

Plotting the Crisis: HIV/AIDS and the African-American Literary Response : 1981-1990

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AIDS in America officially began with the CDC report of June 5 1981.¹ By late August 1981 over 108 cases of PCP and Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) were reported by the CDC. Since the majority of the incidental victims were active homosexuals, the syndrome was (mis)named as GRID² (Gay Related Immune Disorder) and was also colloquially referred as 'gay cancer'. In order to avoid a political backlash from the homosexual community, the Haitian immigrants³ and hemophiliacs⁴ (4H's) the CDC provided a more appropriate title—AIDS—in 1982.⁵ Although one among five cases reported in the first CDC report was a black American;⁶ the question of ethnicity and heterosexual transmission was addressed only in 1983. The CDC reported two AIDS cases among females, one Black and a Latino and in an accompanying report documented sixteen prisoners diagnosed of AIDS in New York and New Jersey—seven of them were black and two were Latinos⁷. In view of the above statistics, the CDC from 1983 began to report the AIDS crisis based on racial and ethnic divide. By 1985, African Americans constituted roughly a quarter of all people diagnosed with AIDS thereby making AIDS “a uniquely black problem from the start” (“Black AIDS Institute” 11). This paper provides a historical insight into the African American literary and cultural responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis from 1981 to 1990.

Limited knowledge about the etiology of AIDS led to an explosion of figural meaning making AIDS simultaneously an “epidemic of transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification” (“How to have Theory in an Epidemic” 11) as Paula Treichler puts it. The paranoia surrounding AIDS was further augmented by the way science and popular culture especially media tenuously but steadily defined AIDS as a gay plague.⁸ If the media through its reckless representations held homosexuals responsible for the outbreak of the disease, the Ronald Regan administration,⁹ as well as most state and city governments, with its conservative attitude was equally negligent of the crisis. In a similar vein, the religious discourse surrounding the AIDS crisis was centered on the retributive moralism targeting homosexuality.

To counteract the gross misrepresentations of PLWH/PLWAs and homosexuals in the dominant discourse and further to challenge the ineptitude of Regan administration in addressing the epidemic, gays formed community collectives such as Gay men's Health Crisis (GMHC), NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, Silence=Death, and ACT UP. Even though these organizations were dominated by the white gay men, African American gay leaders like Reggie Williams were

involved in AIDS activism. Joining the Black and White Men Together (BWMT)¹⁰—a group which organized gay men to build a visible, supportive community—and allying with Phil Wilson (presently the Executive director of Black AIDS Institute), they sought to fight the dangerous misconception among African Americans that AIDS afflicts only white gay men or the blacks who have sex with white men.¹¹ The resulting activities launched the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention—a coalition of groups working to stop HIV/AIDS among gay men of color. The black gay community was also supported by black women such as Debra Fraser-Howze who founded the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS in 1987. Local activists from around the country such as the Philadelphia group BEBASHI, the Atlanta based Outreach Inc. founded by Sandra McDonald in 1987, Black Coalition on AIDS in San Francisco and the Minority Task Force on AIDS (MTFA) provided services to the black PLWAs.

Even while the CDC¹² reported the growing affliction of HIV/AIDS among other sections of population such as heterosexuals, IV drug users and ethnic minorities, AIDS was predominantly understood as a white urban middleclass gay man's disease. With the medical community's focus around white gay PLWAs, there remained a virtual silence about other people affected by AIDS. Further, the "relative invisibility" of affected black Americans according to Cohen "sent a wrong message to the general population and especially black and gay communities" (*Boundaries of Blackness* 23) that AIDS was a white gay man's disease.

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

A plethora of AIDS themed narratives produced by the gay writers in the first decade sought to challenge and subvert the dominant illogical equation homosexuality = AIDS. Earliest and prominent among them were Larry Kramer and William M. Hoffman.¹⁴ Vividly capturing the emotive aspects of PLWAs, both the playwrights, stressed the need and urgency to address the crisis. The first major novel to address the AIDS crisis is Paul Reed's *Facing It*¹⁵ (1984). However, Samuel R. Delany's *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*¹⁶ (1985) Part III of *Flight from Neveryon* published by a major university press i.e., Wesleyan University Press, is arguably the first full-length work of fiction on AIDS by a black gay writer.

In "Appendix A: Postscript" of *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, Delany characterizes the novella as "*a work of imagination [and] . . . a document . . . [of] misinformation, rumor and wholly untested guesses at play through a limited social section of New York City during 1982 and 1983*" (*The Tales of Plagues* 361). The plague in Delany's fantasy milieu, Kolhari, is the fictional correlate of AIDS in New York. Interspersed within this fictional narrative is Delany's objective and subjective account of AIDS. Juxtaposing the plague of the prehistoric times and the AIDS crisis of the present, Delany draws parallels between the two and analyzes the chaotic responses generated with the onset of a new disease. Furthermore, the narrative also critiques the metaphorical understanding of AIDS; the governmental/administrative lapses in addressing the AIDS crisis and the shortcomings of CDC studies. However, Delany's primary objective in this narrative is to unravel the role of alternative literature during a crisis. Although, the racial identity of the characters in *The Tales* is not clearly mentioned, the obscure references to the color codes such as brown and dark signifies to the people of color.

Yet another prominent work is Joseph Beam's *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986). Republished by RedBone press in 2008, the anthology consisting of stories, verses, interviews and plays address the concerns and aspirations of the black gays. As Beam in the introduction argues: "The bottom line is this; we are Black men who are proudly gay. What we offer is our lives, our love, our visions... we are coming home with our heads held up high" (*In the Life* xi). Dominated by themes such as homophobia, coming home and the double lives of black gay, the anthology also consists of Craig G. Harris's "Cut off from Among Their People" which portrays the loss caused by AIDS. The short story narrates the incidents taking place at the funeral of Jeff's lover, who has died of AIDS. The story foregrounds how both the family and the church, the two major institutions in the African American community excludes Jeff from his lover's funeral and humiliates him. Furthermore, the minister's homophobic sermon at the funeral attests to the silencing of homosexuality and AIDS by the black community. Though AIDS is a minor theme in this anthology, the text remains a valuable document in the black gay

AIDS literary tradition as noted by James Earl Hardy in the introduction to the new edition. He laments that half of the contributors to the anthology including the editor Joseph Beam and the poets such as Melvin Dixon, Essex Hemphill and Assotto Saint, among others, have not survived AIDS. Though the anthology *In the Life* as Joseph Beam argues “didn’t prevent the deaths of the contributors of their many peers in the death tolls of AIDS virus in black communities in the 1980s . . . it did *save their lives*” (*In the Life* viii) by symbolically immortalizing their lives.

Black men with AIDS also appear in several AIDS novels written by white novelists. Howard Fast’s *The Dinner Party* (1987) narrates the story of Leonard, the son of a senator coming home to disclose his AIDS status to his family and his relationship with Jonsey, a black man with AIDS. Though Leonard escorts Jonsey to the dinner party, the homophobia and racism of the guest at the party force Jonsey to leave the place. Reynold Price’s *The Promise of the Rest* (1996) which is the last part of Price’s *Mayfield’s Trilogy* details the story of Wade Mayfield, a white gay architect diagnosed of AIDS. Unable to manage his own needs Wade allows his father, Hutch Mayfield, a bisexual English professor at Duke University, to come to New York to close the apartment he shared with Wyatt, his African American lover who infected him with the virus and had committed suicide. What follows is a long conversation between Wade and his father and the novel closes with Wade’s death.

Compared to literary response to the AIDS crisis by the white writers, the African American literary response to AIDS during the first decade was minimal. One of the reasons for the minimal response of black gay writers is due to the reluctance of the white heterosexist dominated publishing industry to publish the works of black gay writers. Furthermore, the profit motive of the publishing industry failed to find marketplace for the works of black gay writers. Steven Corbin, describes the exclusionary practice of the publishing industry thus: “The publishing world is decidedly an exclusive, white male, predominantly heterosexual, elite fraternity that stretches itself to any length to protect its narrow confines, even in its exclusion of women who, statistics convincingly show, comprise the majority of readers and book buyers” (“White Men” 14). Even with the presence of established gay presses such as St. Martin, Naiad, Alyson and Knights Press, the “booming trade in gay books” as Victoria Brownworth notes “is still the domain of a select few gay white men” (“Black Out” 80). Furthermore, the inability of the white gay writers to identify themselves with the black gay experience and “the underlying racist and classist idea that blacks don’t read and buy books” (“Black Out” 80) hinder the publication of works by black gay writers. Besides the exclusionary practices of the publishing industry, the issue of readership for AIDS themed novels, especially of black PLWAs also posed a challenge to the black gay writers. As Corbin states: “Even

though the face of AIDS has changed, you can't find publishers willing to take on books related to AIDS and Black Queers...there is no market for an AIDS novel that is multicultural. Our men are dying too. Our writers are also doing work like Paul Monette and other white writers with AIDS. We need to be able to see the multicultural context of AIDS. We too are fighting this killer" ("Black Out" 83).

Even AIDS related deaths of Max Robinson, the first African American broadcast network news anchor, in 1988 and Alvin Ailey, a black dancer and choreographer, in 1989 failed to evoke necessary response in the community. However, the CDC report of 1986¹⁷ which reported blacks to account for half of all the AIDS cases ever recorded among women, initiated a political response to the AIDS crisis. However, this response from the community, as Cohen argues, was "not one of acceptance and mobilization" (*Boundaries of Blackness* 101) as the community leadership and the black ministries held on to the old moralistic beliefs and condemnation of homosexuality and drug addiction.

In tune with the heightened political response, the late 1980s also witnessed literary response to HIV/AIDS from African American writers. Larry Duplechan's *Tangled up in Blue* (1989), though not preoccupied with the concerns of black gays or PLWAs addresses the unwillingness of heteronormative society to legitimize homosexuality and its consequence on gay men engaging in bisexual behavior. The novel set in the mid 1980s centers around three white characters: Daniel Sullivan, who poses himself as a heterosexual but in fact is bisexual, Crockett Miller, Daniel's ex-lover and who is diagnosed of ARC (AIDS Related Complex), and Maggie Sullivan, Daniels wife and Crockett's friend. In his interview with Christopher Davis, Duplechan explains his preoccupation with white characters and interracial relationships thus: "I don't have a strong black identity. My gay identity is much more important to me" ("CS Interview with Larry Duplechan" 62). Though Duplechan doesn't address the concerns of black PLWH/PLWAs, the novel contributes to broaden as Emmanuel S. Nelson argues "the literary representation of AIDS by exploring the complex connections among gay, bisexual and straight characters who are at risk" (*Contemporary African American Novelists* 139).

Yet another important African American cultural narrative to discuss the issue of AIDS crisis is Marlon Riggs' semi-documentary film *Tongues Untied* (1989). Weaving poetry, performance, personal testimony and history in a complex pattern, the narrative presents the situation, politics and culture of black gay men. Both a documentary and a work of poetry *Tongues Untied* according to Riggs was "motivated by a singular imperative: to shatter America's brutalizing silence around matters of sexual and racial difference" (Riggs "Tongues re-tied?"). The rhythmic chant of 'Brother to Brother' in the beginning of the documentary sets the pace for Riggs to explore the

complex dynamics of acceptable black masculinity and sexuality. Furthermore, he effectively uses this narrative space to vocalize the painful lived experience of young black gay men with AIDS and in doing so, critiques the silence surrounding AIDS crisis among the black community. Riggs who was diagnosed with HIV in 1988¹⁸ while working on *Tounges Untied* died of AIDS in 1994.

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

To conclude, the literary and cultural responses, though minimal, to the AIDS crisis from the African American community were produced by black gay writers, with the exception of Cheryl L. West. The black LGBT movement, unlike its white counterpart was at its infancy when the AIDS crisis began plaguing the community. The lack of community collectiveness, financial and economic resources hampered an effective response to the AIDS crisis. The black gay writers were engaged in a political attempt to gain visibility and the issue of AIDS was relegated. In spite of these impediments, the black writers, at least a few, addressed the issue of AIDS. While Delany’s novella is preoccupied with the metaphorical aspect of AIDS; governmental negligence towards the crisis; the shortcomings in CDC studies, among others, *In The Life* primarily anthologizes the concerns of the black gay community and their attempt to come out of their closeted homosexuality. Duplechan’s *Tangled up in Blue* and West’s *Before it Hits Home*, centers on closeted homosexuality and the feigned heterosexuality. Notably, all the main characters afflicted with HIV/AIDS in these narratives are black homosexual men (West’s play also includes a black woman diagnosed of AIDS) signifying the (mis)perception that AIDS is a homosexual disease. Taken together,

the literary response of African Americans to the AIDS crisis in the first decade is minimal compared to their white counterparts.

Notes

¹ CDC. “Pneumocystis Pneumonia- Los Angeles”, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. June 5, 1981.30 (21): 1-3. See James Kinsella *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media* page 10. The report states that two doctors reported a bizarre outbreak of pneumonia in five healthy men. Two had already died. The only characteristic the men shared was that they were all gay: “The fact that these patients were all homosexuals suggests an association between some aspect of homosexual lifestyle or disease acquired through sexual contact and *pneumocystis* pneumonia.”

² Refer <<http://www.avert.org/aids-history-86.htm>>. Refer Dennis Altman *AIDS in the Mind of America* page 33. Instead of using the term GRID, the CDC officially used a neutral phrase “Kaposi’s sarcoma and related opportunistic infections.”

³ MMWR Weekly (1982) “Opportunistic infections and Kaposi’s Sarcoma among Haitians in the United States”, July 9, 31(26); 353-4,360-1. The name of Haitian immigrants was later removed from the list by CDC following protests for the Haitian government and the immigrant community in America as it had led to widespread discrimination and violence against the community. Refer Dennis Altman *AIDS in the Mind of America* page 72-73.

⁴ MMWR Weekly (1982) 'Epidemiologic notes and Reports *Pneumocystis carinii* Pneumonia among persons with hemophilia A', July 16, 31(27); 365-7.

⁵ The name AIDS was suggested at a meeting in Washington, D.C., in July. Refer *Time* (2003) “A Name for the Plague,” March 30. The term AIDS was first properly defined by the CDC in September. Refer CDC MMWR Weekly (1982) 'Current Trends Update on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)- United States', September 24, 31(37); 507-508,

⁶ See Randy Shilts *And The Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic*. New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2007. Print. Page no. 61.

⁷ CDC. “Epidemiologic Notes and Reports: Immunodeficiency among Female Sexual Partners of Males with Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)—New York”. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. Jan. 7, 1983. 31(52): 697-698. CDC. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in Prison Inmates -- New York, New Jersey. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. Jan. 7, 1983. 31(52): 700-701.

⁸ See James Kinsella’s *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media* page 54. He cites the example of UPI’s science writer Jan Ziegler who in September 15, 1982 called AIDS as a “gay Plague.”

⁹ Ibid., See page 2-3 section titled “A Joe around the White House.” No serious attention was given by the Ronald Reagan administration towards the AIDS crisis. He didn’t utter the word AIDS till 1986. AIDS was seen as a joke by the administration which is evident in the example cited by Kinsella. “Nothing sums up that attitude better than a joke reportedly told at a meeting of the president and some of his key advisers in 1986. The white house was considering further action against Moamar Gadhafi’s Libya, which the United States had bombed that spring in retaliation for the terrorist attacks against American servicemen abroad. The Libyan leader was rumored to be a transvestite, so at the meeting Regan asked, “why not invite Gadhafi to San Francisco; he likes to dress up so much.” To which Secretary of State George Shultz allegedly replied, “Why don’t we give him AIDS?”

¹⁰ The group later in 1985 became the AIDS Task Force, America’s first Black AIDS organization.

¹¹ See “AIDS in the Black face: 25 years of an epidemic” published online by Black AIDS Institute, June 2006. Page12.

¹² See MMWR Weekly report of September 9, 1983 titled “Current Trends Update: Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS)—United States”

¹³ See Cathy J. Cohen *Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. page 13-14. She further argues that “issues such as AIDS and drug use in black communities, as well as the extreme isolated poverty disproportionately experienced by black women—all issues which disproportionately and directly affect poor, less empowered, and ‘morally wanting’ segments of black communities—fall into this category of political issues” (14).

¹⁴ William M. Hoffman’s *As Is* and Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* both performed in 1985 established AIDS as a literary theme. Kramer’s essay “1112 and Still Counting” (1983) is an early indictment against the government’s tardy response to the epidemic.

¹⁵ Though Dorothy Bryant’s *A Day in San Francisco* (1982) alludes to a plague affecting homosexual men, Paul Reed’s *Facing It* is considered as the first AIDS themed novel.

¹⁶ The full title of Delany's novella is *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals, or: Some Informal Remarks Towards the Modular Calculus, Part Five*. Part 1 of the series starts with *Trouble on Triton* (1976).

¹⁷ CDC. "Epidemiologic Notes and Reports Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) among Blacks and Hispanics -- United States." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. October 24, 1986. 35(42);655-8,663-6.

¹⁸ See Avena, Thomas. "Interview with Marlon Riggs." *Life Sentences: Writers, Artists, and AIDS*. Ed. Thomas Avena. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994. 258-273

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