuity precisely because of their exclusion from normative reproductive culture.



I would like to offer two final observations about the challenges we face as we continue to examine gay male generation trouble, as well as a strategy for addressing those challenges via a reading of Neil Bartlett’s innovative use of the generation concept in *Who Was That Man?* First, in my view, Generation Q—both as a concept and as a social constituency—embodies some of the contradictions and challenges of what I’ve been describing as generation trouble. The preferred name of Generation Q as a constituency—or its obverse, the queer generation—joins together two terms that have opposing functions: the term *generation* suggests a social body with a distinct identity that, in many respects, contradicts the nonidentitarian principles that many find valuable in the term *queer*. That members of Generation Q fail to see this as a problem—one, I should add, that invites rather than hinders serious reflection about the issue of gay

⁴⁶ Andrew J. Hostetler and Gilbert H. Herdt, “Culture, Sexual Lifeways, and Developmental Subjectivities,” *Social Research* 65 (1998): 264 (original emphasis).

cultural literacy as it pertains to gay identity formation—is symptomatic of their seeming lack of knowledge that *generation* and *queer* are terms whose respective histories predate the emergence of Generation Q as a social constituency. Arguably, Generation Q emerged and gained currency around the same time that the term “queer” appeared in the academy as a theoretical category that effectively opposed not only heterosexuality but also, more broadly, various “regimes of the normal.”⁴⁷ Indeed, critics and theorists who have begun to include the generation concept in their analyses of gay male identity and culture often do so within the framework of the disciplinary transition from gay studies to queer theory (Escoffier 121-24). I have found their analyses helpful as a starting point, though, as I have shown throughout this chapter, gay male generation trouble far exceeds the boundaries of the academy. In other words, there exists a complex relationship between, on the one hand, self-reflexive critiques of heteronormativity by queer theorists and by activists in groups such as ACT UP, Queer Nation, and Sex Panic!, and, on the other, the unselfconscious co-optation of the term “queer” in gay popular culture.

This relationship, moreover, demonstrates that generational contracts function differently in gay male culture than in other sociocultural contexts.⁴⁸ In saying this, I have in mind generation theorist José Ortega y Gasset’s differentiation between the two main kinds of generational periods in history. According to Ortega, “ages of accumulation” signify periods of continuity, whereby the younger generation accepts its inheritance from previous generations; conversely, “ages of elimination and dispute” signify periods

⁴⁷ Michael Warner, introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi.

⁴⁸ For discussions of generational contracts, see the essays in *The New Generational Contract: Intergenerational Relations and the Welfare State*, ed. Alan Walker (London: Routledge, 1996).

of rupture, whereby the younger generation rejects its inheritance.⁴⁹ Gay male generation trouble presents a scenario that does not quite fit Ortega's schematization. Unarguably, particular social and historical events have certainly contributed to the production of gay male generation trouble, just as much as they have to the creation of other forms of generational consciousness in other sociocultural contexts. But gay men have had to negotiate differently their acceptance and/or rejection of their inheritance from previous generations, not only because of their exclusion from normative reproductive culture but also because of their experience of the AIDS epidemic. The very existence of Generation Q—and, specifically, its members' conjoining of two terms that have opposing functions—suggests that processes of accumulation and elimination are not so easily distinguishable in gay male culture, precisely because it lacks formalized institutions of learning and remembering necessary for securing and sustaining its sense of cultural heritage across generations.

My reflections on gay male generation trouble return me to Mannheim's suggestion that "the unity of generations is constituted essentially by a similarity of a number of individuals within a social whole" (365). Specifically, I want to suggest that the "location relationships" between gay men underscore not only the different ways that many of us approach, assimilate, or apply the material or data available to us, whether within or outside the context of gay male culture, but they also show that the generation concept itself figures prominently as part of that very archive of materials and data. Put another way, the generation concept works not only on a discursive level but on a metadiscursive level as well. In the former sense, the generation concept shows that age or generational differences do shape gay men's relation to their cultural traditions and

⁴⁹ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Modern Theme*, trans. James Cleugh (New York: Harper, 1961), 17-18.

history. In the latter sense, gay men of different age groups or generational constituencies *use* the generation concept for radically different purposes. They explicitly make mention of the generation concept—in all its guises—in order to make those very differences visible to begin with. Although it might be argued that this is part and parcel of the generation concept—what generational constituency does not use the concept for various purposes?—I maintain that gay men’s uses of the concept demonstrate far more complex operations than other generational constituencies. Whereas generations are defined, in nongay contexts, solely by specific historical circumstances, in gay male culture, the term “generation” must itself appear in the formulation. In short, *generation* appears as a term that periodizes gay male history even as it secures gay men’s sense of identity and social belonging based on that process of periodization. If we are truly interested in understanding how the problem of generations “can only be solved on the basis of a strict and careful analysis of all its component elements” (Mannheim 395), then we need to be vigilant in evaluating the ways in which Stonewall, the AIDS epidemic, and Generation Q trouble our understanding of gay male identity formations and social belonging. In my view, Stonewall, the AIDS epidemic, and Generation Q are connected less because they are foundational touchstones of gay history in the last several decades, but more so because, in each case, the generation concept modified and helped to shore up our interpretations of those very touchstones.

I would like to conclude with a final strategy for future theoretical elaborations of gay male generation trouble. In an article entitled “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” Judith Butler proposes a “double-edged” mode of critical thinking about gay kinship and gay marriage that is equally relevant for addressing the concerns I have

established in this article. According to Butler, we need to possess an understanding of the terms that structure debates relating to gay sexual life; and, at the same time, we need also to refuse to allow those very same terms to circumscribe the parameters or to determine the outcome of those debates. “If we engage the terms that these debates supply,” she argues, “then we ratify the frame at the moment in which we take our stand. And this signals a certain paralysis in the face of exercising power to change the terms by which such topics are rendered thinkable.”⁵⁰ The further elaboration of gay male generation trouble requires a similar strategy of critical thinking. As I have shown, I’m anxious about the relative ease and haste with which members of Generation Q seek to differentiate themselves from previous gay generations. And I’m equally anxious about the misguided perception, such as those proposed by *Out* magazine in its October 2001 issue, that the “gay generation gap” is a foregone conclusion. Both of these tendencies fail to engage in a Butlerian mode of “double-edged” critical thinking. As we continue to engage in debates about the possibility of a “gay generation gap,” and about whether gay male and queer generations are different in kind or only in degree, we need to be cautious not to allow the generation concept itself to become, in the end, the sole determining measure that defines our identity.

Ultimately, I am hopeful that the definitional and usage problems of the generation concept will motivate us in pursuing gay male generation trouble. I conclude my reflections with yet another strategy drawn from Neil Bartlett’s *Who Was That Man?* In his attempt to examine Oscar Wilde’s pivotal role in the history of homosexuality in London, Bartlett explicitly uses the generation concept in an innovative—and conditional—fashion: that is, he strategically collapses the distinction between the

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” *differences* 13, no. 1 (2002): 40.

biological-genealogical and the sociohistorical dimensions of the generation concept to enrich his understanding of the history of homosexuality—and, also, of his social membership within that history. He explains his interpretation of history and his approach to the generation concept in the following way: “I don’t dwell unnecessarily on the contradictions of Oscar’s social position, or on the peculiarities of my choice of him as father and guide to the city [of London].” “I read [Wilde and about Wilde],” he adds, “in order to discover my solidarity with my gay peers” (35). For Bartlett, Wilde remains important precisely because he is at once father figure and peer, ancestor and cohort. Exploring Wilde’s life enables Bartlett to glimpse into the mirror of the past; the view reflected back leads to his recognition that the past continues to shape, in both indelible and profound measure, his own life and those of his peers and contemporaries. Rather than pose the query “Is There a Gay Generation Gap?” we should instead take Bartlett’s cue and step back to consider a more pressing query—one that allows us to reflect not only upon the present-day relationship between gay male and queer generations, but also upon *their* connections to *past generations*. In order for us to understand who we are, we need also wonder: Who were those men?

Chapter Two

Neil Bartlett's Generation Cues

A lot of people say, “When I read your writing it’s like hearing you talk.” Now they’re usually wrong because the voice they hear when they read my books isn’t my natural voice, it’s a constructed voice in any of my texts, but I think my written texts are always very performative—because they sound like someone’s doing them, because [I] don’t see writing and performing as separate activities.

—Neil Bartlett¹

In his brilliant experimental first-person narrative, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*, playwright, novelist, and performance artist Neil Bartlett explains that his self-education as a gay man began within the confines of a library, and as a result of the scenes of reading that such spaces make possible. “The place I started looking for my story was not the city [of London], but the library,” he confides.² “As I sit in the library, Wilde’s books can make my face break into a ridiculous smile. I look around to see if anyone notices. I will read anything that is ‘about us,’ anything that makes me smile as I see myself” (35). Bartlett stresses that reading has not only indelibly shaped his self-recognition as a gay man, but also helped him secure a sense of belonging with other gay men—and, as I’ve intimated in the previous chapter, not only those gay men who are his contemporaneous cohorts, but also those who have come before him: “I read in order

¹ Qtd. in Andrew Kiernander, “‘Theatre without the stink of art’: An Interview with Neil Bartlett,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 2 (1994): 222.

² Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988), 26. I borrow the classification of Bartlett’s *Who Was That Man?* as an “experimental first-person narrative” from Dianne Chisholm; see her “City of Collective Memory,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7, no. 2 (2001): 195-243.

to discover my solidarity with my gay peers” (35). Writing about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Bartlett reflects: “I recognize in this old book my own feelings when I wake and turn and look at the face of the man sleeping next to me. I discover the heart, the meaning locked in a text which cannot, for historical reasons, declare itself. I sympathize. I understand; I am one of them too” (35). Reading, while affording him immense pleasure, remains a highly serious enterprise that requires diligence and practice: “But note, to read [*Dorian Gray*] in this way, I have to be cultivated” (35).

Bartlett, like many of the authors discussed in the dissertation’s introductory chapter, is an autodidact who embarks on a journey of voracious reading in order to gain an understanding of gay history and his place within it. Gay men, he insists, need to cultivate and educate themselves to become skilled and discerning readers largely “[b]ecause the meanings we seek and need are usually hidden” (36). The process of self-cultivation he is proposing, however, goes beyond reading as a visual engagement with or registration of text. Rather, insofar as gay male reading practices involve deciphering text that is “usually hidden,” they also involve “listening” to what has been silenced or expressed in code out of necessity. Bartlett, I would argue, posits that acts of reading involve acts of listening to these other voices. His engagement with and attentiveness to this dimension of language—what he identifies, in a lecture entitled *The Uses of Monotony*, as “the sound of [. . .] sentences” inherent in written texts—is what distinguishes Bartlett as a specific kind of gay reader.³

In his many theatrical and literary productions, Bartlett engages with language in order to highlight the articulation of such voices—in print, during performance, and

³ Neil Bartlett, *The Uses of Monotony: Repetition in the Language of Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, Edmund White and Juan Goytisolo*, The William Matthews Lecture, delivered at Birkbeck College, London, on 17 May 1994.

through the transmission of oral or folkloric culture. By showing his audience ways of listening, he is, in essence, also showing them ways of reading. Through different strategies—presenting and performing scenes of reading, theorizing about the value of reading in writing and via performance—he directs his readers and theater audiences to acknowledge the importance of becoming literate with diverse print-based archives and performance-based repertoires.⁴ I call Bartlett’s insistence that his readers, listeners, and spectators become literate his “generation cues,” and argue that he advocates the cultivation of heterogeneous forms of literacy—of texts and performances, and of cultural rituals and traditions—as a means towards preserving memory of the past in the present.

To the extent that the term “cues” is oriented both towards performance (i.e., a stage direction or a dramaturgical statement) and towards audience reception (i.e., the ways in which textual and stage performances make manifest and engender particular responses on the part of readers as well as spectators), my term “generation cues” pays homage to Bartlett as playwright and dramatist. Just as a playwright or dramatist would cue his actors and in effect his audience, Bartlett demonstrates to readers and spectators

⁴ In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), Diana Taylor explains that there has been a historic rift “between the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)” (19). Although I find Taylor’s distinction useful, I would qualify that Bartlett’s work, as we shall see, demonstrates that archives and repertoires are not mutually exclusive repositories of knowledge. Moreover, at stake for Bartlett is not only the kinds of knowledge that gets preserved, but also the ways in which they are transmitted across the generations. In this way, he is profoundly engaged in the “arts of transmission.” I borrow this term from a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* guest edited by James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Adrian Johns. In “Arts of Transmission: An Introduction,” they underscore the interrelations between different cultures of communication—print culture, oral culture, manuscript culture, and, most recently, digital or information culture—and, more importantly, call attention to the “ways in which knowledge has been, is, and will be shaped by the transmissive means through which it is developed, organized, and passed on. Those means are technical, both in the restricted modern sense and in the broader, classical sense. That is, they rest not only on devices like the printing press and the internet but on practices: *on skills and crafts that must be learned and transmitted from generation to generation*” (2; my emphasis). See James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Adrian Johns, “Arts of Transmission: An Introduction,” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (2004): 1-6.

of his work the need to recover texts and to revive performances as strategies for establishing both literary-aesthetic and sociocultural continuity in gay culture. In *Who Was That Man?* he articulates his own struggle to find, reclaim, and become literate with a particular kind of language that informs his identity as an urban gay man:

All the time, I needed to find our own words, even if I spoke the same language as other men. I knew from this experience that this speech would be marred and decorated by resistance and confusion. We have very different things to express. This requires the invention of different mannerisms and inflections to alter the meaning of our city's language. I listened to my peers, to the continuous gay chatter of the past hundred years, and I learnt how to do it" (84; original emphases).

Given that such acts of preservation and of queer world-making have been made all the more pressing by the devastation wrought by the AIDS epidemic, it would serve us well to heed and respond to Bartlett's generation cues—to read and listen, and to revive and remember.



Bartlett shares his views of reading and listening to voices in the aptly titled "Words" chapter of *Who Was That Man?* In an act that recalls photographer Robert Giard's encounter with his family dictionary, Bartlett looks up the word homosexual in "the *New English Dictionary*, the first self-proclaimed 'complete' English Dictionary, and which was later to be the *Oxford English Dictionary*." Because the *OED* "was the recognized authority on the words from which Wilde and the others contrived their language," Bartlett concedes that "[i]t is the guide [he is] supposed to turn to" (77). He reports his findings: "Under 'H' (written between 1897-99) there is no entry for **Homosexual** (although one was included in the 1972 Supplement); there are entries for

Effeminate (1888-93), **Invert** (1899-1901) and **Pervert** (1904-09), but I looked them up and none of them refer to us. We do appear at considerable length as **Sodomites** and **Buggers**, but these words are used of us, not by us” (77-78; original emphases). By noting that these words are used to describe men like him, rather than used by men like him, Bartlett models a discerning reading strategy for readers of *Who Was That Man?*

Rejecting the *OED* and its inventory of “perverse” sexual identities, as well as the cultural literacy that such a cataloguing practice promotes, Bartlett cautions gay readers to be attentive to other “voices.” “According to the *Dictionary*, we had no voice of our own. Don’t you believe it,” he warns. “In a different part of the city, our language was spoken, if not recorded. Our history is not a gallery of mute faces. We were using then the words we are using now” (78). He suggests that obtaining cultural literacy involves more than reading the dictionary. It also involves listening to the “voices” that are recorded in other kinds of texts. Bartlett contrasts his encounter with the *OED* with his experience of reading Walter’s multivolume sex diary, *My Secret Life*, which he finds “moving, one hundred years on, not because of anything that is said, but because of the language that is used to say it” (78-79). He quotes an extensive passage in which Walter reproduces a conversation he had with the man he had just picked up in Soho Square:

*“Are you fond of a bit of brown” — he asked — I did not understand and he explained. — “We always say a bit of brown among ourselves” — he questioned me — had I been up a man. — “No” — There was no pleasure like it. — “Shall I suck it?” — “You?” — “Yes?” — “Do you do so?” — “Lord, yes, I had had it so thick in my mouth, that I’ve had to pick it out of my mouth with a toothpick.” . . . “Do let me sod you” said he all at once quite affectionately; “I should so like to do it to you and take your virginity.” (qtd. Bartlett *Who* 78).*

It’s significant that Bartlett should choose to cite a passage of recorded speech, rather than a narrative description from *My Secret Life*. The sentiments and desires articulated in

the passage afford him a moment of intimate identification with the speakers. “I suddenly realize that I recognize the words,” Bartlett explains, “that words I use have been used by others. I wasn’t the first to talk like this, or to be attracted to someone because they do. [. . .] I recognize the voice because it is *ours*” (78-79; original emphasis).

Although Bartlett readily identifies with such voices from the past, he also understands that language inevitably changes with the passing of time. In the “Words” chapter, he offers a primer on the need to cultivate an oral cultural literacy that is attentive to how context determines language use:

The city changes. As we no longer speak only in private, or only in slang, or only in books, how do we, a hundred years on, talk about our lives? Our style must still always be various, chameleon, our speech adaptable, since we speak in such different locations, public and private (the bus, the bar, the bedroom, the living room); it must also accommodate itself to the fact that not everyone speaks the same language at the same time. East still meets West End; a butch queen can’t be butch all the time; and a sixteen-year-old must talk to a sixty-year-old. A particular sentence must have a different meaning for a man who is still waiting to come out, a man who is rarely in a room filled with other gay men, and for a man who goes to a gay pub at least three times a week, who has a lover and has been on the scene for six years. A pub in Soho does not speak the same language as a pub in Wimbledon. (83)

The above passage is striking because it privileges verbal speech and language over written language. Gay men “speak” in different ways—“in private,” “in slang.” We “talk” (rather than write?) “about our lives.” Conversations make possible the crossing of geographical, affective, and generational boundaries between gay men: “East still meets West End; a butch queen can’t be butch all the time; a sixteen-year-old must talk to a sixty-year-old.” Moreover, the passage is remarkable because it locates gay men’s engagement with language and with each other in “different locations, public and private.” Bartlett underscores the relationship between text and context, explaining that the grammatical unit of any “particular sentence” would mean different things when

articulated by different gay men. Bartlett's humorous, anthropomorphical endowment of pubs with the capacity for speech underscores his unequivocal appreciation of the role of verbal language and oral culture in the lives of urban gay men.

In the end, though, he recognizes that, while some of the language gay men use is unique to gay culture, it is also the same language that is used and circulated in mainstream culture: "our speech must constantly acknowledge and play with the fact that there is and cannot be a language that is ours alone. Our words are not entirely under our own control. [. . .] There is no separate stream of language, a gutter of arcane gossip, that we can claim as ours. Our language has always been part of the other languages which the *Dictionary* assembles. We must remember that even the simplest words, the word 'man' for instance, have a history. They have a life of their own" (83, 84). It's worth dwelling on Bartlett's unique strategy for coping with this double bind: "our speech must constantly acknowledge and play with the fact that there is and cannot be a language that is ours alone." We must do more than acknowledge this fact; we must also *play* with it. Put another way, he advocates an active and improvisatory engagement with language throughout *Who Was That Man?* and in his other works.



Bartlett shares his views on the interrelations between language and improvisation—and, in the process, between writing and performance—most compellingly in a lecture entitled *The Uses of Monotony: Repetition in the Language of Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, Edmund White and Juan Goytisolo*, which was delivered at Birkbeck College, London, in 1994. I want to spend a bit of time considering this lecture,

since the views Bartlett articulates in it can help us appreciate his aesthetic vision concerning the interrelations between reading, written and oral forms of language, and performance. At the outset of the lecture, Bartlett admits that he will be “speaking from notes, not reading a written paper,” and explains his choice for this extemporaneous mode of address. First, he wants to establish “a clear distinction between [his] own speaking voice, which will be rather disorganised,” and “the extremely organised and distinctive prose” of the authors whose works he’ll be reading from and discussing in the lecture. Second, he wishes to allow himself “room to ramble a little,” a gesture that serves both rhetorical and polemical purposes, since part of his goal is to demonstrate “why one might ramble and what rambling can achieve as a literary device.” Finally, Bartlett wants to underscore the relationship between the lecture’s form—that is, its improvisatory quality—and its content, which is a theoretical formulation about the value of improvisation. “[I]t is important that you know that I am speaking out loud, and in some sense improvising on themes,” Bartlett explains to his audience, “because that is a quality of written text—a quality of improvisation—which I think is too little thought about. We all think, because books are written down that they are primarily conceived of in terms of text. This seems to me to be deeply untrue,” he concludes (1).

In *The Uses of Monotony*, as well as in his other works, Bartlett is engaged in a project of historical excavation and recovery. By dramatizing through oral performance the “quality of improvisation” inherent in “written text[s],” he seeks not only to call into question the narrow and misguided view of the “fixity” of written texts. More significantly, as he explains, he wants to think through the ways in which performance enables and facilitates the transmission of knowledge across generations. At one point in

the lecture he suggests that the improvisatory quality of writings by homosexual authors provides evidence for making “an argument for the most remarkable consistency of gay culture,” which, he clarifies, is not “the same thing as saying that there is a distinctive gay voice or gay sensibility or anything like that” (10). Bartlett argues that it’s possible “to trace an ancestry of the sentence from [Wilde and] Proust through to authors as various as Edmund White or Tennessee Williams or Juan Goytisolo” (10). “[T]o be able to see”—and, as we’ve already discovered, in effect, to be able to hear or listen to—“a form of sentence making its way through history in that way” leads Bartlett to conclude that “there must be something going on” (10-11). For Bartlett, the “consistency of gay culture” resides not only in its written texts, but also in the audible and improvisatory quality of those texts. Put another way, the project of tracing “an ancestry of the sentence” involves a very specific kind of reading practice: rather than solitary or silent reading, it involves reading out loud—that is, reading *as* performance.

To be sure, Bartlett himself strives to achieve this aesthetic standard in his own work.⁵ In the remainder of this chapter, I want to explore the aesthetic affinities between

⁵ Bartlett appropriately draws upon the language of oratory and performance—and, specifically, upon metaphors of sound and gesture—to talk about writing by Wilde, Genet, White, and Goytisolo in *The Uses of Monotony*. He claims that these authors’ “use of punctuation, for instance, reflects the punctuation of the speaking voice,” or what he identifies as “a dramatic punctuation” that is different from “a literary punctuation” (1). Bartlett is here concerned less with the issue of grammatical punctuation, and more with making audible the aural and oral texture of printed words and text. That is to say, he invites his listeners to be attentive during the lecture not only to the sound of his speaking voice, but more particularly to the ways in which that voice is “punctuating” the texts by Wilde, Genet, White, and Goytisolo he is reading from. Bartlett admires these authors for “the sound of their sentences” (3, 8) and for the improvisatory quality of their prose, characterized by “sentences that seem to go on for ever and never get quite where you thought or hoped they might get to” (3), which leads him to conclude that, for the authors discussed in his lecture, “it is the *gesture* of the sentence, the *cadence* of the sentence rather than the *sense* [. . .] that matters” (7; original emphases). Barnett’s distinction between a “dramatic punctuation” and a “literary punctuation” exposes an obvious familiarity with the long-standing and complex debate between text and performance, which has been well-rehearsed and staged by critics in theater and performance studies. For a discussion of the differences between “dramatic text” and “performance text,” see John Rouse, “Textuality and Authority in Theater and Drama: Some Contemporary Possibilities,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 146-157. For a

reading and performance as they are staged in two of Bartlett's theatrical productions: *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep (Part Three)* (1989/1990), a play subtitled "a spectacle devoted to the memory of Simeon Solomon," a well-known nineteenth-century painter and poet who was arrested for "gross indecency"; and *Night After Night* (1993), an autobiographical musical about Bartlett's father, Trevor, and his own impending birth. As we will see, these works make reference to other texts and performances: *A Vision of Love* is based on Solomon's 1871 homoerotic prose poem of the same title, while *Night After Night* quotes lyrics from various mid-twentieth-century musicals. Figuring textuality in literal ways, Bartlett highlights in these works the profound role reading plays both in the formation of archives and in the constitution of identity. In *A Vision of Love*, Bartlett and the other actors are shown not only reciting, but literally reading from, Solomon's book and other texts. In *Night After Night*, the cast of this musical-within-a-musical is repeatedly shown to consult a programme, though all the actors have committed to memory their scenes. Through such scenes of reading and recitation, Bartlett bridges the present with the past in an effort to construct a queer literary-aesthetic tradition in which to situate himself. In the process, he also models for his audiences the role of particular reading practices in creating a sense of belonging to an ongoing queer sociocultural formation.



discussion of this debate in specific relation to modernist and avant-garde aesthetics, see the essays collected in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*, ed. James M. Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). Finally, for a useful overview of the historical development of the disciplines of theater and performance studies, see Julia A. Walker, "Why Performance? Why Now?: Textuality and the Rearticulation of Human Presence," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 16, no. 1 (2003): 149-75.

In his effort to make audible the improvisatory and aural quality of textuality in his work, Bartlett makes an important contribution to our understanding of the challenges of creating, sustaining, and transmitting a queer literary-aesthetic tradition across generations. Significantly, for Bartlett, the literary archive is neither the sole repository of the past nor the singular carrier of the historical record. He also understands that oral and folkloric culture functions, in equally meaningful and transformative ways, in the creation and transmission of the historical past in the present. To borrow from David Román's recent study, *Performance in America*, I would suggest that Bartlett in his work is centrally concerned with addressing the question: "How might performance enable the transmission of cultural memory from one historical moment to another?"⁶

Bartlett tackles this question in his experimental play *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* and, by reading aloud on stage, underscores the aural/oral texture of printed words and text through and via performance. *A Vision of Love* is based on a homoerotic prose poem of the same title published in 1871 by Simeon Solomon, a painter and poet who was arrested and charged for "gross indecency" in 1873.⁷ In Solomon's poem, a male speaker has a dream vision in which he is led on a journey of self-discovery by his

⁶ David Román, *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 141.

⁷ Simon Reynolds describes the incident in his excellent book, *The Vision of Simeon Solomon* (Gloucester, UK: Catalpa Press, 1984), which not only offers a useful biography of Solomon's life and career, but also reprints the full text of Solomon's prose poem "A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep" and reproduces a number of his paintings. "At 7:10 p.m. on the evening of February 11th 1873," Reynolds writes, "the police arrested Solomon in a public lavatory situated in Stratford Place Mews, off Oxford Street. He and his partner 'in crime,' George Roberts, a sixty-year-old stableman, were taken to the police station and medically examined; neither was found to be under the influence of drink. The offence of sodomy being unproven, they were charged next morning at Marylebone Police Station with gross indecency [. . .]. At the Clerkenwell Petty Session of February 24th, the accused pleaded not guilty to the charge, but both were found guilty: Roberts was sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment whilst Solomon's sentence was mitigated to a mere six weeks in the Clerkenwell House of Correction and a fine of £100" (81).

“Soul.” Bartlett uses Solomon’s poem as both pretext and context for considering the connections between the past and the present. He recontextualizes the poem’s allegory of self-discovery to probe issues such as gay bashing and the AIDS epidemic in relation to gay male identity formation. He admits in the preface to the printed edition of *A Vision of Love* that his “fascination with the life and work of Simeon Solomon is easily explained. It is always better to tell your own story by telling someone else’s. In dark times, which ours surely are, then you turn to the unlikeliest heroes for moral and spiritual support. And in a time when gay culture seems under such attack, the story of this man seems particularly vivid, not just because of his courage, his defiance and his beautiful paintings, but because that story, although he died only in 1905, has been so completely lost. The piece is about many different kinds of inspiration, many different meanings of the word ‘survival.’ It is about how I feel when I stand, now, in the centre of the city of London, and look at a Solomon painting” (84). Solomon’s story “has been so completely lost” not because it was undocumented or unrecorded. Rather, his story has been lost because it has not been taught as an integral story in gay history. Thus, in *A Vision of Love* Bartlett seeks to recuperate and reclaim Simeon Solomon as a figure whose life and example continue to be relevant for understanding the formation of gay male cultural identity in the late twentieth century. And he stages this process of recuperation and reclamation by performing the archive.

It’s worth pausing momentarily over Bartlett’s understanding and use of the archive, his ambivalence concerning the ephemerality and nonreproducibility of performance, and his recognition for the need to preserve performance in writing on the

other.⁸ He shares his views on these matters in the printed edition of *A Vision of Love*.

“The ‘script’ of **A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep**,” he explains, “attempts to document a piece of devised gay performance; it is not actually a script at all in the conventional sense. It is a transcript of an actual performance—and even then it omits those passages of improvisation which are crucial to the effect of the show but which simply wouldn’t make sense written down” (82). The “script” of this improvisatory play constitutes and records “documented hearsay,” a source that, according to Bartlett, is significant in the historical archive.

At the same time, Bartlett is equally invested in what can be called *undocumented* hearsay. This investment manifests itself in Bartlett’s ambivalence about the relationship between speech and writing. As he explains in the preface to *A Vision of Love*:

No account of gay performance and performances, whether historical or contemporary, which deals only with that kind of theatre which is based on scripts or playtexts can be considered complete or representative. It would, for instance, be very odd to construct a history which omitted all reference to our only two unique British theatrical art forms, the pantomime and pub drag (as opposed to American glamour drag or continental *travestie*), just because neither of those forms can be in any useful way represented by a script. [. . .] If by a “gay theater” we mean art made by gay people which is created out of distinctively gay imaginations and out of the traditions of gay culture and experience—a theater which creates gay images and gay language rather than just “gay characters”—then that gay theatre cannot be adequately represented by a collection of scripts. (82)

Bartlett understands that performances are defined and constituted by their ephemerality and thus nonreproducibility. At the same time, however, he is profoundly aware and appreciative of the role of writing for preserving and transmitting such performances

⁸ In her book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), Peggy Phelan argues: “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology” (146; original emphasis).

across generations. He phrases this concern rhetorically as a question in the preface to *A Vision of Love*: “The problem is, how do you preserve, disseminate or even talk about this other theatre, since it is the unique property of the artists who make it? It is art generated and made public by the artist themselves, not written down and then realized by someone else” (82). Bartlett addresses these questions by performing—or, more precisely, by reperforming—the archive in *A Vision of Love*. For, as Joseph Roach reminds us, “[t]o perform also means [. . .] to reinvent” (xi). That is to say, Bartlett does not merely cite passages from various sources; on the contrary, he literally re-cites through performance.

It’s apt that Bartlett should insist that the printed version of the play remains but a “transcript” that “attempts to document a piece of devised gay performance.” The term “transcript” underscores the practices of recovery that *A Vision of Love* is ostensibly meditating upon. For the prefix *trans* suggests the idea and the aspiration to carry—to carry over time and across generations—both documented and undocumented evidence. Bartlett thus explores the ways in which aesthetic-literary traditions are created and transmitted both in written archives and in oral language. The concept of “orature,” as defined by Kenyan novelist and director Ngugi wa Thiong’o, is especially useful for understanding Bartlett’s project in *A Vision of Love*. “Written language and orature,” Ngugi explains, “are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries. [. . .] Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.”⁹ In a statement that resonates

⁹ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 15-16.

with Ngugi's reflections on Gikũyũ as a vernacular language, Bartlett, as we have seen, expresses his commitment to discovering and preserving a gay vernacular language in *Who Was That Man?* I am referring, specifically, to his intent to hear and pay heed "*to the continuous gay chatter of the past hundred years, and I learnt how to do it*" (84; original emphases). Bartlett puts the matter more bluntly in an interview explaining his views of the responsibilities of the artist: "I have an image of the artist as being someone who is conductor of or receptor for my culture—and things are going through me which are larger than myself. I am using the language; I am talking about incidents and images which don't belong to me."¹⁰

Mixing together and creating an eclectic pastiche of textual materials drawn from both historical and contemporary archives, Bartlett in *A Vision of Love* refuses to privilege or grant absolute authority to any single textual material or source. The play cites extensive passages from Solomon's poem as well as from an eclectic range of other printed materials. "Almost everything that is said about Solomon in the show is said in the words of historical accounts, letters, newspapers, documented hearsay. There's text stolen from Dickens, from Marie Lloyd and from the Bible; material from other texts by Solomon and from his letters" (82). The play also draws upon contemporary archives to augment and supplement its use of the historical archive. "There is text culled from newspapers published, and TV and radio programmes broadcast, during the period of the work's devising," Bartlett goes on to explain in the preface. He further suggests that the textual passages culled and created "through discussion, arguments and gossip with and confession to the company" are "apparently informal, personal and colloquial." But "this

¹⁰ Neil Bartlett, interview by Peter Burton, in *Talking to: Peter Burton in Conversation with . . .* (Exeter: Third House, 1991), 4.

material,” he immediately qualifies, when located “in the mouths of the particular queens who made this show [. . .] becomes as ‘textual,’ as ‘historic,’ as vivid with meaning and allusion and distinctive period rhythm, as anything from the nineteenth century” (83).

Bartlett underscores the collaborative and improvisatory efforts of the members of the company, who “worked on, refined, and put into almost audible quotation marks” textual passages for inclusion in the play (83). The script “was not written by one person; it was devised by the company, using, as a basis for six weeks of rehearsal, text which had been devised in the rehearsals for two earlier, solo versions of the show created over a two-year period.” “As is often the case with work as influenced by the working practices of performance art as by theatre,” he goes on to explain, “almost all the material used in the performance is ‘found’—historical or personal material stolen, borrowed, reworked and re-placed, spoken with new meaning. This is indicated in the script by the use of a different typeface” (82).¹¹

I’m struck by Bartlett’s claim that there are passages in *A Vision of Love* that are “put into almost audible quotation marks,” and that it contains material that, through performance, is “spoken with new meaning.” Resonant with the idea he proposed in *The Uses of Monotony* that there is an audible quality inherent in written sentences, the claims he makes in *A Vision of Love* likewise highlight the interrelationship between orality and

¹¹ Art historian Gayle M. Seymour provides a brief production history of Bartlett’s *A Vision of Love* in her article, “Simeon Solomon and the Biblical Construction of Marginal Identity in Victorian England,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 33, nos. 3/4 (1997): 97-119. She writes: “Neil Bartlett (author) and Robin Whitmore (artist and set designer) performed their first version of ‘A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep’ at the Battersea Arts Centre, London, February 18-21, 1987. It was subsequently revised and performed at a derelict warehouse on Butler’s Wharf, Tower Bridge, London, October 20-November 14, 1987. In December 1987 Bartlett performed his solo version at Oxford, Sheffield, Glasgow (The Third Eye Centre), Edinburgh, and Loughborough, and internationally at Copenhagen in April 1988. ‘A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep, Part III,’ was revised and the cast enlarged in 1989, and performed at the Drill Hall Arts Centre, March 1-18” (117; fn. 1).

oral performance on the one hand, and textuality and print on the other. What does Bartlett mean when he claims that contemporary textual sources, when translated and articulated via performance in the play, can be rendered “as ‘textual,’ as ‘historic, as vivid with meaning and allusion [. . .] as anything from the nineteenth century””? How does performance—the space and temporality of performance—facilitate this process of translating and transforming textuality into something that would *sound like* or *resonate with* “distinctive period rhythm” consonant with the nineteenth century?

Through performance, Bartlett succeeds in translating the oral/aural texture of textuality and print. In other words, he deliberately conflates the language of speech and orality to talk about writing and print, and in effect makes the audience register the extent to which textual passages are “put almost in audible quotation marks” and “spoken with new meaning” during and through performance. Indeed, a glance at the “script” of *A Vision of Love* easily reveals a number of different typographical markings. According to Bartlett, “the use of a different typeface” reproduced in what is ostensibly “a transcript of an actual performance” is meant to convey the extent to which the material is “reworked and re-placed,” and, most strikingly, “spoken with new meaning.” Put another way, to make both audible the improvisatory quality of the play’s materials requires that they be represented visually through the use of different typefaces. The visual and the typographical are conflated with the auditory and the performative. It is impossible to escape from this aporia. While readers of the printed edition of Bartlett’s play have access to and are able to see and read these typographical markings on the page, spectators of *A Vision of Love* experience something else entirely: for audience members of the play, this kind of “close reading” involves instead skills that resemble “close

listening.” The relationship between “close reading” and “close listening,” I would argue, helps us better appreciate Bartlett’s ambivalence towards the role of writing and textuality in the history of gay theater and performance. In short, Bartlett’s generation cues propose a queer cultural literacy that requires skills both in close reading and in close listening.

The opening scene of *A Vision of Love* introduces the inextricable relationship between reading and listening as they pertain to the problem of cultural literacy. The play opens with two different scenes of reading—one offstage, outside the parameters of the action proper; the other, onstage, as part of the play itself. In the conclusion of his prefatory remarks to the play, you may recall, Bartlett writes that *A Vision of Love* “is about many different kinds of inspiration, many different meanings of the word ‘survival’” (84). This pretext or paratext is reflected in the play’s opening, during which Bartlett offers the different meanings of the words “vision” and “visionary.” At the start red velvet curtains part on stage to reveal “*a wall of black fabric,*” onto which are projected “*a sequence of captions, white letters on a night sky*” (87). The first several captions present definitions of the words “VISION” and “VISIONARY” from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, while the last two introduce the play’s title and subtitle: “a spectacle dedicated to the memory of Mr S Solomon” (87).

VISION

VISION: SOMETHING WHICH IS APPARENTLY SEEN OTHERWISE THAN BY ORDINARY
SIGHT: PRESENTED TO THE MIND IN SLEEP OR IN AN ABNORMAL STATE

VISION: A PERSON SEEN IN A DREAM OR TRANCE

VISION: A PERSON OF UNUSUAL BEAUTY

VISIONARY: 1) ONE TO WHOM UNKNOWN THINGS ARE REVEALED

II) ONE WHO INDULGES IN FANTASTIC IDEAS/ AN UNPRACTICAL
ENTHUSIAST

A VISION OF LOVE REVEALED IN SLEEP

a spectacle dedicated to the memory of Mr S Solomon[.] (87)

These captions comprise a visual text whose very existence as the play's material background implicates the audience in a collective act of reading. Moreover, to the extent that this list is literally drawn from the *OED*, it suggests not only Bartlett's attempt to thematize the play's concerns, but also to foster a basic literacy, that is, a familiarity, with the definitions of the term "vision," and of its cognate, "visionary."

The "extratheatrical" experience of reading engendered by the projection of these captions is followed, moments later, by a metatheatrical scene of reading onstage. Soon after the appearance of these captions, "*a single naked lightbulb snaps on*" to reveal "*a semi-naked man, posed like an artist's model,*" and carrying a portrait (87). The man, who the audience recognizes as the playwright himself, explains that the portrait is of Simeon Solomon (88). Bartlett then proceeds to deliver a monologue, in which he cites passages from Solomon's prose poem, "A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep," as well as offers a brief biography of Solomon.¹² Behind Bartlett, the back of the theater "*can now be dimly seen in the lights,*" revealing a "*gold wall*": "*it is in fact a giant decayed, unfinished canvas, its golden surface covered in fragments of Solomon's paintings and drawings [. . .]. Across the painting, spreading out onto the walls of the theatre in gold*

¹² Gesturing to the portrait he holds in his arms, Bartlett intones: "This is a picture of Mr Simeon Solomon, born in London in 1840, in the nineteenth century. He died here, in London, in 1905, in the twentieth century, in our century. Mr Solomon was short, fat, thinlegged . . . ugly; everybody said so, ugly. Alcoholic. Redhaired. Bald. Criminal. Homosexual. Jewish—and this night is dedicated to him. Of all the lives I could cry for, tonight it is him I choose to mourn; and of all the men I could choose to follow[,] it is him I choose to follow tonight, on this night of all nights" (88).

script, can be seen the three quotations from The Song of Solomon which begins Neil's first text" (88).

At approximately the same time that the gold wall is revealed to the audience, Bartlett "walks to the painting, and hangs the portrait of Solomon on a nail sticking out of its worn and paint-splattered surface," then "turns again to face [the audience], walks forward [onstage] and picks up a small, old red-bound book that has been left lying on the studio floor." Having picked up the volume, Bartlett addresses the audience, saying: "And [Solomon] also wrote a book. And this, this is his book. He called it *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*. And everything I say tonight is true, and everything I say tonight is written here, in this book, and this book was published in 1871" (88). The stage directions then read: "*He then begins to read from the book; the phrases of text are continually supported, punctuated and interrupted by the piano*" (88).

This metatheatrical scene of reading makes explicit the role of reading that the play has thus far posited—both in the projection of the *OED* definitions of the terms "vision" and "visionary" and, in more complex ways, in the projection of the three quotations from Solomon's *A Vision of Love*. That the audience would recognize these *as quotations* is a result not of the visualization of text per se—a case of, say, *déjà vu*. More precisely, this represents an instance of what I would call the visualization of text that is *already heard*.

According to the stage directions, once Bartlett is revealed standing on stage, he "looks as if he has been woken in the middle of the night" and begins to speak "in the broken, sleepy way you do speak when, for instance, woken by a phone call at half-past-two in the morning" (87). In both form and content, Bartlett's monologue is delivered

“broken.” I quote at length his opening monologue (as it is reproduced in the printed edition of *A Vision of Love*):

Neil What time is it? Is it late?

Upon the waning of the night, at that time when stars are pale, and when dreams wrap us about more closely . . .

Are we alone?

I was sleeping. I was asleep, I must have been dreaming. I had this dream, and when I woke up I could remember three things, and the first thing was,

“I sleep, but my heart waketh;”

and the second thing was

“Many waters cannot quench love;”

and the third thing . . . the third thing was,

“Until the day break, and the shadows flee away.”

And I fell to musing and pondering upon these things and then, behold, there came to me a vision, and I was walking in a strange land that I knew not, and it was filled with a light I had never seen before, and I was dressed as a traveler. And so I set forth, dazed, and wondering, with my eyes cast down upon the ground, and I felt just as one who sets forth on a journey but who knows not yet its goal;

I didn’t know where I was supposed to be going. And so . . .

I called upon my spirit to make itself clearer to me, and to show me, as in a glass what it was I sought; to show me what I was supposed to be looking for. *Then the silence of the night was broken, and for short while I knew nothing . . .* and then I looked up, and there was someone standing there. Standing right there beside me. (87; original emphases)

No doubt Bartlett’s delivery of this monologue would have contained stops and different intonations of voice. Readers of the printed version of the devised script of *A Vision of Love* can easily register the differences in typescript that are meant to signal differences of textual sources. In the majority of examples, the text that is reproduced in bold,

italicized letters refers to direct quotations (with some minor, though significant, differences) from Solomon's prose poem. In some cases, bold, italicized text signals material that has been "worked on" and "refined" by the company in their collaboration.

In *A Vision of Love* Bartlett seeks to represent onstage this idea of making audible "the continuous gay chatter of the past hundred years." A particularly striking stage direction in the play reads: "**Neil strikes a grand art-historical pose; *The Artist's Model*. During this sequence he begins to play ventriloquist, the voice moving between his own and that of the nineteenth-century polite society that he is conjuring. The effect is of a solitary figure in an empty studio, but a studio crowded with absent people from the past**" (90). This specific stage direction exposes the irreconcilable but productive tension between visibility and writing on the one hand—the play is entitled *A Vision of Love*, after all, and its opening scene includes the words "vision" and "visionary," and their *OED* definitions, projected on the back wall of the stage—and with orality and aurality on the other, that is, with voice. Put another way, what this stage direction stresses, I would argue, is less the visual effect of registering Bartlett's "*grand art-historical pose*" as an "*artist's model*," and more the oral/aural effect of him as a "*ventriloquist*," whose voice strives to move and shuttle between the play's present (the form and temporality of its actual performance) and the past (the historical context of the play). The play's audience sees "*a solitary figure in an empty studio*," but they simultaneously (are led to) hear "*a studio crowded with absent people from the past*."

The play's stage directions highlight the various instances whereby Bartlett is cued to change or modulate his voice. These cues—registered visually on the page by readers, and audibly during the performance by audience members—function to locate

the fact that Bartlett is delivering or citing passages from different texts, as well as to mark shifts in the play's actions, both onstage and offstage. In the opening sequence alone, Bartlett is directed in the following ways: "**Neil's voice suddenly cuts from the elevated, gentle tone of the opening to a common, chatty, sexy conversation with the men in the audience**" (88); "*He begins to read from [Solomon's book]; the phrases of the text are continually supported, punctuated and interrupted by the piano*" (88); "**Neil improvises a brief talk with the audience, breaks the tension, welcomes any latecomers, has a drink and returns to reading from [Solomon's] book**" (89); "**Neil's voice changes into that of a preacher**" (89); and "**Neil's voice drops into a hushed sexual whisper**" (89). While it is significant to note the various typographical markings of the stage directions, it is more important to register that these directions need to be *performed* in order for their differences to be materialized. In other words, performance not only articulates and makes manifest, but also mediates, the writing that describes the play's actions.

In an article on the work of Nathaniel Mackey, Brent Hayes Edwards argues that "we consistently encounter [in the work of Nathaniel Mackey] examples of music straining towards speech, or embodying the noise at the edges of articulate expression. Indeed the convergence between a writing so obsessed by sound and music so drawn to speech might be best understood as a common concern with the limits of *voice*—its inception, its exhaustion. Voice in all its connotations: as the particular physical apparatus, the ways a throat channels air, as advocacy, as 'speaking for,' as articulation, joining phonemes into an utterance; as the abstraction of personality, an 'individual voice'; even as a disembodiment or haunting, communication from an unseen source" (573; original emphasis). Edwards is here theorizing about the function of voice in the

work of Mackey and, more generally, in black expressive culture. For the purposes of my discussion of Bartlett's engagement with gay expressive culture in *A Vision of Love*, I would modify Edwards' argument and suggest that Bartlett is concerned not only with the limits of voice, but also with the potentially infinite plenitude of voice, that is to say, not with its exhaustion, but with its multiplicity. As textual, printed objects, the stage directions—as well as Bartlett's and the actors' delivery of those directions—foreground the various functions of voice and its effects in the play.

The idea of voice is of course present in Solomon's prose poem "A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep." In the poem, the speaker falls asleep and is awakened by a vision who represents an allegorical figure of the speaker's "Soul." Significantly, the vision—or, rather, the visionary figure—in Solomon's poem is a *speaking* vision. The poem, in effect, describes the speaker's externalized conversation with the projection of his inner soul. In the final scene of *A Vision of Love*, Bartlett attempts to represent this externalized conversation between speaker and soul, and, in the process, literalizes the complicated relationship between the reading of text on the one hand, and the performance of reading on the other. According to the stage directions: "**Regina, Bette and Ivan** [the Three Queens] *ascend the stairs, pausing half way up. Bette turns and gives Neil an envelope. Neil opens it, and reads the letter to the audience.*" Neil delivers the following closing monologue:

Simeon Solomon wrote me a letter. And this is what he said: *My Dear Boy, . . . Thank you so much for sending me your photograph. You're not quite what I was expecting, but I must say that I think you are very attractive. I can't help, however, wishing that you were just a year or two younger. Since I last wrote to you, it seems, things have got worse. Please, try not to be too frightened. And tell me darling, because it's what I'd really like to know, are you on your own? Are you alone?*

I'm very sorry I can't be with you tonight.

Lots of love . . . lots of love.

The final stage directions read: “**Neil** kisses the paper, and then shows it to the audience. It is completely blank. He holds the paper up in the last of the light” (112).

That Bartlett should read aloud a letter that turns out to be blank is certainly consistent with his views of improvisatory performance. At the same time, however, considering that Bartlett borrows and embeds such an eclectic mix of textual sources in *A Vision of Love*, and considering that the play is about reading and the archive, it's both curious and remarkable that Bartlett should conclude with a scene involving a blank letter. What is the significance of the blank letter? I would suggest that Bartlett, in the concluding scene of *A Vision of Love*, is not only performing a scene of reading, but he is in effect modeling a literate practice where reading becomes an act of pure imagination. After delivering his monologue in the opening scene, Bartlett, according to the stage directions, “hangs the portrait of Solomon on a nail [. . .]. Quietly, he bends to kiss the portrait on the lips, and murmurs something in its ear which the audience cannot hear” (88). The play's concluding scene, I would suggest, intimates that Bartlett has “heard” Solomon's words, and, in reading aloud the letter, that he is sharing those words with the audience. The audience is made to register the words aurally, even though the letter is blank. Put another way, the letter at the end of *A Vision of Love* is the imagined response—by Solomon to Bartlett's earlier, private murmurings to Solomon—a response that the audience shares in hearing as a result of Bartlett's reading out loud.



Those in the audience familiar with *Who Was That Man?*, published in 1988, a year prior to the production of *A Vision of Love*, might recall Bartlett's use of the letter genre in one of the chapters in that earlier work.¹³ Entitled "Messages," the ninth chapter of *Who Was That Man?* contains two letters, both of which are addressed to Wilde. I would suggest that Bartlett's letters to Wilde demonstrate what Carolyn Dinshaw identifies in another context as "a queer historical impulse" on the part of contemporary critics to the historical past for "partial, affective connection, for community, for even a touch across time."¹⁴ Notwithstanding their shared attempt to establish a queer touch across time with an addressee named Oscar Wilde, the two letters in *Who Was That Man?* differ significantly in both tenor and content. Bartlett begins the first letter with the salutation "Dear Oscar," then goes on to describe, to his imagined interlocutor, visiting his gravesite in Paris. The visit to Wilde's gravesite inspires Bartlett who, upon returning to London, "started writing" what presumably became the text entitled *Who Was That Man?* (211). "Darling, it's all for you," he notes,

We're doing this all for you. I wish you could be here to see us. The streets are not all that different—you wouldn't get lost—but we are very different these days. Can you imagine, tonight I walked down the Strand with my lover, and we talked about which pub we would go and drink in; we have a choice of places to go now [. . .]. I can't make it up to you, and it doesn't justify what they did to you, but I wanted to tell you nevertheless. I think you didn't know things were going to change, and that really you weren't trying to change anything. You weren't thinking about us. The weight of a lover's arm on your shoulder is not a sensation you can ever enjoy now, nothing can ever be worth what was done to you, nothing can change that, but oh almost it does. We're walking your streets.

We're doing it all for you. It's all for you,
Love

¹³ Letters will continue to appear in Bartlett's work. In *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (New York: Plume, 1992), the protagonist Boy periodically receives letters from a figure named "Father," as well as a letter from Mother/Madame explaining the contents of a package she gives him as part of his education (76-77).

¹⁴ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1, 21.

Separated merely by an arrow \Rightarrow the second letter reads:

Oscar, you fat bitch,

Last night I dreamed your hand was on my face. You were there in the bed, big and fat like I've been told you were, lying in bed and taking up all the room. It was quite funny at first. I tried to ignore you. I tried to get back to sleep, but I was uneasy about sleeping. I thought you might be watching. Sometimes, half-asleep, I'd roll over and knock against your body, our skins would rub together, and then I'd feel your hand on my face. [. . .] So I got up and put on the lights and [. . .] waited for you to talk. I realized that I had no idea what your voice would sound like. [. . .]

I wanted you to talk; I would have listened to anything you might have said. I would have held you if you'd wanted me to. I would have talked or listened all night. After all, I've done that for a lot of other men. I would have done anything; masturbated in front of you, or let you do anything you wanted.

And you said nothing, you didn't even look at me half the time. You smoked. Your eyes were dead, your fat white flesh was sweating slightly and quite dead. [. . .] I couldn't talk [. . .]. I couldn't say what I wanted to say. I don't pity you. I don't even want to ask your advice, just to hear your stories. I'll work out what they might mean to me. Please, say anything at all to me, and I can use it. You old queen, you've got your hand on my face, I can't talk now.

Love, (211-13)

Bartlett's tone in the first letter is poignant, even wistful: he wants to communicate to Wilde that London's contemporary gay culture can trace its roots back to Wilde and the late nineteenth century. He further wants his imagined interlocutor to understand that part of the *raison d'être* of gay culture is to voice and make articulate "the love dare not speak its name." In the second letter, though, the tone is one of frustration resulting from an imagined indifference on the part of Wilde, as well as anger at the supposed legacy left by Wilde. Just as he illustrates with reading the blank letter from Solomon at the end of *A Vision of Love*, Bartlett demonstrates at least two ways of processing Wilde's legacy—our inheritance as gay men—in his two radically different letters to Wilde in *Who Was That Man?* In both *A Vision of Love* and *Who Was That Man?* Bartlett underscores how our interpretations of text and history are acts of pure imagination, and that such

interpretations depend on context and are necessarily provisional. By imagining his connection to Wilde and to Solomon, Bartlett models for his audiences a literate practice that cultivates a gay cultural literacy based on these two historical figures.



Whereas he looks to Solomon to locate an aesthetic-literary tradition in *A Vision of Love*, and to Wilde in *Who Was That Man?*, Bartlett looks to musical theater in *Night After Night* as an archive integral both to contemporary gay culture and to his personal life story. In his preface to the printed edition of the musical, Bartlett explains that “*Night After Night* started with an anecdote: my father’s memories of a visit to the West End in 1958 made me wonder about the differences (and similarities) between his nights out and mine.”¹⁵ First performed in 1993 at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh and at the Royal Court Theatre in London, the musical’s concern with alterity and verisimilitude dramatizes, in effect, the veracity of the Wildean aphorism that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.”¹⁶ Set on a rainy evening in the spring of 1958, the musical tells the story of thirty-year-old Trevor Bartlett, who attends a musical only to discover that its scripted narrative resembles, improbably, the story of his own life.

Night After Night is more than just any old musical, it’s actually a musical framed within another musical. As an autobiographical musical-within-a-musical, *Night After Night* treats art and life, and their mimetic relationship to each other, in equivalent and

¹⁵ Neil Bartlett, *Night After Night* (London: Methuen Drama, 1993), 3-4.

¹⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying: An Observation*, in *Oscar Wilde: De Profundis and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 74.

indistinguishable terms: Neil Bartlett stages a musical in 1993 about his father going to see a musical in 1958, in which Trevor Bartlett finds himself transported into the musical he has gone to attend, and consequently meeting the man his yet unborn child will become. In August of 1958, as the musical reveals, Trevor and Pam Bartlett will welcome into the world their first-born son. Curiously enough, thirty-five years later, this same person—the yet unborn child whose birth is announced and whose future is briefly glimpsed in *Night After Night*—will eventually become the writer, lyricist, director, and costume designer of a musical production commemorating that momentous evening from his parents' past. More remarkably still, this same person will also star as one of the show's principal actors, performing not only the role of "himself," but also, at different moments, that of Bartlett *père*! Bartlett succeeds admirably in the execution of this performative conceit due to the fact that he bears, as the musical thematizes, a striking physical resemblance to his father—a fortuitous coincidence that, considering the circumstances, is admittedly not very surprising.¹⁷



¹⁷ In his interview with Kiernander, Bartlett explains the happy accident of physically resembling his father: "By accident I looked exactly like my father, and if you see a picture of him at the age I am now it looks like a picture of me." When asked whether or not Trevor Bartlett has seen an earlier version of the show that would later become the musical, Bartlett responds: "No, he didn't come and see that one [version], because we only performed it in very small theatres, and the problem would be, because we do look like each other, everybody would have been able to see him, and I didn't feel that was . . . I know that he wouldn't enjoy people knowing that it was him. Everyone knows that I'm Neil Bartlett because they've read my name in the program. I come on giving Part One of the show and say, 'Good evening, my name is Trevor Bartlett and I was born in 1928.' And everyone immediately gets it—'Oh right, he's talking about his father,' and I think everyone would look [at my father] and that wouldn't be proper. So when we're doing it in big theatres in the autumn, he can come and sit in the dark with everybody else, and no one will know it's him" (qtd. in Kiernander, 228, 229).

According to Bartlett in *Night After Night*, his connection to his father becomes meaningful in particular ways only by first considering the social. Or, to put it another way, the story of his paternity becomes intelligible in different ways when juxtaposed with the history of musical theater. Bartlett intimates the relationship between the personal and the sociohistorical right from the beginning of *Night After Night*. As the show opens, we first see two male actors dressed in identical dinner suits enter a stage sparsely furnished with six identical gilt chairs. The actors' costumes and the furniture suggest a homogeneous quality to the scene—a visual cue that is reinforced with the entry of four more actors, also dressed identically as the first two. The six proceed to take their seats on the gilt chairs. Suddenly, one of them stands and directly addresses the audience members in the theater. He welcomes them to the show, before proceeding to tell them that people often mistake him for his father. “Good evening. Good evening,” he says:

Sometimes, when people see me for the first time they say: Good heavens. It can't be. It can't be him. It couldn't possibly be him.

That's because sometimes, at family gatherings, people mistake me for my father. They come up to me and say, do you know, I walked in and I thought it was Trevor. I thought you were your father. You look just like him. (7)

By speaking to the audience, the actor differentiates himself from the others on stage who have remained silent during his monologue. In doing so, he also confirms to those in the audience, and in particular those who have consulted their programmes, that he is none other than Neil Bartlett—the playwright who, as many in attendance already know and expect, also frequently performs in his own productions. To the extent that Bartlett is initially indistinguishable from the other actors on stage because he is dressed like them, and to the extent that by speaking he subsequently becomes differentiated from them, this

opening scene can be read as a moment of self-identification that reveals Bartlett's difference not only from his father, but from the other actors.

Bartlett thus cues his audience to recognize that he is speaking in the persona of "himself." In effect, his melodramatic protestations—"Good heavens. It can't be. It can't be him. It couldn't possibly be him"—seem to suggest two forms of ventriloquization: he is articulating not only the thoughts of people who have in the past mistaken him for his father, but also the thoughts of the actual audience members attending a performance of *Night After Night*. These two forms of ventriloquization, and the suspension of disbelief they demand of the audience, are crucial to the success of the musical. Because the opening scene centers on the dialectic between recognition and misrecognition, it intentionally implicates the audience members in the theater watching *Night After Night*. As we will soon discover, the show's protagonist, Trevor Bartlett, is likewise later asked to suspend his own disbelief as he is transported into the very show he was about to see.

Having introduced this verbal cue to the audience, Bartlett abruptly stops talking to change his costume on stage, a change that signals his characterological transformation as Trevor. To borrow his language from *Who Was That Man?*, Bartlett literally "suits up" and chooses a style—one that, as he himself embodies it, combines the filial, the paternal, and the extrafamilial.¹⁸ As Trevor, Bartlett is no longer identical to the chorus boys anymore. He then proceeds once more with his speech:

¹⁸ In the chapter entitled "Pretexts" in *Who Was That Man?* Bartlett writes: "For us, the past holds no terrors, if we are not afraid of joining, of being seen in the company of our 'doomed,' our condemned ancestors. For we may pick and choose from the riches of our history and of the city. Which tradition(s) do you place yourself in—by which I mean which style suits you best? Tell me which books you place on your shelves, and whose phrases appear in your diary . . . When you are old, who will ghost your memoirs?" (208).

Good evening. My name is Trevor Bartlett. I was born in 1928. Recently married, almost four years ago exactly. No, no children. Well, not yet anyway. [. . .]

And now—well, when you're first married you don't go out so often—not least because you're still saving. But when [my wife] told me—well, when she told me that I am going to be a father, I thought, I know we should be saving, I know we've got a future to think of, but let's make tonight a special occasion—[.] (7-8)

Following the delivery of Neil's opening monologue as Trevor Bartlett, he "*moves out of the spotlight,*" the stage directions read, "*which has illuminated **Trevor** and his romantic outburst, leaving **Trevor's** costume lying in the spot on the floor*" (10). Bartlett then resumes the role of himself and delivers the following speech:

You have to remember that this [the previous monologue] is my father talking. It isn't me. It couldn't be, it couldn't be me talking about how I feel sometimes when I'm waiting to meet "someone," it couldn't be, it couldn't possibly be . . . this is the early spring of 1958 and I wasn't born until the autumn of that year; and it couldn't be me, because if I was arranging to meet someone in the West End of London, then I don't think this would be the show we'd choose, I mean it's a musical, strictly boy meets girl—[.] (10)

As visual and verbal cues, Bartlett's costume changes invite the audience to recognize that he will perform both the roles of father and son in the musical. In inhabiting the persona of his father, Bartlett illustrates that *Night After Night* will in part be a retelling of the story of his paternity.

Bartlett's resemblance to his father functions as both the frame and the medium through which he is able to interweave two seemingly unlikely narratives in *Night After Night*: the story of his paternity and the history of gay men's integral role on the British stage. When either father or son appears on the stage, he literally represents a cue about generational difference. In other words, the appearance of either father or son functions as a visual cue throughout the musical, punctuating not only its temporal movements but

also connecting its two parallel and overlapping narratives. Inasmuch as the musical succeeds in portraying the father-son relationship between its author and his father—beginning with the case of mistaken identity in its opening scene, and culminating in the dream ballet sequence in its closing scene—it also succeeds in portraying gay men’s ubiquitous presence in musical theater during the twentieth century.

In the opening scene of *Night After Night*, Bartlett reports that people who mistake him for his father say: “You look just like him” (7). At the end of the musical, he likewise says that “They say—you look just like your father’s son” (56), an observation that echoes and yet is subtly different from his earlier claim. The “him” in the earlier statement is transformed, in the latter, as “your father’s son.” The similarity between the two statements is connected, I would suggest, to Bartlett’s explanation in his interview with Adrian Kiernander: “Myself, I think I’ve reached a second stage of realizing that I am my father,” Bartlett confides in that context, “and I can’t just say I’m not him” (qtd. in Kiernander, 228). What is striking is the fact that in the musical Bartlett chooses the seemingly redundant formulation “you look just like your father’s son” instead of simply saying “you look just like your father.” His choice underscores the ways in which he seeks to claim a filial identity that is predicated not only upon his physical resemblance to Trevor Bartlett, but, more revealingly, also upon how that physical resemblance constitutes a visual marker of his filiality. Moreover, considering that Bartlett is an artist who borrows and “plagiarizes” from others as well as from himself, the aural resemblance between these two statements indicates the ways in which he had cued his audience to be attentive—not only in close viewing, but also in close listening.



On the fateful evening that the musical dramatizes, Trevor Bartlett looks forward to spending a “night out” with his wife, Pam, with whom he has arranged to meet after work at a theater in London’s West End. They have planned to see a show to celebrate the news that she is pregnant. He waits patiently for her, but the inclement weather has delayed her arrival. Although disappointed at the unexpected turn of events, Trevor remains enthusiastic about the prospect of watching the show. He knows precisely what to expect—enchancing song numbers and dance sequences that tell the story of courtship and romance between a man and a woman, as well as an ensuing plot that leads up to their marriage and to their becoming parents.

Trevor knows the plot of the as-yet-unseen show because the genre of the musical is formulaic and, hence, its plot, predictable and familiar to him. In fact, throughout *Night After Night*, Bartlett plays up the idea that most everyone—in the audience and in the metatheatrical audience within the show—is always already familiar with the genre. Through this clever dramaturgical conceit, Bartlett succeeds not only in advancing his show’s plot, but, more significantly, in providing his audience with a lesson on the history of musical theater. Such moments—let us call them scenes of instruction, during which Bartlett proffers his generation cues—are peppered throughout the show. Below is the first, humorous scene of instruction during which the programme sellers, in advance of the show, teach Trevor and the metatheatrical audience in *Night After Night* of the plot of the musical:

François [. . .] Programmes, one shilling only. Programmes, one shilling only.
(*Music*)

Stephen Crew to the stage, please. Crew to the stage. And gentleman of the chorus this is your fifteen minute call. Your fifteen minute call.

Music during which Reg, Paul, Craig and François become the four Programme Sellers.

François (*sings*)
 Who's in the show,
 The set, the plot, the frocks, the star.
 Who's starting out and who'll go far —
 You want to know —

Stephen, Craig, Reg, Paul (*sing*) Well, there you are

François Get your programmes here,

Craig containing full biographies for the whole company —

Stephen Telling you who is

Craig in the show

Paul and a full listing of this evening's musical numbers, so that it comes as no surprise, telling you who's who in which number and more importantly

François who isn't. Let's see what we have in store for you tonight . . . first of all, we have the Overture (*Music*) which as you can hear is basically happy although it does hint (*Music*) that things may get a little dramatic in the second half but then life's like that, then Opening Chorus, "Places, Please," Shaftsbury Avenue in the rain, all the lights on, meet the girl, see the show, it's just like real life, only . . . choreographed. Then — "There You Are" duet (*Music*) which as you can hear is the Boy Meets Girl scene, and then you have the Comedy Boy Meets Comedy Girl, "You're Just The Ticket For Me" (*Music*) which as you can hear is the same scene, only in 4/4 time, a little bit shorter and brighter—[.] (16-17)

The scene continues with the actors reciting the remainder of the show's musical numbers, each of which continues to chart the development of heterosexual romance and courtship: "Love Is Never Easy"; "Not For Us"; "Now Is The Time"; "When Two People Meet"; "The Same, Later That Evening"; "There's Nothing In The Way"; and followed by "the big dramatic ballad of the evening, entitled in this production" "Try Not To Be

Unhappy: Just Remember That What Life Will Be Like Thirty-Five Years From Now Is Partly Your Responsibility” (17-19).

As this list of musical numbers suggest, *Night After Night* both parodies and pays homage to the genre of musical theater as a cultural institution. Put another way, Bartlett draws from, performs, and literally inhabits the archive of musical theater in *Night After Night*. In saying this, I’m borrowing Brent Hayes Edwards’s argument, in a different context, concerning “the condition of the archive” as itself constitutive of historiography. “Might one analyze,” Edwards asks provocatively, “something like a practice of inhabiting the archive [. . .] as precisely a practice of a historiography?”¹⁹ Bartlett, as we’ve seen, clearly relies upon the archive in *Who Was That Man?* But in *Night After Night*, he not only uses but, literally, performs and inhabits the archive of musical theater by enunciating and listing works that constitute that archive itself. That is to say, in rehearsing a story about Trevor Bartlett’s night out at the theater, Bartlett embeds his father’s life story not within the context of an individual (i.e., personalized) life narrative but, rather, within a historical archive of musical theater. That he performs the archive is evident in the ways in which the musical underscores the formulaic nature of the musical as a performance genre through its typological classification of scenes such as “The Boy Meets Girl” and “the Comedy Boy Meets Comedy Girl” (17) and through its multiple allusions to other musical productions such as *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*—allusions that are registered not only in references to their signature songs and lyrics but also visually by the male actors’ costume changes; two stage directions, for example, provides the following cues: “Enter Boys, dressed as technicolour farm hands: neckties,

¹⁹ Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Shadow of Shadows,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 11, no. 1 (2003): 30.

waistcoats, hats, bales of straw, etc” (42); “*Exit Beverley, enter Boys, dressed as technicolour sailors*” (43).

Sharing his vision of the archive in the Preface to the printed edition of *Night After Night*, Bartlett explains that part of his goal in staging the show was to debunk a misguided but commonly accepted theory about gay men and the theater.

Characteristically, he again uses the language of ancestry to make his argument:

Some people think that performers in the theatre mean what they say, and only what they say. According to this theory, gay people only really started to appear on stage in Britain in the late 1960s and [that] “gay theatre” is a series of plays in which people talk about the “theme” or “subject” of homosexuality. Before that (so the theory goes), all we had was a few tortured ancestors—the frightened or frightening queens of [Noel Coward’s] *The Vortex* [1924], [Mordaunt Sharp’s] *The Green Bay Tree* [1933], the Britten operas, [Tennessee Williams’s] *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* [1958]. True, some of the most famous, glamorous and successful authors on the West End stage were (unknown to their public) homosexual—Coward, [Terrence] Rattigan, [Somerset] Maugham, [Ivor] Novello—but they never said what they really wanted to say, and so must be consigned to our pre-history.

This version of history chooses to forget that gay people were there all the time, occupying a central place in the manufacture of all our nights out—stage managing, dressing, selling the tickets, directing, designing, composing and choreographing the most popular shows in town. One particular kind of artist has always worked in the heart of the West End: the chorus boy. Applauded, desirable, skilful, athletic, he contradicted and contradicts every stereotype of a gay person. The strange thing is that he does it without saying a word, and whilst dancing his way through lyrics and plots that have, or ought to have, absolutely nothing to do with the reality of our lives.

This conundrum persists: thousands of people go to see shows every night and have no idea that they are watching their fantasies being acted out by gay people, while gay people still know what they have always known, that shows which “say” nothing about us can still be some of the most powerful and exciting vehicles of our pleasures and our griefs. (3)

Bartlett's strategy of "listing," one we've already encountered repeatedly in *Who Was That Man?*, enacts a poetics and politics of nominalization that establishes and promotes a gay cultural literacy.²⁰

Indeed, *Night After Night* fulfils its goal of challenging the "theory" that "gay people only really started to appear on stage in Britain in the late 1960s." Its plot in fact illustrates that "gay people were there all the time." In its first act, for example, we see Trevor encountering, while waiting for his wife, an all-male staff at the theater—from the youth at the coatcheck to the barman who serves him his drink, from the programme sellers to the usher who eventually leads him to his seat. According to John M. Clum, "*Night After Night* is highly theatrical and metatheatrical, a celebration of what some might call kitsch. Here is a mainstream work [. . .] that asserts that musical theater is not only gay now, but that it was gay even when it seemed most straight. Those gay men in a more oppressive age, whose lives were built on performance, had the greatest investment in the theatricality of and romantic hope offered by those musical fantasies."²¹ To the extent that *Night After Night* illustrates going to the theater as an "event" in its own right,

²⁰ Conservative gay historian Rictor Norton and the much more radical Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick both note the importance of naming and listing in their widely divergent projects. See Norton, "The Great Queens of History," in *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity* (London: Cassell, 1997), 215-38. In *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), Sedgwick puts the matter rather more convincingly when she poses the rhetorical questions: "Has there ever been a gay Socrates? Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare? Has there been a gay Proust?," before suggesting: "A short answer, though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, Proust; and beyond that, legion—dozens or hundreds of the most centrally canonic figures in what the monoculturalists are pleased to consider 'our' culture, as indeed, always in different forms and senses, in every other" (52). Bartlett's point about there being a "conundrum" about the ways that heterosexuals and gay people perceive the musical nicely confirms Sedgwick's argument. For a different discussion of the "politics of nominalization," from which I draw my term, see Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text* 19, no. 1 (2001): 46.

²¹ John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 4.

even prior to sitting down to see the show performed, I would thus extend Clum's argument: gay men are invested not only in the theatricality of theater but also in the theatricality of going to the theater *night after night*.²²

It's significant that Bartlett should issue his challenge specifically to gay men, especially those who misguidedly perceive that, before the late 1960s, "all we had [in the theater world] was a few tortured ancestors" who "must be consigned to our pre-history." For him, *Night After Night* is more than just a solipsistic or narcissistic venture to rehearse events from an evening from his father's past, even if those events ostensibly announce and anticipate his own birth, personhood, and career in the theater. As his prefatory remarks indicate, he also views the musical as a project of recovery, one that in effect attempts to remedy the historical amnesia prevalent in contemporary gay male culture. He specifically issues his challenge to gay men because they themselves are the ones who stand to lose from their own historical amnesia. In this respect if in no other, *Night After Night* constitutes an artistic production with enormous social, historical, and political consequences for contemporary gay male culture. In other words, the musical asks us—gay men—to remember and cherish, as well as to preserve and pass on, the legacies we have inherited from our "tortured ancestors."

²² In many ways, Bartlett's *Night After Night* anticipates and dramatizes, quite literally, D. A. Miller's meditation on the Broadway musical in *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Miller's argument is equally relevant for the genre's incarnations in London's West End. Miller suggests that the musical represents a "gay genre, the only one that mass culture ever produced," because, "with 'disproportionate numbers' of gay men among its major architects, [it] is determined from the inside out by an Open Secret whose fierce cultural keeping not all the irony on a show queen's face can ever quite measure, nor all his flamboyance of carriage undo" (16, 39; original emphasis). The architects Miller refers to in his argument, as well as the chorus-boy-as-artist Bartlett wishes to recuperate in *Night After Night*, constitute a gay male typology. Bartlett explains that "[t]he characters who appear in *Night After Night* are, with the exception of Trevor Bartlett, unnamed. This reflects that they are types, anecdotes or quotations as much as they are people. In the script they are referred to either by their role at any particular moment or by the first name of the performer. This naming reflects the fact that quite often in the performance deliberate use is made of the confusion or similarity between character and performer" (4).

Using the language of ancestry in his preface to *Night After Night* and thematizing the father-son relationship in the musical proper, Bartlett shows how the story of his paternity is firmly embedded within a larger sociocultural context—in this case, within the story of gay men’s “tortured ancestors” in British theatre history. The juxtaposition of these two stories underscores the inextricable, if at times also tenuous, connections between generation as a biological-genealogical phenomenon structured by familial succession, and generation as a sociohistorical phenomenon that makes available and secures practices of social and extrafamilial belonging. Bartlett situates himself within his familial narrative and maps his professional identity as a gay dramatist having been made possible by previous dramatic artists including the ubiquitous figure of the chorus boy. Bartlett privileges the figure of the chorus boy as integral to the formation of musical theater. The chorus boy, according to Bartlett, remains unique because “he contradicted and contradicts every stereotype of a gay person,” and “does it without saying a word, and whilst dancing his way through lyrics and plots that have, or ought to have, absolutely nothing to do with the reality of our lives.” By demonstrating the important role of chorus boys, *Night After Night* shows its audience ways of listening to these figures.



In Act I of *Night After Night*, after the scene involving the programme sellers, Trevor, while waiting for the curtains to rise, offers his own interpretation of the show he has yet to see. Speaking his thoughts aloud, he prophesies that the show’s leading man

and leading woman will develop an intimate relationship and begin to build and share a life together:

The lights go down, he [the show's leading man] puts his arms around her [its leading woman], they've got their whole lives ahead of them, just like all of these shows, and you know—well, you know how it's gonna be, you can just see it, that's what life is like, you meet a girl, you buy her dinner, you take her to a show, you've found what you were waiting for, you know what happens next—. (25)

Judging from his interpretation, Trevor views his attendance at the show as more than mere diversion, and he makes no secret of his longing to see a familiar story—that of familial life—enacted on stage. Given that he addresses his thoughts to himself, his use of the pronoun “you” is thus directed at himself. At the same time, however, he presents his monologue to be “overheard” by the audience attending the performance of *Night After Night*. And while he knows that this particular show promises to be “just like all” other musicals he has seen, he also suspects that it will prove to be particularly meaningful and thus distinctive from the others, precisely because the events described in its narrative at once resemble and anticipate those in his own life trajectory. “[T]hat's what life is like”: he has already met and married the girl. “[Y]ou know what happens next—”: he will soon become a father. Trevor posits that “life” and its various “life stages” resemble—in fact, are emplotted through—the musical's formulaic narrative.

Trevor, however, is completely unprepared for what actually transpires in the course of his night out at the theater (and, for that matter, so is the audience of *Night After Night*). He discovers that art really does imitate life; hence, his prophecy becomes a self-fulfilling one. As the show begins, he notices that the female actor on stage, played by Beverley Klein, has begun to address him directly, saying: “everybody thinks musicals are about somebody else, don't they, but tonight, I thought well, let's make tonight a

special occasion, so: . . . That tonight the show is YOU—Yeah!” (28-29). Immediately following her speech—which concludes Act One of *Night After Night*—Trevor discovers to his consternation that he has been transported, suddenly and inexplicably, into the very performance he has only moments ago just proffered an interpretation. “I was sitting in my seat and . . . you came on. And now I’m not sitting in my seat anymore,” he explains to Beverley, who, he realizes, has preternaturally summoned him onto the stage (30). She dismisses his bewilderment, however, and instead proceeds to question him as if nothing peculiar had happened. “Well, and now what happens? Try looking in your programme,” she advises him (30). Trevor stutters his reply: “I . . . I don’t seem able to find it” (31). Undeterred by his response, Beverley continues: “Oh, really. Let’s see if we can remember. Opening number, Shaftesbury Avenue in the rain, full chorus, and then—” (31).

Strangely, as Beverley and the other actors enact during the remainder of Act Two, the show Trevor Bartlett was about to see turns out to bear an exact mimetic correspondence to the events of that particular evening in 1958. That is to say, the show Trevor was about to see performed—the same one he now finds himself in—also tells the story of a thirty-year-old man who looks forward to a night out with his wife. *That man* also has arranged to see a musical with *his wife* to celebrate the news that she is pregnant. *He, too, anticipates becoming a father.* With the encouragement of Beverley and her fellow cast members, collectively identified as “the Boys” in the printed text, Trevor is persuaded to recognize that the show he went to see is really about him—and, more specifically, about his future as a father. When Trevor wonders “[w]hat life will be like thirty-five years from now,” Beverley convinces him to imagine “the scene which is just

like real life, only it's real life in the future. This is the scene where we see how life could be" (53).²³ In the same way that Bartlett admits in *Who Was That Man?* that "coming to London meant moving into a life that already existed," so too does he present in *Night After Night* that going to the theater, for Trevor, means being transported onto the stage to discover that *his* life is already scripted.



The performance and inhabiting of the archive is also evident in the way that the actors in Act Two "rewrite" Trevor Bartlett's life narrative, one he had rehearsed in the opening scene in Act One. Following Neil's transformation on stage as Trevor, he (Neil/Trevor) addresses the audience and rehearses a condensed version of his life story:

Good evening. My name is Trevor Bartlett. I was born in 1928. Recently married, almost four years ago exactly. No, no children. Well, not yet anyway.

I was sixteen when the war ended and then did my National Service of course. We [my wife and I] met in '51, started courting in '52. [. . .] (7)

In Act Two, the audience sees—or, more precisely, is asked to imagine—Trevor finding himself transported onto the stage and into the performance he has gone to see. Once the

²³ Given the musical-within-a-musical structure of *Night After Night*, it's especially appropriate that "life" is repeatedly equated with "art." Consider the following hilarious and witty statements made by the chorus boy played by actor François Testory: "Let's see what we have in store for you tonight . . . first of all, we have the Overture (*Music.*) which as you can hear is basically happy although it does hint (*Music.*) that things may get a little dramatic in the second half but then life's like that, then, Opening Chorus, 'Places, Please,' Shaftesbury Avenue in the rain, all the lights on, meet the girl, see the show, it's just like real life, only . . . choreographed. [. . .] [A]nd then, 'The Same, Later That Evening' (*Music.*) which reminds us what life is actually like, but then you will be relieved to hear we move swiftly on to The Ballet (*Music.*) [. . .] A lot of harps, as you can hear. The Ballet in this production is entitled 'There's Nothing In The Way' and the setting is, well, they fly all the scenery, I love it when they do that . . . this is the scene in the show where we get to see how life should be, or how it could be, and of course, it's all just a dream, but I promise you that when you see this number you will be in heaven, what I mean is, this is the one scene in the show which is like real life, it's just that it's real life in the future" (17, 19).

actors have assuaged Trevor's confusion at the turn of events, they in turn ask him to recall the significant events of his life narrative. Then Trevor is asked to imagine the future, fails, and is cued to try again. The following scene, which I reproduce at some length, describes the actors' rewriting of Trevor's life story by explicitly embedding it within the context of musical theater:

Paul [. . .] Go on, try again.

Trevor It's going to be a boy. I'm going to have a son. Tell me what he's going to look like. How's he going to move, what's he going to do for a living — and how is any of this going to happen if she [my wife] doesn't turn up. I mean, you can't have a show without a girl, can you?

Beverley Oh, come on, give the kid a chance.

Now, where were we?

Trevor I was sixteen when the war ended.

Craig 1945: *Perchance to Dream*

Trevor Then, of course, I did my National Service, well it's what you do when you're a young man, isn't it?

Craig 1947: *Annie Get Your Gun*

Trevor We met in '51.

Craig 1951: *Oklahoma . . . South Pacific*

Stephen “. . . You May Meet a Stranger” — upstairs in the crush bar of the Royal Opera House, in the second interval of *Norma*, and when you have met him, you feel —

Craig you feel — *The King and I* — 1953

Trevor We were married in 1954.

Craig 1954: *Bells Are Ringing*

1955: *The Pyjama Game*

Paul, Craig, Stephen 1957: Judy Garland at the London Palladium

Stephen “I Could Go On Singing . . .”

Reg And so there you are. The story of your life. You wanted to be happy, perchance to dream; you were doing what came naturally. It was an enchanted evening, you could have danced all night, people did say you were in love, bells were ringing and now tonight, tonight —

Trevor Tonight —

Reg 1958 — *West Side Story* — something’s coming, something’s good, so I really don’t see what you’ve got to worry about —

[. . .]

Beverley What night did *West Side Story* open?

Stephen December 12th, 1958. Her Majesty’s Theatre. I knew the stage manager.

Trevor So what night is this?

Beverley Exactly, what night is this? Anybody got a programme?

Craig One rainy night, early spring of 1958—

Reg — so he should be born in about —

Trevor When? When's he going to be born. Tell me! (39-41)

This scene is definitely queer both in its content and in its form, as is evidenced in the quick and witty repartee between the actors. In it, Bartlett interweaves events that have defined Trevor Bartlett's life—enlisting in the military, meeting and courting the woman who would later become his wife and bear his son—in relation to a chronological account of mid twentieth century musical theater. Bartlett insists that his father's life story, and by extension *his own life story*, is predicated upon and becomes meaningful because it is constituted by and overlaps with the history of musical theater. The paternal narrative becomes fully intelligible, as Bartlett presents it, only in conjunction with a larger historical narrative of gay men's role in musicals.

In this scene, the actors take turns to recite and enunciate the archive of musical theater. While the easy delivery between the actors suggests a certain glibness or familiarity, there is also, at the same time, a seriousness to their incantation of musical works as a litany. As a result, this scene dramatizes the absolute link between the context of *Night After Night* (a musical-within-a-musical that lists other musicals) and the positionality of the actors on stage (gay men as chorus boys). With this scene, Bartlett cues his spectators by signaling what Kobena Mercer identifies, in a different context, as the “politics of enunciation”: “certain kinds of performative utterances produce different meanings, not so much because of what is said but because of *who* is saying it.”²⁴

Through his actors, Bartlett rereads the history of his current identity and attempts to

²⁴ Kobena Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 204 (original emphasis).

discover his personal history—namely, his paternal-filial relationship to Trevor Bartlett—in a particular collective history of musical theater. Reg’s speech, for example, embeds references to musical productions such as *Perchance to Dream* (by Ivor Novello, 1945), *South Pacific* (by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, 1949), *My Fair Lady* (by Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner, 1956), and *Bells Are Ringing* (by Betty Comden, Adolph Green, and Jule Stein, 1956): “And so there you are. The story of your life. You wanted to be happy, perchance to dream; you were doing what came naturally. It was an enchanted evening, you could have danced all night, people did say you were in love, bells were ringing and now tonight, tonight — [.]” (40). Thus Bartlett links the individual with the collective and, at the same time, the personal with the “impersonal” and the familial with the extrafamilial. Trevor Bartlett’s “life story”—and by extension, Neil Bartlett’s “life story”—becomes intelligible as a result of its embeddedness within this other narrative.

This embeddedness, moreover, leads to the problematization of temporality in this scene. When Beverley asks about the opening date of *West Side Story*, Stephen responds: “December 12th, 1958.” But when Trevor asks “what night is this?” Craig answers: “early spring of 1958.” The scene represents time not only as inadequate but also as potentially having alternative senses, meanings, or purposes. Craig’s cue reminds Trevor that he is inhabiting a metatheatrical temporality. In effect, so too are audience members of *Night After Night* reminded that they are merely spectators of a scene occurring in a meta-metatheatrical temporality. For the future Trevor Bartlett projects in the musical is not only his future (“When? When’s he going to be born. Tell me!” he demands); it is

also, at the same time, his son's past and his son's present. Time is confused in this scene, just as it has been suspended at other moments in the musical.

And, most strikingly, by the end of *Night After Night*, time is figured as a metaphor of continuity, stasis, and repetition. In his final soliloquy, Bartlett, reappraising the role of "Neil," addresses the audience, saying:

What will be the changes, you never can imagine. He never could have imagined who these arms of mine would hold, what this body of mine would do night after night, the others I'd hold, both the living and the dead, the sweat, the love made, the dreams I would have and the streets I can't walk down; he could never have imagined these years, could never have imagined how or why I'd cry to this music, that these songs would be our songs, that these nights could be our nights, but when the lights go down you do imagine, and you must, tonight and tomorrow night and every night of our lives, because that's why we go out at night, because the future has still to happen, the show has still to start, my father is going to have a son, and it will happen, the curtain will rise night after night and so hold my hand and I'll take you there, hold my hand in the dark, hold it, day after day, year after year, night after night after night. (57)



The "programme" plays a significant role as a material object throughout *Night After Night*. Sold for "one shilling," the programme "contain[s] full biographies for the whole company" and "a full list of this evening's musical numbers" (16). Waiting for his wife to arrive, Trevor muses: "Still, if we miss the opening number it's all there in the programme" (24). Given the function of the programmes in advancing the metatheatrical plot of *Night After Night*, it's curious that the stage directions provide little evidence to suggest their actual existence as physical objects or props during the show. Moreover, even when they are mentioned during scenes, they are either misplaced or missing. For instance, at the beginning of Act Two of *Night After Night*, when Trevor is perplexed at

finding himself transported into the show he was about to see, he is prompted by Beverley: “Well, and now what happens? (*No response from Trevor.*) Try looking in your programme.” Trevor, however, is unable to find his programme, stuttering: “I . . . I don’t seem to be able to find it” (30-31). In the scene during which the actors rewrite Trevor’s life story by recontextualizing it with the history of musical theater, Beverley, again, makes reference to this textual object. At one point, according to the stage directions, “**Beverley** sees that **Reg** has gone one page too far” (40). Yet, moments later, as the actors are trying to help Trevor locate himself in time, she asks, rhetorically: “Exactly, what night is this? Anybody got a programme?” Although Craig responds—“One rainy night, early spring of 1958”—there is no evidence to suggest that he even consulted a programme (41).

Finally, towards the end of *Night After Night*, after having enacted Trevor Bartlett’s life story, Beverley cues him to imagine the future and, in particular, to the birth of his son.

Trevor Why am I going on like this? He ain’t even born yet . . . but I can see just exactly — but I can’t

Beverley “He’d better look a lot like me” . . .

Trevor “The spittin’ image” — I can’t see it —

Beverley But you said —

Trevor Yes, I know, but I can’t —

Beverley I think you’ll find that if you look in your programme, sir —

Trevor I can’t find it.

Beverley Try and remember what it said. Think. This is important!

Trevor What life will be like thirty-five years from now . . . This is the scene

Beverley This is the scene . . .

Trevor This is the scene

Beverley This is the scene which is just like real life, only it's real life in the future. This is the scene where we see how life could be. Thank you. (53)

As this scene indicates, Beverley prompts Trevor to remember without aid of reading the programme.

It is significant that the programme, as a material object, should be so ubiquitous and yet remain absent in *Night After Night*. To the extent that the plot of *Night After Night*, as well as the plot of all the other musicals it references, centers on the development of heterosexual courtship and romance, the absent or misplaced programme indicates that such narratives are always already familiar to everyone. What is significant in the end, though, is the fact that the always already familiar heteronormative narrative is juxtaposed with the history of musical theater. Trevor is able to conjure his future as a father only after he has been cued to relive his life story according to a historical timeline of musicals.

Before Trevor can begin to envision the future, however—a future that, given the musical's temporal structure, is really the present—he needs to be reminded of the past. One after another, the actors direct cues to him, reminding him of the important events in his life—events he himself has rehearsed in front of the audience during his opening monologue. “1928. You were born and then, 1945, you're sixteen years old. You've got your whole life ahead of you.” “1954, almost four years ago exactly, you got married.” “And now, one rainy night in the early spring of 1958. Tonight.” “Tonight.” “[Your wife] told you you were going to be a father. Remember” (54). To the extent that knowledge of

the various stages of the life course counts as cultural literacy, the introduction of a gay cultural literacy—as it is represented by the production’s representation of the history of musical theater—complicates this other form of literacy. Through his generation cues, Bartlett introduces and educates his audience to acquire this new form of cultural literacy.

Chapter Three

AIDS Literacy in Allen Barnett's Short Fiction

There are now 1,112 cases of serious Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. When we first became worried, there were only 41. In only twenty-eight days, from January 13th to February 9th [1983], there were 164 new cases—and 73 more dead. The total death tally is now 418. Twenty percent of all cases were registered this January alone. There have been 195 dead in New York City from among 526 victims. Of all serious AIDS cases, 47.3 percent are in the New York metropolitan area.

—Larry Kramer¹

E. D. Hirsch's controversial *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, published in 1987, includes an appendix entitled "What Literate Americans Know: A Preliminary List."² Compiled by Hirsch with the help of Joseph E. Kett and James Trefil, the appendix offers an extensive, alphabetized list of terms and concepts ranging from "abolitionism" and "abortion" to "zoning" and "Zurich" (152, 215). The authors explain that their list "is intended to illustrate the character and range of the knowledge literate Americans tend to share," though "[s]ome proposed items were omitted because they seemed to us known by both literate and illiterate persons, too rare, or too transitory" (146). Considering that the appendix represents in the aggregate Hirsch's definition of cultural literacy, namely, "the network of information that all competent readers possess" and share (2), it's both revealing and disturbing that the AIDS epidemic fails to make the

¹ Larry Kramer, "1,112 and Counting," in *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 33-34.

² E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 146-215.

list. The omission of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome from Hirsch's appendix suggests the alarming extent to which AIDS, a half decade following the first reporting of the disease in 1981, remained largely repressed from the general public's cultural consciousness and absent from its repertoire of shared cultural references.

It's worth noting that the appendix in *Cultural Literacy* does include references to "homosexuality" and "gay rights," as well as to topical current events, such as Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (dubbed by the press and listed in Hirsch's appendix as "Star Wars"), a debate that, like the AIDS epidemic, was making headlines in the mid 1980s. Cultural literacy, as Hirsch defines it, represents "the background information, stored in [the readers'] minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read" (2). If this is the case, it seems strange that the appendix would include references to "homosexuality" and "gay rights" and not to "AIDS," the single most pressing issue affecting urban gay male communities in the U.S. in the mid 1980s.

In the same year that Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* appeared, the arts journal *October* published a special issue entitled "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism." Edited by art historian and cultural critic Douglas Crimp, the 1987 *October* special issue represented one of the earliest attempts to theorize, within the arts and the humanities, the construction and representation of the AIDS epidemic.³ Two articles in the journal

³ In his introductory essay of the same title to the volume, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), Douglas Crimp argues that art and artistic productions, while often underregarded, in fact play an extremely important role in promoting AIDS consciousness. "Raising money [for AIDS research]," Crimp contends, "is the most passive response of cultural practitioners to social crisis, a response that perpetuates the idea that art itself has no social function (aside from being a commodity), that there is no such thing as an engaged, activist aesthetic practice. [. . .] [A]rt *does* have the power to save lives, and it is this very power that must be recognized, fostered, and supported in every way

explicitly address the interrelations between AIDS, language, and discourse: “AIDS: Keywords,” by Jan Zita Grover; and “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” by Paula A. Treichler.⁴ Using as her model Raymond Williams’s *Keywords*, Grover offers her list of “keywords” as an “attempt to identify and contest some of the assumptions underlying our current knowledge” of AIDS (18).⁵ In a similar manner, Treichler examines how AIDS is constructed through language and, specifically, in biomedical and scientific discourse. She proposes that AIDS is an “epidemic of signification” because it is “simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification,” in which the “name *AIDS* in part constructs the disease and helps make it intelligible” (32, 31; original emphasis). Considering that the Human Immunodeficiency Virus was officially named only in 1986, in the year preceding the publication of the *October* special issue, Grover and Treichler are, in effect, participating in the cultivation of what I would call “AIDS literacy.” That is to say, they are promoting and circulating the use of a body of knowledge that combines a familiarity with biomedical discourse, an awareness of cultural debates, and a sensitivity to how sexual beings negotiate desire and risk.⁶

possible. But if we are to do this, we will have to abandon the idealist conception of art. We don’t need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don’t need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it” (6-7; original emphasis).

⁴ Jan Zita Grover, “AIDS: Keywords,” in Crimp, 17-30; and Paula A. Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” in Crimp, 31-70. Other notable articles included in the special issue are Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS” (71-86); Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (197-222); and Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic” (237-271).

⁵ Included in Grover’s list are entries for the following keywords: “acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS)”; “AIDS . . . the disease”; “AIDS test”; “AIDS virus”; “condone”; “family”; “general population”; “gay/homosexual community”; “heterosexual community”; “lesbian”; “prostitute”; “PWA (Person with AIDS)”; “risk group”; “risk practice”; “spread”; and “victim.”

⁶ For other provocative discussions on the discursive construction of AIDS in the service of what I am calling AIDS literacy, see Henry Abelove, “The Politics of the ‘Gay Plague’: AIDS as a U.S. Ideology,” in



From its early years, the story of the AIDS epidemic has been a story about literacy. For the emergence of AIDS involved the need to become knowledgeable with the various terms then circulating as references to “the AIDS virus.” Prior to 1986 three terms in particular were being used, in competition and often interchangeably, to describe the retrovirus considered to be the cause of AIDS: LAV or lymphadenopathy-associated virus, the name given the virus by Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute in France; HTLV-III or human T-cell lymphotropic virus type III, the designation selected by Robert Gallo of the National Cancer Institute; and ARV or AIDS-associated retrovirus, the term recommended by Jay A. Levy of the University of California at San Francisco School of Medicine. Empowered by the International Committee on the Taxonomy of Viruses to resolve this nomenclature dispute, the Human Retrovirus Subcommittee in 1986 recommended that a new term—HIV or Human Immunodeficiency Virus—be used to identify the causative agent of AIDS. According to Treichler, “[t]he multiple names of ‘the AIDS virus’ point toward a succession of identities and offer a fragmented sense indeed of what this virus, or family of viruses, ‘really’ is,” while “[t]he new name, in contrast, promises to unify the political fragmentations of the scientific establishment and to certify the health of the single-virus hypothesis” (57). The entry of HIV into the AIDS lexicon had wide-ranging repercussions beyond the borders of the scientific

Body Politics: Disease, Desire, and the Family, eds. Michael Ryan and Avery Gordon (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 3-17; Lee Edelman, “The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and ‘AIDS,’” in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 79-92; Steven F. Kruger, “Is a Virus Language?,” in *AIDS Narratives: Gender and Sexuality, Fiction and Science* (New York: Garland, 1996), 3-32; and Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988).

establishment, not least because it underscored the ways in which the all-encompassing term “the AIDS virus” was dangerously imprecise. As Grover explains, the widespread circulation of the term “the AIDS virus”—used by “the popular press,” as well as by “physicians, scientists, and public health planners”—mistakenly “conflates HIV with a terminal phase of HIV infection—AIDS,” and, in effect, “equate[s] infection with death” (21).

The nomenclature debate surrounding the naming of the retrovirus during the mid 1980s changed the politics of “AIDSpeak,” the neologism coined by gay journalist Randy Shilts to describe the discursive mode in which public health officials, gay politicians, and AIDS activists discussed the AIDS crisis in the public sphere. The role of AIDSpeak in shaping cultural awareness of the emerging public health crisis in the early to mid 1980s cannot be underestimated, though critics disagree about the extent of its efficacy. In his book *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, Shilts faults those who use AIDSpeak as irresponsible, arguing that “[w]ith [gay] politicians talking like public health officials, and public health officials behaving like politicians, the new vernacular [of AIDSpeak] allowed virtually everyone to avoid challenging the encroaching epidemic in medical terms.”⁷ For Shilts, AIDSpeak signified “the language of good intentions in the AIDS epidemic,” “the language [that] went to great lengths never to offend,” and was consequently equivalent to being “the language of death” (315). Treichler, however, considers AIDSpeak to be valuable and effective. In “AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse: Current Contests for Meaning,” she suggests that, “[a]lthough such linguistic activism is dismissed by Shilts as misguided public relations

⁷ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 315.

efforts on the part of the gay community, [AIDSpeak] is more accurately seen [. . .] as part of a broad and crucially important resistance to the semantic imperialism of experts and professionals. Challenging the authority of science and medicine—whose meanings are part of powerful and deeply entrenched social and historical codes—remains a significant and courageous action.”⁸

The circulation of AIDSpeak highlights not only an early form of what I am calling AIDS literacy, but also, more broadly, the interrelations between scientific literacy and cultural literacy in public discourse. Explaining the rationale for the appendix of *Cultural Literacy*, and in particular the inclusion of words related to “the domain of scientific literacy,” Hirsch notes that “[i]t is widely agreed that our shared knowledge of science and technology ought to be enhanced, because of their growing importance in our lives” (136). Given this view, it seems strange that he should exclude the term “AIDS” from his book’s appendix on the basis that it is a topic “still too new to have passed into general currency” (138).⁹ In so doing, Hirsch and his colleagues, Kett and Trefil, neglect

⁸ Paula A. Treichler, “AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse: Current Contests for Meaning,” in *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, eds. Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 214. For another critique of Shilts and AIDSpeak, see Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 237-71, especially pp. 238-45. For other discussions of the politics of AIDSpeak, see Richard Goldstein, “Visitation Rites: the Elusive Tradition of Plague Literature,” *Village Voice Literary Supplement* 59 (October 1987); and Walter Kendrick, “AIDSpeak,” *Village Voice Literary Supplement* 59 (October 1987). AIDSpeak also challenged the use of the homophobic and xenophobic “4-H List” issued by the CDC in reference to the four groups they considered to be most at risk: homosexual men, heroin users, hemophiliacs, and Haitians. This list was prevalent not only as a shorthand way of referencing AIDS in the general public domain, but it was also widely used by the nursing staff of hospitals, who, according to Shilts, developed a macabre gallows humor by joking that there would soon be a fifth “H” to add to the list: the “house staff” of hospitals treating AIDS patients (197). This admittedly bizarre example suggests the extent to which AIDS literacy can be used not only to advance knowledge and incite action, as I am proposing, but also, and unfortunately, to recirculate stereotypes and promote ignorance.

⁹ Hirsch explains that “decisions about many items are not clear cut. The inclusion or exclusion of such borderline items must be matters of judgment; we must draw a northerly border, above which lies specialized knowledge, and a southerly one, below which lies knowledge so obvious and widely known that its inclusion would make the list unusably long. There are also easterly and westerly borderline areas. To the east lie materials that are still too new to have passed into general currency. For instance, only a few

to take into account the fact that AIDS, as the debate over AIDSpeak illustrates, was *already* being discussed in scientific and popular venues during the early to mid 1980s, the same time period when they were compiling their appendix for *Cultural Literacy*. Unlike Hirsch and his colleagues, the members of the Human Retrovirus Subcommittee rightly recognized the intersection between scientific and cultural literacies, as is illustrated by their decision to publicize their recommendation to identify HIV as the cause of AIDS in the pages of *Science* and *Nature*, two publications that appeal equally to scientists and science-enthusiasts.¹⁰



To advance AIDS literacy, I would argue, is neither simply to challenge the relative repression of HIV and AIDS from the general public's consciousness, nor, by extension, to rectify the term's omission from Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*.¹¹ More importantly, to promote AIDS literacy is to insist that the AIDS epidemic is already part of the culture—even during its formative phase in the early to mid 1980s—and that HIV

years ago that would have been the case with *AIDS* or *Ayatollah Khomeini*. To the west are items, like *Sherman Adams*, which have passed from view and are now known only by older generations" (138).

¹⁰ After a year of deliberations, the nomenclature subcommittee published its recommendations in the form of a letter that appeared in the 9 May 1986 issue of *Science* and the 1 May 1986 issue of *Nature*. For a summary of this nomenclature dispute, see Jean L. Marx, "AIDS Virus Has a New Name—Perhaps," *Science* 232 (9 May 1986): 699-700.

¹¹ To be fair, AIDS does make an appearance—finally and belatedly—in *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, a volume co-edited by Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil, which was published in 1993. Curiously enough, though, their subsequent *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, published in 2002, once again omits any reference to AIDS. This oscillation highlights the waning cultural consciousness of AIDS as an ongoing health and social crisis in the U.S. and elsewhere in the West. Furthermore, as Larry Kramer's "rant" in "1,112 and Counting" clearly indicates—a passage from which serves as this chapter's epigraph—many urban gay men at that time also lacked an awareness of the magnitude of the AIDS epidemic.

and AIDS thus constitute necessary references for cultural literacy. Furthermore, as I have begun to demonstrate, and as I will elaborate more fully in my discussion of Allen Barnett's short fiction, the project of analyzing AIDS literacy necessarily involves taking into account the ways in which HIV and AIDS circulated, and continue to circulate, as cultural references in various publications and among different reading communities whose members may have different investments for understanding and dealing with AIDS.¹²

It is especially urgent to cultivate and promote more nuanced understandings of AIDS literacy during the present historical moment, when there is an increasing decline in the general public's consciousness of AIDS as an ongoing health and sociocultural crisis in the U.S. and elsewhere in the West.¹³ At least since 1996, when researchers at the XI International Conference on AIDS in Vancouver announced the relative success rate of protease inhibitors and combination "cocktail" therapy as viable drug treatments

¹² Although it is beyond the scope of my discussion, I would like to acknowledge the significant relationship between women (especially heterosexual women) and AIDS. For discussions on this topic, see Katie Hogan, *Women Take Care: Gender, Race, and the Culture of AIDS* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Paula A. Treichler, "The Burdens of History: Gender and Representation in AIDS Discourse, 1981-1988," in *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 42-98; and Nancy L. Roth and Katie Hogan, eds., *Gendered Epidemic: Representations of Women in the Age of AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹³ It is important to note that I am here discussing the lingering effects of the AIDS epidemic in gay male culture in the U.S., and therefore not in relation to other constituencies in the U.S. and regions of the world that have also been greatly impacted by HIV and AIDS. In recent years, there has been a commitment, especially on the part of the U.S. government, to reallocate funding and resources for AIDS research, education, prevention, and treatment to non-Western regions of the world, including South and Southeast Asia and, especially, Africa. While it is absolutely necessary and crucial that AIDS continues to be addressed as a global pandemic, this refocusing and displacement of AIDS inadvertently leads to furthering the misleading perception and false sense of security that the epidemic is not a public-health crisis among the more industrialized nations in the West. In "From Nation to Family: Containing African AIDS," in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), feminist AIDS theorist Cindy Patton argues that Western governments and media actively promote the shift in cultural perceptions of AIDS from a Western "Pattern One" version to an African "Pattern Two" version, thus implying that "Euro-American heterosexuality is 'not at risk' as long as local AIDS is identified as homosexual and heterosexual AIDS remains distant" (130).

for people living with HIV, AIDS has come to be perceived as a chronic but manageable illness, rather than as a “death sentence.” While these medical advances in treating HIV and AIDS are significant and welcome, they have also contributed to two misguided notions—either that the AIDS epidemic is happening “elsewhere,” or that it is “over.”¹⁴

Within the specific context of gay male culture, AIDS literacy needs to be cultivated because it is linked, as I discussed in Chapter One, to the debate about the “gay generation gap.” This debate reflects the competing ways in which older and younger gay men understand the generation concept and, in effect, negotiate and claim their generational identity. Members of “Generation Q,” or the queer generation, use the concept to assert their difference from their “forebears,” while older gay men, as members of the pre-Stonewall and Stonewall generations, use the concept to imagine their connection to a gay past. To the extent that the debate about the “gay generation gap” involves the ways in which different generations of gay men view how processes of gay identity formation continue to be shaped by historical events such as the Stonewall riots and the AIDS epidemic, it is in many ways a debate about shared cultural references, and, hence, cultural literacy. The decline in generational consciousness of

¹⁴ Months after the introduction of protease inhibitors, conservative gay activist Andrew Sullivan proclaimed, in the pages of the *New York Times Magazine*, “the twilight of the epidemic, the end of AIDS.” See Sullivan, “When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic,” *New York Times Magazine* (10 November 1996): 52-62+; an expanded version is reprinted as a chapter in his *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 3-86. For insightful responses challenging Sullivan’s now infamous claim that the AIDS epidemic is “over,” see Philip Brian Harper, “Gay Male Identities, Personal Privacy, and Relations of Public Exchange,” in his *Private Affairs: Critical Ventures in the Culture of Social Relations* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 89-124; Douglas Crimp, “Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction,” the title essay in his *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 1-26; and David Román, “Not-about-AIDS,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6.1 (2000): 1-28. According to Román, “[n]ot surprisingly, the end-of-AIDS discourse [precipitated by Sullivan’s article] soon led to a general lack of media interest in AIDS and to calls from gay figures for ‘post-AIDS’ identities and cultures” (1).

AIDS in gay male culture, therefore, both contributes to and results in the inevitable decline of AIDS literacy among gay men.

The task of promoting AIDS literacy has been complicated during the last several years by the appearance of three new terms in discussions of gay male sexual behavior: “barebacking,” defined as an act of intentional unprotected anal sex; and “bug chasing” and “gift giving,” defined, respectively, as the desire to engage in intentional unprotected anal sex in order either to become infected with HIV or to infect another person with the virus.¹⁵ According to Gregory Tomso, this recent debate, taking place in “both popular and scientific” venues, “provide[s] evidence of a renewed social interest in investigating and policing gay men’s sexual ‘intentions,’ an interest that often collapses the conceptual distinction between barebacking and bug chasing.”¹⁶ In response to such discursive elisions, Tomso proposes examining the use and circulation of these terms at the level of discourse in order to “work toward promoting more savvy forms of ‘discourse literacy’ for gay men and those who care about them. Such literacy,” he goes on to explain, “might

¹⁵ The phenomena of barebacking and bug chasing have been discussed in a number of disparate venues, including local weeklies, nationally-distributed magazines, and scientific journals. See Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Culture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Gregory A. Freeman, “In Search of Death,” *Rolling Stone* (6 February 2003): 44-48; Brian K. Goodroad et. al., “Bareback Sex and Gay Men: An HIV Prevention Failure,” *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care* 11, no. 6 (2000): 29-36; Eric Rofes, “Barebacking and the New AIDS Hysteria,” *Seattle Stranger* (8 April 1999): <http://www.thestranger.com/1999-04-08/feature.html>; Dan Savage, “Savage Love,” *Seattle Stranger* (30 January 2003): <http://www.thestranger.com/2003-01-30/savage.html>; and Andrew Sullivan, “Sex- and Death-Crazed Gays Play Viral Russian Roulette!,” *Salon.com* (24 January 2003): <http://www.salon.com/opinion/sullivan/2003/01/24/rolling/>.

¹⁶ Gregory Tomso, “Bug Chasing, Barebacking, and the Risks of Care,” in *Literature and Medicine* 23, no. 1 (spring 2004), 89. Tomso elaborates: “The elision of barebacking, or any act of unprotected intercourse, into what is generally portrayed as the morally repugnant and antisocial practice of bug chasing, in which gay men wantonly (or so the story goes) seek their own deaths, is made possible in part because of a refusal to take seriously the facts that, first, unprotected receptive anal intercourse between men does not inevitably lead to HIV infection and, second, that unprotected intercourse is most often a heterosexual phenomenon” (107-08). Subsequent references to this article will be made parenthetically in the text. For a now classic discussion of the hierarchization of sexual desires according to a moral value system, see Gayle R. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3-44.

begin with revitalizing the distinction between barebacking and bug chasing, not as different forms of perversion or separate diagnoses but as names we give ourselves in an attempt to comprehend behaviors and desires that, at the moment, exceed our powers of understanding and explanation” (108). As the most recent additions to an ever-evolving AIDS lexicon, terms such as barebacking, bug chasing, and gift giving, along with their slippery usage relations, foreground the ways in which AIDS remains, to borrow Treichler’s prescient formulation, “an epidemic of signification.”



In the remainder of this chapter I wish to examine the tensions and interrelations between the forms of literacy I’ve begun to outline, that is, between cultural literacy and AIDS literacy, by analyzing two short stories by gay author Allen Barnett (1955-1991): “Philostorgy, Now Obscure” and “The *Times* As It Knows Us.” First published in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1990, “Philostorgy, Now Obscure” was included, along with “The *Times* As It Knows Us” and four other stories, in Barnett’s award-winning collection, *The Body and Its Dangers and Other Stories*, which was released later that same year by St. Martin’s Press in its imprint series devoted to contemporary gay male literature—the Stonewall Inn Editions—founded by editor Michael Denny. Prior to 1990, Barnett had had only one other short story published: entitled “Snapshot,” the piece first appeared in 1986 in *Christopher Street*, a gay literary magazine also edited by Denny, and was subsequently included in *The Body and Its Dangers*.¹⁷

¹⁷ Allen Barnett, “Philostorgy, Now Obscure,” *The New Yorker* 66.16 (4 June 1990): 36-46; the story was reprinted, in a revised version, in Barnett’s collection *The Body and Its Dangers and Other Stories* (New

It's worth pausing over the intended or implied readerships of the different venues in which Barnett's work was published: *The New Yorker* is a quasi literary magazine aimed at a mainstream but highly literate audience, while *Christopher Street* magazine and the Stonewall Inn Editions imprint are targeted at a gay male reading audience, though that readership is also, admittedly, remarkably literate. Barnett himself intimates his appreciation of these different readerships when he admits preferring the version of "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" that appeared in *The New Yorker*, rather than the later version collected in *The Body and Its Dangers*. "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" recounts Preston Wallace's return to Chicago and his attempt to reconnect with friends and lovers from his past by sharing with them the news of his recent diagnosis as HIV-positive. While the majority of the story centers on Preston's reunion with his two female college roommates, Roxy Atherton and Lorna Fairweather, it also includes, in both versions, a description of Preston's reconciliation with a former lover named Jim. In the *New Yorker* version, Preston and Jim meet up and reconnect in a purely platonic manner, while the version included in *The Body and Its Dangers* additionally describes the two men's reconciliation as a sexual encounter. In an interview, Barnett shares his views about the *New Yorker* version of "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" and its treatment of Preston's meeting with Jim: "It's cleaner, and I think it's even more powerful. It's the difference," Barnett elaborates, "between what a gay sensibility thinks something should be and what

York: St. Martin's Press, 1990). *The Body and Its Dangers* won the 1991 Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction, given out by the Lambda Literary Foundation, an organization devoted to the promotion of gay and lesbian literature, and the 1991 Ferro-Grumley Award, administered by the Ferro-Grumley Foundation, an organization funded by the estates of gay novelists and lovers Robert Ferro and Michael Grumley. In a letter dated 27 March 1991, Barnett wrote to Phillip Gambone: "Did not get PEN/Hemingway. I'm shattered. Got Miss Runner Up, the 1st loser." See Philip Gambone, "Allen Barnett," *Something Inside: Conversations with Gay Fiction Writers* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 68, fn. 4. Although Barnett's collection failed to win the PEN/Hemingway Award, it did receive a citation from the Ernest Hemingway Foundation as one of the best first-published books of fiction by an American author in 1990.

an outside look might suggest. We're so, Oh, this is gay and this is the way we are. And you start thinking, Wait a minute. [. . .] Not all gay people act alike, and not all moments are going to force the same behavior on different people."¹⁸ Barnett's interview comments reveal a keen awareness of the value of difference, both in the context of a "gay sensibility" that differs from the mainstream and, equally importantly, in the context of gay men's identification with a shared, collective sexual identity.¹⁹

In fact, in "The *Times* As It Knows Us," Barnett exploits and plays up the ways in which the AIDS epidemic has made more pronounced the potential differences between and among gay men, and, in so doing, encourages gay male readers of the story to think about the functions, as well as the limitations, of group identification in contemporary gay culture. The story is set during a July weekend in the summer of 1987, at the height of the AIDS crisis in the U.S.—and, coincidentally, during the same year that saw the publication of Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* and the special issue of the arts journal *October*. Told from the perspective of a man named Clark, who is sharing a house with six other gay men in the Pines on Fire Island, the story centers on two collective, and consecutive, scenes of reading in which the seven housemates discuss the contents of the *New York Times*. The first scene describes a debate over a lifestyle-and-human interest piece the

¹⁸ Barnett elaborates: "The difference between the two stories is that the men who meet—Preston and Jim, the old boyfriends—in the book go home and have sex. And the *New Yorker* said, This is not a story about sex; it's a story about affection, and secondly they said, "If you have these two men go to bed together it will take away from the reconciliation between Preston and [Lorna] at the end of the [story].' Well, I'm not sure that Preston and [Lorna] are reconciled, but, okay, that's the way you feel about it. This was [editor] Bob Gottlieb's doing. Now, listen, if somebody has been editing longer than you've been alive says change something and they're paying you a dollar a word, you listen" (qtd. in Gambone 77).

¹⁹ The differences between gay men is literalized in the character of Jim, who has a different surname in each of the two versions of "Philostorgy, Now Obscure": in the *New Yorker* version, Jim's surname is "Christon," and, in the later version, "Stoller." For a story about gay men and the AIDS epidemic, this name change is significant because the name "Stoller" bears a euphonic resemblance to "stall-er," a person who stalls, and, more precisely, who stalls time, as well as contains the word "toll," which is associated with death.

Times had published earlier in the week and, in particular, over its characterization of a Fire Island household used to illustrate the impact of the AIDS crisis on New York City's gay community. The housemates direct much of their anger and frustration at their housemate, Perry, who apparently had served as the reporter's source. This debate then transitions into another scene of collective reading, in which the men decode the obituaries listed in the paper's Saturday edition, filling in information, such as the cause of death, which has been omitted from the death notices. The juxtaposition of these two scenes of reading, as I will discuss later in this chapter, highlights the complex interimplications of representation, misrepresentation, and self-representation. In his critique of the nation's "newspaper of record" in "The *Times* As It Knows Us," Barnett is interested not only in analyzing how gay men are being represented in the mainstream media, but also in how they are implicitly cultivating AIDS literacy through acts of reading that inform how they engage with each other and with the cultural debates staged by the media.



In both "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" and "The *Times* As It Knows Us," Barnett presents characters and narrators who possess a high level of cultural literacy, and whose conversations and ruminations are peppered with references to literary and philosophical authors, texts, and traditions. At the same time, however, these characters and narrators are shown struggling to reconcile their possession of cultural literacy with the onset of AIDS. Clark, the narrator of "The *Times* As It Knows Us," intimates this struggle when he makes the observation that, "[s]ince the [AIDS] deaths began, the certified social

workers have quoted Shakespeare at us: ‘Give sorrow words’”(105). However, for Clark, as well as for a generation of gay men traumatized by AIDS, these lines from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (Act IV, Scene iii) fail to provide solace and consolation. “But the words we used now reek of old air in churches,” Clark laments, “taste of the dust that has gathered in the crevices of the Nativity and the Passion. Our condolences are arid as leaves. We are actors who have over-rehearsed our lines” (105). In his reading of this specific passage from Barnett’s “The *Times* As It Knows Us,” literary critic and editor David Bergman notes that “[t]he old words do not help, and the old places where those words were spoken do not help either. Some new style is required—some new mode of speech, or living [. . .]. [F]or Barnett, this new language will come not by denying or erasing what came before, but by transforming what was most valuable from the past.”²⁰ Bergman is right to foreground Barnett’s commitment to developing a “new mode of speech” that would help accommodate, if not also potentially lessen, the pain suffered by gay men as a consequence of AIDS. However, I would slightly modify Bergman’s claim by suggesting that this “new language” will emerge not only “by transforming what was most valuable from the past,” but also by reevaluating the function of cultural literacy in the service of developing and promoting AIDS literacy. In Barnett’s stories, Shakespeare and other high cultural references are juxtaposed in complicated ways with other bodies of knowledge such as biomedical discourse, and with newly emergent genres of representation such as the AIDS obituary, which had begun to appear with increasing frequency during the mid 1980s to early 1990s in gay publications and in mainstream newspapers such as *The New York Times*. Through the juxtapositions of diverse textual

²⁰ David Bergman, “Beauty and the Beach: Representing Fire Island,” in *Public Sex/Gay Space*, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 112.

and discursive materials, Barnett showcases the connections and disjunctions between cultural literacy and AIDS literacy, and, in the process, analyzes the integral role of reading in gay men's lives during the epidemic.

Reading is featured in Barnett's stories, I would argue, as a "practice of everyday life," as a literate practice that enables gay men to acquire, preserve, and transmit bodies of knowledge and modes of literacy across the generations.²¹ For many gay men during the past quarter century, reading has become, as Barnett illustrates, a communal enterprise involving, among other things, the search for informed media representation and accurate medical information, the decoding of obituaries, and the sharing of information through oral transmission. Barnett's stories offer a rare and significant glimpse into the history of gay readers and their reading practices as they struggle to acquire AIDS literacy. "The *Times* As It Knows Us" engages the topic of gay readers explicitly by featuring scenes of collective reading, while the story "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" does so implicitly by juxtaposing AIDS literacy with cultural literacy and by comparing homosexuals' and heterosexuals' familiarity with AIDS discourse and medical terminology. Through their encounters with a range of printed materials, Barnett's characters and narrators are led to imagine themselves with past and present communities of readers. Moreover, by juxtaposing cultural literacy with AIDS literacy, Barnett foregrounds the ways in which textual archives and the reading practices they foster function as vital institutions of memory that help to redress gay male culture's lack of formal structures of learning and of remembering. At issue for Barnett in his stories—

²¹ On reading as a practice of everyday life, see Michel de Certeau, "Reading as Poaching," in his *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 165-176.

as well as for myself in the present analysis of AIDS literacy—is more than just literary-aesthetic continuity but also, simultaneously, historical and cultural continuity.

That Barnett should engage with the topic of gay male readers in his work is not surprising, given that he has had an affinity for books and reading from an early age. In fact, he alleges that the first word he uttered as an infant to his mother was not “momma,” but “book.” This incident was interpreted by his mother as “some sort of revelation about his character,” and she soon “felt compelled to read to him.”²² Though Barnett attributes his development as a reader to his mother, it is his curiosity and courage that would eventually lead him to become a “gay reader.” In 1971, at the age of 16, he recalls taking out the “three gay books” that were available at his local public library: Donn Teal’s *The Gay Militants: How Gay Liberation Began in America, 1969-1971* (1971), Dennis Altman’s *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* (1971), and Gordon Merrick’s *The Lord Won’t Mind* (1970). In an interview, Barnett recounts his encounter with these texts:

I took them home and learned in one weekend that gay was a political thing, and that a political movement had started with [the 1969] Stonewall [riots in New York City], and that a man could fuck another man and that the man who was getting fucked could like it. So that was a lot to learn in one weekend. And I’ve never forgotten those two lessons. (qtd. in Gambone 79-80)

Whereas Barnett views reading during his childhood simply as “a form of escape and fantasy” (qtd. in Gambone 69), he eventually becomes an autodidact during his adolescence and begins to recognize the pedagogical function of texts and the different uses of literacy. He learns about the politics of the gay rights liberation movement from Teal’s and Altman’s historical studies, and gains an unapologetic literary portrayal of

²² This anecdote is retold by Ron Caldwell in an essay memorializing his friendship with Barnett. See Ron Caldwell, “Love With the Light On,” in *Taking Liberties: Gay Men’s Essays on Politics, Culture, and Sex*, ed. Michael Bronski (New York: Richard Kasak, 1996), 297-322.

homosexuality from Merrick's novel. And though he did not do "a whole hell of a lot" with the knowledge at the time, two decades later he would recognize that weekend's textual encounter as a formative moment in his "emergence as a gay person" (qtd. in Gambone 80).



For Barnett, as well as for many other gay men, as I illustrated in the introductory chapter, reading plays a central role not only in the acquisition of cultural literacy, but also in the constitution of a sense of self and a sense of belonging within a larger collectivity. Barnett recognizes that the AIDS epidemic has transformed gay men's relationship to reading, as is evident in his decision to title one of his stories "The *Times* As It Knows Us."²³ The "us" in the title refers to gay men—and, if the story's characters and the reference to the *New York Times* are any indication, a select group of urban gay men who are middle-class and well-educated. Moreover, given the story's focus on gay male reading practices, the "us" is most particularly a reference to gay readers.

Barnett's "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" opens by juxtaposing a tension between cultural literacy and AIDS literacy. The opening scene of the story describes its three main characters—Preston, Roxy, and Lorna—engaged in a conversation about Preston's health. Their conversation introduces readers to the fact that Preston is HIV-positive and,

²³ Barnett's relationship to reading is shaped, of course, by being a writer. He recalls the onset of AIDS and its influence on his identity as a writer: "So I wanted to write that funny novel. I turned in my thesis in 1981 and what happens next? There's AIDS. And my theme was always 'the body and its dangers.' And I just realized I could not write that novel [. . .]. I thought, How in the hell do I write that book [. . .] when the ante had been raised [. . .]? How do you write about sex when your friend is dying across the street? I just thought, I can't do this" (qtd. in Gambone 75-76).

more significantly, establishes a difference between Roxy's and Lorna's capacity and willingness to acquire AIDS literacy. Unlike Lorna, Roxy is quite knowledgeable about the different symptoms of and treatment options for HIV and AIDS. Fearing that additional "stress [might] blow out whatever's left of [his] immune system," Roxy advises Preston to consider postponing his plans to visit his parents (34). Lorna, in her turn, offers the suggestion that Preston need not "tell [his] mother anything," since he "[will] be the one they'll find a cure for." Registering "the instant and dismissive optimism of Lorna's response," Preston returns with the comment: "As if science were so specific or personal" (35).²⁴

The remainder of the opening scene goes on to explore the veracity of Preston's claim that science—or, more precisely, scientific knowledge or scientific treatments—is neither "specific or personal." During the course of their conversation, Roxy is shown struggling to reconcile, on the one hand, a more technical, functionalist understanding of HIV and AIDS with, on the other, a more humane and personalized understanding of the health crisis. The version of the story included in *The Body and Its Dangers* reads:

Roxy asked [Preston], "Are you going onto DHPG?"
 "I'm surprised you even know what it is," he said. He was even more surprised when she burst into tears.
 "I've worried about you," Roxy cried, for she also knew that his medication would require a catheter inserted into a vein that fed directly into an atrium of his heart. There the drug would be diffused into his blood and sped through his body in a matter of seconds. She knew that the drug had yet to be approved by the FDA and that it was given on a compassionate-use basis. She knew, too, that nurses would teach him how to administer it to himself, so that he could do it alone, sitting at home beneath his own I.V. pole for an hour, five times a week. He would have sacks of sucrose, and a big red plastic container for medical waste. She knew as much about this disease as she could know. (35)

²⁴ In the version in the story that appeared in *The New Yorker*, Preston's response reads: "As if science were so personal." This earlier version also does not include the description of Preston's registration of "the instant and dismissive optimism of Lorna's response" (36).

In the original version of the story that appeared in *The New Yorker*, Roxy's question is immediately followed by the narrator's explanation that "Preston had told them [Roxy and Lorna] that he had cytomegalovirus," or CMV, an opportunistic infection that causes blindness (36). In the later version, however, the narrative does not elaborate that the drug DHPG is used to treat cytomegalovirus. The explicit reference to DHPG in the *New Yorker* version, along with its implied relationship to CMV, suggests the need to provide such information to readers less familiar with HIV and AIDS. In a similar manner, the unexplained reference to DHPG in the later version intimates that the readers of *The Body and Its Dangers*—the majority of whom are presumably gay—are already in possession of this knowledge, or, at the very least, are likely able to draw a connection between DHPG and CMV.

The oral exchange between Roxy and Preston—the fairly casual way with which she delivers her question, as well as his genuinely surprised response to it—suggests the extent to which HIV and AIDS have entered the characters' lives. Even though neither HIV nor AIDS are mentioned during this exchange, both terms are intimated, metonymically, by the reference to DHPG and CMV.²⁵

²⁵ In fact, the first actual reference to AIDS appears much later in the narrative—and, not insignificantly, in a reference to a written document. Angered by Lorna's indifference to his health, Preston threatens to send her "a pamphlet called *When Someone You Know Has AIDS*," which is "filled with helpful hints for friends of the afflicted" (*The Body and Its Dangers*, 45; *The New Yorker*, 40). Barnett's "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" is among many other stories about gay men and AIDS that either delay mentioning AIDS, or fail to mention it at all. For a discussion of this narrative strategy, see James W. Jones, "Refusing the Name: The Absence of AIDS in Recent Gay Male Fiction," in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, eds. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 225-243. According to Jones, "it is impossible to read a piece of gay fiction about gay men in the present and not assume AIDS is going to make its presence felt one way or another. Writings by and about gay men must henceforth assume that the reader bears in mind precisely that culturally determined equation of homosexuality = AIDS. That is why the name does not need to be invoked specifically and yet the reader can be expected to decode the signs that signify AIDS within the text" (229). The strategy of decoding what is unnamed in such narratives is related, as I will argue later in my reading of Barnett's "The Times As It Knows Us," to the act of decoding AIDS obituaries. Moreover, the narrative strategy of not naming AIDS—or, as in the case of Barnett's "Philostorgy, Now Obscure," of delaying that naming—is not the

In both versions of “Philostorgy, Now Obscure,” Roxy is consistently portrayed as a touchstone for AIDS literacy. The narrator’s description, in free indirect discourse, shows that Roxy is familiar not only with the medical treatment for CMV, but, more significantly, with the human consequences of such a treatment. In other words, the story does not explain that CMV, to cite the official definition from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is “a member of the herpesvirus group, which includes herpes simplex virus types 1 and 2, varicella-zoster virus (which causes chickenpox), and Epstein-Barr virus (which causes infectious mononucleosis).”²⁶ The story instead describes the unspoken fact that Roxy “knew [. . .] that nurses would [have to] teach

same thing as Hirsch’s decision not to include the term “AIDS” in his appendix. In other words, unlike Hirsch, Barnett is committed to promoting AIDS literacy and, equally significantly, understands the interrelationship between AIDS literacy and cultural literacy.

Nongay readers of *The New Yorker* can also easily enough deduce the content of “Philostorgy, Now Obscure,” not only because of the way the story is constructed, but also, possibly, because they might have read “The Way We Live Now,” a short story by Susan Sontag about gay men and the AIDS crisis that also leaves unnamed the disease, which had appeared in *The New Yorker* in November 1986, several years prior to Barnett’s “Philostorgy, Now Obscure.” In Sontag’s story, a group of friends, both men and women, discuss the health of a mutual, male friend: all the friends are named, but the name of the man with AIDS is never disclosed. In fact, throughout the narrative, which is structured entirely as free indirect discourse, the term “AIDS” is never explicitly named; the closest approximation is the following passage: “And it was encouraging, Stephen insisted, that from the start, at least from the time he was finally persuaded to make the telephone call to his doctor, he was willing to say the name of the disease, pronounce it often and easily, as if it were just another word, like boy or gallery or cigarette or money or deal, as in no big deal, Paolo interjected, because, as Stephen continued, to utter the name is a sign of health, a sign that one has accepted being who one is, mortal, vulnerable, not exempt, not an exception after all, it’s a sign that one is willing, truly willing, to fight for one’s life” (261). Sontag’s description of a man with AIDS willing himself to utter the name of the disease that afflicts him, and as a way to empower himself, is significant for the present discussion of AIDS literacy. To my mind, it evokes an image of a person who is struggling to acquire language skills by pronouncing and repeating words. AIDS literacy, then, involves not only highly sophisticated ways of engaging with and understanding cultural debates and biomedical information, but also, as the passage from Sontag’s story suggests, a basic and more functionalist mode of literacy. See Sontag, “The Way We Live Now,” in *The Best American Short Stories of the Eighties*, ed. Shannon Ravenel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 252-270. Sontag’s story was later arranged for stage production by director Edward Parone for the Mark Taper Forum; the printed arrangement is reproduced as “The Way We Live Now,” in *The Way We Live Now: American Plays and the AIDS Crisis*, ed. M. Elizabeth Osborn (New York: Theatre Communications Group), 99-128. It is worth noting the extent to which dramatic and theater productions helped to foster awareness of the AIDS crisis, for it is no small coincidence that, to those in possession of AIDS literacy, the acronym “AIDS” can also signify for “AIDS-inspired drama syndrome.”

²⁶ <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/cmrv.htm>

[Preston] how to administer [the catheter] to himself, so that he could do it alone, sitting at home beneath his own I.V. pole for an hour, five times a week.” Roxy seeks to “translate” biomedical information; notwithstanding Preston’s skepticism, she wants to make applicable AIDS literacy on a “specific [and] personal” level. Her ability and willingness to do so approximates the kind of medical exchange that takes place between seropositive patients and their physicians. Robert M. Ariss notes that, in the last quarter century, there has emerged as a consequence of AIDS “a patient population of middle-class gay men who have achieved a high level of medical literacy.” These men have learned to master and to make intelligible for themselves what Ariss calls “medical creole,” that is, “the symbolic system of biomedical language—its technical jargon, labels of therapies, and associated ideologies of treatment.”²⁷

Roxy’s AIDS literacy becomes more and more evident during the course of the narrative. In a passage describing Roxy’s consciousness, the narrative describes, again in free indirect discourse:

Preston had cytomegalovirus, which most people are exposed to by the time they have reached kindergarten. It could make him go blind; it could become systemic, but there was something Roxy was more afraid of and was afraid to bring up—it was unlikely that a person with AIDS would only have CMV without the presence of another opportunistic infection. Did Preston know that? she wondered. Should she ask? (39)²⁸

Here, and elsewhere in the story, Roxy is portrayed consistently as someone who actively teaches herself about HIV and AIDS. Always worried about her friend’s health,

she thought of a list of things that could kill him: *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, Kaposi’s sarcoma, lymphoma, toxoplasmosis, cryptosporidiosis,

²⁷ Robert M. Ariss, *Against Death: The Practice of Living with AIDS* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1997), 73.

²⁸ The original version of the story suggests a more hesitant Roxy. The rhetorical question Roxy poses to herself reads: “Should she ask if that was true?” (37).

mycobacterium tuberculosis, cytomegalovirus, Hodgkin's disease, multifocal leukoencephalopathy, encephalitis, cryptococcal meningitis—over twenty-five diseases that constituted a diagnosis of AIDS. She thought of wasting-away syndrome and dementia. On her nightstand and desk was a pile of books on the immune system, subscriptions to treatment updates, newsletters out of San Francisco and New York. She knew as much about the subject as anyone could. (48)

Roxy here mentally recites the list of opportunistic infections as identified by the CDC. Barnett's portrayal of Roxy and her willingness to acquire AIDS literacy models for his readers the need to become literate with the lexicon of AIDS. Significantly, this list only appears in the later, revised edition of the story, and not in the original *New Yorker* version. Barnett's inclusion of this list in the version of the story included in *The Body and Its Dangers*—that is, in a collection whose primary audience are gay male readers—highlights the assumption that some of the story's readers are already in possession of AIDS literacy, while those who are not are encouraged to inform themselves to become fluent and knowledgeable with the vocabulary of AIDS.

The story both privileges and, paradoxically, questions Roxy's role as a touchstone of AIDS literacy. After showing that Roxy is able to recite the "twenty-five diseases that constituted a diagnosis of AIDS," the narrator goes on to note her belief that "[s]he knew as much about the subject as anyone could." This qualification echoes the earlier description, at the beginning of the story, that Roxy "knew as much about this disease as she could know" (35). The obvious resonance in the language used to describe Roxy's AIDS literacy suggests that, notwithstanding her admirable desire to grasp the human consequences of the AIDS crisis, her *knowledge* of the disease can only ever approximate the *experience* of seropositive people—such as Preston—who have a more direct and experiential relationship to the AIDS crisis. To Roxy, AIDS will always

remain in a mediated, abstract sense as a “subject” of study, for she is not a subject who has to live with HIV inside her body. If Preston is right to suggest that scientific knowledge is not “specific or personal” (35), it is only because there are different degrees of personalization—that is, different registers with which to experience the human consequences of AIDS. Roxy knows all that she could know because her AIDS literacy is knowledge-based, whereas Preston’s is also based intimately on his experience as an HIV-positive gay man.

To be fair, Barnett seems to suggest that it is not enough for Roxy or anyone else just to be literate with biomedical information—for he consistently draws a connection between his characters’ possession of AIDS literacy and their emotional intelligence and compassion.²⁹ For instance, although Roxy knows that “it was unlikely that a person with AIDS would only have CMV without the presence of another opportunistic infection” (39), she is also emotionally intelligent enough to know not to press Preston on the issue until an appropriate moment presents itself. Preston, too, is shown to become more and more compassionate towards Roxy, as he learns throughout the course of his visit that she has taught herself to learn about HIV and AIDS: “wander[ing] into Roxy’s bedroom,” Preston “saw a photocopy of an article from *The New England Journal of Medicine*” “[b]eneath the phone on her nightstand,” and “[b]eneath that article he found treatment updates out of San Francisco, which Roxy would have had to subscribe to in order to get” (54). By the end of the story, both Roxy and Preston have learned to communicate openly once more with each other. When Roxy finally trusts herself and Preston enough to ask him about his CMV, Preston reassures her that he has not yet exhibited symptoms to

²⁹ See Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam, 1995).

indicate that he might have other opportunistic infections, all the while withholding from her the fact that he has been experiencing “pain under his arm” (60), a sign that he may have begun to develop lymphoma (36).



Preston is shown from the very beginning of the story as having an interest in the etymology of words. During his conversation with Roxy and Lorna,

Preston looked around the dining room as the women wept. This had been their favorite room when the three of them lived together as undergraduates. It had a south window and the sun came in all day long. There was nothing in it but a table, chairs, and a plant, a philodendron that was in the same place he had put it twelve years ago. In the decade that the three of them have lived apart, it had grown as high as the ceiling, claiming the corner with the unfolding of each new leaf. A philodendron’s name implied self-love, he thought, if one was a tree. *Philo*, love; *dendron*, tree—loving tree, or love of trees. Narcissism seemed to impel this one. Philharmonic, he thought, was love of music; philosophy, love of wisdom; philopolemic (rare), love of war or disputes. Philter was a love potion, philanderer actually meant fond of men. Philostorgy, meaning natural affection, was now obscure. (36-37)

Unlike the earlier reference to DHPG, the Greek term “philostorgy” is explained at length in the story, suggesting not only Preston’s cultural literacy—his ability to look up and break down words—but also the need to provide this contextual information for readers of the story.

The appearance of Greek terms in “Philostorgy, Now Obscure” illustrates, moreover, the ways in which cultural literacy can aid in the cultivation of AIDS literacy. At one point in the narrative Preston asks Lorna, who is pregnant, if she is “going to have amniocentesis” (39). The description continues:

Lorna said it wasn’t necessary at this time, but he wasn’t listening. In his head, he was breaking the word down: amnio, which came from *amnion*, the membrane

around the fetus, was Greek for lamb; the cognate *centesis* meant to puncture or perforate. (39)

Preston's knowledge of the etymology of words serves him well in developing "his fluency in a Greek-like and latinate language of cancers, viruses, funguses, and rare pneumonias" (41). His extensive cultural literacy literally allows him to play language games that in explicit and implicit ways help him to understand AIDS.

Judging from the story's title, and the description of the term, it remains unclear whether the term "philostorgy" was itself obscure, or whether it is the sentiment the term conveys—natural affection—that is seldom used, understood, or available. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines philostorgy as "natural affection, such as that between parents and children," and records that the term appeared in Henry Cockeram's *The English dictionarie, or an interpreter of hard English words* (1623/1626) and, later, in Thomas Blount's *Glossographia, or a dictionary interpreting such hard words . . . as are now used* (1656/1681). The fact that there are three centuries separating the first two appearances of the term during the Renaissance, and, according to the *OED*, Barnett's use of it in his story, suggests that "philostorgy" is indeed obscure. At the same time, however, Barnett seems to suggest that the sentiment conveyed by the term—the ontological quality of the feeling of natural affection—is still available, or, at the very least, if rare, is still worth pursuing. In the story, Preston, Roxy, and Lorna are shown struggling to rekindle their friendship, and, in the end, they succeed by becoming more and more affectionate—more precisely, more compassionate—with each other.³⁰

³⁰ Significantly, Barnett is using the term not only in its more limited definition of natural affection between parents and children, but also in relation to what I would otherwise call compassion. "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" begins with Roxy's suggestion that Preston postpone his visit to his foster parents. When Preston had come out to his foster parents twelve years ago, his foster mother had responded by arguing that "homosexuality is genetic," "since there were no homosexuals in her natural family. But Preston's

Preston's capacity for compassion, I would add, is consistently linked in the story to his possession of cultural literacy. Through the juxtaposition of cultural literacy with AIDS literacy, Barnett draws a correlation between compassion and Preston's pursuit of humanistic studies. Three seemingly disparate moments in the narrative, when read together, suggest the ways in which Barnett attempts to show that natural affection is not obscure—that, though the sentiment might be rare, it is still achievable. During his reunion with his former lover, Preston gives Jim a gift: "a bowl of hand-carved, sandblasted glass, just larger than a softball. In its surface were philodendron leaves, carved against deep green glass" (58). This scene of gift-giving echoes an earlier moment in the narrative. When Roxy and Lorna begin to cry during the course of their conversation with Preston, the narrator observes that, out of compassion, "Preston said nothing, allowing them their moment of grief, as if it was his to give, a possession he could pass on, like a keepsake" (36). Significantly, it is during this moment that Preston begins to reminisce about the past he shared with the two women: "look[ing] around the dining room as the women wept," he recalled that "[t]his had been their favorite room," in which stood "a plant, a philodendron that was in the same place he had put it twelve years ago" (36). The philodendron bowl Preston gives to Jim is a literal representation of the sentiment of affection.

Preston's cultural literacy, moreover, assists him in acquiring an AIDS literacy that is intimately and particularly connected to his sense of identity as a gay man. "After

foster father," the narrative goes on to explain, "had been warmer. Privately, face to face, he told Preston, 'We make our choices where affections are concerned,' and then he touched Preston's face with an open palm, as if to show that he concealed no weapon" (34-35). The description here introduces the idea of philostorgy as the affection between parents and children. During the course of the story, Barnett shows the need to broaden this definition of affectionate relations—and he does so by highlighting Preston's cultural literacy. For cultural analyses of compassion, see the essays assembled in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (New York: Routledge, 2004).

the doctor had given him his diagnosis,” the narrator tells us at a crucial moment in the story, “Preston had gone home and begun to clean his apartment,” “empt[ying] the closets full of clothes” and “thr[owing] out record albums and photograph albums, school diplomas, high-school literary magazines, ribbons won at speech tournaments, his draft card” (46). “Only [the discovery of] his college notebooks slowed the process [of cleaning] down,” the narrator continues, “as if there should be a reason to stave off their destruction, as if there was something in them he might have forgotten and needed learning again” (46). Finding “notebooks for classes he couldn’t remember having taken,” and “journals” containing “drafts of poems he had tried to write,” Preston decided that it was “[b]etter to throw it all away than to have someone find it, lay claim to it, or reduce his life to it” (46, 47).

The narrator then goes on to describe Preston’s discovery of two papers that he had written in his college literature classes:

Some things he saved: letters from friends, and two papers he had written in college, one on the Pardoner from *The Canterbury Tales*, and one on Walt Whitman. “The first angry homosexual,” he had written about the Pardoner, “the first camp sensibility in English literature.” And then there was Whitman’s vision of love between two men, almost a civic duty, and one that had flourished for a while. The latter paper he had turned in late with a note to the teacher, “I have gotten a disease in a Whitmanesque fashion, perhaps a hazard from the kind of research I have been doing lately.” Something had made the glands in his legs swell up till it was impossible to walk. “Are you homosexual?” the school doctor asked, having seen the same infection in the gay neighborhood where his practice was. “Well, now that you mention it,” Preston replied. (47)

According to Steven F. Kruger, Barnett, by including these literary references,

“emphasizes the need to discover and claim a particular, complicated gay history—one that includes both Whitman and the Pardoner [. . .]. Such a history is complexly related to the present historical moment, with Whitman’s joyous ‘vision’ paradoxically bound up

in the experience of disease, and the Pardoner's anger providing Preston with a model for his own angry response to the diagnosis of AIDS. [. . .] Preston looks to the violence of the past out of the violence of the present," Kruger concludes, "to claim a voice that might angrily challenge or campily subvert the legacies of homophobia."³¹ Although he does not use the terms, Kruger is essentially pointing out how Preston is engaging with the need to cultivate an AIDS literacy that augments the (gay) cultural literacy he had gained in college. Therefore, I would suggest that Barnett illustrates in his short story that the project of challenging and subverting the legacies of homophobia involves examining the interrelationship between cultural literacy and AIDS literacy.



Even more so than "Philostorgy, Now Obscure," Barnett's "The *Times* As It Knows Us" makes reference to a diverse range of authors, philosophers, and musicians, including, in the order of their appearance in the story: Auden (62; 82), Spinoza (62), Vergil (63), Euripides (72-73), Rilke (73), Mozart (73), Verdi (88); Emily Dickinson (89-90); Madeleine l'Engle (104); and Shakespeare (105). In its formal structure, "The *Times* As It Knows Us" opens with an epigraph and a prologue, followed by the two main parts of the narrative. The first two lines from a poem by W. H. Auden serves as an epigraph: "Time will say nothing but I told you so, / Time only knows the price we have to pay." Readers unfamiliar with Auden would register easily enough the visual and aural resemblance between the "*Times*" in the story's title and the twice-repeated "time" in the

³¹ Stephen F. Kruger, "Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 6, no. 1 (spring 1994): 118.

epigraph. In a similar way, they would probably note the story's intimation of an already existing audience, as suggested in the first-person plural pronouns that appear in the title and epigraph ("us" and "we"). Those more familiar with or curious about Auden might additionally recognize these lines as the opening two lines of "If I Could Tell You" (1940), a poem about the impossibility of predicting the future, due to the fact that only the passing of time will reveal the emergence and outcome of events.³²

Following the epigraph, the story opens with a short, untitled prologue that begins with a direct quotation from Spinoza and ends with one from Vergil. The prologue not only introduces the story's readers to the topic of reading, but also implicitly offers a metatextual strategy for approaching and reading the story itself. By including these intertextual allusions in the prologue, Barnett frames "The *Times* As It Knows Us" right from the outset as a story about reading and literacy, and about memory and loss. The story's opening paragraph reads:

"With regards to human affairs," Spinoza said, "not to laugh, not to cry, not to become indignant, but to understand." It's what my lover, Samuel, used to repeat to me when I was raging at the inexplicable behavior of friends or at something I had read in the newspaper. I often intend to look the quote up myself, but that would entail leafing through Samuel's books, deciphering the margin notes, following underlined passages back to where his thoughts were formed, a past closed off to me. (63)

³² Given the historical moment in which the story was published, readers would be led to assume that "The *Times* As It Knows Us" is about gay men's experience during the AIDS epidemic, and in that assumption, be further led to wonder about the ominous dark tone of the epigraph. Those more familiar with Auden's poem might also be led to recall that "If I Could Tell You" was composed and published during World War II, a historical moment that also concerns the deaths of men on a mass scale. This intertextual war metaphor is not uncommon in AIDS literature. See Michael S. Sherry, "The Language of War in AIDS Discourse," in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, eds. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 39-53. Susan Sontag concludes her book *AIDS and Its Metaphors* with the argument that among the many metaphors used to describe illnesses and their treatments, "[t]he one I am most eager to see retired—more than ever since the emergence of AIDS—is the military metaphor." Though she understands that "the effect of the military imagery on thinking about sickness and health is far from inconsequential," she maintains that "[i]t overmobilizes, it overdescribes, and it powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatizing of the ill" (94). See her *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988).

By embedding a passage from Spinoza, and Clark's subsequent explanation, the story immediately suggests that its characters are highly literate gay men. It also sets up a relationship to reading that implicitly teaches the story's own readers how to read. The narrator is familiar with the Spinoza quotation only because of his lover, Samuel, who, we learn during the course of the story, has recently died. In short, Clark's familiarity with Spinoza is mediated through Samuel.

The opening paragraph also introduces the role of newspapers—ostensibly the topic of the short story—and their effect on Clark. It is especially fitting that *The New York Times* should feature so prominently in Barnett's story, not least because the paper published, on Friday, July 3rd, 1981, the now infamous article, "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals." Thus, Barnett's "The *Times* As It Knows Us" reads as a critique of, and an intervention into, the context of early mainstream news coverage linking AIDS and gay men.³³

The story's opening passage, moreover, attempts to draw a connection between disparate texts: newspapers, philosophical treatises, and personal marginalia. It is striking that being annoyed by reading the newspapers should conjure Spinoza's saying in Clark's mind. It is also striking that Clark has yet to excavate the readerly trace left by Samuel in his books, not least because, as Clark puts it, that "would entail leafing through Samuel's books, deciphering the margin notes, following underlined passages back to where his thoughts were formed, a past closed off to me." Readers are led to assume that the past

³³ Curiously, the actual date of the *Times* article, "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals," is misremembered in Barnett's story. The narrator Clark admits that he has been collecting articles on HIV and AIDS "since they first appeared in the *Times* on a Saturday morning in July several years ago. RARE CANCER SEEN IN 41 HOMOSEXUALS the headline of the single-column piece announced, way in the back of the paper" (68). In 1981, July 3rd fell on a Friday, not a Saturday.

that is “closed off” refers not only to a past that Clark once shared with Samuel, but perhaps also a pre-AIDS past that would be too painful to resuscitate in the present. But the narrative intimates another reason for Clark’s reticence, namely, that the AIDS epidemic has required the negotiation of different modes of literacy.

Barnett’s characters in “The *Times* As It Knows Us” struggle to negotiate the tensions between cultural literacy and AIDS literacy. An especially memorable paragraph illustrates the ways in which AIDS literacy has become part of gay men’s everyday conversation. Having just lamented the fact that “Babel fell before we had a decent word for death,” Clark continues:

And simply speak, disinterested and dryly, the words that fill your daily life: “Lewis has KS of the lungs,” or “Raymond has endocarditis but the surgeons won’t operate,” or “Howard’s podiatrist will not remove a bunion until he takes the test,” or “Cytomegalovirus has inflamed his stomach and we can’t get him to eat,” or “The DHPG might restore the sight in his eye,” or “The clinical trial for ampligen has filled up,” or “They’ve added dementia to the list of AIDS-related illnesses,” or “The AZT was making him anemic,” or “His psoriasis flaked so badly, the maid wouldn’t clean his room,” or “They found tuberculosis in his glands,” or “It’s a form of meningitis carried in pigeon shit; his mother told him he should never have gone to Venice,” or “The drug’s available on a compassionate basis,” or “The drug killed him,” or “His lung collapsed and stopped his heart,” or “He was *so* young.” What have you said and who wants to hear it? (105)

The shift from a Biblical reference—the Tower of Babel—to a fast-paced and exhaustive oral recitation of symptoms associated with seropositivity underscores the connection between cultural literacy and AIDS literacy. By referencing God’s act of confusing the languages, as narrated in the story of the Tower of Babel (*Genesis* 11: 1-9), Barnett suggests that AIDS literacy involves an ability not only to sift through medical and scientific information, but also to differentiate between facts and gossip, hearsay, and speculation.

Through Clark, especially, Barnett suggests that gay men's cultural literacy can only be useful if it is transformed to meet the pressing concerns of dealing with the AIDS crisis. Earlier, I cited a passage in which Clark bemoans the empty words of social workers who encourage gay men to "Give sorrow words" (105). These lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are immediately followed by citations from the Book of Sirach: "*Let your tears fall for the dead, and as one who is suffering begin the lament . . . do not neglect his burial. [. . .] Let your weeping be bitter and your wailing fervent; then be comforted for your sorrow*" (106). For Clark, however, it is only possible to "give sorrow occasion and [to] let it go" by *re*-interpreting these high-cultural texts. "Find in grief the abandon you used to find in love," he instructs the story's readers, "grieve the way you used to fuck" (106). By reinterpreting the social workers' invitation to "give sorrow words," Clark asserts his desire for self-representation and, by extension, contextualizes mourning as an extension of gay love and desire.



"The *Times* As It Knows Us" contains a critique of the representations—or lack thereof—of the AIDS epidemic in the mainstream media, and in particular the nation's paper of record. This critique is contextualized in relationship to gay men's self-representations of their own responses to the health crisis devastating their lives. Thus the story stages a debate between representation and self-representation—a tension summed up by the exchange between Clark and Perry over the contents of the lifestyle-and-human interest article that had appeared in the newspaper. Perry tries to justify his reasons for agreeing to be the source for the reporter: "I was told this was going to be a human-

interest piece. [. . .] They wanted to know how AIDS is impacting on our lives— [. . .] and I thought we were the best house on the Island to illustrate how the crisis had turned into a lifestyle.” Upon hearing this, Clark berates Perry by reminding him that “How we represent ourselves is never the way the *Times* does.” Perry then rejoins with the claim that the newspaper “officially started using the word *gay* in that article” (65). By contrasting Clark’s and Perry’s responses to the lifestyle-and-human-interest piece, Barnett models for his readers multiple ways of reading—and, in the process, contrasting ways of engaging with AIDS in the public sphere. In short, both Clark and Perry are “gay readers,” though their interpretations of and responses to a shared text, as well as their participation in a shared cultural debate, are noticeably different.

To the best of my knowledge, the article featured in “The *Times* As It Knows Us” is a fictionalization. However, other details in the story function as historical markers situating the events described in July of 1987. Especially pertinent is Clark’s narrative observation: “Indeed, the *Times* had just started to use the word *gay* instead of the more clinical *homosexual*, a semantic leap that coincided with the adoption of Ms. instead of Miss, and of publishing photographs of both the bride and the groom in Sunday’s wedding announcements. And in the obituaries, they had finally agreed to mention a gay man’s lover as one of his survivors” (65; original emphases). According to James Kinsella in his book *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media*, the *New York Times* underwent considerable changes at the end of 1986 in its policies about covering the epidemic. In December of that year, the new editorial page editor Max Frankel “wrote what became known as his ‘AIDS memo,’ calling for increased reporting and recognition that the disease was one of the most important stories of the decade.” Later that month,

“another memo [was] circulated, this time from the office of style-watchdog Allan M. Siegal. Breaking a long tradition of extreme propriety, Siegal wrote: ‘We can mention a live-in companion of the same or the opposite sex in the course of the narrative.’” Six months later, in June of 1987, a month before the setting of Barnett’s “*The Times As It Knows Us*,” Siegal distributed another memo that explicitly promoted the use of the term “gay”: “Starting immediately,” his memo stated, “*Gay* may refer to homosexual men, or more generally to homosexual men and women.”³⁴

Although the story provides historical verisimilitude in its setting, its author ultimately resists situating it precisely within *that* historical moment. There is one especially telling description of an obituary, which reads: “Mazzochi, Robert, forty-four on July — , 1987. [. . .]” (71). Leaving blank the actual date of Robert Mazzochi’s death, Barnett seems to invite his readers to contemplate and recognize the all too real possibility that the AIDS crisis represents an *enduring* catastrophe in gay men’s lives.

The fact that little has changed between 1987 and 1990, between, that is, the setting of the story and its publication, is highlighted in the second scene of collective reading. Clark describes the strategies and the reasons for reading AIDS obituaries:

We deduced the AIDS casualties by finding the death notices of men, their age and marital status, and then their occupation. Fortunately, this information usually began the notice, or we would have been at it for hours. If the deceased was female, old, married, or worked where no one we knew would, we skipped to the next departed. A “beloved son” gave us pause, for we were all that; a funeral home was a clue, because at the time, few of them would take an AIDS casualty [. . .].

We also looked for the neighborhood of the church where a service would be held, for we knew the gay clergy. We looked at who had bought the notice, and what was said in it. When an AIDS-related condition was not given as the cause of death, we looked for coded half-truths: cancer, pneumonia, meningitis, after a long struggle, after a short illness. The dead giveaway, so to speak, was to whom

³⁴ James Kinsella, *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 81 (original emphasis).

contributions could be made in lieu of flowers. Or the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim. (70)

This passage foregrounds a methodical reading strategy for interpreting the obituaries—a reading practice that contributes to the characters' acquisition of AIDS literacy.

According to Clark, there are a number of death notices that do not include “an AIDS-related condition [. . .] as the cause of death,” and thus are in need of decoding.³⁵

Reading and decoding the obituaries gives the housemates an opportunity to confront, cope with, and commemorate the losses wrought by HIV and AIDS. “It was good that we had this system for finding the AIDS deaths,” Clark goes on to narrate,

otherwise we might have had to deal with the fact that other people were dying, too, and tragically, and young, and leaving people behind wondering what it was all about. Of course, the difference here was that AIDS was an infectious disease and many of the dead were people with whom we had had sex. We also read the death notices for anything that might connect us to someone from the past. (71)

I would suggest that it is this intense and desperate desire to connect with others from the past that leads Barnett to leave blank Robert Mazzochi's death date in the story.

There is yet another instance of ambiguity with regards to this man's obituary. Earlier I

³⁵ It is worth noting that, as early as July 1983, the *New York Times* had begun to publish obituaries that implicitly and explicitly reference AIDS. See, for example, the following death notices: John S. Saloma, 48, who “died of pneumocystic pneumonia” (July 8, 1983); Jon Sims, 37, who died of “acquired immune deficiency syndrome” (July 19, 1984); and Lynne Carter, female impersonator, 60, who died of “acquired immune deficiency syndrome—AIDS” (January 14, 1985). For discussions of AIDS obituaries in gay male culture, see Michael Bronski, “AIDS, Art and Obits,” in *Personal Dispatches: Writers Confront AIDS*, ed. John Preston (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989): 161-166; and Timothy F. Murphy, “Testimony,” in his *Ethics in an Epidemic: AIDS, Morality, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 52-66. For discussions of AIDS obituaries in the *New York Times*, see Charles Winick, “AIDS Obituaries in the *New York Times*,” *AIDS and Public Policy Journal* 11, no. 3 (fall 1996): 148-152; and A. Odasuo Alali, “The Disposition of AIDS Imagery in *New York Times* Obituaries,” *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 29, no. 4 (1994): 273-289. In *Multiple AIDS-Related Loss: A Handbook for Understanding and Surviving a Perpetual Fall* (Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis, 1997), psychotherapist David Nord discusses the role of writing obituaries as a strategy for dealing with loss: “When a person dies, writing the obituary may be a collective effort. It provides an excellent opportunity to reminisce. Many who die from AIDS have life histories that are divided between family of choice and the early years and their friends and adult lives. The writing of the obituary provides a time to bring these parts of the deceased together” (241). Barnett's “*The Times As It Knows Us*” suggests that reading obituaries can prove to be equally therapeutic. For more general discussions on the cultural role of obituaries, see Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); and Mushira Eid, *The World of Obituaries: Gender Across Cultures and over Time* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002).

had suggested that Barnett includes contrasting responses on the part of his characters to suggest multiple ideas of what constitutes gay readers. In a similar manner, Barnett offers yet another example of contrasting texts and readings in relation to Robert Mazzochi's death. Barnett's story includes two obituaries for Robert. The first one reads:

Mazzochi, Robert, forty-four on July — , 1987. Son of Victor and Natalia Mazzochi of Stonington, Connecticut. Brother of Linda Mazzochi of Washington, D.C. Served as lieutenant in the United States Army. Came back from two terms of duty in Vietnam, unscarred and unblaming. With the Department of Health and Human Services NYC since 1977. A warm, radiant, much-loved man. (71)

The second one reads: "Robert, you etched an indelible impression and left. Yes, your spirit will continue to enrich us forever, but your flesh was very particular flesh. Not a day will go by, Milton" (71). Judging from their language, these two obituaries are written, respectively, by Robert's family and by Milton, a man we learn is Robert's lover (72). The juxtaposition of these two obituaries reminds us, once again, about the interimplications between representation and self-representation. Whether written by his family or his lover, Robert's obituaries represent his loved ones' attempts to articulate their grief and to celebrate his life in a national publication. In his discussion of the representational politics of the AIDS epidemic, Stuart Hall reminds us that "[t]he question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are the many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not?"³⁶ I would extend Hall's important point by adding that, as Robert's two obituaries illustrate, the question of AIDS remains, even after death, additionally a question of who gets represented by whom.

³⁶ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 285.

Earlier in the story Clark had confided that “[w]e read the death notices for anything that might connect us to someone from the past.” Not surprisingly, the reality is far different. Clark is deeply affected when he hears the second obituary for Robert read aloud, for he and Robert had once entertained the idea of becoming lovers (73). “The others sat looking at me as I stood there and wept,” Clark describes, “They were waiting for a cue from me, some hint as to what I needed from them. I felt as if I had been spun out of time, like a kite that remains aloft over the ocean even after its string breaks. I felt awkward, out of time and out of place [. . .] Robert’s funeral service was being held at that very moment” (72). Reading, it seems, fails to result in forging a connection between Clark and Robert, “someone from [his] past.” Or, more precisely, reading evokes a connection that does not adhere either to time or space. Time collapses: Clark only learns of Robert’s death at almost the precise moment in time that the latter’s life was being mourned and celebrated at the funeral service.

Clark recalls that the last time he had seen Robert “was a Thursday afternoon in early October, a day of two funerals. Two friends had died within hours of one another that week” (72). After attending “the funeral of the one [friend] who had been an only child,” Clark remembers making a “bargain with [him]self”: “If Robert Mazzochi was alive, I would go to work. If he was dead, I would take the day off. When he did not answer his home phone, I called the hospital with which his doctor was associated, and the switchboard gave me his room number. I visited him on my way to work, a compromise of sorts” (72). When Robert asks Clark “How did you know I was here?,” the latter replies: “Deduction.” For Clark, as for the majority of gay men living through the height of the AIDS epidemic in the mid 1980s to early 1990s, deduction—not unlike

the strategy of decoding AIDS obituaries—was a necessary cognitive strategy for figuring out who among their friends and acquaintances were sick or dying. Readers of the story are led to infer that Robert, if not also Clark, had had sexual relations with either or both of the “[t]wo friends [who] had died within hours of one another that week.” For Clark, learning of Robert’s death forges a connection that extends beyond the two men’s relationship with each other—but also, in effect, to other relationships with friends, lovers, and casual sexual partners.



I would like to conclude by returning once more to the beginning of Barnett’s “The *Times* As It Knows Us,” and in particular back to its epigraph. While conducting my research, I was, of course, encouraged to refamiliarize myself with Auden’s poem “If I Could Tell You.”³⁷ As it turns out, Barnett has not only left blank Robert Mazzochi’s

³⁷ Auden composes “If I Could Tell You” in the villanelle style: “A type of fixed form poetry consisting of nineteen lines of any length divided into six stanzas: five tercets and a concluding quatrain. The first and third lines of the initial tercet rhyme; these rhymes are repeated in each subsequent tercet (aba) and in the final two lines of the quatrain (abaa). Line 1 appears in its entirety as lines 6, 12, and 18, while line 3 reappears as lines 9, 15, and 19” (http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/literature/bedlit/glossary_t.htm). The poem reads, in its entirety:

Time will say nothing but I told you so,
Time only knows the price we have to pay;
If I could tell you I would let you know.

If we should weep when clowns put on their show,
If we should stumble when musicians play,
Time will say nothing but I told you so.

There are no fortunes to be told, although,
Because I love you more than I can say,
If I could tell you I would let you know.

The winds must come from somewhere when they blow,
There must be reasons why the leaves decay;

death date, but he has also omitted a crucial line from Auden's poem. The entire opening stanza of Auden's "If I Could Tell You" reads:

Time will say nothing but I told you so,
Time only knows the price we have to pay;
If I could tell you I would let you know.

Already from its opening, Barnett's short story is marked by a sense of loss, namely, the absence of this third line—a line that changes the meaning of the previous two lines. The third line makes clear the exchange between a speaker and an interlocutor. "If I could tell you," the speaker admits to his listener, "I would let you know." Barnett's omission is especially curious, not least because the first and third lines of the poem are alternated as the final line in the poem's subsequent five stanzas, and also because the poem's final two lines transpose its opening lines. The poem concludes with: "Will Time say nothing but I told you so? / If I could tell you I would let you know."

I would suggest that Barnett understands, even identifies with, the speaker of Auden's poem and his uncertainty, his inability to know or articulate what time will eventually say or what the passing of time will eventually bear out. Bringing in the penultimate line in Auden's poem to bear on Barnett's story underscores the need for gay male self-representation. At one point in the narrative, Clark confides to one of his housemates his disappointment with the coverage in the *New York Times*. "I always expect insight and consequence in their articles," Clark says, "and I'm disappointed when

Time will say nothing but I told you so.

Perhaps the roses really want to grow,
The vision seriously intends to stay;
If I could tell you I would let you know.

Suppose all the lions get up and go,
And all the brooks and soldiers run away;
Will Time say nothing but I told you so?
If I could tell you I would let you know.

they write on our issues and don't report more than what we already know. [. . .] And sometimes I assume that there is a language to describe what we're going through, and that they would use it if there was" (84). Though "Time" or "the *New York Times*" or "the times" may "say nothing but I told you so," Barnett attempts to say something else in his story, even if he remains uncertain about what the future will say retrospectively about AIDS and gay men during this early moment in the crisis. In other words, the intertextual reference to Auden's poem functions not as an admonishment, but, rather, as a call for sympathy and understanding. Through the narrator Clark, Barnett displays his cultural literacy in the service of developing AIDS literacy. In the end, the only language that counts for Clark is the message left on his answering machine telling him that one of his housemates, an HIV-positive man who had had a close brush with death that weekend, is "feeling much better" (116). Though textual encounters contribute to processes of gay male identity formation, it is this final scene of interlocution—the phone message and its invitation to return the call—that sustains life on the page.

Chapter Four

The Ghosts of AIDS

Looking through old photos one becomes aware of a growing army of the dead. You learn to avoid certain streets, certain towns, certain cities. Often bars and clubs feel intolerably thick with ghosts [. . .]. To avoid ghosts it is necessary to find new social haunts, but nowhere remains ghost-free for long. Then you learn to stop trying to avoid them, for their messages are important.

—Simon Watney¹

One man whom I thought had died [. . .] surprised me one morning at the gym. [. . .] Having become accustomed to such weird occurrences over the past dozen years, I wasn't too disturbed to see a ghost.

—Eric Rofes²

In *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (1988), Paul Monette projects an image of “the magic circle” to convey a deep fear that HIV/AIDS poses different threats to older and younger gay men, and in effect to the generational collectivities to which they respectively belong. “The magic circle my generation is trying to stay within the borders of is only as real as the random past,” he confides. “Perhaps the young can live in the magic circle, but only if those of us who are ticking will tell our story. Otherwise it goes on being *us* and *them* forever, built like a wall higher and higher, till you no longer think to wonder if you are walling it out or in.”³ Although *Borrowed Time* is ostensibly a

¹ Simon Watney, “These Waves of Dying Friends: Gay Men, AIDS and Multiple Loss,” in *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 223.

² Eric Rofes, *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures* (New York: The Haworth Press, 1998), 6.

³ Paul Monette, *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (New York: Avon, 1988), 6 (original emphases).

memoir recounting Monette's life partner's battle with AIDS, it is also a significant historical chronicle that commemorates the Stonewall generation's collective life-shattering experience during the early years of the epidemic. As members of the Stonewall generation, the men whose life stories are featured in *Borrowed Time*—Monette (1945-1995), his partner, Roger Horwitz (1941-1986), and their friends—were among the first to experience both the heady promise of the gay rights movement in the 1970s and the absolute devastation of the AIDS epidemic a decade later.

Significantly, the image of “the magic circle” appears elsewhere in Monette's body of AIDS writing. “Three weeks, two dead—two more lost from the magic circle,” he writes in a later essay. “As for my own losses, the pile of bodies is hardly countable anymore except in the heart—because the dead outnumber the living now.”⁴ According to G. Thomas Couser, Monette in *Borrowed Time* “foregrounds the difficulty of narrating illness because of the way it threatens one's sense that life has coherence, continuity, and extension. [. . .] AIDS interferes with [Monette's and Horwitz's] plotting their lives.”⁵ But Monette is equally concerned, as suggested by his recurrent use of the metaphor of the “magic circle,” with the challenges of narrating HIV/AIDS as a collective, generational experience, as well as with the difficulties of representing death as a “social event” and a shared reality for gay men of the Stonewall generation in the early years of the crisis. As Michael Dennen explains in his important article on the cultural and sociopolitical functions of AIDS writing, “[w]hen death becomes a social event, the

⁴ Paul Monette, “Some Afterthoughts,” in *Last Watch of the Night: Essays Too Personal and Otherwise* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992), 306-07.

⁵ G. Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 157.

individual death is both robbed of its utter privacy and uniquely individual meaning and simultaneously amplified with the resonance of social significance and historical consequence. When death is a social event, both the individual *and the community*—and, I would add, the different generations within that community—“are threatened with irreparable loss.”⁶ Drawing upon Denny’s explanation, I would suggest that Monette not only illustrates how the epidemic challenges the plotting of an individual life, but also how it confounds, to extend Couser’s argument, the “coherence, continuity, and extension” of gay male generations and thus the *social life* of contemporary gay male culture.

The narrative of gay men and the AIDS epidemic, both in the U.S. and to a less virulent degree in the U.K., has been a story about gay male generation trouble. Generation trouble, as I elaborated in Chapter One, underscores the ways in which HIV/AIDS has radically reshaped gay men’s negotiation of generational identity and difference and thus their sense of social belonging in gay male culture, as well as profoundly complicated their struggles to preserve and pass on historical memory of the epidemic across the generations. My concept of gay male generation trouble and Monette’s metaphor of the “magic circle”—whose borders are “only as real as the random past”—both share a concern with how the AIDS epidemic has more firmly redrawn the boundaries between older and younger gay men—in the U.S., between the Stonewall and post-Stonewall generations, or, as the latter has since come to be

⁶ Michael Denny, “AIDS Writing and the Creation of a Gay Culture,” in *Confronting AIDS Through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation*, ed. Judith Laurence Pastore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 37 (original emphasis). For another discussion of how the AIDS epidemic has transformed the sociohistorical meanings of death, see William Haver, *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

identified, Generation Q or the queer generation; and, in the U.K., between the Gay Liberation and post-Gay Liberation generations.⁷

Monette expresses through the metaphor of “the magic circle” the distressing but real possibility that the epidemic would debilitate the momentum of the gay rights movement and undermine the hard-won efforts of the previous decade. As he explains elsewhere in *Borrowed Time*: “Loss teaches you very fast what cannot go without saying. The course of our lives had paralleled the course of the [gay rights] movement itself since Stonewall, and now our bitterness about the indifference of the system made us feel keenly how tenuous our history was. Everything we had been together—brothers and friends”—and cohorts, too, I would add—“might yet be wiped away” by AIDS (227-28). Viewed through the lens of AIDS, the collective aspirations and achievements of the 1970s, ones that affected such radical changes in gay men’s consciousness of themselves and of each other, appear as if from a surreal and seemingly “random past.” Because of AIDS, gay male history is rendered “tenuous” and, worse still, “might yet be wiped away.” Monette’s desire to record his generation’s experience of the AIDS epidemic is thus motivated by the fear that that generational narrative, unless it is recorded and preserved, would soon be forgotten.



⁷ In his collection of essays, *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity*, Simon Watney distinguishes between the Gay Liberation and post-Gay Liberation generations (66, 68). There is an obvious difference between how gay men of different ages claim their generational identities in the U.K. than in the U.S., suggesting that terms such as “Stonewall” and “queer” resonate in markedly different ways.

Monette's fear that the "magic circle" would potentially disappear and become extinct has unfortunately proved prophetic.⁸ Well into the third decade of the epidemic, it is obvious that the tragedy of AIDS has forever altered the social and psychic landscape of gay male culture both in the U.S. and in the U.K. The epidemic has exacted a crushing human toll in gay male communities and irrevocably interrupted the process of generational continuity in contemporary gay male culture. And because gay male culture lacks the default forms of intergenerational transmission that are typically filled by the traditional family unit, efforts to safeguard collective consciousness of HIV/AIDS as an ongoing crisis and to transmit historical memory of the epidemic across the generations remain especially difficult tasks to fulfill. Who will remember the dead when the ones who remember them are themselves ill—and will themselves die?

This is a question that the work of gay male writers and artists demands that its readers and viewers confront. Monette, for instance, takes up in his body of AIDS writing the daunting but necessary challenge of bearing witness to and remembering the horrifying consequences of the epidemic.⁹ "If we all died and all our books were burned," he speculates in *Borrowed Time*, "then a hundred years from now no one would ever know" of our existence and of our experience of the epidemic (228). He puts the matter even more unequivocally in his autobiography *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story*

⁸ Other AIDS activists, of course, also shared Monette's fears. In "1,112 and Counting," Larry Kramer polemizes: "Our continued existence as gay men upon the face of this earth is at stake. Unless we fight for our lives, we shall die. In all the history of homosexuality we have never before been so close to death and extinction. Many of us are dying or already dead" (33). See Larry Kramer, "1,112 and Counting," in *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), 33-51.

⁹ Monette's other books on AIDS includes the autobiography *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); the autobiographical essay collection *Last Watch of the Night* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992); the novel *Afterlife* (New York: Avon Books, 1990); the poetry collections *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988) and *West of Yesterday, East of Summer: New and Selected Poems, 1973-1993* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

(1992), published four years after *Borrowed Time*, in which he describes his coming-out experience and his ongoing struggle with AIDS. Because of the epidemic, “every memoir now is a kind of manifesto, as we piece together the tale of the tribe. Our stories have died with us long enough. We mean to leave behind some map, some key, for the gay and lesbian people who follow [us]” (2).¹⁰ By underscoring the role of writing as a means of recording gay men’s experiences of the epidemic, Monette and other gay male writers in effect stress the profound role that reading plays as a strategy for remembering the terror of the recent past—and of preserving those memories in the present and for the future. As Denny points out, the rich and varied archive of AIDS narratives reveal how “[t]hose who bear witness carry the soul of the community, the stories of what it has done and what it has suffered, and open the possibility of its existence in memory through time and beyond death” (48). More than just a collection of artifacts of gay male literary history, the archive of AIDS narratives represents a vital institution of memory within contemporary gay male culture. As I hope to establish in this chapter, revisiting this archive can help us engage with the projects of sustaining collective consciousness of the ongoing crisis and of passing on historical memory of the epidemic to subsequent generations.

¹⁰ *Becoming a Man* was the winner of the National Book Award for Nonfiction in 1992. For Monette as well as for a number of gay male writers, the acts of witnessing and remembering the AIDS epidemic are mutually constitutive. In an interview, John Preston explains the role of witnessing in his now classic edited collection, *Personal Dispatches: Writers Confront AIDS* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990): “The drive of each author was to bear witness, and in rereading [*Personal Dispatches*] I was struck by how often that word was used [. . .]. [T]he word ‘witness’ is not a passive word, it’s a very active verb. To ‘witness’ is not simply to make note, not simply to record, although there is a power in that. It is to go out and see what is going on.” See Sarah Pettit, “Bearing Witness: An Interview with John Preston,” *Outweek* 25 (10 December 1990), 43.



True to his own intentions, Monette indeed bequeaths “some map, some key” to readers of *Becoming a Man*, that is, a memorable strategy that would help them to remember and honor the lives and legacies of those who have died from AIDS. In the book’s final paragraph, he registers his intense grief by enumerating the names of loved ones lost to AIDS—several of whom readers first encountered in *Borrowed Time*. Despite his grief, however, he still maintains an acute belief that the ghosts of his loved ones continue to “live on,” if only in his memory. The image of the spectral he projects is both haunting and transcendent: “I only wish my ghosts were happier today,” he confides at the conclusion of his autobiography,

It’s hard to keep the memory at full dazzle, with so much loss to mock it. Roger gone, Craig gone, César gone, Stevie gone. And this feeling that I’m the last one left, in a world where only the ghosts still laugh. But at least they’re the ghosts of full-grown men, proof that all of us got that far, free of the traps and the lies [of the closet]. And from that moment on the brink of summer’s end, no one would ever tell me again that men like me couldn’t love. (278)

Monette’s articulation of grief exemplifies what is known as “multiple AIDS-related loss syndrome,” a condition officially introduced by the healthcare profession at the 1992 International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam—the same year that *Borrowed Time* was published—to describe how, for many gay men, “dealing with death has again become a crucial part of life.”¹¹ The image of “the ghosts of full-grown men” captures, aptly yet poignantly, the deaths of men who had the chance to grow up but not the chance to grow old—men who were forced as a result of HIV/AIDS to confront the trajectory of their life

¹¹ Jeffrey Weeks, “Post-Modern AIDS,” in *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology*, eds. Tessa Boffin and Sunil Supta (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1990), 139.

course as a “living end.”¹² At the same time, this image also complicates assumptions about the finite temporal dimensions of the individual life course and projects, by extension, the hopeful possibility that the “magic circle” of the Stonewall generation might still yet exist, even if in an otherworldly realm. Monette’s claim of being haunted by ghosts, moreover, lends a differently nuanced resonance to Denneny’s argument that gay male writers who bear witness in their work “open the possibility of [the gay male community’s] existence in memory through time and beyond death.” In other words, the image of “the ghosts of full-grown men” is itself captivating and memorable, functioning both as a literal reminder that too many gay men have died during the epidemic and as a metaphor for an alternative form of remembering the dead.

Significantly, other gay male writers and artists likewise propose this very strategy, albeit in different ways, in their work. As we will see, there are a striking number of AIDS narratives that include representations of ghosts and descriptions of gay men being haunted by them. Because “death by AIDS is everywhere [. . .] seething through the streets of this broken land” (*Becoming 2*), to borrow once more from Monette, gay men, at the height of the crisis during the 1980s and through the early 1990s, were compelled to accept the perverse consolation that a “faith of loss” inevitably represented the only certainty for the present and for the seemingly unrealizable future.¹³

¹² I borrow the term “the living end” from the title of Gregg Araki’s film *The Living End* (1994).

¹³ I borrow the formulation “the faith of loss” from Robert Bellah’s analysis of the relationship between religion and secularism in the U.S. In his introduction to *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), Bellah writes: “David Reisman has reversed Gilbert Murray’s phrase to speak of ‘the nerve of failure’ so perhaps one can transpose another phrase common today and speak of ‘the faith of loss.’ ‘The nerve of failure’ and ‘the faith of loss’ point to a situation in which the idols are broken and the gods are dead, but the darkness of negation turns out to be full of rich possibility. Out of nothingness which has swallowed up all tradition there comes nihilism but also the possibility of a new ecstatic consciousness” (xi). The concept of the “faith of loss” is especially suggestive as a description for how many gay men have turned to religion and spirituality as a result of the

But what ultimately sustains many gay male writers and artists in their attempts to narrate and record the AIDS epidemic is their recognition that dealing with death and loss necessarily involves dealing with ghosts. Believing in ghosts provides them with a viable strategy to grieve the untimely deaths of countless men who were once their companions and comrades, their contemporaries and cohorts. These writers and artists pass on that strategy for their audiences, suggesting that remembering the dead involves a willingness to acknowledge their continued existence as ghosts, as well as a desire to commune and communicate with them.

Following the lead of these writers and artists, I would like to speak with, listen to, and remember the dead. My purpose in this chapter is to consider the problem of gay male generation trouble in relation to the haunting of U.S. and U.K. contemporary gay male cultures by “the ghosts of full-grown men.” I begin my discussion by considering how the trope of spectrality and the language of haunting are also evident in AIDS discourse and by suggesting that the rhetorical and ideological uses of the ghostly bear an uncanny relationship to “post-AIDS” discourses that announce “the end of AIDS.” I then examine the sociopolitical functions of AIDS narratives, the role of historical memory, and the challenges of creating and sustaining institutions of memory in gay male culture. My use of the term “historical memory” intersects with Marita Sturken’s term “cultural memory. In *Tangled Memories*, Sturken usefully suggests differentiating cultural

AIDS epidemic. In an age of burgeoning self-help and alternative lifestyle books, the texts issued by the gay male publishing industry show an equal commitment to representing the rediscovery of faith within a demographic constituency that has been and continues to be devastated by the AIDS epidemic. See, for example, Brian Bouldrey, ed., *Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995); Will Roscoe, ed., *Queer Spirits: A Gay Man’s Myth Book* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Michael Lowenthal, ed., *Gay Men at the Millennium: Sex, Spirit, Community* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1997); and Mark Thompson, ed., *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).

memory from personal memory and “official” history; as she defines the term, cultural memory represents “memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning.”¹⁴ In the present discussion, however, I prefer the adjective “historical” rather than “cultural” to describe “memory” for several reasons. Given that gay and queer cultures “do not have the institutions for common memory and generational transmission around which straight culture is built,” as Michael Warner suggests,¹⁵ I believe that the kinds of memories that are shared among gay men about AIDS are linked in complex and intricate ways both to historical discourses and literary and cultural narratives about AIDS. I also use the term historical memory in order to underscore AIDS as an ongoing historical phenomenon whose temporality needs to be preserved and protected against “post-AIDS” discourses currently circulating in mainstream and in gay male and queer cultures alike. The seemingly wholesale adoption of a “post-AIDS” consciousness among gay men illustrates the tenuous, fragile, and contested nature of historical memory in contemporary gay male culture. As a social group, gay men face enormous challenges in trying to sustain and transmit that memory—indeed, that history—of the epidemic to subsequent generations.

The second part of this chapter comprises close readings of the recurrence of tropes of the spectral, the supernatural, and the miraculous in a range of generically diverse AIDS narratives including memoir, short fiction, drama, film, and poetry, written by an equally diverse array of writers and artists including, among others, Allen Barnett,

¹⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 3.

¹⁵ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 51.

Mark Doty, Steve Kammon, Jay B. Laws, Edmund White, and David Wojnarowicz. As we will see, in describing the experience of being haunted, gay male writers and artists underscore how spectrality is itself an ontological condition of gay male identity in the age of AIDS. Although such a condition is thrust upon them and not of their own choosing, they nonetheless find themselves compelled to include representations of hauntings, visitations, and other seemingly “inexplicable” phenomena not only to address the personal losses they have suffered as a result of HIV/AIDS, but also as a strategy to preserve and pass on their experience of the epidemic—in the form of historical memory—to subsequent gay male generations.



AIDS Discourse and Spectrality

This chapter is an attempt not only to consider the relationship between ghosts, ghostly memories, and generation trouble, but, more ambitiously, to elaborate the theoretical implications of how the spectral, the supernatural, and the miraculous are themselves constitutive elements of the history of gay men’s experience of the AIDS epidemic. Put another way, I want to suggest that the language of haunting is also evident in discourses about gay men and the AIDS epidemic, and that it is used, more revealingly, by both heterosexual and gay male critics to express radically different perspectives. Consider, for example, Vincent Coppola and Richard West’s *Newsweek* article “The Change in Gay Lifestyle” (1983), one of the earliest reports in the U.S. mainstream press to document the epidemic’s impact on U.S. urban gay male culture.

Writing about gay men's purportedly unchecked pursuit of "life in the fast lane," the authors claim that, "ironically, the freedom, the promiscuity, the hypermasculinity that many gays declared an integral part of their culture have come *to haunt them*."¹⁶ Coppola and West use the language of haunting to convey the homophobic opinion that unrestrained gay male sexual desire has been both the symptom and the cause—"ironically"—of the AIDS epidemic. Such homophobic views puts into full relief the significance of Monette's recognition—and insistence—that those haunting him are "the ghosts of full-grown men," whose very existence, however spectral, constitutes the "proof that all of us got that far, free of the traps and the lies" of the closet. That these men had the courage to come out of the closet and lead their lives as openly gay men is in itself a remarkable life achievement—one that unequivocally *justifies*, Monette rightly insists, their pursuit of sexual freedom and sexual expression. Thus he explicitly refutes the homophobic view that the AIDS epidemic represents an unfortunate but *justifiable* consequence of gay men's unchecked and promiscuous pursuits of sexual pleasure during the decade of the gay rights movement.

While gay male writers and critics use the language of haunting rhetorically, they do so not to impose a moralistic judgment about gay men's sexual behavior or desires. On the contrary, they do so to register a palpable feeling that reflects their profound experience of loss. In his essay "These Waves of Dying Friends: Gay Men, AIDS and Multiple Loss," Simon Watney conjures an image of being haunted by a "growing army of the dead":

Looking through old photos one becomes aware of a growing army of the dead. You learn to avoid certain streets, certain towns, certain cities. Often bars and

¹⁶ Vincent Coppola and Richard West, "The Change in Gay Lifestyle," *Newsweek* (18 April 1983): 18 (my emphasis).

clubs feel intolerably thick with ghosts, though they usually encourage one to have a good time. To avoid ghosts it is necessary to find new social haunts, but nowhere remains ghost-free for long. Then you learn to stop trying to avoid them, for their messages are important. (223)

By explicitly using the language of learning to frame his observation, Watney intimates the idea that a “spectral literacy” is part and parcel of gay male social life as a consequence of the AIDS epidemic. Moreover, he is implicitly arguing against Coppola and West’s assumption that gay men’s actions in the past have unfortunately come to haunt them. In other words, he welcomes being haunted as a means of remembering and staying connected to the past—and stresses, like Monette, the need to recognize the dead and to heed their messages. “I keep a kind of personal iconostasis where I work,” Watney goes on to note, “with photographs of the living and the recently dead, and some now long-dead. We develop our own private rituals” (223). The shift from the first-person singular pronoun “I” to the first-person plural “we” is striking. The living and the dead, Watney suggests with this pronominal shift, continue to share a meaningful and lasting bond with each other—a bond that has been forged not only on the basis of a shared sexual identity but, more profoundly, on the basis of a shared experience of loss.

Watney is not alone in using the language of haunting to express loss; nor is he alone in desiring to converse with the dead. Many other cultural critics also use the trope of spectrality as a conceptual category in their thoughtful analyses of gay men’s (and other PWA’s) experience of loss during the epidemic. In her chapter on the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, Sturken explains that the making and viewing of the AIDS Memorial Quilt offer to panelmakers, survivors, mourners, and visitors the opportunity to commune with their loved ones and, more generally, with the dead. “Each panel corresponds approximately to the size of a body or a coffin; thus, the quilt laid out on the

mall in Washington evokes for many an image of war dead strewn across a now quiet battlefield. To many panelmakers and viewers of the quilt, it remains the sole location of the dead. There, the dead are spoken to; there, the dead are perceived to hear and respond” (196).¹⁷ Sturken provides several poignant examples of messages embroidered on the quilt panels that demonstrate the powerful desire on the part of quiltmakers who literally wish to converse with and maintain their connection to their loved ones: “Hey . . . Wait a minute . . . Where did you go? We’re not done talking yet. Can you hear me? I really miss you, Jon Stangland”; “Is that you, Clyde?”; “Call collect” (qtd. in Sturken 196-97). Embroidered upon the quilt panels, such messages are visual representations that literally dramatize a desire on the part of the living to converse with the dead.

What is especially uncanny about these representations from the NAMES Project is the fact that they are based upon tangible experience. Many quiltmakers have shared stories about how they viscerally experienced encounters with their loved ones from the beyond during the process of quilting. In her sociological study of the NAMES Project, “Constructions of Immortality in the AIDS Memorial Quilt,” Mary Beth Krouse writes that “[m]embers of the NAMES Project have come to refer to these stories, with both reverence and whimsy, as ‘woo-woo stories’” that “present actual events as evidence of supernatural forces at work around the quilt.”¹⁸ The experience of being haunted by loved ones leads gay male quiltmakers to construct “woo-woo stories” and, by extension, to portray through imagery those stories as visual representations in the

¹⁷ For a discussion of the prevalence of war imagery to describe gay men’s experience of the AIDS epidemic, see Michael S. Sherry, “The Language of War in AIDS Discourse,” in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, eds. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): 39-53.

¹⁸ Mary Beth Krouse, “Constructions of Immortality in the AIDS Memorial Quilt,” *Sociological Spectrum* 17 (1997): 30-31.

quiltpanels. For example, a gay man named Steve recalls having had a dream of his close friend, Tom, who is dying of AIDS, on the very night of Tom's death. "I had a dream of [Tom] dying," Steve remembers,

I went directly into a dream of Tom. [. . .] And out of that [dream] emerged a word suddenly. After he had gone off for some time, the word "adios" just leaped out at me. And I woke up to that. And I thought it was Tom, but I wasn't really sure. And as soon as I let the thought in, "I think that is Tom. Tom has just died," I became overwhelmed with a sensation that I've never experienced in life: It was certainty. I knew that Tom had just died. I knew that he had just said good-bye, and there was also so much more that went with that. It was like a message from Tom. (qtd. in Krouse 34)

It's certainly plausible that Steve, knowing that his friend is close to death, wills himself into having a dream of Tom. But what is more important, in my view, is Steve's willingness to interpret his dream as a message from his friend, rather than dismissing it out of hand. It is this willingness that is also evident, as we will see, in gay male authors' descriptions of being haunted.

Documenting and interpreting this and other "woo-woo stories" in her article, Krouse argues that "the constructions of immortality in the quilt take on implications of resistance. The discourse that takes place around the quilt that testifies to life beyond death for gay men who have died of AIDS is a proclamation of the limits of society's power and an affront to religious spokespersons for that society." Just as Monette celebrates "the ghosts of full-grown men," so too does Krause conclude that "woo-woo stories" are empowering and transformative experiences for gay men, not least because "[t]he subjects of woo-woo stories are not condemned; on the contrary, they take on supernatural characteristics. They are posed as having 'made it,' as having transcended the death and fear that society's power thought it could impose" (44).

As Watney, Sturken, and Krouse suggest in their respective discussions, many gay men believe that ghosts exist and continue to inhabit their lives and, more generally, the psychic and physical landscape of gay male social life. Ghosts in AIDS narratives are more than just representations; they are articulations of gay men's tangible experiences of being haunted, and reflections of their belief in the spectral, the supernatural, and the miraculous. As I will demonstrate in my readings of literary texts, ghosts are represented in different contexts and perform different roles in AIDS narratives: some are purposely conjured or "summoned" by the gay men whom they have left behind, while others, uninvited, nonetheless make their presence known and felt; some offer succor and consolation, while others demand not only to be remembered but also released from their earthly bonds. These differences notwithstanding, ghosts in AIDS narratives, when approached collectively as a literary and sociocultural phenomenon, serve both as literal reminders of the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic and as metaphors for an alternative form of memory roused by grief, mourning, and the determination to imagine the present connection with past generations. As "evidence" proving that the crisis is *not* over, the uncanny presence of ghosts in these narratives reminds us that the story of gay men and the AIDS epidemic is to be continued.



The Politics of Remembering AIDS

The AIDS epidemic is one of the defining events in the history of late-twentieth-century gay male culture. It has radically transformed how gay men, individually and

collectively, negotiate their sense of social belonging and of being embedded within a historical moment that has been identified as “post-Stonewall” or “post-Gay Liberation,” and, more problematically, also as “postgay” and “post-AIDS.” The emergence of “post-AIDS” discourse in the last few years is the most significant and disturbing indication of the waning consciousness, both in mainstream and in gay male cultures, of AIDS as an ongoing public-health crisis and an enduring historical phenomenon.

A number of events in the last few years have contributed to the shifts in the cultural perception of HIV/AIDS. The introduction of protease inhibitors and combination therapies as viable drug treatments for people living with HIV, whose relative success rate was first announced at the 1996 International AIDS Conference in Vancouver, has undoubtedly and dramatically changed the perception of AIDS as a chronic but manageable illness rather than as a “death sentence.” These medical advances in treating HIV/AIDS led conservative gay activist Andrew Sullivan to proclaim, months later, “the twilight of the epidemic,” the end of AIDS.¹⁹ In 2000, a small contingent of ACT UP/San Francisco proposed that HIV is not the cause of AIDS and, further, that AIDS is not a killer disease but an intricate homophobic conspiracy. Their controversial views have led their detractors to dub the contingent “AIDS dissidents” or “AIDS denialists.”²⁰ In September of that same year, South African President Thabo Mbeki

¹⁹ See Andrew Sullivan, “When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic,” *New York Times Magazine* (10 November 1996): 52-62+; an expanded version is reprinted as a chapter in his *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 3-88. For insightful responses challenging Sullivan’s now infamous claim that the AIDS epidemic is “over,” see Philip Brian Harper, “Gay Male Identities, Personal Privacy, and Relations of Public Exchange,” in *Private Affairs: Critical Ventures in the Culture of Social Relations* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 89-124; and Douglas Crimp, “Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction,” in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 1-26.

²⁰ See Katie Szymanki, “The Boys in the Band,” *POZ* (October 2000): 50-54.

made headlines when he announced that, in South Africa and Africa more generally, AIDS is not *solely* caused by HIV but also by endemic poverty, malnutrition, contaminated water, and infections of malaria.

In recent years, we have seen a commitment, especially on the part of the U.S. government, to resituate funding and resources for AIDS research, education, prevention, and treatment to non-Western regions of the world, including South and Southeast Asia and, especially, Africa. While it is absolutely necessary and crucial that we continue to address AIDS as a global pandemic, this refocusing and displacement of AIDS inadvertently leads to furthering the misguided perception and false sense of security that it is not (or no longer) a public-health crisis among the more industrialized nations in the West. According to feminist AIDS theorist Cindy Patton, Western governments and media actively promote the shift in cultural perceptions of AIDS from a Western “Pattern One” version to an African “Pattern Two” version, thus fostering the view that “Euro-American heterosexuality is ‘not at risk’ as long as local AIDS is identified as homosexual and heterosexual AIDS remains distant.”²¹ This false and misguided sense of security is especially evident in the U.S. and in the U.K. In an essay provocatively titled “Epidemic! What Epidemic?” Watney explains that in the U.K. AIDS is perceived as a “*slow-motion* epidemic” in comparison to the number of cases in Europe and the U.S.; more problematically, it is also perceived as “essentially a *private* epidemic” that is “largely invisible in the public sphere” (3).

²¹ Cindy Patton, “From Nation to Family: Containing African AIDS,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 130.

Finally, the waning consciousness of the epidemic in gay male culture, especially in the U.S., has accompanied and resulted from the tremendous shifts in the agendas of gay activist groups who have reoriented their focus from AIDS to issues of gay marriage, gay adoption and parenting, and gays in the military. But there is another, and more obvious, reason why so many gay men suffer from historical amnesia about the epidemic: many from the generation who lived through the 1980s and early 1990s have died. It is this issue that I will be most concerned with in my discussion of ghosts and gay male generation trouble.

The AIDS epidemic is ongoing and, contrary to Andrew Sullivan's proposal, is thus most definitely *not* over. In fact, one can argue that it is "beginning" again both in the U.S. and in the U.K. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there was a 2.2 percent increase in new cases of HIV-infection among the U.S. general population in the year 2002—an increase for the first time since 1993. The number is even higher among gay and bisexual men—7.1 percent—an increase for the third consecutive year that totals a staggering 17.7 percent since 1999. In its most recent report of statistics from the year 2006, released in September 2008, the CDC estimated that there were 56,300 new HIV infections in 2006. "Even though the 2006 estimate does not represent an actual increase in the annual number of new infections," the CDC concedes that the number represents "a sobering reminder that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is far from over in this country." The report goes on to state: "The new estimates provide a profile of HIV/AIDS in the United States that is primarily young, male, and African American. The epidemic also disproportionately affects Hispanic and Latinos; particularly Hispanic and

Latino men who have sex with men (MSM). Indeed, gay and bisexual men of all races and ethnicities are the most affected of any group of Americans.”²²

Statistics for the U.K. are likewise forbidding; according to Watney, “[b]y the end of December 1998 there had been 33,764 cases of HIV in Britain, and 16,028 cases of AIDS. Gay men cumulatively account for 67 per cent of UK AIDS cases. The second largest group consists of heterosexuals infected overseas, who account for 13 per cent of cases, a high proportion of whom are African residents in Britain. By December 1998 more than 13,000 people had died from AIDS in the UK” (2).

Significantly, the increasing rate of HIV-infection and HIV-seroconversion in the last few years, especially among younger gay men, is both caused by and reflects the radically changed, if not also diminishing, awareness of HIV/AIDS as an enduring crisis in present-day gay male culture. In his 1995 essay “Unsafe: Why Gay Men are Having Risky Sex,” Michael Warner suggests that “positive men have developed a culture of articulacy about mortality and the expectations of ‘normal life.’ When negative men identify with positive men, they are not just operating out of survivor guilt. They are staking their interests with that culture and taking as their own its priorities, its mordant humor, its heightened tempo, its long view of the world.”²³ In recent years, the desire on the part of HIV-negative men to identify and forge bonds with HIV-positive men has continued to inform gay men’s decisions to engage in high-risk and unsafe sexual practices such as barebacking. The introduction in 1996 of protease inhibitors has also subsequently shaped gay men’s decisions on how best to negotiate and balance between

²² Centers for Disease Control, “New HIV Incidence Estimates: CDC Responds” (September 2008), <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/surveillance/resources/factsheets/pdf/response.pdf>.

²³ Michael Warner: “Unsafe: Why Gay Men Are Having Risky Sex,” *Village Voice* (31 January 1995): 35.

desire, pleasure, and risk. In a 2003 op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, gay playwright and actor Harvey Fierstein comments upon the 2002 CDC reports and speculates that the rise of HIV-infection among gay men is in part attributable to the pharmaceutical companies producing protease inhibitors, whose ads “illustrate hot muscular men living life to the fullest thanks to modern science” and “show couples holding hands, sending the message that the road to true love and happiness is being HIV-positive.” To his credit, Fierstein simultaneously recognizes that the marketing strategies of the AIDS industry are inadequate explanations to account for the rise of HIV-infection among gay men. Ultimately, he also places responsibility upon gay men—especially those who call themselves “bug chasers” and who deliberately engage in barebacking in order to try and contract HIV as a “gift.” His interpretation of the current crisis doubles as a cautionary warning: “After all the effort exerted to convince the world that AIDS is not a gay disease,” he concludes, “we now have a generation embracing AIDS as its gay birthright.”²⁴ In juxtaposing Warner’s and Feinstein’s observations, I am by no means imposing a moralistic judgment about the kinds of decisions gay men make or should make about their sexual behavior and activities. I am imposing, however, an urgent invitation to remember the epidemic’s devastation in the past in order to prevent it from happening again in the near future. Now, more than ever, it is especially crucial that we revisit the ongoing public-health crisis of AIDS *as an enduring problem of gay male generation trouble*.

Cultural critics and AIDS activists on both sides of the Atlantic have long recognized the inextricable relationship between AIDS, gay male identity, and the

²⁴ Harvey Fierstein, *New York Times* (31 July 2003). For an uncritical endorsement of the pharmaceutical industry, see Andrew Sullivan, “Pro Pharma,” *New York Times Magazine* (29 October 2000): 21-22.

concept of generation. In an essay entitled “AIDS in America: Postmodern Governance, Identity, and Experience” (1991), the late U.S. literary critic Thomas Yingling observed that “[i]t remains to be seen whether the numbers of younger gay men and women who have joined the battle against AIDS will continue their political work. Certainly they, too, know people infected and dying, dead or at risk, but *as a generation* they could choose to avoid AIDS, to see it as the issue of an older generation of gay men.”²⁵ The CDC reports for 2002 strongly suggest that younger gay men, as Yingling presciently predicted in 1991, have chosen to see AIDS as an issue for an older generation. Writing about U.K. gay male culture, Simon Watney likewise worries that two-thirds of the 2,500 annual cases of HIV-infection throughout the 1990s have been concentrated among gay male populations. He poses two central questions for addressing how “changing needs will require new responses in relation to different groups as the epidemic grinds on”: “[W]hat does AIDS mean to the new generations of young men born after the beginning of the epidemic and now entering the gay scene for the first time? Few of them will have had adequate HIV education at school. What do they think or do about AIDS?” (3, 8).

Our ability to continue to think about and to respond to AIDS ultimately depends upon our willingness to remember the past. In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner has suggested that the relative lack of institutions of common memory in gay and queer culture has contributed, in implicit and explicit ways, to the ever-diminishing and ever-waning consciousness of the AIDS epidemic. He writes:

One reason why we have not learned more from the history [of AIDS and AIDS activism] is that queers do not have the institutions for common memory and generational transmission around which straight culture is built. Every new wave

²⁵ Thomas Yingling, “AIDS in America: Postmodern Governance, Identity, and Experience,” in *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 294 (original emphasis).

of queer youth picks up something from its predecessors but also invents itself from scratch. Many are convinced that they have nothing to learn from [the] old dykes and clones and trolls, and no institutions—neither households nor schools nor churches nor political groups—ensure that this will happen. And since the most painfully instructed generation has been decimated by death, the queer culture of the present faces more than the usual shortfall in memory. Now younger queers are told all too often that a principled defense of nonnormative sex is just a relic of bygone “liberationism.” This story is given out in bland confidence, since so many of the people who would have contradicted it have died. (52)

What is striking about this passage is the way Warner archly moves from placing responsibility upon younger queers and gay men (“many are convinced that they have nothing to learn from [the] old dykes and clones and trolls”) to then displacing that very responsibility elsewhere (“younger queers are told [. . .]”; “this story is given out in bland confidence [. . .]”). But told and given out by whom, precisely? According to Warner, the main culprits responsible for revising gay male history are conservative gay activists such as Andrew Sullivan, Michelangelo Signorile, Bruce Bauer, and Gabrielle Rotello, among others, whose viewpoints have influenced the disturbing turn in U.S. gay politics throughout the 1990s. More concerned with gay marriage than with AIDS activism, these conservative gay activists have succeeded in making gay politics become, in Warner’s words, “[n]ot assimilationist, exactly, but normalizing” (52). But I would rephrase Warner’s last two sentences in order to redirect them back to his main argument about the lack of historical memory in present-day gay male and queer cultures—that is to say, in order to place *equal* responsibility on the part of conservative activists *and* on the part of gay men and queers themselves, irrespective of age, who have adopted the revisionist history proposed by these conservative gay activists. Put another way, the point is not simply that gay men and queers have forgotten the efforts of countless activists—both during the gay rights movement in the 1970s and the AIDS epidemic from the 1980s

onwards—that have made contemporary gay male culture possible. Rather, the point is that many have chosen, in implicit and explicit ways, to forget that history.

This rhetorical slippage I see Warner enacting perhaps helps to explain why he seems to be so hesitant and cautious about the possibility that there might already be existing institutions of memory in contemporary gay male and queer cultures. While I share his concern that “neither households nor schools nor churches nor political groups” will help ensure processes of generational transmission in contemporary gay male culture, I am more optimistic that there are alternative institutions of common memory that are available for gay men to draw upon, including but not limited to the rich archive of gay male literature and cultural representations. Indeed, one of the main goals of this chapter is to underscore the sociopolitical functions of AIDS narratives, along with their representations of the spectral, as a significant institution of memory in gay male culture.

To be sure, the saturation of “post-AIDS” discourse in gay male culture has made it increasingly difficult to sustain memory of the epidemic as a continuing phenomenon. The controversial concept of “post-AIDS” is defined in different ways by older and younger gay men—and, not surprisingly, by gay men of the same or similar age. In *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures*, radical AIDS activist Eric Rofes readily admits that AIDS is “not over. In fact, it is far from over.”²⁶ At the same time, however, he stresses the need to differentiate the epidemic before and after the advent of protease inhibitors and calls, consequently, for the abandonment of the “AIDS-as-crisis” model:

²⁶ Eric Rofes, *Dry Bones Breathe: Gay Men Creating Post-AIDS Identities and Cultures* (New York: Haworth Press, 1998), 4.

We are no longer in the midst of a time in which vast numbers of our friends are dying. The profound impact we felt in epicenter cities from 1989-1995 has abated. The intensity now is muted, spread out, mitigated. It seems strange to admit, but the experience of losing twenty-five friends, colleagues, and social acquaintances in a single year is qualitatively different from losing them over a ten-year period. Having what felt like a generation of gay men die in a single decade is different from having a significant portion of the next generation of gay men die over three decades. (12)

The elaboration of “post-AIDS” discourse and the claiming of “post-AIDS” gay identity is crucial, according to Rofes, because “gay male communities must shift their perspectives and fully acknowledge the diverse realities of contemporary gay men’s lives” (18). For prevention efforts will only work by taking into account the different prevention needs of older and younger gay men at the present historical moment, and, more significantly, by factoring in how the needs of gay men have changed in relation to the progression of their life stage. He writes:

The groups that, in 1985, we insisted had very different prevention needs than their cohorts just a few years older are now a dominant population in gay male cultures. [. . .] Yet prevention efforts with these men mistakenly assume, because they’ve grown up and become the same age gay men of my generation were when the epidemic hit, their relationship to the epidemic is the same as ours of a dozen years ago. Prevention groups, with rare exception, attempt to foist crisis-focused campaigns onto these men who have never experienced AIDS as the crisis it was for my gay generation. (88-89)

One might well wonder whether the CDC statistics would in any way persuade Rofes to reconsider his suggestion to abandon the “AIDS-as-crisis” model. Curiously enough, Rofes and playwright Harvey Fierstein are both the same age (both men were born in 1954) and would undoubtedly claim their membership within the Stonewall generation. Yet Rofes rejects the “AIDS-as-crisis” model, while Fierstein insists on seeing AIDS as an ongoing crisis. Their radically different perspectives serve as a necessary reminder that we should not assume, expect, or demand homogenous responses from men who

share the same or proximate generation location and who, by extension, have had similar experiences of loss during the AIDS epidemic.

Needless to say, younger gay men—members of the post-Stonewall or post-Gay liberation generation or Generation Q—also differ in their definition of “post-AIDS.” In his article “641,086 and Counting” (1998), for instance, conservative gay activist Michelangelo Signorile (b. 1960) warns that gay men’s belief that AIDS is over will lead “toward an unqualified disaster” in which “a new generation of gay men [will] become as immersed in the horrors of AIDS, disease, and death as previous generations.”²⁷ In “Sex Panics, Sex Publics, Sex Memories,” Christopher Castiglia juxtaposes two narratives by two unnamed gay men: the first is by a man in his early to mid 30s; the second, by a self-identified member of Generation Q in his early to mid 20s. The second narrative is revealing about the younger generation’s different perspectives on gay identity and the AIDS epidemic. I reproduce the young man’s narrative at some length:

As a fairly representative member of the elite of “Generation Q” . . . I feel fairly safe in saying that that activism, per se, is gasping for its final breath before falling into oblivion. [. . .] For decades, centuries even, there was a prevailing fear and discomfort at the concept of being a gay individual in society. And it simply no longer is an issue for most people who are entering adulthood in the late 1990s. Growing up, I as well as a number of my friends, [was] not confronted with the sort of oppressive antigay imagery that activism works so feverishly to eradicate. We don’t feel oppressed, we don’t feel limited, we don’t WANT to feel the need to be a “united front”—rather what we see is a culture among gay young adults that is far, far more concerned with individual concerns and causes. [. . .] However, in the 1980s what occurred was a regeneration of activist spirit to “fight AIDS.” Well, it’s been years now—and the community understands it. And frankly, among many (though I do not speak for all) Generation Qers, there is a prevailing feeling that “no one has a body that’s good enough to die for.” Essentially, the sympathy is no longer there—if someone doesn’t practice safe sexual practices, then it is THEIR problem. [. . .] Some say that it is a matter of

²⁷ Michelangelo Signorile, “641, 086 and Counting,” *Out* (September 1998): 72. The title of Signorile’s essay clearly alludes to Larry Kramer’s infamous “1,112 and Counting,” which appeared in *The New York Native* in 1983.

the abrupt and visible tendencies of the under-25 Queer culture to be considerably more conservative than the over-25. Rather, I see it as a subconscious rejection of what we are not comfortable with. [. . .] It has finally occurred to Generation Q that [in order] to make any significant progress in our own lives (call it greedy, if you like) it's time for gay men to stop thinking with their dicks (excuse the expression) and start thinking about the future. The buzzword, so to speak, of Generation Q has been POST GAY. Although rather amorphous in definition, it is essentially this feeling that "queeny protest" is out—and getting on with our lives is in. . . . Our energies are better spent elsewhere on the question of gay prosperity.²⁸

According to Castiglia, "[w]hile the first writer expresses a desire, a fondness, even an 'envy' for the 1970s, the second views that same decade with distaste. Locating the 1970s as the originary site of 'whore culture' and 'queeny protest,' the second writer invoked memory only to shape it as unhealthy, thereby distancing himself from the past" (153). The second writer's views about AIDS ("Well, it's been years now—and the community understands it"; "if someone doesn't practice safe sexual practices, then it is THEIR problem") might well support Eric Rofes's contention that AIDS activists and educators need to shift their strategies and focus so as to reanimate a commitment on the part of younger gay men and queers in the struggle against AIDS. Moreover, this Generation Qer's admission of not feeling "oppressed" and of a "conservatism" that reflects "a subconscious rejection of what we are not comfortable with" might well confirm Michael Warner's point about historical amnesia and about the problematic ways in which younger queers and gay men too readily accept the revisionist history that has been scripted by conservative gay activists.

Just as profoundly troubling is this young man's claim that "the buzzword" of "Generation Q has been POST GAY." To rephrase Kwame Anthony Appiah's question from a different context, one might well wonder if the "post" in "postgay" is the same

²⁸ Christopher Castiglia, "Sex Panics, Sex Publics, Sex Memories," *boundary 2* 27, no. 2 (2000): 151-52.

“post” in “post-AIDS”?²⁹ I suspect this young man and I would both answer in the affirmative—though, it’s worth adding, for radically different reasons. He would probably welcome the similarity and contiguity between “postgay” and “post-AIDS.” But, in my view, “postgay” is only a small and *problematic* step away from “post-AIDS” and thus should be resisted. The meaning and intelligibility of “gay” and “AIDS” are complexly intertwined because of the epidemic’s huge and lingering impact upon gay male culture. Therefore, this young man’s resistance of “gay”—his wholesale espousal and endorsement of “POST GAY”—constitutes a resistance to “AIDS” as well. Here, I would cite Simon Watney’s eloquent, forceful, and timely reminder for older and younger gay men to affiliate *across* the generations. “I persist in believing that most gay men face similar personal problems and challenges in our lives,” Watney confides, “and that however much things may generally be changing for the better in terms of social attitudes towards us, still, across the generations, we are likely to have in common a wide range of social and emotional experience, rooted in myriad ways in our shared homosexuality, however badly and inadequately we may deal with one another as mere mortals. To question this seems to me to question the most palpable reality in front of one’s eyes. It suggests a resistance to the very idea of *belonging*” (18; original emphasis). Like Watney, I, too, would underscore the need to forge, rather than resist, modes of social and generational belonging, especially because both are necessary for the creation and the transmission of sustainable institutions of memory in contemporary gay male culture.

²⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991): 336-57.



“Post-AIDS” and Spectrality

Although I feel that the characterization of the present historical moment as “post-AIDS” is largely misguided and potentially dangerous, I do think that elaborations and contestations over the concept’s intelligibility and validity are profoundly instructive. In fact, I would even go so far as to suggest that “post-AIDS” discourses are themselves constructed and understood, at least implicitly, in relation to spectrality. In his brilliant article “Not-About-AIDS,” theater and cultural critic David Román offers a cogent summary of the different ways the concept of “post-AIDS” has been used by AIDS activists and cultural critics to advance their radically varied agendas and arguments: Eric Rofes’s call to abandon the “AIDS-as-crisis” model; Michelangelo Signorile’s desire to return to the language and commitment of early 1980s AIDS activism; Andrew Sullivan’s pronouncement of the “end of AIDS”; and Phillip Brian Harper’s promotion of a more socially responsible and engaged activism. According to Román, “[g]iven these different meanings, claims for the end of AIDS and a post-AIDS discourse might best be understood not as markers of a definitive and identifiable moment of closure but as the latest developments in the discursive history of AIDS. Both the ‘end of AIDS’ and the post-AIDS discourse participate in a larger social phenomenon that encourages us to believe that the immediate concerns facing contemporary American culture, including queer culture, are not-about-AIDS.”³⁰ He correctly surmises that pronouncements about

³⁰ David Román, “Not-about-AIDS,” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2000): 6.

the “end of AIDS” and the debates over “post-AIDS” are themselves intrinsic and constitutive elements in the ever-evolving and highly-contested discursive history of AIDS. In short, even discourses and debates that are supposedly “not-about-AIDS” are, in fact, really *about* AIDS.

I see a productive convergence between Román’s and Warner’s respective arguments. For there is a dialectical relationship between the circulating discourses that are at once about and not about AIDS on the one hand, and, on the other, the relative lack of institutions of common memory in gay male culture that has resulted in the changed, if not also drastically reduced, cultural consciousness of AIDS. The circulation of “end-of-AIDS” discourses further displaces the possibility of creating sustainable institutions of memory. In a similar fashion, the difficulties of transmitting historical memory of the epidemic across the generations in meaningful and collective ways further foster the premature celebration and misguided perception of the end of AIDS. The epidemic illustrates that the dynamics of remembering and forgetting in gay male or queer cultures work in different ways than in mainstream or heterosexual cultures—cultures that already have a host of sustainable institutions and technologies of memory, not the least of which are default forms of generational transmission provided by and through the traditional family and kinship models.

Moreover, I also interpret Román’s argument as suggesting that there exists an aporia or liminality between AIDS discourse on the one hand, and, on the other, “not-about-AIDS” discourse that is itself constitutive of AIDS discourse. With this in mind, I would like to suggest that such an aporia or liminality in “not-about-AIDS” discourse bears an uncanny relationship to the “in-betweeness” that inheres in the concept of

spectrality and in the relationship between the living and the dead. Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that the language of haunting and the trope of spectrality are themselves constitutive elements in gay men's experience of the AIDS epidemic—from Simon Watney's mourning of a "growing army of the dead" to articulations of encounters with the dead by those engaged in the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. Since 1996, when protease inhibitors or combination therapies were introduced to improve the health and extend the lives of many people with AIDS, there has been a different sense of the uncanny and the spectral in gay male culture. Many gay men report with amazement at seeing friends who have for years been sick, even almost dying, "returning" to life.

Eric Rofes recalls a joyous reunion in the spring of 1996 with a friend who had just started on the new regime of protease inhibitors, colloquially known as "the cocktail." "I was struck by the powerful transformation that had occurred in this man in the few months since I'd last seen him," Rofes recalls. "Instead of somberly and with great ambivalence grappling with his approaching death, he was reconceptualizing his life possibilities and reengaging with the world. [. . .] Like the biblical figure Lazarus, he seemed to have returned from the dead" (5). Within weeks, moreover, Rofes began to hear more and more stories describing encounters with friends and acquaintances who had had similarly remarkable recoveries from illnesses that had afflicted them for years. He writes of another chance encounter with an old acquaintance:

One man whom I thought had died because I hadn't seen him around our usual haunts, surprised me one morning at the gym. Having become accustomed to such weird occurrences over the past dozen years, I wasn't too disturbed to see a ghost. Yet Julio wasn't simply alive, he was his old hunky self again—big arms, great legs, great legs, solid mass of butt. My first thought was that he'd joined [. . . the] quest to beat wasting syndrome through the use of steroids. But before I knew it, Julio was rattling off lists of drugs of which I'd never heard, singing the praises of his physician, and complaining about having to live by an alarm clock. One ten-

minute conversation yanked Julio out of the cemetery of my mind and placed him back in the mad whirl of San Francisco's gym/bar/dance/party/sex culture. (6)

In describing his encounter with Julio, Rofes is clearly using the language of hauntings and the trope of spectrality. But what is most striking about this passage is how its content is conveyed and articulated through form and language. Rofes is essentially describing a "haunting" and an "exhumation." He admits that the chance encounter with Julio, however fortuitous and unexpected, was not all that surprising: it is but one of a series of "weird occurrences" that take place on a fairly regular basis. "I was not too disturbed to see a ghost," he claims, meaning that he frequently runs into friends and acquaintances he had not seen in a while—ones whom he assumes, given the all-pervasive collective experience of loss in San Francisco, had died. His absolute lack of distress at "see[ing] a ghost" can be read as underscoring the regularity of hauntings in his life. In short, being haunted is not an extraordinary but a quotidian experience. After his conversation with Julio, Rofes, convinced that his friend is on his way to recovering his health, performs a mental "exhumation," so to speak, by "yank[ing] Julio out of the cemetery of my mind and plac[ing] him back in the mad whirl of San Francisco's gym/bar/dance/party/sex culture."

In reading Rofes's descriptions, I am not proposing that the advent of protease inhibitors is the one and only reason that has radically reoriented gay men's consciousness of HIV/AIDS and their relationship to sex, desire, and mortality during the last dozen years. Following Rofes, I would register a cautious attitude towards what he terms "the protease moment."³¹ I am merely underscoring yet more telling examples that

³¹ Rofes writes in *Dry Bones Breathe*: "It is dangerous to consider protease inhibitors as the sole cause of growing gay awareness of a changing epidemic, yet we are asked repeatedly to put all our fragile eggs into the protease basket. If protease inhibitors don't work for many people, or fail to be effective after a year or

demonstrate how gay men's experience of the epidemic is intimately connected to the language of haunting and to the tropes of the spectral, the supernatural, and the miraculous. Rofes's examples suggest how "the protease moment" has in many ways led to the circulation of "post-AIDS" discourse and the claiming of "post-AIDS" identities. To the extent that Rofes's descriptions can be read as "post-AIDS" moments, they also prove Román's point that discourses that purport not to be about AIDS are always already about AIDS. As Rofes's description of the encounter with Julio clearly illustrates, the hauntings that occur during a "post-AIDS" moment are always already *haunted* themselves by previous hauntings that once occurred during an "AIDS" moment. In short, the task of interpreting the AIDS epidemic involves and is accompanied by the task of interpreting ghosts and hauntings.

Significantly, just as some critics and theorists have found difficult the task of interpreting AIDS, so too have others found challenging the task of formulating interpretations of ghosts and hauntings. Notwithstanding the significant contributions of Sigmund Freud, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Hélène Cixous, and Jacques Derrida, among others, who in their respective works have engaged the problem of spectrality and its various incarnations—apparitions, phantoms, the return of the repressed, *revenants*—we still lack, according to sociologist Avery F. Gordon, sufficient critical methodologies and interpretive tools "for understanding how social institutions and people are haunted, for capturing enchantment in a disenchanted world."³² In part to

two, or end up doing more harm than good, the roller coaster we've been riding for fifteen years is likely to snap and whip us all into another sudden and sharp decline. The impact would be devastating" (64). It is also worth noting that protease inhibitors are expensive to produce and purchase and thus not available to everyone who might benefit from them.

³² Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8. See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919); Theodor Adorno and Max

address this lack, Gordon usefully suggests revising common assumptions about spectrality and the experience of being haunted. “The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person,” she argues, “but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. [. . .] Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling, of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative experience” (8). To see ghosts as social figures—whose presence is potentially transformative—allows for a far more expansive view of the dead and of their roles and functions in our imaginations, in the material world, and in literature.³³



The Ghosts of Gay Male Literature

Horkheimer, “The Theory of Ghosts,” a short treatise appended to *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944); Hélène Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* (‘The Uncanny’),” *New Literary History* 7 (1976): 525-46; and Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³³ Although literary and cultural critics have yet to present a sustained treatment of ghosts in AIDS narratives, they have been arguing, quite rightly, about the integral role of the spectral in literary and cultural texts. See, for example, Kathleen Brogan, *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999); Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, ed., *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999); Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Daniel Erickson, *Ghosts, Metaphor, and History in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude* (New York: Palgrave, 2009); Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Jeremy Tambling, *Becoming Posthumous: Life and Death in Literary and Cultural Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001); Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, ed., *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); and Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny, and Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

Before I proceed with my readings of AIDS narratives, I would like to note that the trope of spectrality is also evident in texts written by earlier homosexual writers, and by more contemporary gay male authors whose works, while published during the last two decades during the age of AIDS, are not explicitly about AIDS. Yet even though these later works do not mention AIDS, the fact that they were written, published, and read during the crisis also makes them “not-about-AIDS” narratives that are, implicitly, also “about AIDS.”

In terms of earlier writers and texts, Henry James’s “The Jolly Corner” (1908) and E. M. Forster’s “Dr Woolacott” (1927) are especially noteworthy for their use of the spectral and the uncanny to represent the repression of homosexual desire.³⁴ “The Jolly Corner” recounts bachelor Spencer Brydon returning to the U.S., after years of living in Europe, and encountering his “ghostly double”—an apparitional Doppelganger figure who, as critics have long argued, represents not only Brydon’s un-lived life in the U.S. but also his unclaimed homosexual identity.³⁵ “Dr Woolacott” narrates the story of yet another bachelor, an invalid squire named Clesant, who, during his convalescence and against the wishes of his physician, Dr Woolacott, develops a crush on one of his servants—a man that is revealed by the narrative’s end not to have existed at all, a mere figment of Clesant’s imagination in his attempt to make material and enact his attraction to other men. “The Jolly Corner” and “Dr Woolacott” are examples of bachelor literature, a genre in which “the paranoid Gothic—or, more broadly, the supernatural—makes a

³⁴ Henry James’s “The Jolly Corner” was first published in *The English Review* in December 1908 and is reprinted in *Henry James: Selected Fiction*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1964). E. M. Forster’s “Dr Woolacott” was published posthumously in *The Life to Come and Other Stories*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989). Another notable example is Oscar Wilde’s satiric critique of American provincialism in his ghost story “The Canterville Ghost: A Hylo-Idealistic Romance” (1887).

³⁵ See, for example, Eric Savoy, “The Queer Subject of ‘The Jolly Corner,’” *The Henry James Review* 20, no. 1 (winter 1999): 1-21.

reappearance” as a conventional trope that illustrates, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, how “homosexual panic was acted out as a sometimes agonized sexual anesthesia.”³⁶

Whereas James and Forster use spectrality to represent the repression of homosexual desire, contemporary U.S. and U.K. gay male authors such as Ethan Mordden and Neil Bartlett use it to articulate and celebrate same-sex desires. More revealingly, they also use it to elaborate social bonds between men across time and to establish historical memory and historical continuity. “The Ghost of Champ McQuest” (1988), one of the stories in Mordden’s hilarious and campy “Buddies” trilogy, recounts the adventures of his hero narrator, Bud, and his group of New York gay male friends. The story is set in 1979, a decade after the Stonewall Riots, and takes place in The Pines and Cherry Grove, two communities in the Long Island resort town of Fire Island that attract a large number of gay men and lesbians. That summer, Bud and his friends have rented a house in The Pines. Among the housemates is Tom Adverse, a forty-year-old heterosexual man who in his twenties used to pose as a model in gay pornography. As is typical of Mordden’s “Buddies” stories, “The Ghost of Champ McQuest” is peppered with wonderfully rich “period” details. For example, although the house that Bud and his friends have rented is “known as Chinatown for no reason that anyone could name,” it is also considered as “one of the Island’s historic sites. It’s had everything from visiting movie stars to a suicide.”³⁷ Tom Adverse, moreover, is described by Bud for the

³⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 188, fn. 14.

³⁷ Ethan Mordden, “The Ghost of Champ McQuest,” in *Everybody Loves You: Further Adventures in Gay Manhattan* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1988), 57, 63. Mordden’s “Buddies” trilogy also includes *I’ve Got a Feeling We’re Not in Kansas Anymore: Tales from Gay Manhattan* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986) and *Buddies* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).

edification of readers in this way: “Tom Adverse was the Cherry Grove Carpenter, for those of you who con the folklore back into the early 1970s. [. . .] Tom Adverse was not only an amenity of the gay part of Fire Island but a regular stop on the newcomer’s tour. Day-trippers to The Pines couldn’t call their visit official till they had marched over the sand to scan the Cherry Grove Carpenter” (55). Through such details, Mordden is articulating more than just a well-developed sense of a campy aesthetic. Like his literary predecessors Andrew Holleran, Larry Kramer, and Edmund White, he is attempting to capture and show, through his descriptions of a vibrant New York-Fire Island scene, an already-established but ever-evolving urban gay male subculture on the U.S. East Coast.³⁸ Through his narrator, Bud, moreover, Mordden implicitly invites, perhaps even implicates, gay male readers of “The Ghost of Champ McQuest” to “con the folklore” and cultural narratives of *their* history.

Although the story of “The Ghost of Champ McQuest” is set in a “pre-AIDS past”—in 1979—its retelling by Bud occurs, close to a decade later, during the AIDS epidemic. One rather striking passage reveals the active excavation and remembering of the past on the part of Bud and, by extension, his creator, Mordden. “It was 1979. I had just turned thirty and was only now seriously considering the prospect of Growing Older [. . .],” Bud confides at one point in the narrative. “We were young. We were healthy. We

³⁸ In 1978, close to a decade after Stonewall, both Holleran and Kramer published their now-classic novels about the New York-Fire Island gay scene. See Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance* (New York: Plume, 1986); and Larry Kramer, *Faggots* (New York: Plume, 1987). A few years earlier, in 1973, Edmund White published his Fire Island novel, *Forgetting Elena* (New York: Vintage, 1994). It is of course worth stressing how the category of class intersects with and even fractures the New York-Fire Island scene: the gay men who frequent the Pines either are able to afford weekend or summer shares or have to work menial jobs such as houseboys. Of course there are other “scenes” that are equally vibrant that make up the urban gay male culture in New York city, including such cruising grounds as theaters and the Meat Packing district. For literary treatments of these other scenes, see Samuel R. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1960-1965* (New York: Richard Kasak, 1993), especially his wonderful description of the St. Mark’s Bathhouse (266-71); and David Wojnarowicz, *The Waterfront Journals*, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: Grove Press, 1996).

were having a grand time. The only person I knew of in our generation who had died was Jeff Willis, of my class at Friends Academy, killed in a car accident in his freshman year at Duke” (57). In this passage, Bud embeds his personal recollection of his friend within the context of a generational narrative in which he recalls his cohorts as “young” and “healthy” men in the 1970s and who, by implication, are no longer as “young” or “healthy” a decade later. Indeed, the shift from “I” to “we” in Bud’s recollections signals the ways in which personal memories, as Sturken suggests, are entangled with historical or cultural memory. Or, to draw upon David Román’s formulation, although “The Ghost of Champ McQuest” is arguably “not-about-AIDS,” this moment leads readers to interpret the possibility that the story, in its retrospective account of a “prelapsarian” gay past, if you will, is implicitly also about AIDS.

The characters in Mordden’s story are all forced to remember and confront the past through the figure of the ghost. Tom, one day, unexpectedly tells Bud that he “saw a ghost last night” in the house (60). Bud is initially skeptical of Tom’s story, until more housemates start to report similar sightings of an apparition (63, 67-68). Tom then confides to Bud: “I know who it is. [. . .] Visiting at night here? I used to know him. [. . .] He’s a very sad guy. Very nice guy and very sad. Good looking. It was hard to know what to do with him because his feelings always got hurt very easily. [. . .] His name was Champ McQuest, and this was something like 1972. Maybe 1973. Champ McQuest” (72, 73). While his descriptions of Champ McQuest are rather vague, even a bit cryptic, they nonetheless indicate Tom actively engaging in recalling an old friend.

Intrigued by Tom’s story, Bud seeks more information about Champ McQuest from “a wise old queen”—an “*old* gay [man], older than clones and discos and

politics”—who “had been all over the scene for a good thirty years” (75; original emphasis). Sharing the story with Bud, this “wise old queen” embeds Champ McQuest’s individual narrative—a life trajectory shared by so many others that one can arguably call it a gay *Bildungsroman*—within the context of the culture-transforming and world-making possibilities engendered by the Stonewall riots. Champ, Bud learns, was “[o]ne of many [. . .] chillingly handsome young men who fell into the city in droves those first years after the [Stonewall] Riot [when] [t]he gates were pulled down [. . . and] [t]he citadel was opened up. Champ was not the handsomest or the youngest, but he may well have been the nicest” (75, 76). To his surprise, Bud also learns from the “wise old queen” that Champ had died in the “Chinatown” house of an accidental drug overdose that some people interpreted as a suicide (79). The “wise old queen” then shows Bud an underground “private film” called “Sailor Dick and Pants-Down Johnny” featuring Champ McQuest and, to Bud’s utter surprise, Tom Adverse (80-83).

Armed with this knowledge, Bud rightly surmises that the ghost haunting the “Chinatown” house is indeed, as Tom claims, none other than Champ McQuest. The real reason for Champ’s “restlessness” is not revealed until the story’s end. One night, all the housemates gather together for “Ghost Patrol,” waiting to ambush the apparition that has been haunting them. The ghost finally makes an appearance, but rushes out of the house to the porch, where Tom has just arrived from the beach. After hearing “a fabulous series of crashes from the porch,” the others rush out to find Tom, “on his knees, in a stupor.” When Bud asks him if he is okay, Tom responds: “It’s all right. [. . .] He said it’s all right. [. . .] He said it wasn’t me. He wanted to make sure I . . . He talked to me . . .” Tom then “began to weep,” all the while saying: “He talked to me. [. . .] He said, ‘Remember me’”

(91-92). Tom's sense of relief helps to explain why he was so "haunted" by his old friend: no doubt knowing that Champ had had a crush on him, Tom was pained by the knowledge that his unrequited affection might have been the reason for Champ's "suicide." The message from Champ releases Tom from the demons of his past. Or, as Bud himself interprets Champ's message: "It was not a message from the past, then, but for the future," meaning that it gave Tom the necessary permission to go on with his life. More generally, given that Bud in the story is recalling the summer of "1979," his memory of his interpretation of the ghost's message is productively ambiguous: that is to say, it remains unclear whether it is a memory or an interpretation of a memory filtered through the early years of the AIDS epidemic. Read in this way, "the past" refers both to the early part of the 1970s when Tom and Champ were friends as well as to the later part of the 1970s in which the story takes place. This richly suggestive final scene returns the narrative back to its opening epigraph, which had intimated the story's concern with the thematic of haunting and ghostly memories. Two lines from Emily Brontë's poem "Remembrance" (1846) serve as an epigraph to "The Ghost of Champ McQuest":

"Faithful, indeed, is the spirit that remembers / After such years of change and suffering!"

Memory and acts of remembering, in other words, sustain, transform, and perhaps even help to transcend the "change and suffering" that have indelibly marked gay men's experience of all-pervasive loss and death during the first decade of the AIDS epidemic.

Although Mordden's "The Ghost of Champ McQuest" does not explicitly name or represent AIDS in the context of gay men's lives, it does share a strategy with other contemporaneous examples of gay male literature of the late 1980s whose narratives tacitly focus on sick and dying men without, strikingly, any mention of AIDS. According

to James W. Jones, the absence of AIDS in novels such as Robert Ferro's *Second Son* and Christopher Davis's *Valley of the Shadows*—both published, incidentally, in 1988, the same year as Mordden's collection *Everybody Loves You*—exemplifies a deliberate strategy on the part of their authors of “refusing to name” in order “to particularize and to universalize the effects of AIDS.”³⁹

Memory, too, is the vehicle through which historical continuity is established. Neil Bartlett's novel *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1990), for example, contains a crucial scene in which the ghosts of past homosexual men are present when the protagonists, O and Boy, consummate their “marriage.” Framed within the novel's attempt to appropriate the traditional family unit to create alternative gay kinship structures, the spectral in *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* represents historical continuity between homosexuals and gay men as well as the celebration of male same-sex desire. While Bartlett does not explicitly identify these men as ghosts, his description certainly invites readers to arrive at this conclusion. The novel's unnamed narrator recounts the scene:

Neither of them [O and Boy] looked up and saw, hovering over that white and isolated bed, or rather not hovering but crowding, pressing, stretching up on their toes some of them so that they could see, a crowd of fifty or sixty men. All of them were whiteskinned and darkeyed, like the lovers; and all of them, like the lovers, were naked. These were the ones who had come before, the men whom O and Boy never knew or had never even heard about, their witnesses and peers, the attendants and guests of honour at this ceremony, this great labour of love; the ones we forgot to invite. All of these men were quite still, and all of them smiled; all of them cast down their eyes to behold the slow-moving wonder on the bed. Some were frankly fascinated, watching two handsome men engage in sexual practices which had not been current in their own century; their eyes opened wide. [. . .] Some of the men held hands, or seemed to be lovers themselves. [. . .] Some

³⁹ James W. Jones, “Refusing the Name: The Absence of AIDS in Recent American Gay Male Fiction,” in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, ed. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 236.

were themselves sexually excited, perhaps by being in such a crowd, or perhaps by what they were watching.⁴⁰

In this ghosts-as-voyeurs scene, not only are the lovers accompanied by ghosts of the past, but the ghosts also continue what is going on in the present (i.e., sexual activity). Through this chiasmus or crossing, the generations are doubly drawn together. That Bartlett should depart from the examples of his literary ancestors—his transfiguration of the bachelor as “husband and husband,” so to speak—reflect changes not only in literary tropes and conventions, but also in cultural perceptions of homosexual and gay male desire. While Bartlett’s novel neither mentions nor deals with AIDS, this specific passage does bear a significant resemblance to AIDS narratives in the way it underscores the intimate relationship between spectrality and sexuality.



The Sociopolitical Functions of Ghosts in AIDS Narratives

In his 1993 essay “AIDS Writing and the Creation of a Gay Culture,” Michael Denny argues that AIDS writing is a unique and significant literary phenomenon. I quote his cogent and germane explanation at length:

What distinguishes this AIDS writing from other literary production in our time is not only the writers’ intention but the unique situation in which the act of writing occurs. This is not strong emotion recollected in tranquility; these are reports from the combat zone. AIDS writing is urgent; it is engaged and activist writing; it is writing in response to a present threat; it is in it, of it, and aims to affect it. I can think of no good parallel for this in literary history. As far as I know, most of the writing done about the Holocaust was published after 1945, when the nightmare was over in reality and began to haunt the imagination. And while the closest

⁴⁰ Neil Bartlett, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (New York: Plume, 1992), 217.

parallel might be the poetry that came out of the trenches of the first World War, the bulk of that writing was published, reviewed and read after the war; whereas this AIDS writing is not only being produced in the trenches, as it were, but is being published, read by its public and evaluated by the critics in the midst of the crisis. It is as if Sassoon's poetry were being mimeographed in the trenches and distributed to be read by men under fire—the immediacy of these circumstances precludes the possibility of this being a merely aesthetic enterprise. The aesthetic requires distance and the distance is not available, not to the writer, not to the reader. (46)

I agree with Denny that AIDS narratives—and, more generally, other cultural and artistic products produced during the epidemic—are especially important as documents and artifacts chronicling the diverse lives, loves, and losses during the epidemic and, as a consequence, are significant contributions to literary history.

I would, however, challenge his suggestion that there is “no good parallel” between AIDS narratives and other forms of testimonial writing produced during periods of historical trauma; the rich archive of autobiographical and fictionalized accounts of slave narratives, for example, were produced, read by its public, and evaluated by critics in the midst of the period of slavery during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that AIDS narratives in general, and those containing representations of ghosts in particular, bear less resemblance to Gothic literature and more to slave narratives and other forms of testimonial writing that share a concern with chronicling historical events of traumatic proportions. I would additionally challenge Denny's suggestion about not evaluating AIDS narratives on their aesthetic qualities and properties due to the fact that they were produced in such an immediate and urgent context. But fifteen years have since passed since the publication of Denny's essay. Perhaps these years provide sufficient “distance” for critics and readers to approach and recuperate the rich archive of AIDS narratives—and to form their

evaluations of texts on aesthetic criteria. My main focus in the present discussion is to consider one recurrent and pervasive aesthetic thematic in AIDS narratives concerning ghosts and hauntings. The task of reading AIDS narratives should not only fall upon literary critics, however. On the contrary, gay men of different ages especially should commit themselves to this task as well. For the archive of AIDS narratives represents an integral institution of common memory that needs to be tapped into, preserved, and passed on. Reading and viewing AIDS narratives, I believe, would do much to contribute to a heightened and reinvigorated consciousness of the AIDS epidemic as an ongoing and historical phenomenon that has defined, and continues to define, contemporary gay male culture.

The representations of the spectral, the supernatural, and the miraculous in AIDS narratives both demand and provide different ways of reading the cultural amnesia that inheres in our current historical moment. For AIDS registers what Yingling labels as “the historical sublime,” whereby any interpretation of AIDS must take into account how our reading practices are “framed equally by demand and defeat, as the ground on which we are condemned to negotiate the difference between that which can be comprehended by the capacities of the intellect and that which can only be apprehended as beyond, in excess, or pitted against such capacities” (292). Yingling’s distinction between comprehension and apprehension applies not only to how we understand AIDS but also to how we *interpret* our understanding of AIDS. As my discussion has thus far summarized, there have indeed been multiple and contradictory shifts in our understanding of the epidemic: AIDS remains, to borrow Paula Treichler’s argument, “an

epidemic of signification.”⁴¹ Yet through all these changes in AIDS discourses, what has remained consistent are representations of the spectral, the supernatural, and the miraculous in AIDS narratives. I would argue that such a consistency—an uncanny one, to be sure, inasmuch as it illustrates Freud’s notion that the uncanny is in part constituted by and through repetition—can itself be read as an epistemic, discursive, and representational “excess”—one that attempts to negotiate, perhaps even to reconcile, the relationship between *comprehending* and *apprehending* the material effects and human costs of the AIDS epidemic.



The Body and Its Ghostly Memories: Allen Barnett’s “Philostorgy, Now Obscure”

Although I have devoted the previous chapter to Allen Barnett, I would like to focus, in this section specifically, on the author’s engagement with the spectral.

“Philostorgy, Now Obscure” is a striking example of an AIDS narrative that engages the theme of the gay male body, identity, and desire. The story, you will recall, centers on the sustained, if strained, emotional bonds between Preston Wallace and his two former college roommates, Roxy Atherton and Lorna Fairweather. The two women respond in different ways to Preston’s recent diagnosis of cytomegalovirus retinitis, one of dozens of

⁴¹ Paula A. Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987): 31-70.

“AIDS-defining” conditions, which could potentially cost him his sight.⁴² Unlike Lorna, Roxy is deeply anxious about Preston, and the story consistently portrays her as extremely proficient in “AIDS-speak.”

Barnett skillfully plays up the dialectic between surface and depth in “Philostorgy, Now Obscure”: through his presentation of Preston, he orchestrates his readers’ responses, forcing them to reconsider their assumptions about the body and, more specifically, about the biomedical body. At first we learn that “[o]ne would not guess that [Preston] was ill. His shirt stretched tightly across broad shoulders. He had joined a gym after moving to New York” (38); later, however, we learn that he has “a gland swollen in his arm the size of a golf ball” (49). Preston’s swollen gland is hidden under clothing, just as the HIV coursing through his body is “hidden” beneath the skin. Although Preston finds himself “betrayed” by a body whose immune system is now vulnerable, causing it to be susceptible to various opportunistic infections, he eventually experiences a turning point that alters his relationship to his body. Significantly, this turning point is marked by his recognition that the body is a repository of memory: it is precisely *through* his body that he is able to divine the palpable presence of men who were once his lovers and casual-sex partners—now dead—and who return to haunt him *in* his body. Barnett writes of Preston:

Memory, Preston had always thought, was like an old bomb shelter, holding cans of Del Monte, boxes of Bisquick, forgotten gifts of expensive wine. He had begun to learn, however, that the body can recall things on its own. There were nights when he felt the recent dead getting into bed, climbing over him as if they had just come from the shower. He felt their bodies against his own, or beneath him, a sack of balls loose between their legs, wet hair on the nape of their necks. He could feel the way each of them used to push into the mattress on their way to

⁴² Allen Barnett, “Philostorgy, Now Obscure,” *The Body and Its Dangers and Other Stories* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 39.

sleep. It was even comforting to have them there, to be remembered by them before they got up to lie briefly, like this, in someone else's bed. There were dead men he could still arouse himself for. (52)

Preston's body is represented as a sentient entity that is able to "recall things on its own," especially the bodies of other men. The dead, on their part, are represented as fully *embodied* and sexual beings whose bodies Preston "felt [. . .] against his own, or beneath him, a sack of balls loose between their legs." Preston repeatedly resurrects the dead in his memory and through his body; he remembers and becomes aroused and transformed by their presence: "There were nights when he felt the recent dead getting into bed" with whom "he still could arouse himself for."

In "Bodies of Commemoration: The Immune System and HIV," Sturken notes that "the human body is a vehicle for remembrance—through its surface (the memory that exists in physical scars, for instance), its muscular and skeletal structure (the memory of how to walk, the effects of a physical injury), its genetic tissue (the marking of one's lineage and genetic propensities), and its immune system (the memory of the body's encounters with disease)" (220). Although bodies are always already marked by racial and gender difference, the construction of the biomedical body in AIDS discourse, Sturken explains, poses a different set of challenges, especially in relation to its metaphoric representation of the immune system. "[T]he metaphors of the immune system are essential to its scientific definition, and these metaphors reveal a deep fear of difference. Popular medical discourse defines the immune system as a regulating force that identifies the 'foreign' within the body; it is thus a primary agent distinguishing self

and nonself” (222).⁴³ Drawing upon Sturken’s analysis, I would argue that Barnett uses the trope of spectrality in his short story to complicate assumptions about the body and its immune system as having the ability to recognize and regulate the difference between “self” and “nonself”—an alterity that, by extension, parallels the alterity between the living and the dead. In other words, the difference between the living (Preston) and the dead (those haunting him) is mediated through their shared memory of bodily contact with each other in the past *and* mediated as well through their reenactment of those encounters in the present.

Barnett’s description of Preston’s ability to divine a collective ghostly presence both confirms and challenges Emily Apter’s argument about HIV/AIDS as haunting the lives of gay men. Writing about AIDS or *le sida* in France, and in particular Hervé Guibert’s *L’Image fantôme*, Apter suggests that “[o]ne could say that HIV, with its baggage of dead souls, bears down unrelentingly on the subjectivity of those surviving with AIDS. Transmitted and introjected, like the virus itself, the ghosts of former lovers and friends settle in for the duration, crowding out the space allotted for life’s ordinary preoccupations and pleasures. What the ghosts fail to claim as their personal territory, pain acquires, colonizing consciousness along with the body.”⁴⁴ Like Guibert, Barnett shows how his protagonist, Preston, is indeed haunted by “dead souls” and “the ghosts of former lovers and friends [who] settle in for the duration.” But, unlike his French contemporary, Barnett also suggests that Preston gains a heightened consciousness of his

⁴³ For another useful discussion of this topic, see Steven F. Kruger, *AIDS Narratives: Gender and Sexuality, Fiction and Science* (New York: Garland, 1996), especially Chapter 1, “Is a Virus Language?” (3-32).

⁴⁴ Emily Apter, “Fantom Images: Hervé Guibert and the Writing of ‘sida’ in France,” in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, eds. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 90.

own past—and even derives an erotic and sexual pleasure—precisely through being haunted in his body. In other words, Preston’s ghosts are in no way interested in “colonizing” his body; rather, his is only one of many destinations in their visitations from bed to bed.

Preston’s belief in his body’s ability to remember and record past sexual encounters is especially profound. Although his life is completely saturated by a “faith of loss,” his body offers him an alternative belief system: “Preston believed that he would survive, not the illness, but death itself. It was one of those things that one believes despite one’s self, a tiny bubble of thought that hangs suspended somewhere between the heart and mind, fragile and thin as a Christmas tree ornament yet managing to last decades. He believed in his consciousness, that it would do more than last, but would have impact and consequence, that wherever it went, there would be discourse and agitation; decisions would be made and adhered to” (53). The body—his body, Preston realizes—will transcend even its own death.

These fond recollections of past sexual encounters eventually lead Preston to decide to visit an old flame from ten years ago, Jim Stoller, a man whom he still deeply desires and “could arouse old feelings” for (53). During their reunion over lunch, Preston tells Jim of his seropositive status. He also confides his memories of Jim’s body:

There is no one, no one anywhere in the world, and I’ve been around, whose mouth I remember like I remember yours. [. . .] I can remember your skin. It was powdery, like a boy’s. In bright light your eyes were the color of green beach glass . . . Of course, you were wearing contact lenses, but so what? You weren’t the first, and by God, I could probably figure that there were hundreds after you, but when I think of them all—and I’ve had to for studies [in AIDS research] because they all want to know how many men you’ve been with—I always think of you. (57-58)

Preston remembers in detail Jim's body parts—his mouth, his skin, his eyes—that, in sum, helps him to recall his “experiences” with Jim. After their lunch, Jim invites Preston back to his apartment for a sexual encounter. Preston, however, balks at the invitation, saying to Jim: “It’s too dangerous.” Jim responds, convincing Preston: “I’m not afraid of you anymore. [. . .] And I want some say in how you remember me” (59). Both men come to the conclusion that sexual pleasure and sexual satisfaction far outweigh the risks and the potentially dangerous consequences of sharing an encounter that they both want. Before leaving Jim’s apartment, Preston leaves Jim, who is fast asleep, a note that reads: “Dear Jim, [. . .] I suspect and hope that somewhere I stalk your dream, that you’ll wake from it, and find that I’m not here, and attempt to go back to it” (60). Later, back at his own place, Preston savors the memory of his recent tryst with Jim, recalling “Jim’s hand between his shoulder blades, and then later, Jim inside him, which was not something he had expected to feel again. The smell of Jim was still on his beard, the taste of him under his tongue. If he had been Jim’s first lover, he suspected that Jim would be his last” (60). Preston’s note and his solitary musings appear to be in tension: on the one hand, Preston clearly “hopes” that he is “stalking” Jim’s dream; on the other, he also strongly “suspects” that Jim will be his last lover. At the same time, however, these two moments also appear to be mutually constitutive in their narrative and temporal logic if we read them in relation to the earlier haunting episode. In other words, although it is certainly plausible that Jim might very well be Preston’s last lover while alive, it is equally possible, whether in a dream or during a haunting, for Preston to enter into and inhabit Jim’s life, just as those haunting Preston have entered his life. In the haunting episode and during his sexual encounter with Jim, Preston comes to experience his body not

solely as a body that now contains a potentially deadly virus but, more profoundly, as a vital repository of memory and as a site that allows for the performance and reenactment of sexual desires. Haunted by his body and its ghostly memories—and, by extension, by the future possibility that he will himself haunt other bodies—Preston embraces, rather than rejects, “the body and its dangers.”

“Philostorgy, Now Obscure” is an especially striking, economical narrative that challenges assumptions about the body, its mediation of alterity, and its potential to transcend death. It is also noteworthy for its suggestion that hauntings are transformative experiences not only for Preston but, at the same time, for those who haunt him and, by extension, those whom he will haunt. We have, of course, already seen a similar dynamic at work in Bartlett’s description of the ghosts-as-voyeurs in *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*. But there are two obvious differences between these two texts: Barnett’s short story is definitely an AIDS narrative, while Bartlett’s novel is not. More significantly, in Bartlett’s novel, O and Boy are too wrapped up—in their own bodies, in having sex—to divine the presence of their visitors: “Had O or Boy looked up,” the novel’s narrator explains, “they would have seen that some faces appeared in the crowd several times” (216). In Barnett’s short story, however, the haunting episode is obviously structured within a dialectics of recognition and remembrance for both Preston and those who haunt him. In free indirect discourse, Barnett writes of the encounter: “It was even comforting to have them there, to be remembered by them before they got up to lie briefly, like this, in someone else’s bed.” The visitation is an ephemeral but intimately tangible moment for Preston, who is grateful for the experience—and grateful, too, that his visitors remember *him* so fondly, as he does them.



Misrecognizing the Spectral: Michael Lynch's "The Terror of Resurrection"

Hauntings are represented as dialectical in Michael Lynch's poem "The Terror of Resurrection" (1993). The poem is reprinted in his essay entitled "Terrors of Resurrection: 'By Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,'" a paper that Lynch had composed (referring to himself in the third-person) to be delivered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in lieu of his absence due to his illness, at the MLA Annual Convention in 1988.⁴⁵ The poem "The Terror of Resurrection" contains two moments—marked off by parenthesis—that describe a man, recently deceased due to complications from AIDS, returning to the land of the living. The return of the dead intrudes upon the consciousness of the poem's speaker:

[. . .]

Now that I've welcomed you back the terror
of resurrection
(catastrophe for the closest friends
must have been that face
of what had been so grievingly safely bound
talking gently)

slaps against the hollow body

and the resurrection
(but theirs was nothing compared to his:
facing the mourner's security

⁴⁵ Michael Lynch, "Terrors of Resurrection 'by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,'" in *Confronting AIDS Through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation*, ed. Judith Laurence Pastore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 78-83. Lynch's essay includes the following note: "Before his death, Michael Lynch stipulated in a letter dated October 16, 1990, that his essay be titled 'Terrors of Resurrection 'by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.'" He also wanted a note saying: "This piece was written by Michael Lynch to be delivered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick when he was unable to attend the conference for which it was planned': the Modern Language Association Meeting, New Orleans, December 1988" (83).

of well-done affection
 and the disrupter himself jarred to find
 himself this kind of disrupter)
 of terror [. . .]

The speaker has purposely conjured but remains a bit terrified by the presence of the dead man: “Now that I’ve welcomed you back the terror / of resurrection / [. . .] / slaps against the hollow body / and the resurrection / [. . .] / of terror.”

According to Lynch in his MLA paper, “[t]he second insertion in the poem’s counterpoint shifts to the consequent reactions of the returning person—let us call him a “him,” first of all, and ‘the resurrectee’”—who, like the poem’s speaker, also “confronts [the] catastrophe” of AIDS. “[T]he resurrectee,” Lynch goes on to explain, “has every right to be jarred when his friends receive him not with rejoicing but with fretting. Let sleeping dogs lie; the dead remain in their shrouds” (81). As his own analysis of his poem indicates, Lynch clearly empathizes more with the resurrectee than with the living—that is, the speaker of the poem, and, more generally, the resurrectee’s friends. Lynch conveys his “bias” through his sardonic quip to let sleeping dogs lie, to let the dead remain in their shrouds—imperatives that, however colloquial and common-place, are ultimately devoid of real meaning. Lynch’s empathy with the resurrectee is meant as an invitation to readers and listeners of the poem not only to prepare themselves to recognize the return of the dead when those opportunities should arise, but, more revealingly, to be rejoiced rather than distressed by such returns.

Having just provided the above analysis of the poem, Lynch goes on to provide the following argument in his essay (as delivered verbally by Sedgwick, the “I” in the passage):

At this point, I must invoke a gambit to distance us a little from Lynch's script. The problem with talking about apocalypse or resurrection is their distance from lives as led. Let's talk in more proximate terms, terms more domesticated, certainly more secular. Let's talk of those persons in some of whose white cells a virus called HIV is replicating. We've learned how not to talk about the epidemic as a plague. Now let's try to talk about it for a while, without the language of terror, of panic, of death, of resurrection, of apocalypse.

[Silence punctuated by efforts to speak that don't go anywhere.]

Well, we tried. There didn't seem to be much to say. AIDS is so firmly ligatured to death, in our framing of it, and to apocalypse, that we cannot easily locate alternatives. (81-82; original emphasis and parenthetical insertion)

Lynch's parenthetical observation about silence performs its own rhetorical function: visually and aurally, it marks a "silence punctuated by efforts to speak that don't go anywhere." This "silence"—articulated during Sedgwick's delivery of Lynch's analysis of his own poem—corresponds to the intrusion of the resurrectee in the poem itself. Just as the resurrectee is dismayed by the reception of the living upon his return—"the disrupter himself jarred to find / himself this kind of disrupter"—so too is Lynch frustrated by the possibility that some gay men are unwilling to acknowledge the "reality" that the dead are still everywhere present in their lives and, more generally, in present-day contemporary gay male culture. He articulates his frustration—bordering on ambivalence—most clearly through his obviously ironic invitation to move beyond "the language of terror, of panic, of death, of resurrection, of apocalypse," and to substitute those terms with ones that are "more proximate," "more domesticated," and "more secular." But, in Lynch's view, it is impossible for gay men to discuss their experience of the AIDS epidemic *without* using language evoking the ghostly and the supernatural, the spiritual and the nonsecular. Lynch, to my mind, would endorse U.S. author Felice

Picano's identification of AIDS as "the new crucible of faith,"⁴⁶ as well as support Simon Watney's claim that "nowhere remains ghost-free for long" (223) in a culture that has been so devastated by the epidemic. In related ways, these critics all resist the impulse to move beyond such language, recognizing that doing so would only yield a deafening and all-encompassing silence—a silence that ultimately would negate gay men's genuine efforts to articulate and verbalize their grief in the age of AIDS.

Lynch is certainly justified in being ambivalent and frustrated that gay men might potentially misrecognize spectrality and the value of hauntings, least of all because, curiously enough, subsequent critics such as David R. Jarraway have *misread* Lynch's argument. In his article, "From Spectacular to Speculative: The Shifting Rhetoric in Recent Gay AIDS Memoirs," Jarraway uses Lynch's analysis to critique Paul Monette's repeated descriptions of AIDS as a "horror" in *Borrowed Time*. "Far from Lynch's call for a relaxation of the language of terror and panic," Jarraway observes, "'horror' appears to be almost a watchword throughout [Monette's] memoir." Faulting Monette for describing the bodies of HIV-positive men in language that is "positively ghoulish," Jarraway further notes: "One wonders if Monette in fact may not be giving ground completely to the homophobia of his accusers."⁴⁷ For reasons that remain unclear, Jarraway misinterprets both Lynch's argument and Monette's language. As we have seen, Lynch does not propose "a relaxation of the language of terror and panic"; on the contrary, he proposes a heightened vigilance and attentiveness to this language as strategies to recognize hauntings and the possibility of being haunted that would enable

⁴⁶ Felice Picano, "AIDS: The New Crucible of Faith," in *Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men*, ed. Brian Bouldrey (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995): 265-81.

⁴⁷ David R. Jarraway, "From Spectacular to Speculative: The Shifting Rhetoric in Recent Gay AIDS Memoirs," *Mosaic* 33, no. 4 (December 2000): 115-28; 119.

gay men to avoid being silent in responding to the devastation wrought by AIDS.

Likewise, Monette does not use “horror” only as a “watchword,” nor does his “positively ghoulish” descriptions simply indicate a homophobic aesthetic; on the contrary, he does so to capture the reality that AIDS, among other things, represents a “horror” that *is* terrifying to him, his loved ones, and his cohorts.

I can partly understand Jarraway’s fear that the terms and concepts we use to talk about AIDS for non-homophobic purposes can be coopted for homophobic ones—which we have already seen in full display in Vincent Coppola and Richard West’s *Newsweek* article, “The Change in Gay Lifestyle.” However, I would strongly caution against Jarraway’s all too easy dismissal of the obvious fact that gay male writers *purposely* use, as a rhetorical strategy, terms and concepts such as “horror,” “terror,” “resurrection,” and “apocalypse” to describe their experience of the epidemic so as to blur the boundary between the literal and the figural. In his essay “The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and ‘AIDS,’” Lee Edelman offers a brilliant analysis of the tensions and exchanges between the literal and the figural in discussions of the AIDS epidemic. Worried that there is evidently “a language of equations that can be marshaled equally in the service of homophobic [discourse] (‘Gay Rights=AIDS’) or antihomophobic discourse (‘Silence=Death’)—the latter being the rallying call of the AIDS activist group ACT UP—Edelman offers the cautionary and useful suggestion that “[w]e must be wary of the temptations of the literal as we are of the ideologies at work in the figural; for discourse, alas, is the only defense with which we can counteract discourse, and there is no available discourse on ‘AIDS’ that is not itself diseased.”⁴⁸ Rephrasing Edelman’s

⁴⁸ Lee Edelman, “The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and ‘AIDS,’” in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 86, 92.

argument for the present discussion, I would propose that the uncanny presence of ghosts in AIDS narratives demonstrates that there is no available narrative on AIDS that is not itself *haunted*. Or, to borrow from Emily Apter's argument about *le sida* in the French context: "Like most serious illnesses, *sida* in this sense not only interrogates the nature of the subject as medical object, but, more hauntingly, raises the issue of disease as an affair among ghosts whereby each self, haunted and inhabited by the specter of a disappeared friend who has dissolved into the netherworld of metempsychosis, no longer knows whether it has an identity of its own" (88). Lynch, both in his poem and in his analysis of his poem, illustrates Edelman's and Apter's respective arguments brilliantly by demonstrating the interplay between the literal and the figural, and by blurring the boundaries between subject and object in relation to the alterity that determines the speaker's and the resurrectee's identities. Contrary to Jarraway's misreading, I would insist on reiterating Lynch's call to elaborate the language of terror and, by extension, to analyze the functions of the spectral, the supernatural, and the miraculous in AIDS narratives. To disallow or prevent ourselves from recognizing the evidence of "alternate" ways of seeing and believing in ghosts would be blindly foolish and would impose a silence we can ill afford.



Gay Horror Fiction: Jay B. Law's *The Unfinished*

Ghosts or resurectees, to borrow Michael Lynch's term, are portrayed in AIDS narratives as fully sentient and articulate beings. We have encountered a suggestion of

this in Allen Barnett's short story as well as in Lynch's poem. But we have not yet seen ghosts who are capable of speaking. With this in mind, then, I would like in this section to discuss Jay B. Law's posthumously published gay horror novel, *The Unfinished* (1993), and examine its representation of ghosts who are *literally* articulate.

Structured as several narratives interweaving around a central narrative, Law's novel narrates the repeated hauntings of a man named Jiggs by different ghosts who call themselves "the unfinished." The novel's section titles underscore the reasons these ghosts have returned: *to speak with* and to communicate with Jiggs. In "Sam speaks: Backstabbers," the only narrative in the novel that is not about AIDS, the ghost Sam returns to avenge his own murder—he was literally stabbed in the back by, of all people, Joe, his own lover, and Frank, the man with whom Joe was involved. In "Brent speaks: The Look," the ghost Brent returns to tell a story about a secret cult, led by Dr. Anthony Able, that recruits PWAs (People with AIDS, or People Living with AIDS) as "victims" to its fold. The section "Brent speaks" reads as an allegory that cogently critiques the pharmaceutical industry for not providing sufficient and affordable medication to PWAs, who then turn, in their desperation, to Dr. Able, a man who administers to them a potion called "the cocktail," made from children's blood, that is both life-saving and life-destroying. (It's uncanny that Law should name this potion "the cocktail," three years before the 1996 introduction of protease inhibitors or "cocktail therapies" for PWAs. Or, at the very least, reading his novel *through* the colloquial name of protease inhibitors yields uncanny reading effects.) This allegory powerfully dramatizes the extreme actions to which some gay PWAs are driven to in order to preserve their appearance. Like the other HIV-positive men who turn to Dr. Able—all members of what the narrative calls

“The Scarecrow Club,” men who share “The Look” of being gaunt, thin, and emaciated—Brent fears and resents the fact that his illness has drastically changed the appearance of his face and body.

Like the second narrative, AIDS is also the focus of the third and final narrative in *The Unfinished*. The third story is entitled, significantly, “Me speaks: Gravity.” The ghost anonymously identified as “Me”—a “Me” that could be anyone—shares with Jiggs his own life story: of being HIV-positive, of his consistent and rapid weight loss due to the medication he is taking; and of being haunted by the ghosts of gay men who have died of AIDS. With each passing day, “Me” discovers that his weight loss literally prevents him from being “grounded.” The reference to “gravity” in the narrative’s subtitle is thus a clever pun that conveys, on the one hand, the absence of physical, “gravitational” force, and on the other hand, the seriousness and “gravity” of being HIV-positive. One night, “Me” recalls being “startled awake” by “voices under the wind” that beckon to him: “Come . . .”; “We wait for you . . .”; “Join us . . .”; “Come—be with us . . .”⁴⁹ Initially, “Me” is justifiably made fearful by the presence of his uninvited visitors: “I had a sudden image of who very well might be out there: too many of my former companions come to take me away. Too many ghosts more than willing to lead me to the promised land” (274). But, in the end, “Me” bravely wills himself to communicate with his visitors:

“Are you dead?” I blurted out. Again I felt a sadness surround my heart. As though I had to say good-bye before I could say hello.

They chuckled at my distress, though there was no maliciousness in their laughter.

“No,” they chorused on the other side of my window.

“Am *I* dead?” For it had occurred to me: how else to explain my weightlessness and the bizarre circumstances of my present condition? Perhaps my body lay somewhere in the house, but like something out of a bad “Twilight

⁴⁹ Jay B. Laws, *The Unfinished* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1993), 273-74.

Zone” episode I could not see it—and was in fact doomed to this strange purgatory until some outside force discovered my body.

Again, the patient laugh.

“You’re very much alive,” one of them said.

“So are we . . .”

“Come . . .”

“You belong with us.”

Something wet stung my cheeks. Crying. I was crying. After my isolation, to be so wanted, and to discover I was in fact among friends . . .

I opened the shutters to my window and beheld my guests. [. . .]

It was only after I truly realized they were alive, as I was alive, and full of purpose, that I knew I had to go with them. (274-75; original emphasis)

Being haunted is a transformative experience for “Me.” Without reservation, he accepts not only the dead’s claim that they are “very much alive” and “full of purpose,” but eventually also their invitation to join them. It is this final narrative in *The Unfinished* that most accurately reflects Law’s choice of epigraph for his novel—two lines from Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “Sonnet XLIII”: “[. . .] but the rain / Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh / Upon the glass and listen for reply.” As literal frames for the novel itself, both the epigraph and the narrative of “Me” underscore Law’s *own* invitation to readers of *The Unfinished* to heed the call of the dead—those fully sentient and, in this example especially, truly articulate beings who continue to inhabit the world, who wait and “listen for [our] reply.”

Many of the narrative elements in *The Unfinished* suggest its generic identity as a “gay ghost story” and, more generally, as a piece of contemporary gay horror fiction. But, in my view, *The Unfinished* is exceptional because it consciously departs from the typical narrative formula of the “gay ghost story”—in both its sentimental and horror versions. Examples of sentimental gay male ghost stories include Peter Weltner’s *Beachside Entries/Specific Ghosts* (1989) and Toby Johnson’s *Getting Life in Perspective: A Romance Novel* (1991). A representative sampling of horror gay ghost stories can be

located in Michael Rowe's edited collections *Queer Fear* (2000) and *Queer Fear II* (2002). Unlike these examples, Law's *The Unfinished* instills fear without resorting to either sentimentalism or the gruesome. The author's greatest success, as we have just seen, is in his creative ability to blur the boundary between reality and horror by structuring *The Unfinished* as a narrative about the real horror of AIDS.

The narrative told by "Me" differs from the two previous ones told by Sam and Brent. For it is told by an anonymous gay man: "Who am I? [. . .] I am Everyman. I am Me," the ghost tells Jiggs (261). Moreover, it also contains a chain of hauntings—"Me," himself haunted by deceased gay men, returns to haunt Jiggs. We've already seen a similar example of a chain of hauntings in Barnett's "Philostorgy, Now Obscure," in which Preston intuits the ephemeral presence of his visitors before "they got up to lie briefly, like this, in someone else's bed." Law's presentation of a chain of hauntings, however, more clearly suggests that there is a possibility that the dead are themselves haunted, which leads them to haunt the living.

I would like to return to my earlier suggestion that ghosts in AIDS narratives bear more resemblance to testimonial writing such as slave narratives than they do to Gothic literature. Avery Gordon devotes a chapter in her study *Ghostly Memories* on "the lingering inheritance of historical slavery" through a cogent analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. According to Gordon,

Somewhere between the Actual and the Imaginary ghosts might enter without affrighting us. Or at least without scaring us so much that we take off running, away from the reckoning, but still without adequate preparation, into the tangle of the historical fault lines that remain. [. . .] [T]he full weight of Morrison's contribution will rest on the exceptional premise of the book. The ghost enters, all fleshy and real, with wants, and a fierce hunger, and she speaks, barely, of course, and in pictures and a coded language. This ghost, Beloved, forces a reckoning: she makes those who have contact with her, who love and need her, confront an

event in their past that loiters in the present. But *Beloved*, the ghost, is haunted too, and therein lies the challenge Morrison poses. *Somewhere between the Actual and the Imaginary ghosts might enter without affrighting us.* (139; original emphases)⁵⁰

Gordon's argument is especially pertinent for reading Law's novel, which is to suggest that Jiggs himself comes to an uncannily similar conclusion. After being haunted for the third and final time, Jiggs comes to realize that "Me" has haunted him not to instill fear but, rather, "to prove that not all interrupted lives were full of pain and discomfort. That it was possible to be filled with . . . joy." Like Monette, Jiggs—and, by extension, his creator, the novelist Law—chooses to celebrate "the ghosts of full-grown men," despite the fact that those very lives were so tragically interrupted and "unfinished." Through its innovative interweaving of gay horror fiction and AIDS narrative, *The Unfinished* can thus be read as a narrative which foregrounds the historical persistence of AIDS. It is ultimately a story about the trauma and the possibility of redemption in the age of AIDS.



From Norman René and Craig Lucas's *Longtime Companion* (1996), one of the first U.S. mainstream films to address the impact of the epidemic on gay male communities, to Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* (1993), a play about dating and finding love in the age of AIDS, many gay male cultural artifacts share a common strategy of narrating the return of the dead who haunt the living. The final scene of *Longtime Companion* resonates with that of Monette's *Becoming a Man*: in fact, one could argue that the film's visual iconography *literalizes* the metaphor of "the ghosts of full-grown men" that

⁵⁰ The italicized passages are drawn from Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Monette evokes in his autobiography. *Longtime Companion* ends with a scene showing the three main characters, Willy, “Fuzzy,” and Lisa, whose circle of friends has been erased by AIDS, discussing an upcoming ACT UP demonstration, as they stroll on the beach at Fire Island. As they ponder the profound impact of the epidemic in their lives, they wonder what things would be like if and when a cure for AIDS is discovered. Concluding with a foreshowing of such a possibility, *Longtime Companion* offers an interpretive strategy that is relevant not only as a coping mechanism for its surviving characters, but, I would add, also pertinent for its audience. Accompanied by a ballad entitled “The Post-Mortem Bar” as its background music, the film’s final scene imagines a future when the dead would return to join the living in a celebration of a “post-AIDS” moment. Critics such as Bart Beaty fault the film’s “fantasy sequence” and its portrayal of a “collective dream of resurrection,” arguing that it “serves to illustrate just how far Norman René was willing to go—all the way to the Hereafter—to divest his film of its disturbing political implications for the Here and Now.”⁵¹ While I share Beaty’s concern that the film in many ways appeals to the sensibilities of its mainstream (read: straight) audience, I think he misses the point by characterizing the film’s representation of the Hereafter as a displacement of the social reality of AIDS in the Here and Now. Beaty’s misguided characterization fails to take into account the film’s intervention in representing gay men in the age of AIDS—and, as a result, represents a tiresome and unproductive critique that, as many will recall, would again be rehearsed in similar ways

⁵¹ Bart Beaty, “The Syndrome is the System: A Political Reading of *Longtime Companion*,” in *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis*, ed. James Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 119, 120.

in the widespread critique of Jonathan Demme's depiction of gay life in his film *Philadelphia* (1993), released several years after *Longtime Companion*.

More significantly, Beaty's reading fails to consider how gay male writers and artists themselves have resorted to the Hereafter precisely as a way to make intelligible their loss and suffering as a result of HIV/AIDS in the Here and Now. The desire to render the AIDS epidemic intelligible is also evident in Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey*, a 1993 play that was later made into a film in 1995. The narrative of *Jeffrey* focuses on the dating exploits of its protagonist, Jeffrey, and his ongoing search to find love during the age of AIDS. During the course of the narrative, one of the central characters, Darius, posthumously appears—in his costume for the Broadway musical *Cats* no less!—to bid farewell to his lover, Sterling, and Jeffrey. Darius encourages Jeffrey—a self-saboteur of love *par excellence*—to enjoy life, saying to him: “Jeffrey, I’m dead. You’re not. [. . .] Go dancing. Go to a show. Make trouble. Make out. Hate AIDS, Jeffrey. Not life.”⁵² *Longtime Companion* and *Jeffrey* both foreground the extent to which the motif of the return of the dead informs cultural representations of gay men and AIDS. Moreover, such a recurrent motif remains deeply implicated within the spiritual project of the work of mourning—a project that proffers coping mechanisms for survivors facing the frightening escalation of the numerous infected, sick, dying, and dead.



For many gay men, the AIDS epidemic has represented and continues to represent “the new crucible of faith” at a historical juncture that forces us to face the devastating

⁵² Paul Rudnick, *Jeffrey* (New York, Plume, 1994), 84.

decimation of human lives. The “faith of loss” that I identify as constitutive of gay male social life inevitably involves the relationship between grief, mourning, and consolation. In an essay entitled “Dante on Fire Island: Reinventing Heaven in the AIDS Elegy,” literary and cultural critic James Miller argues that representations of AIDS attempt to articulate “the challenging consolations of the anastatic moment,” which he defines as “the illuminative climax of the personal or public struggles of the bereaved to make sense of death, and what they have lost to it, in opposition to the easy consolations provided by the dominant institutions in their culture. [. . .] In AIDS elegies,” he goes on to explain, “anastasis comes as a blessed moment of recovery when the dead rise from the mass graves dug for them by the fatalistic discourse of public health and join forces with the living against the World, the Flesh, and the Virus.”⁵³ Miller’s differentiation between “challenging” and “easy” forms of consolation nicely relates to Yingling’s differentiation between “apprehension” and “comprehensibility” in his idea of the “historical sublime.” As Yingling argues in “AIDS in America: Postmodern Governance, Identity, and Experience,” AIDS “can be apprehended—on bodies, in friends, in news reports, in changing populations, behaviors, and rituals: we know that it is in some undeniable sense ‘real,’ whether its reality be outside or within us. But the frames of intelligibility that provide it with even a meager measure of comprehensibility are notoriously unstable.” Yingling goes on to remind us that “[t]he gap between the apprehension and the comprehension of the disease is thus an asymptotic space where allegory persistently finds itself at play” (292).

⁵³ James Miller, “Dante on Fire Island: Reinventing Heaven in the AIDS Elegy,” in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, eds. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 266.

These analytical models are particularly suggestive for a reading of Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast* (1996), an AIDS memoir depicting the author's spiritual experience following the death of his partner, Wally. In the final scene of the memoir's epilogue—significantly entitled “Consolations”—Doty describes his encounter, one afternoon, with a coyote while walking his dogs along a Cape Cod beach. Perplexed at discovering a coyote out of its natural context, Doty views his encounter with the beast as a preternatural sign of the existence of an alternative world. I quote at length his description of his encounter, which he subtitles “Luckier”:

This is the story I've been saving.

A week and a few days after Wally died, I took the dogs to walk at Hatch's Harbor [. . .].

I'd been walking with my head down, crying, feeling my way through my shaky memory of the poem [Walt Whitman's “Song of Myself”]. I hadn't read it in years; I don't know where it came from, in my memory, what triggered my recall. The lines, what I could recapture of them, felt like company, like the steadying arm of a companion, a voice of certainty. [. . .]

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,

And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

And then I looked up, into the face of a coyote. [. . .]

I thought, *It's a wolf, a timber wolf*, and then thought no, there are no wolves here, it's a dog. But no dog looks like that, or stands alone with that kind of authority and wildness. Then I thought, *It's one in the afternoon on Cape Cod and I'm staring at a coyote.*

Then, from nowhere, I thought, *He's been with Wally, he's come from Wally*. I knew it as surely as I knew the lines of [Whitman's] poem. This apparition, my—ghost, was it? spirit animal? Real creature carrying the presence of my love? Perhaps it doesn't matter. I've never seen one in the middle of the day before or since, and never been so frankly studied from the other side of wildness, from a world I cannot enter. [. . .] [T]he coyote stared back at [me and my dogs], and I could imagine in that gaze Wally's look toward home—his old home—from the other world: not sad exactly, but neutral, loving, curious, accepting. The dead regard us, I think, as animals do, and perhaps that is part of their relationship; they want nothing from us; they are pure presence, they look back to us from a world where we can't begin to comprehend. I am going on, the gaze said, in a life apart from yours, a good life, a wild life, unbounded.

The coyote was, for me, a blessing: *different from what anyone supposed, and luckier*. [. . .] I think it was this visitation [. . .] that most sustained me. [. . .] I don't know what it means, still, only the potent presence and consolation of the

animal body, the gaze across the gulf of otherness. To those eyes I would return, over and over: *different, and luckier*.⁵⁴

Doty articulates, in beautiful and graceful language, what is characteristic of gay male responses to the AIDS epidemic: the compelling need to believe in an alternative world of “pure presence” where the dead survive, and the equally compelling need to justify one’s current realm of existence and one’s identity *as* an AIDS survivor. For Doty, “it doesn’t matter” whether what he saw as the “apparition” represents either Wally’s “ghost,” a “spirit animal,” or a “real creature.” What matters instead is the transformative experience engendered by his encounter with the coyote—one that allows him to negotiate between his ability to comprehend, and his willingness to apprehend, the loss of a loved one. “The dead [. . .] look back to us from a world where we can’t begin to comprehend,” Doty writes (304)—and, I would add, from a world we likewise can’t fully apprehend. The final passage in *Heaven’s Coast* describes the author “walk[ing] into [the] golden band of [sun]light [he’s] been watching.” The quotidian experience of walking the dogs at sunset thus transforms itself into a moment of ontological rejuvenation. “A wild and bracing wind is blowing off the Atlantic,” he writes, “and suddenly the biting air’s alive with a strange kind of joy, stumbling up the dune into the winter wind, my face full of salt-spray and snow” (305).



For many gay men during the last two decades, as I’ve demonstrated throughout this chapter, the world of the living is indeed palpably haunted by “the ghosts of full-

⁵⁴ Mark Doty, *Heaven’s Coast: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 301-04 (original emphases).

grown men.” Edmund White’s short story “An Oracle” (1986) stands as one of the earliest and most skillful examples of narrating the return of the dead upon the living, from which the other texts in the present discussion are “literary descendants.” I would like to conclude this chapter by juxtaposing White’s “An Oracle” with a more recent short story: Steve Kammon’s “A Ghost Story” (1999). No doubt many readers are already familiar with the critically-acclaimed novelist, essayist, and biographer Edmund White, though few, I suspect, are as familiar with Kammon, who, until his untimely death in 2006, was the editor-in-chief of *Circuit Noize* magazine. Originally touting itself as “A Rag Custom Designed for Crazy Party Boys,” *Circuit Noize* magazine has reinscribed itself as “The Premier Guide to Circuit Events Worldwide.” (Since Kammon’s death, the publication has undergone another transformation: it is now called, simply, *NoiZe*.) White’s “An Oracle” first appeared in 1986 in both the gay literary journal *Christopher Street* and in the inaugural volume of the *Men on Men* series, edited by the late George Stambolian. Kammon’s “A Ghost Story” appeared in the fifth anniversary issue of *Circuit Noize* magazine in the fall of 1999.

To be sure, the venues in which each text appeared suggest divergent gay male reading communities. Their focuses, too, are radically different: White’s “An Oracle” is an AIDS narrative; and although Kammon’s “A Ghost Story” does not mention AIDS, it is a “not-about-AIDS” narrative that, as we’ve seen before, also implicitly functions as an AIDS narrative. Both White’s and Kammon’s stories are thus equally constitutive of the tradition I have been tracing in this chapter. In fact, their publication dates—1986 to 1999—can be said to provide a chronological framework for a range of AIDS narratives that contain representations of the spectral, the supernatural, and the miraculous as a

strategy of making intelligible the AIDS crisis. Moreover, the generic nature of their titles—"An Oracle," "A Ghost Story"—are suggestive of their author's intent to particularize and universalize gay men's experience of the AIDS epidemic.

"An Oracle" recounts the story of a man named Ray, who is mourning the AIDS-related death of his partner, George. Although a year has passed, Ray remains mired in the past, unable to break free from a life he had shared with George: "[Ray] looked around and realized he was still impersonating George's lover," "still walking around like a doll George had dressed and wound up before taking off."⁵⁵ Following the advice of his best friend Betty, Ray decides to take a trip to Greece and looks forward to spending three weeks in Crete, for "it would be all new—new place, new language, no ghosts" (343). There, Ray meets and falls in love with a younger Greek man named Marco, with whom he has a brief affair. At the end of the narrative, Ray asks Marco to return to the U.S. with him. Marco, however, declines the offer by responding: "I won't [ever] see you again. You must look out for yourself" (369). Significantly, Marco here repeats George's consistent reminder to Ray: during his illness, George kept insisting that Ray "must look out for [him]self" (335, 343). In effect, Marco's blessing finally enables Ray to mourn, however belatedly, his lover's passing. White describes Ray's catharsis: "[Ray] was blown back onto the bed and he smiled and cried as he'd never allowed himself to cry over George, who's just spoken to him once again through the least likely oracle" (369). Only through the articulation of this oracle can Ray begin both to comprehend and apprehend that his trip to Greece and his sexual relationship with Marco constitute part of the work of mourning.

⁵⁵ Edmund White, "An Oracle," in *Men on Men: Best New Gay Fiction*, ed. George Stambolian (New York: Plume, 1986), 341.

In his essay “Apocalyptic Utterance in Edmund White’s ‘An Oracle,’” Richard Dellamora draws upon Jacques Derrida’s “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy” and, more specifically, the essay’s differentiation between, on the one hand, “articulated discursive content” and, on the other, the two possible “tones” (i.e., “a unity of tone” versus “a generalized derailment” of multiple voices) evident in apocalyptic texts.⁵⁶ Dellamora borrows Derrida’s formulation to propose that White’s short story exhibits a “tonal interference [that] amplifies the range of oracular signification” within the narrative. He observes that such an occurrence enables the short story to function as a site of intervention during the AIDS epidemic: “Poised at a moment when the onset of AIDS had put in question gay identity as constituted during the preceding decade, ‘An Oracle’ poses the possibility that ‘another tone’ can come that will enable the rethinking of gay existence on other bases.”⁵⁷ Dellamora explains that such an alternative tone corresponds with Marco’s invocation to Ray, whereby the latter simultaneously registers the voice of his recently deceased beloved, George. As Dellamora elaborates:

The question arises whether the meaning of [George’s] message changes in this altered context [of having Marco utter it] or whether Ray is condemned to hear it with an unvarying “unity of tone” that Derrida correlates with death itself. The question has political significance since it implies other questions that became important following the onset of AIDS. Do those who, like George, have died as a result of AIDS continue to speak to those who are left behind and do they speak differently? How does AIDS affect the possibility of listening to others who are markedly different? (155)

What does it signify that the dead return *as* speaking-subjects? And what function do those particular speech acts serve for the survivors who are left behind—for their

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., *Oxford Literary Review* 6, no. 2 (1984): 24-25.

⁵⁷ Richard Dellamora, *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 155.

auditors? These questions are especially worthwhile ones to consider in light of the circulating discourses announcing the end of AIDS, as well as in relation for the need to create sustainable institutions of memory within gay male culture.

Dellamora's queries, in effect, echo Michel Foucault's final question in "What Is an Author?": "What difference does it make who is speaking?"⁵⁸ However it is formulated, such an inquiry can be answered, at least initially, with Doty's claim from the conclusion of *Heaven's Coast*—namely, that "[p]erhaps it doesn't matter" who is speaking. But implicit in Doty's description of his transformative experience—as well as in White's "An Oracle"—are the undeniable facts that *it* does matter who is speaking; it does matter what is being said; and, finally, how it is said. In short, these diverse gay male texts illustrate that the message and the messenger are inextricably linked in articulating a speech act—one that serves to enable its auditors to mourn the passing of a beloved, but, simultaneously, one that encourages them to continue on with their lives. Many of the texts discussed in this chapter position the figure of a dead beloved as a speaking subject; in related ways, the resurectee in Lynch's "The Terror of Resurrection," Darius in *Jeffrey*, and Marco/George in "An Oracle," all convey to their auditors (read: survivors) the absolute necessity of preserving themselves during the AIDS epidemic. If, as Jacques Lacan insists—that "there is no speech without a reply, even if it is only met with silence, provided that it has an auditor"⁵⁹—then each of these gay male literary

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 120.

⁵⁹ Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 40.

representations succeeds in securing the transmission of the message to its auditors, figures who must continue to endure, with courage and determination, the current crisis.

For gay men who have had to negotiate life and death on a daily basis since the emergence of the HIV retrovirus, AIDS constitutes a new “practice of everyday life,” to borrow Michel de Certeau’s formulation. In *Jeffrey*, Darius perfectly captures the extreme pathos and, at once, the extreme “everydayness” of the AIDS epidemic when he campily advises Jeffrey: “Just think of AIDS as . . . the guest that won’t leave. The one we all hate” (84). Gay men’s preoccupation with their own and others’ mortality, along with their intuition of being haunted by ghosts, consequently inform how they negotiate their identity as AIDS survivors.



Steve Kammon’s “A Ghost Story” is the one and only textual example in this discussion that appears after 1996—that is, *after* the introduction of protease inhibitors. That there should be an obvious absence of ghosts in the texts produced between 1996 and 1999, the year “A Ghost Story” appeared, invites a number of interpretations, including one that confirms the success of protease inhibitors as a viable treatment for extending lives.

Steve Kammon’s “A Ghost Story,” like Ethan Mordden’s “The Ghost of Champ McQuest,” takes place on Fire Island. The story begins by describing a character named Mark, who decides to take a walk to the beach early one morning in search of a place to meditate. The narrative voice then introduces a new set of “characters” to its setting:

Normally at this time of the day, there were almost no men lurking in the woods. But on a different plane, many lost souls were cavorting in this cruise spot—a place with so much history. These souls endlessly cruised this area during the summer months at all hours of the day. At one time, these souls were men who had used this island as a summer playground, their lives cut short by the plague that had so ravaged their community. Unable to accept their premature death, these beings were still wandering the earth. Here in these woods, they acted out one of the dramas that had always allowed them to hide from their fear of the unknown. Although now played in ethereal form, this game of sexual conquest still kept their fears in check. They knew such yearnings for completeness and searched for it in old patterns that no longer applied to their spiritual bodies. Those bodies could find no satisfaction in acting out the physical couplings of their previous lives. Yet, in this old cruising ground, they had one another and this allowed them to maintain enough mental focus to keep their spirits firmly planted in the third dimension. In this state of limbo, they were stagnating in their willful determination to deny their own death.⁶⁰

Although this passage suggests that these “lost souls” inhabit a “different plane,” it also demonstrates that there exists a far greater proximity and interrelation between the living and the dead than we might have supposed. Indeed, one could go so far as to say that there is little if any need for the dead to return or haunt the living, since they are “still wandering the earth.” By refusing to privilege the living over the dead, and vice versa, “A Ghost Story” strategically plays with and complicates the metonymic chain of signifiers that links gay male identity to death. In fact, Kammon’s story provides an affirmative answer to the question posed by Steven F. Kruger in his study, *AIDS Narratives: Gender and Sexuality, Fiction and Science*: “Might narrative in fact be used to challenge, to subvert, to rewrite the common equations of gayness and disease, gayness and AIDS, AIDS and death?” (82). Moreover, the plot of “A Ghost Story” literalizes what Ellis Hanson elsewhere formulates as “the undead,” by which he means the “images of the abject” that view gay men as “the dead who dare to speak and sin and walk abroad, the

⁶⁰ Steve Kammon, “A Ghost Story,” *Circuit Noize: The Premiere Guide to Circuit Events Worldwide* 21 (fall 1999), 68.

undead with AIDS.”⁶¹ Kammon’s “A Ghost Story” instead strategically recuperates the dead as the undead, thus blurring the boundary between that which is comprehensible and that which is apprehensible, between that which is about AIDS and that which is not-about-AIDS. The ghosts in Kammon’s story lead a posthumous existence—but they “live” nonetheless.

The story claims that the dead possess a “willful determination to deny their own death.” In *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*, philosopher Zygmunt Bauman argues that the desire for mortality-transcendence is an intrinsic human aspiration. “We live *as if* we were not going to die,” he writes.⁶² To what extent are the ghosts in Kammon’s short story enacting a similar refusal through professing what Bauman terms as a “*belief in non-death*” (17; original emphasis)? Do ghosts, in other words, also aspire to their own version of mortality-transcendence? This, I want to emphasize, is not merely a rhetorical question. The meaning of the ghosts’ denial of their own death becomes clearer as the narrative unfolds. The ghosts, we are told, are drawn to Mark, not only because he is “a new sight” to them, but also because, in their view, his “soul [. . .] seemed to exist on both planes simultaneously” (69). Mark’s chanting during his meditation, moreover, makes “his spirit [. . .] ever more visible to these unearthly souls” (68), who, though “more than capable of seeing the physical beings that shared their glen of sexuality,” “generally ignored the humans who were acting out the same game of sexual conquest in the physical world” (68-69). The ghosts consciously ignore the humans, the narrator explains, out of the fear that, in acknowledging them, they

⁶¹ Ellis Hanson, “Undead,” in *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 324.

⁶² Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 17.

“might break the spell and cause them to remember who and what they really were” (69). Significantly, not only do the ghosts deny death, but they do so as a strategy of forgetting themselves, of forgetting that they had led joyful but tragically truncated lives.

Halfway toward the narrative, Mark meets and is cruised by an unnamed blond boy; mutually attracted to each other, the two of them decide to have sex in the dunes. After his sexual encounter, Mark is seen heading towards the ocean: as he “entered the rough seas,” “an extra large wave [. . .] sucked [Mark] up from the ocean floor and tossed him like a rag doll in its wake” (70). “[Mark’s] spirit,” the narrative voice then informs us, “rose out of his body and watched as the waves robbed him of the last thin attachment to life. In the distance, a white glowing light attracted his attention and he began to move off towards the light” (70). Leaving the world of the living, Mark enters the realm of the spectral, and, in doing so, significantly alters the ghosts’ posthumous existence. I quote at length the last two paragraphs of “A Ghost Story”:

This had been a day unlike any in memory for the ghosts of the Pines. Many of the curious had followed Mark into the sea and now they followed him towards the light. Feeling the light, they were flooded with the realization that this light had been there all along during the years of their ghostly existence, but until moments before, its light had been an irritant. Previously, the ghosts had used all of the mental powers to avoid the pull of the light. With a new awareness of who and what they were, the ghosts now slowly moved towards the light. The light’s refreshment poured into their beings, and they experienced the first true joy they’d felt since their untimely deaths. As they moved, they remembered their former human lives. They suddenly knew what they’d hoped to accomplish in their previous lifetimes and they saw where they’d failed to achieve those goals. Their attention was no longer on Mark as they now willingly returned to the collective consciousness—the place of completeness they’d been seeking all along.

As the blond breathed life back into his cold body, where it lay just above the surf, Mark turned from the light and returned to the aches and hurt of a badly-battered physique. (70)

“A Ghost Story” presents an ambivalent view of the values and limitations of memory. On the one hand, it represents the ghosts as fearful of engaging in carnal pleasures and of embodying, once again, their corporeality—for doing so “might break the spell and cause them to remember who and what they really were.” On the other hand, their attraction to Mark and his spirit renders them *forgetful* of their willed avoidance of the light, of their desire to forget their former existence. Mark’s near-death experience enables the ghosts to gain “a new awareness of who and what they were,” and, as a consequence, they are compelled to “remember their former human lives.” The dialectic between their need to forget and to re-remember their own lives remains ambivalent and confused. I want to suggest that such an ambivalence or confusion in the narrative can be read as a veiled critique of the circulating discourses that currently announce the end of AIDS. The dead refuse to remember their lives, just as the living, now, refuse to remember the dead.

“A Ghost Story” and its alternative way of *representing* the spectral, the supernatural, and the miraculous remain, I think, significant for theorizing the values of narrative in relation to gay male identity. Narrative theorists such as J. Hillis Miller have asserted that not only do “we need stories to make sense of our experience,” but that “we need the same stories over and over to reinforce that sense making.”⁶³ In the context of AIDS narratives, Kruger argues that “[c]ultural narratives of AIDS play a crucial role in attempts to understand the past, present, and future of the epidemic, providing a stabilizing framework within which to place the unpredictable, disturbing, world-threatening events so that these seem to make sense as part of a coherent story” (80). In

⁶³ J. Hillis Miller, “Narrative,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 70.

tracing the prevalence of ghosts in AIDS narratives, as well as the uncanny understanding of how the spectral operates in AIDS discourse, I hope to have succeeded in adding to the critical conversation to heed and remember the dead in a supposedly “post-AIDS” world.

Epilogue

ESL:

English as a Shaming Language and the Search for Gay Asian Readers

your eyes plead approval
of each uttered word

and even my warmest smile
cannot dispel the shamed muscles
from your face

let me be honest
with you

to tell the truth
I feel very much at home
in your embarrassment

don't be afraid

like you
I too was mired in another language
and I gladly surrendered it
for english

you too
in time
will lose your mother's tongue

and speak
at least as fluently
as me

now tell me

how do you feel?

—Jim Wong-Chu¹

¹ Jim Wong-Chu, "How Feel I Do," in *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians*, eds. Bennett Lee and Jim Wong-Chu (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991), 17.

The title and final line of Jim Wong-Chu's poem, "How Feel I Do?," frame the linguistic movement between second language acquisition and the potential, perhaps inevitable, surrendering of a first language. While the question posed at the end of the poem certainly marks the speaker's departure from and loss of her or his "mother's tongue," to a lesser extent it also suggests the speaker's desire to return to her or his first language. For the uncanny echo between the title and the last line of the poem—"How Feel I Do?," "how do you feel?"—articulates not only the anticipation of the addressee's linguistic loss, but also the speaker's identification with that very same loss. Importantly, then, the pronominal shift from the "I" of the title to the "you" of the last line enacts a dialogic intertextuality addressing the interlocutor within the formal structure of the poem. At the same time, moreover, such an intertextual address likewise invites and prompts a response—a reading-effect—from the poem's actual readers. I would argue that this reading effect is the response of and to the poem, since "there is no speech without a reply, even if it is met only with silence."²

The first time I encountered Wong-Chu's "How Feel I Do?," the poem literally rendered me silent. In retrospect, mine was undoubtedly an affective reading-effect, primarily informed by my identification with *both* the speaker and the addressee in the poem. Because English is my third language—preceded by Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia) and two dialects of Chinese (Toisanese and Cantonese)—I've always recognized, indeed embodied, the splitting of identifications expressed in Wong-Chu's poem. Yet, to be honest, I haven't always willingly embraced this fact, not least because I can sufficiently "pass" both within and outside of the academy as a native speaker of the

² Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 40.

English language. But, for better or for worse, my past experiences of learning ESL—the foundation for my own literacy narrative—continue to inform, in implicit and explicit ways, my ongoing relationship to the literate arts of reading and writing.

In this epilogue, I want to consider the consequences of the acculturation process I term “English as a shaming language.” Several major phases have constituted this acculturation process thus far in my career as a student and life-long learner: learning ESL in elementary school; engaging with critical theory and with gay male literature in college; encountering theories of composition and pedagogy in graduate school; and, for the last several years, researching and writing this dissertation. Although these scenes of instruction differ in considerable ways, each of them has made me confront the task of learning a new language and of acquiring a new vocabulary for communication. In linking these distinct phases together, I want to meditate upon what Richard Rodriguez eloquently calls “the achievement of desire.” In his autobiography, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, he explains how he came to terms with his past and upbringing during the last stage of his graduate career: “Not until my last months as a graduate student, nearly thirty years old, was it possible for me to think much about the reasons for my academic success. Only then. At the end of my schooling, I needed to determine how far I had moved from my past.”³ Despite the obvious and enormous differences between Rodriguez’s and my experiences, I would maintain that we occupy similar subject-positions in our respective attempts to make sense of, perhaps even to reconcile, the past with the present, and vice versa. In identifying with Rodriguez’s account of his schooling, I am neither appropriating his experiences as mine nor using his

³ Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 47-48.

past as an “ur-account” of “the” ESL experience. I’m less interested, in other words, in Rodriguez’s experiences than in the mixed feelings that those experiences engendered, and, more particularly, in the ways in which Rodriguez qualifies his account as a retrospective narrative. Hence, in our respective “institutional autobiographies,”⁴ the fine and often indistinguishable line between shame and ambition—that is, between cultural alienation and cultural capital—becomes, at once painfully and productively, even more blurry.

In the twilight days of my own graduate career, then, I wish to reflect upon my own pedagogical journey involving the English language, which began in February 1978 when I first entered the halls of Corpus Christi Elementary School in Calgary, Alberta, two months after my departure from Jakarta, Indonesia, where I had spent the first 8 years of my childhood. I want to meditate upon the reasons for my own decisions to distance myself from my own family. I remain physically and emotionally estranged from my biological family in Indonesia (mother and four siblings), and I stay in touch with my brother Rudy in Calgary mainly out of a sense of obligation. But I’ve come to accept that many of my past decisions—to move out after high school, to drop out of college after my freshman year, to move to the United States to pursue the doctorate—were informed not only by the shame I felt as a result of being gay but also by the shame (and resentment) I felt about being sent to Canada at a young age. Only in retrospect, three decades later, can I fully appreciate and entertain forgiving my parents’ decision to

⁴ According to Richard E. Miller, “the entirely unfamiliar (perhaps nonexistent) genre of the institutional autobiography [. . .] unites the seemingly opposed worlds of the personal—where one is free, unique, and outside of history—and the institutional—where one is constrained, anonymous, and imprisoned by the accretion of past practices.” See “The Arts of Complicity: Pragmatism and the Culture of Schooling,” *College English* 61, no. 2 (September 1998): 25.

send me away. I have had, and will continue to have, opportunities that are simply unavailable to my older siblings or to their children in Jakarta. During my first and only visit back to Jakarta in September 2004—a visit to pay respects to my dying father, who died three hours after Rudy's and my arrival at the house, on September 22nd, my 35th birthday—I was forced to accept the painful fact that my parents indeed had my best interests in mind in sending me off to Canada.



In privileging shame as a structure of feeling that (inevitably?) accompanies the pedagogical process, I begin with the Sedgwickian premise that a more nuanced understanding of subject formation emerges from the recuperation, via performance and performativity, of shame and its powerful affects. For “one of the things that anyone's character or personality *is*,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, “is a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion of shame has instituted far more durable, structural changes in one's relational and interpretive strategies toward both self and others.”⁵ Likewise, in coupling shame with ambition, I mean to extend Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of cultural capital—or cultural literacy—in relation to language acquisition. According to Bourdieu, “[a]cademic capital is in fact the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school (the efficiency of which depends on the amount of cultural capital directly

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 12-13 (original emphasis).

inherited from the family).”⁶ Bourdieu’s parenthetical clarification deserves further notice. Cases of second language acquisition, I would maintain, problematize the extent to which family and school *mutually* engage in performing a dialectics of cultural transmission. Children whose parents and guardians are illiterate in English—that is, those who do not have an already accumulated familial legacy to inherit—often find their second language acquisition to be a shaming, an alienating, experience.

In many ways, there is an interesting analogy to be drawn between, on the one hand, children who were raised in households with adults who were illiterate in English, and, on the other, protogay children who grew up lacking formalized methods of learning to become gay. Not unlike protogay children who lacked formalized methods of learning how to become gay, Rodriguez, as a child of Mexican immigrants living in the United States, likewise lacked parental support to learn how to become American. In my own case, I lacked support from my legal guardians, who were insufficiently literate in the English language, to help me become acculturated to Canadian culture.

From this analogy, then, perhaps it’s not too farfetched to suggest that one reason why I’m intellectually and affectively drawn to a gay male aesthetic-literary tradition stems from the fact that I lack a genealogical or familial tradition of my own. I want to test out this suggestion in the remainder of this epilogue by examining the interrelations between race, sexuality, and gay cultural literacy in the work of writer Justin Chin and artist Frank Liu. In unique and clever ways, Chin and Liu position gay men of Asian (and, in particular, Chinese) descent at the center of contemporary gay culture and history in their respective oeuvres. Engaging with their work, I’m especially intrigued with how

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 23.

they represent gay men of Chinese descent negotiating the concept of shame as a strategy to navigate between Chinese culture and gay male culture. Paying attention to the category of racial difference and to the concept of shame, Chin and Liu are promoting the cultivation of a specific kind of gay cultural literacy that blurs the boundary between cultural alienation and cultural capital.



Memory #1: February, 1978. It's the end of my first week of school in Canada and my homeroom teacher, Mrs. Jensen, has detained me. I'm afraid that I've done something to displease her, but her gentle tones appease me. While speaking, she gestures to my arms, two scrawny limbs weighed down with a bag full of notebooks and textbooks. Even though I don't fully understand what she's saying, I nod in agreement. I want to be obedient, despite being uncertain about the nature of my compliance. I'm ashamed at my incomprehension and the way it evokes mixed feelings. Sympathetic with my inability to understand her, Mrs. Jensen writes a note for my aunt and uncle. I smile secretly, knowing that they likewise won't be able to read her note. I'm ashamed at this secret knowledge but relish the pleasure it gives.

As expected, my guardians ask a family friend to translate the note. Mrs. Jensen's message: she requests that my guardians consider purchasing me a proper schoolbag or, if cost is a factor, to put my things in a plastic bag with handles, so that I may better travel to and from school with my things. My uncle interprets the note as a rebuke, convinced that its message essentially questions and, worse yet, undermines his authority as caretaker. He displaces his displeasure onto me, the bearer of the note, saying that

I've brought shame into the family. He accuses me for not having paid attention to this logistical detail myself. The shame I felt earlier at school becomes even more acute at home. I memorize my uncle's embittered words, while trying to recall the cadence of Mrs. Jensen's voice. In my mind, their two voices articulate a dissonance and, as a result, I secretly pledge myself to master the language.

Fourteen years later, in 1992, while in therapy, I recall this day and try to make sense of the dissonance between school and home. I tell my therapist of other occasions of feeling shame at being unable to understand the English language. The time my brother Rudy and I, returning from St. Paul's Elementary after an ESL lesson, were confronted by a group of boys from the neighboring public school. Seeing that the two of us were dressed in identical mock-fur jackets, the boys shout out their taunts: "Hey, you Eskimos, where are your harpoons?" Only later would we be able to decipher their words. I tell Dr. Blackman of the time Rudy and I were walking home with Ronald, a boy in my class, who accuses the two of us of being something indecipherable at the time. And, as we were then passing by the house of another classmate's, Pina, I agree with him and say that, "Yes, I like her a lot, too." I'm secretly pleased that Ronald is jealous because he's not one of "Pina's pals." Only later would I discover Ronald's actual message: that Rudy and I, always together, resembled "penis pals."

In therapy, I recall each of these moments—feeling some perverse pleasure at my former self's naiveté and, at once, mournful that those days are indeed long gone. I also tell my therapist of a strategy Rudy and I devised at home to cope with telemarketers' phone calls and our aunt and uncle's responses to them. "You see," I tell her of my aunt and uncle, "Alice and Ben felt apprehension each time the phone rang. They would have

Rudy and I screen the calls—since they hated speaking to strangers.” Rudy and I later deduce our uncle and aunt’s unspoken feelings of shame, or at least of discomfort, at their heavy accents and imperfect grammar. With this knowledge, we arrange to be occupied with chores or homework each time the phone rings. And we eavesdrop as Alice politely refuses newspaper subscriptions, as Ben impatiently tells charities that he’s not interested in contributing. These childish pranks afford us momentary pleasures that compensate for our unhappiness at being in a strange place, of being forced to learn a strange language.



In a series of oil paintings by Frank Liu, recognizable Muppet figures from *Sesame Street* appear engaged in provocative sexual acts. In *Bert and Ernie* (2001), the two Muppets are shown embracing each other, mouth to groin (see Fig. 1). In *Taking Me Higher* (2002), Ernie is portrayed, with arms stretched, lying on top of a prostrate Bert (see Fig. 2). In both paintings, Bert and Ernie are shown sporting their usual attire: primary-colored-striped sweaters and pants. The depiction of fully-clothed Muppets caught in the act of performing—or, at least simulating—oral and anal sex is an incongruous detail that adds to the playful tone, humorous appeal, and transgressive character of Liu’s paintings. By making sexual practice the subject matter in his paintings—and, more specifically, by positioning gay sexual practice at the center of his aesthetic vision—Liu defamiliarizes what is iconic from our childhood and in our present-day cultural imagination. As a consequence of relocating Bert and Ernie from

Sesame Street to Avenue Q, the artist in effect promotes a new form of visual literacy, a new way of seeing these Muppets as sexual, even homosexual, subjects.⁷



Figure 1
Bert and Ernie (2001)
Oil on canvas: 60" x 48"



Figure 2
Taking Me Higher (2001)
Oil on canvas: 60" x 48"

⁷ The content of Liu's paintings, moreover, has the potential to disturb and shock any number of viewers, irrespective of their sexual preference or ideological positions. In *Bert and Ernie* and *Taking Me Higher*, the artist toys with the possibility that the two roommates residing in the basement apartment at 123 Sesame Street are in fact lovers. However, rather than simply confirm what has long been suspected or wished for by both detractors and fans of these Muppets, Liu goes a step further by inviting viewers of his paintings to consider the prospect that Bert and Ernie are gay lovers who enjoy a bit of bondage play. In a painting entitled *Bound* (2001), the two are shown being restrained—literally, they're physically "bound and gagged"—by what appears to be canvas or another type of heavy fabric (see Fig. 3). As Liu portrays them, it seems that Bert and Ernie are able to gain pleasure as much from vanilla sex as from sadomasochistic sex. As viewers who are led to apprehend Bert and Ernie as lovers with eclectic sexual proclivities—that is, as sexual beings—we are asked, as a result, to rethink our perspectives and assumptions about human sexuality and the hierarchy of values we attach to sexual behavior and identity (i.e., heterosexual vs. homosexual; normative vs. deviant; vanilla vs. sadomasochistic). For a discussion of this hierarchy of values, see Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge), 3-44.



Figure 3
Bound (2001)
 Oil on canvas: 26" x 45"



Figure 4
Mr. Lonely (2001)
 Oil on canvas: 26" x 45"

Liu models practices of spectatorship that are multivalent and complex, and that lead to unexpected and surprising results. Viewers of Liu's paintings often require a second or third glance before they register and apprehend the fact the Muppets are busy playing extremely un-*Sesame Street*-like games: rather than singing songs or telling stories, they are sucking and fucking each other. Not surprisingly, the visual literacy Liu promotes is informed by the intersection of his racial and sexual identities: Liu was born in Taiwan, relocated to the United States in the 1990s, and currently lives in New York City with his partner, the director Anders Cato.⁸

⁸ I am grateful to Frank Liu for granting me permission to reproduce images of his paintings.

What is most compelling to me about Liu's artistic endeavors is less his obsession with *Sesame Street* as a cultural institution than his profound ambivalence towards an iconic institution intimately associated with childhood pedagogy and language acquisition.⁹ The tension between Liu's obsession and ambivalence is most evident in a painting entitled *Ernie* (2001). In it, a doll-size figure of Ernie is depicted surrounded by alphabet letters and numbers (see Fig. 5). The elements of the painting's composition—the white background; the scale of the objects; and the eye-level perspective from which



Figure 5
Ernie (2001)
 Oil on canvas: 48" x 60"

⁹ See Michael Davis, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* (New York: Viking, 2008); and *The World According to Sesame Street*, DVD, directed by Linda Goldstein-Knowlton and Linda Hawkins Costigan (Culver City: Sony Wonder Studios, 2005).

they are presented—suggest that Ernie, and the letters and numbers surrounding him, are affixed on a magnetized surface or toy blackboard, such as the ones used by children to learn the alphabet and number system. Whereas Ernie appears gigantic in the other paintings, the Muppet, in *Ernie*, appears diminutive in scale lying on top of the letters and numbers. More significantly, although the letters appear scattered in a random fashion, careful and observant viewers of the painting, upon closer inspection, would notice that they actually spell out two words: “FAG” and “CHINK.”

To be honest, I was not among the viewers able, at first glance, to discern these words in the painting. My inability to register this detail, however, is evidence of Liu’s subtle and skillful artistry for producing an art object that can be read in different ways. On one level, *Ernie* can certainly be viewed as a seemingly benign visual representation of familiar toys and objects. But by including the words “FAG” and “CHINK,” the painting can be read in a much more interesting way as the artist’s sharp but self-reflexive meditation on his identity as a gay Chinese American man. By inviting viewers of his paintings not only to register the objects contained within the painting, but also, and literally, to read and spell out the letters, Liu, I would suggest, prompts an attentiveness and cultivates a particular kind of visual literacy. He proposes that reading is a layered practice, and that the literacy that results is not flat but multivalent.

My encounter with *Ernie* produced a profound reading-effect not unlike the one I had after reading Wong-Chu’s “How Feel I Do?” Although I wasn’t rendered silent, I was made to feel ashamed—not once, but twice. First, I felt shame because I failed to register the words “FAG” and “CHINK,” and, once I apprehended them, I felt shame because the words themselves interpellated me as both a “FAG” and a “CHINK.” But

shame, as queer theorists have argued, can work powerfully in affective ways. In his essay, “Mario Montez, for Shame,” Douglas Crimp argues: “Saying ‘Shame on you’ or ‘For shame,’ casts shame onto another that is both felt to be one’s own and, at the same time, disavowed as one’s own. But in those already shamed, the shame-prone, the shame is not so easily shed, so simply projected: it manages to persist as one’s own. This can lend it the capacity for articulating collectivities of the shamed.”¹⁰ I would suggest that Liu’s *Ernie* is addressed, in part, to “collectivities of the shamed” made up of gay men of Asian and Chinese descent. In other words, the painting interpellates them, and invites them to connect their sense of belonging not only within such a collectivity, but also in relation to both their ethnic culture and to gay male culture.

It is from this self-reflexive and critical perspective that Liu’s *Ernie* could be said to deploy a queer of color critique of the concept of shame. In “Shame and White Gay Masculinity,” Judith Halberstam cautions against uncritical uses and nostalgic understandings of shame that she claims is typical in white queer studies. At the same time, however, she understands that “we cannot completely do without shame and that shame can be a powerful tactic in the struggle to make privilege (whiteness, masculinity, wealth) visible.”¹¹ I would suggest that Liu deploys shame in a similar fashion to remind his painting’s viewers of the limits of cultural assimilation. That is to say, the alphabet letters in the painting are scattered and appear to be homogenous. Most viewers of the painting would miss reading the words “FAG” and “CHINK” simply as a result of the

¹⁰ Douglas Crimp, “Mario Montez, for Shame,” in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, eds. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 66. See also Michael Warner’s argument, in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999) that “the special kind of sociability that holds queer culture together” “begins in an acknowledgement of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself. Shame is bedrock” (35).

¹¹ Judith Halberstam, “Shame and White Gay Masculinity,” in “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” eds. David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Muñoz, special issue, *Social Text* 84/85 (October 2005): 220.

supposed random positioning of the letters across the canvas. Put another way, the letters spelling out these words appear “assimilated” among the other letters. At the same time that the letters spelling out the words “FAG” and “CHINK” co-exist with the other letters, in the end, they remain different by their very legibility. That the words “FAG” and “CHINK” are assimilated within, and simultaneously differentiated from, the other alphabet letters serves as a subtle but powerful reminder that sexual and racial exclusions remain—even in the world of Sesame Street.



Memory #2: December, 1994. It's my last year of college at the University of Alberta. Finally, after fulfilling the requisite program requirements during the two previous years, the English department officially registers me into its Honors program. One final course requirement needs to be met, however: a critical reading course that Honors students usually take in their second year. Armed with a newly-acquired theoretical vocabulary from previous classes, along with the straight 9s that line my transcript, I'm confident that the critical reading course will be a breeze.

However, a week's worth of classes indicate the personality clash between me and Larry McKill, the Honors Advisor teaching the course. McKill wants me to be attentive to my peers, second-year students just entering the Honors program. I interpret his suggestions as an attempt to “hold me back” and, in turn, challenge his authority at every opportunity in class. Our relationship deteriorates with every assignment. McKill reads my prose style as full of jargon and wants me to be more clear and concise. On several occasions, I see him during office hours and explain my reasons: my continued

struggle with adopting a new theoretical vocabulary and analytic language. I tell him why I write the way I do: to become more comfortable with often mystifying yet empowering concepts and terminology. He simply thinks I'm deliberately resisting him and warns me of self-sabotaging my present and future career as student. I give up trying to reason with him.

At the end of term, the note McKill attaches with my folder reads:

Rick,

I think you have a good future in English studies, and I'm assigning a grade of 8 on the basis of your engagement with texts and on the promise of a style that will communicate more clearly the ideas you wish to express. I think jargon has its place, but it mustn't become hollow and obscuring. I read critical theory—some good, some annoyingly obtuse, not worth much after the translation. Because of the complexity of some of your ideas (and the expression of them), you in particular need to slow down, if your points are to be made. If they aren't made, what have you then accomplished?

I should mark down severely those papers that exceeded the maximum length called for, but I don't think I would do you any service by assigning a 7 rather than an 8. I hope you'll take my comments as constructive, for I have certainly intended to be useful in helping you develop a readable style and better oral delivery, both necessary in graduate school.

*Sincerely,
LM*

I think I've failed and obsess over the grade. I'm upset that he equates my style with writing that requires "translation"—when I'm in fact trying to translate those writings for myself. I blame him for misinterpreting my ambitions: he turns my desire for cultural capital into an alienating experience. I feel infantilized, ashamed and fearful that I'm inadequate to meet the demands of the Honors program.

Only later do I learn to appreciate McKill's comments, both in the note and throughout the term. The experience teaches me several valuable lessons. Sensitizing myself to the bureaucratic machinery of the university, I learn to develop productive

working relationships with future instructors and students, even in cases where personalities are at odds. Equally if not more importantly, I learn to pay more careful attention to the mechanics of writing, diligent in my crafting of readable and clear prose, since I want to prevent other instructors from misinterpreting either my writing or my ambitions.



“Chain Letter,” the opening prose-text in the collection *Mongrel: Essays, Diatribes, and Pranks* (1999), by performance artist and author Justin Chin, at once fulfills and defies readerly expectations. It certainly contains typical and recognizable features characteristic of the genre of the chain letter, namely, advice and admonishment to its recipient to heed and follow its instructions, and subsequently to forward the letter to others, in order either to gain unimaginable rewards or to avoid misfortune. Writing in the persona of the letter-writer, Chin describes that one letter-recipient who carried on the chain had a pregnant dog who then welcomed “*beautiful puppies*,” while another reader—“M Prince, of Twenty Nine Palms, California”—broke the chain and subsequently “*developed several canker sores*.”¹² Notwithstanding such familiar characteristics, Chin’s piece remains an atypical chain letter in both its form and content. While it can be read as an essay disguised as either a “diatribe” or a “prank” (the genres listed in the subtitle of Chin’s collection), it is most certainly not a hoax, as is typical of the genre of the chain letter. More strikingly, by exploiting the conventions of the genre,

¹² Justin Chin, “Chain Letter,” *Mongrel: Essays, Diatribes, and Pranks* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 2 (original emphases).

Chin's piece offers a witty, funny, and thoughtful meditation on the literate arts of reading and writing. For instance, the unfortunate M Prince who broke the chain not only developed canker sores, but did so, Chin specifies, "*while reading the new John Grisham best-seller and could not enjoy the book. You get the picture,*" Chin goes on to conclude: "*Please do not break the chain. [. . .] THIS IS NOT A JOKE. Do it now and good things will befall you*" (2; original emphases). M Prince's story serves as a cautionary tale for other potential letter-recipients, for dire consequences will befall those who risk breaking the chain: they will, at the very least, be unable (any longer) to find pleasure in reading John Grisham's novels. To be deprived of such enjoyment is, Chin intimates, a very serious affair.

Though Chin proposes that reading is no laughing matter, it's hard not to chuckle or laugh out loud while reading his "Chain Letter." The piece succeeds in conveying its humor in large part because it exploits, in a clever and sardonic fashion, the trope of reading. For the letter-recipient to heed and follow the letter's instructions, he or she must necessarily *read* the letter. From the very beginning of the piece, moreover, reading is posited as both a worthwhile activity and a pleasurable pursuit. The letter opens with the salutation "*Dear Friend of Literature,*" thus simultaneously imagining and addressing its readership, and, by extension, the readership of Chin's collection *Mongrel* more generally. The letter continues with the following claims and instructions:

Enclosed is a very good book. In fact, it is more than supergood. It is fucking brilliant. Please take the time out to read the book and recommend it to eight others. If you do not wish to read the book or find that you cannot finish it for whatever reason (book too long, too verbose, failing eyesight, leprosy, etc.), please give the book to someone else who will appreciate it and also recommend it to eight others. PLEASE DO NOT IGNORE THIS LETTER. (1; original emphases)

Chin makes the odd suggestion that readers of chain letters are also readers of literature who would appreciate his book—a collection of essays packaged as *Mongrel*. And his first, and primary, instruction to his readers—those “*Friend[s] of Literature*,” no less—is to “*take the time out to read the book and recommend it to eight others.*”

While the letter intimates that its ideal reader is a “Friend of Literature,” its subsequent criteria for evaluating the aesthetic quality of texts is highly suspect. Apparently, ideal readers are less than ideal, as they are susceptible to being uninterested and bored by what they encounter on the page. They have short attention spans and are prone to blindness. They may even succumb to leprosy. Notwithstanding these less-than-ideal factors, the ideal reader of “Chain Letter” remains ideal for the simple reason that he or she already belongs to a community of readers. In other words, even if the letter’s reader failed to read the letter, he or she is still able to circulate it to at least eight other friends.

Chin is confident that the letter-recipient or reader would have friends to circulate “Chain Letter,” and by extension the book *Mongrel*, because he recognizes that his audience consists of readers who are also writers. More significantly, for the purposes of the present discussion, these readers and writers come from a motley crew of pan-Asian American backgrounds, as is revealed by their names, some of them hyphenated to the nth degree. After the warning “*PLEASE DO NOT IGNORE THIS LETTER*,” Chin goes on to describe the literary melting pot he imagines as the audience of “Chain Letter”:

Aloysious Wong, of Hoboken, heeded it and now his first novel, I Don’t Know What Race I Am (I’m So Confused), is currently being shopped around at A MAJOR NEW YORK PUBLISHER with film rights in the works. On the other hand, Geri-Ann Shimizu, of Honolulu, chose to ignore this letter and, to date, her only publishing credit is her poem “Flip Flops at Sandy Beach,” published in the spring of 1998 issue of Bamboo Canyon. It was on the left side of a Juli-Anna

Shibata Lee-Nelson poem and so only four people read it. The fifth reader, Geri-Ann's babe, Scott Nishimoto-Newman, only made it halfway through because he couldn't understand it. Catherina Sung, of White Christmas Valley Canyon, received this chain and chose to ignore it and her second book, Memories of Sewing and Cooking with My Mother, went unnoticed. She later remembered the chain and passed it on and her third book, A Sewing and Cooking Girlhood, is currently #11 at the Waimea Barnes and Noble bestest-seller list. (1-2; original emphases)

In comparison to its general address to “*Friend[s] of Literature*” at the beginning, the letter’s subsequent catalogue of names makes no secret of its imagined and intended readership. The ideal readers of “Chain Letter” not only derive pleasure from reading John Grisham’s novels, but they also include, Chin specifies, talented Asian-American writers such as the novelist Aloysious Wong, the poet Geri-Ann Shimizu, and the memoirist Catherina Sung. By suggesting that his readers are also writers, Chin thus succeeds in further exploiting the trope of reading: these other writers are his readers; moreover, their readers are also potentially his readers. In short, he imagines an already established interpretive community of pan-Asian-American readers for the work produced by him and other Asian-American writers. And in imagining such a readership, he also creates it.

In “Chain Letter,” Chin explores the vexed relationship between racial identity and reading communities. In both implicit and explicit ways, his own background contributes to his ability to identify across ethnic and cultural boundaries: he was born in Malaysia, raised in Singapore, studied in the United States—at the University of Hawaii at Moana and, later, at San Francisco State University—and now lives in San Francisco. When read within the larger context of the collection within which it is situated, “Chain Letter” also represents Chin’s attempt to meditate upon his own identity not only as a writer of Chinese descent but as a gay man. Chin intimates this by addressing his “Chain

Letter” to a “Friend of Literature,” an appellation that resonates with “Friend of Dorothy,” a term that is synonymous, in Anglophone gay slang, for a gay man.¹³

“Chain Letter” is followed by “Monster,” an autobiographical essay about Chin’s childhood and adolescence in Singapore, and his coming to terms with his gay identity. In the essay’s opening sentences, Chin introduces his views concerning the interrelationship between identity, cultural literacy, and authorial and readerly authority:

The first gay people I knew were not called gay at all. They were the drama queens at school, Nellie boys who lived for the annual music and drama night where they would take over an empty classroom to pile on their makeup, stagger in their heels, and shimmy up tight dresses fit for the trashiest lounge singers in Bras Basah Road. These were the boys destined for the infamous Bugis Street, but that was before the government tore the street down and rebuilt it to tourist efficiency, complete with government-approved drag queens. The queens were called fairies, homos, a-quas, bapok, derogatory names for their effeminacy” (3).

In its opening gambit, “Monster” calls into question the stability—or, rather, the fluidity—of language to describe sexual identity. Put another way, the catalogue of terms in the passage underscores the fact that Singapore is a multicultural, and hence multilingual, city. Whereas the queens of Bugis Street are called “fairies” and “homos” in English, they are also called “a-quas,” the word for transvestite in Hokkien, a Chinese dialect spoken by 30% of the Chinese in Singapore, as well as “bapok,” the term for an effeminate male in Malay, one of the four official languages in Singapore. In the context of Singapore, then, gay cultural literacy must necessarily involve a familiarity with terms

¹³ Ross Higgins, “French, English, and the Idea of a Gay Language in Montreal,” in *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language*, eds. William L. Leap and Tom Boellstorff (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 98.

spoken in all of its four languages—English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil—as well as their linguistic derivatives.¹⁴

Chin, like many of the authors examined in Chapter One, makes no secret of his autodidacticism and his penchant for reading. In fact, he claims to have read voraciously and promiscuously to alleviate his growing obsession with the male body and, in particular, with the penis. He writes, candidly:

I wanted so much to see another penis: my father's, uncle's celebrities' in a magazine, anyone's. I scanned through my father's medical textbooks that he stored under my brother's bed for pictures of penises, and I found them all in their diseased glory: bulbous members plagued with syphilis, gonorrhea, and other sores and boils. I read Dr. David R. Reuben's *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex, But Were Afraid to Ask*, and was titillated by the sexual details described in the book. I looked in the dictionary to see what I would find in the words *penis*, *homosexual*, and *intercourse*. (5-6; original emphases)

Like photographer Robert Giard, who looks up the word “homosexual” in the family dictionary to try to find a definition of himself, Chin also goes to the dictionary to find definitions of words that would help him come to terms with his homosexuality.

In the end, though, he learns to acquire a gay cultural literacy, and a sense of his own identity, not through the dictionary or through books, necessarily. Instead, he learns to be gay through sexual encounters and experiences. As he confides:

I fucked a lot in teenage days. At some point, I very distinctly remember that I had lost count of the number of men that I had tricked with. [. . .] I didn't know any better. I wanted more. I had no idea what I wanted. And at some point, and I don't particularly remember when, I stopped praying for [God's] forgiveness.

I'm also not sure exactly where and when I got the language for who and what I am. I don't remember how I learned the words gay, homo (sexual), fag, queen, etc. I just seemed to have picked them up and understood what they meant.

With the closet door ajar, and with my ear to the crack, I watched and heard what people said and how they reacted to gay life. Some were pleasant and

¹⁴ It's worth noting that issues of cultural literacy and cultural capital operate in different ways in Singapore, not least because of its unique language and educational policies. For recent discussions of these issues, see the essays collected in *Language, Capital, Culture: Critical Studies and Education in Singapore*, eds. Vinita Vaish, S. Gopinathan, and Yongbing Liu (Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2007).

tolerant, others were horrified and vicious. The names called and used to describe *that life* were used lovingly and violently at the same time. It didn't matter what I was called, I realized—*sticks and stones* . . . as they say—but who I was to be. And from the periphery of that closet, I learned to piece together who I was as a little queer. (8; original emphases)

"I don't have any regrets about how I learned to be gay," Chin writes in the conclusion of "Monster" (11). In fact, he relishes having been a sexual and linguistic autodidact, who succeeded in teaching himself to navigate the terrain of Singapore's gay subculture during his adolescence.



In "A Mangy Afterword," the last essay in *Mongrel*, Chin returns to some of the issues he first presented in "Chain Letter," namely the interrelations between identity, cultural literacy, and authorial and readerly authority. Whereas the tone of the collection's opening text is sardonic and breezy, its closing text is notable for its tone of genuine humility. I quote at length from "A Mangy Afterword":

Writing essays and opinion pieces are a strange thing for me. Growing up, I was the youngest in the family, and anytime I tried to participate in family discussions at dinnertime, I was always derided and dismissed for being naïve, ill-informed, and just plain wrong. I learned not to make my opinions known. I was taught not to seek attention, not to argue, and not to challenge authority openly. So this collection of writings is a bit of a challenge for me; and admittedly, it is all making me terribly nervous and apprehensive. That this book might be read absolutely terrifies me. After all, essay writing is essentially an open invitation to readers to argue with me, and to challenge my thoughts and my opinions.

If anything, this work, for me, is also a political stand. As Asians, and Asians in America, we are so often not encouraged to claim authority, to claim an opinion. There are historical reasons for this silence, and blood memory runs deep. With this book, I wanted to be able to do just that, claim authority even knowing full well that I may be wrong. It never seemed to stop anyone else, so why not me? (175)

Gone is the bravura of the writer who exhorts in “Chain Letter”: “*Enclosed is a very good book. In fact, it is more than supergood. It is fucking brilliant*” (1; original emphases).

Gone, too, is the writer’s recognition of an already established community of readers. In their place is the writer’s terrifying fear that “this book might be read.” Chin’s anxieties, he explains, are the consequence of having been taught “not to seek attention, not to argue, and not to challenge authority openly.” It could be argued that Chin was shamed into becoming submissive and obedient as a child. In the end, though, Chin rejects the sense of alienation and shame engendered by being “the youngest in the family” and by being an Asian American. According to Chin, “Asians writing about their families is a rather subversive act as well, since we are so often taught to respect the family” (176).

As a gay Asian reader and writer (and as the youngest in my family, as it happens), I have taken up Chin’s invitation “to claim authority, to claim an opinion.” But even as I have wrestled in this epilogue with the acculturation process of learning English as a shaming language, I have come to realize that claiming my own authority is no straightforward task of self-assertion. For it must involve recognizing and accepting what I have in common with the speaker and addressee in Jim Wong-Chu’s “How Feel I Do”; with the interpellated viewer of Frank Liu’s *Ernie*—the one who is both a “FAG” and a “CHINK”; and, finally, with the kind of Asian American reader and writer that Chin embodies in his writing. Put another way, although writing this dissertation represents my desire to secure cultural capital, I am aware that such an “achievement of desire,” to borrow from Rodriguez once more, is part of an ever-evolving process of negotiating the ambivalences integral to the politics of language acquisition, sexuality, and race. As I have tried to show throughout this dissertation, such ambivalences are productive for

reading not only personal pasts but collective ones as well. From Neil Bartlett composing two very different letters addressed to Wilde in *Who Was That Man?* to Allen Barnett describing his characters' contradictory responses to "The *Times* As It Knows Us"; from older and younger gay men's competing understandings of the generation concept to the indeterminate relationship between comprehending and apprehending the possible existence of ghosts as a way to make sense of the AIDS epidemic—these and the other examples discussed in this dissertation comprise a larger project in which the reading of gay culture and the AIDS epidemic generates viable literacies.

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