


8-2013

# Decoding Literary AIDS: A Study On Issues of the Body, Masculinity, and Self Identity In U.S. AIDS Literature From 1984-2011

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## Recommended Citation

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Decoding Literary AIDS: A Study On Issues of the Body,  
Masculinity, and Self Identity In U.S. AIDS Literature  
From 1984-2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

By

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Florida State University  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2002

August 2013  
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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

Rather than waiting decades to respond, novelists of nearly every literary genre began conceptualizing the AIDS epidemic shortly after the first documented case of the virus in the United States in 1981. Writers, feeling a sense of urgency, wasted little time constructing didactic texts that differ from much historical fiction in that they were written as the tragedy they are commenting on occurred. However, AIDS literature has changed as the disease has spread well beyond the gay communities of San Francisco and New York, causing people to reexamine their longstanding beliefs on masculinity, sexuality, and body politics.

My Master's thesis will analyze this new literary subgenre in an attempt to determine the different ways that socially conscious novelists, screenwriters, and comic book writers have conceptualized AIDS over the past four decades. Several texts, including Armistead Maupin's *Babycakes* (1984) and R.D. Zimmerman's *Hostage* (1997), portray the virus as a force capable of diminishing the sexuality of the body and causing tainted blood to be viewed as the ultimate biological weapon. Furthermore, closeted gay characters in the literature of African-American authors E. Lynn Harris and Sapphire construct hyper-heterosexual personas, naively believing that masculinity will somehow protect them from contracting the virus once dubbed "gay cancer."

The often-restrictive rhetoric associated with AIDS has been analyzed during the epidemic, perhaps most notably by Susan Sontag in her seminal work *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989). Furthermore, Judith Laurence Pastore's *Confronting AIDS through Literature* (1993) examines the language used with the virus. My thesis will expand upon these previous works, as well as others by queer theorists and social commentators, to determine how the last epidemic of the twentieth century has forever influenced literature and other forms of pop-culture entertainment.

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## No AIDS-Free Generation: An Overview of AIDS Literature

In a highly publicized speech at the State Department on November 29, 2012, outgoing United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said an “AIDS-free generation” is obtainable at some point in the future.<sup>1</sup> While she conceded that HIV might be here to stay, she stressed that “the disease that it causes need not be.” Clinton then unveiled a so-called “blueprint” to end the AIDS epidemic, noting that scientific advances have reached the point where new infections could be prevented. Less than four months after the speech, doctors announced that a baby from rural Mississippi had been cured of HIV after receiving antiretroviral drugs within thirty hours of birth. While medical experts waited for the study to be confirmed<sup>2</sup>, the finding was initially hailed as a major breakthrough in the fight to prevent more children from contracting HIV, which has long been considered incurable. If the results are proven to be accurate and they could be replicated on other children, the prospect exists that the spread of HIV could be prevented with early detection and aggressive medication. Nonetheless, Clinton’s proclamation of an AIDS-free generation does not appear to be anytime in the near future.

An *Associated Press* article on Clinton’s speech notes that an estimated 34 million people are living with HIV, including the 2.5 million newly documented cases in 2012<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports on its website that nearly one in five Americans infected with HIV are unaware that they have it, all but ensuring that the virus will continue to spread to unsuspecting people of nearly every demographic. There is no certainty for when the last epidemic of the twentieth century might come to an end, and as a result, novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers will keep devising new ways to broadcast the voices of those people living with HIV/AIDS and their loved ones.

AIDS literature has emerged as a mostly male-dominated subgenre since female novelist Dorothy Bryant published *A Day in San Francisco* (1982), which Judith Laurence Pastore credits in *Confronting AIDS through Literature* (1993) as perhaps “the first AIDS-themed novel—though the disease had yet to

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<sup>1</sup> Boseley, Sarah. “Hillary Clinton Predicts AIDS-Free Generation.” *The Guardian*. 29 Nov. 2012. Web. 18 Jan. 2013.

<sup>2</sup> A *New York Times* article, published the day after the HIV report, noted that some outside medical experts questioned whether the unidentified baby had the virus in the first place or if the heavy dose of drugs simply prevented the child from contracting it.

<sup>3</sup> Neergaard, Lauran. “Hillary Clinton Releases Road Map For AIDS-Free Generation.” *Associated Press*. 29 Nov. 2012. Web. 18 Feb. 2013.

be given its unfortunate acronym” (91). Novelists of nearly every genre have attempted to address an epidemic that has killed millions, left millions more in need of lifesaving drugs, and raised complex issues about sexuality, privacy, and masculinity. Pastore suggests that “from the beginning then, literary AIDS has had many educational goals: to preach the need for safe sex and clean needles, to dispel unwarranted fears, and to win sympathy for the infected and their loved ones” (3). There is a sense of urgency to the didactic works of Sapphire, E. Lynn Harris, and other socially conscious authors who have watched AIDS halt the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies and usher in a “sexual depression,” as Susan Sontag refers to it in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989).

Bathhouses, which sprung up as underground havens for promiscuous, often-unprotected gay sex, were shut down in the eighties as a concerned segment of the population began to alter its sexual behavior for fear of contracting AIDS. All of a sudden, a sexually transmitted disease had arrived on the scene from an undetermined source and forced people to rethink their views of sex for pleasure and the destructive capability of the body, a notion that Catherine Waldby examines in *AIDS and the Body Politic* (1996). AIDS-themed novels grew out of this frustration of the eighties, a decade that saw a business class celebrate the financial prosperity brought on by President Ronald Reagan at the same time homosexuals and other marginalized groups shouted at the White House’s delayed response to the “gay plague.” Much of the AIDS literature written over the past thirty years contains an angry, defiant tone, which should be expected considering that many of the authors witnessed the mass deaths while living at ground zero of the AIDS epidemic.

A host of other writers have discussed at length the immense pain and paranoia they experienced as openly gay men living in San Francisco and New York in the eighties. R.D. Zimmerman admitted in an email interview that he was inspired to write his AIDS-themed revenge narrative *Hostage* (1997) after a friend of his died of an AIDS-related illness a year after the novelist was misdiagnosed with the disease. Zimmerman stated:

Actually, in the eighties and nineties, there was a lot of literature about AIDS. Most of that, however, came in the form of memoirs or semi-biographical novels, and most of those were heartbreaking and wonderful. But as a writer, that’s not me. I’m a terrible memoirist and/or journalist. (Zimmerman)



Zimmerman instead turned to his fast-paced style as a suspense and mystery novelist to convey his frustration, as well as the injustice and loss of self felt by those living with AIDS. However, AIDS literature stands apart from traditional historical novels of the past two centuries in that there is little distance between the novelists and the human tragedies they are commenting on in their texts. AIDS is not an event that has occurred or an institution that has been eradicated by the time novels about them are published. *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Kurt Vonnegut's satirical response to the bombing of Dresden, was published twenty-four years after the postmodernist author survived the aerial raid as a prisoner of war. Furthermore, William Stryon's slave narrative *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) sparked a controversy upon its release nearly a century after the adoption of the thirteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery. However, literary AIDS amounts to historical fiction being constructed in the present and without the perspective that one gains through a significant passage of time. This lack of retrospection creates a challenge for writers, as Sarah Schulman experienced when she began writing *People in Trouble* (1991), which has a plot that shares similarities with the Broadway play *Rent*.<sup>4</sup> Schulman told Pasture:

The first thing that I did was to go back to fiction that had been written about large disasters, like Holocaust fiction, Hiroshima, the plague; and what I found out is that very, very little fiction was written about those events at the time they happened or even within the next forty years or so after them (22).

Such immediacy has led to AIDS literature reading like a running commentary on the epidemic, which has stretched into its fourth decade. However, AIDS has diminished as a major theme in works of fiction since the nineties. The decline coincides with the change in public perception of HIV/AIDS from a "death sentence" for those who contracted it to, whether accurate or not, more of a manageable disease with the introduction of antiretroviral drugs. Many authors have turned their attention to other social issues—and diseases such as cancer—now that there is not as much of a sense of urgency with AIDS. In a 2011 interview with National Public Radio, Michael Cunningham said the decline in AIDS literature could be attributed to "a new generation of young artists who have no recollection of a time when AIDS did not exist." He added that while these younger writers might "subtly present" the epidemic in their

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<sup>4</sup> In a 2005 article on Slate.com, Schulman accused the late playwright Jonathan Larson of ripping off large parts of her novel for his play *Rent*, including the love triangle that appears in both works.

works, it is not as literal as it is in older texts. More so than now, novelists in the eighties and nineties watched friends and family members die from the virus, and their novels were intended to spark action, both in personal behavior and public policy. Not everything has changed over time, though.

Writers of literary AIDS still must fight against long-standing misconceptions about the virus, even as their cast of characters has become more diverse to include more than just gay Caucasians battling the epidemic. Pastore suggests that “AIDS writing may not produce a cure, but it can produce a climate in which a cure is more likely” (94). The response from literary scholars, queer theorists, and social commentators to AIDS literature has been just as vast and timely as the novels published. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier collaborated on the anthology *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis* (1993), in which Murphy suggests that writers are “nearly unanimous in their assertion that AIDS has irremediably changed the way that gay literature can be either written or read, whatever the reader’s or writer’s feelings about the epidemic or the homoerotic” (9). Murphy’s suggestion is hard to dispute. AIDS looms as an overt threat in much of the gay literature written since the early eighties, giving both promiscuous and monogamous characters a reason to curb their sexual behavior. Furthermore, readers might be prone to insert the presence of AIDS into texts that avoid any mention of the virus. Characters who jump from bedroom to bedroom are judged harshly, perhaps even more so than they might have been before the AIDS crisis made people more conscious of the health risks associated with unprotected sex. Pastore notes on this cultural change in *Confronting AIDS through Literature*, published the same year *Writing AIDS* was released, illustrating the volume of AIDS-themed novels produced in the first decade of the epidemic.

Scholars and theorists have not had to wait a few decades for the first wave of novels about AIDS to arrive. *Babycakes* (1984), the fourth novel in Armistead Maupin’s popular *Tale of the City* series about a colorful collection of San Francisco residents living in the early days of the epidemic, was published three years after the first documented case of AIDS in 1981. Hundreds of AIDS-related novels have since joined the extensive collection of plays, films, and television shows that have sought to make sense of the myriad of body and language issues unearthed by the virus. However, the portrayal of the AIDS figure is anything but rosy. Sontag argues that “AIDS, like cancer, does not allow romanticizing or sentimentalizing, perhaps because its association with death is too powerful” (24). She suggests that

writers over the years have been kind to characters dying of tuberculosis, with Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* suffering "almost symptomless, unfrightened, beatific deaths" (16). But Sontag suggests that characters living with AIDS and cancer are not afforded such sympathetic literary portrayals. Their physical breakdowns and mental deteriorations are often described in graphic, brutally honest terms meant to evoke sympathy for the sick. *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, the follow-up to Sontag's seminal work *Illness as Metaphor* (1977), is regularly cited in texts that look into the language and literature of AIDS.

A number of essays, anthologies, and books have been written about the varying ways that AIDS has been portrayed over the years. Pastore, Murphy, and others have examined the vast library of AIDS literature to determine its greater function as fiction meant to educate, cause social change, and earn sympathy for people living with the disease. Additionally, works by queer theorist E. Patrick Johnson, documentary filmmaker Marlon T. Riggs, and others have attempted to bring light to the taboo issue of closeted homosexuality and bisexuality within the African-American community, which has been cited as a contributing factor to the dramatic spike in HIV infections amongst blacks. More so than other epidemics of the past two centuries, AIDS has sparked discussion about race, sexuality, and the challenges of bringing the two together. With no assurances for when HIV might be regarded as an actual manageable disease like tuberculosis and polio, more analysis of AIDS—and literary AIDS in particular—is bound to occur.

My thesis builds on previous critical works and relies on both new and old concepts involving masculinity, body politics, and language to dissect texts that have often been overlooked in the study of AIDS literature. Much has been written over the years about Tony Kushner's *Angels In America* (1991), which is regarded as one of the seminal works of AIDS literature with its brutal honesty and use of fantastical, postmodernist elements. Furthermore, *The Hours* (1998), Cunningham's reinvention of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), brought more attention to the struggle of gay men with AIDS. However, I chose to avoid discussing both Pulitzer Prize-winning texts, as well as others that have earned considerable attention for their depictions of AIDS. While many of the themes discussed in this thesis are present in *Angels In America* and *The Hours*, several less-known novels have offered similarly multifaceted portrayals of AIDS. They, too, show the different ways that the epidemic has been

conceptualized, from the forced celibacy that many gay men took in the eighties to the rejection of the “faggot” figure in more recent African-American AIDS literature. One could theorize the reasons that scholars have largely ignored some of these texts in their studies of literary. Zimmerman’s *Hostage* is an unpopular, fast-paced thriller that can be hard to find, while Sapphire’s *The Kid* (2011) is a disturbing, disjointed coming-of-age story that was recently published. However, both novels, which rely on graphic images of violence and focus on characters who could be considered antiheroes, have a place in the discussion of AIDS literature.

These and the other novels that will be examined in the ensuing chapters span the four decades of the AIDS epidemic, offering a small sample into the progression of literary AIDS as a subgenre. While the selected novels differ in tone and cover larger genres, such as fantasy and thriller, each text discusses the change in sexual attitudes brought on by the virus. However, much of the language of AIDS has remained the same, as characters have repeated the same war metaphors and misconceptions that only “faggots” can contract the virus. This seems to be intentional, though, as novelists have tried to show that attitudes about AIDS have progressed at a slower rate than the medical science. Nonetheless, AIDS literature has shifted and taken on different forms, much like a virus. With this in consideration, it made sense to include two comic book series of the nineties—*The Incredible Hulk* and *Shadowhawk*—that use vivid imagery and the fantastical to educate a larger audience on AIDS. Additionally, Hollywood has offered its take on the epidemic after curiously waiting too long to make films that fictionalize the crisis.

However, my thesis will not spend much time discussing *Philadelphia* (1993), which earned Tom Hanks his first Academy Award for Best Actor and is regarded by some as the landmark AIDS film. While scholars have taken a close look at *Philadelphia* because of its almost seamless blend of race and homosexuality in its discussion of AIDS, my intent is to draw attention to smaller films that have raised similar issues of identity and the body. Working with smaller budgets and less-well known casts, *Parting Glances* (1986) and *Longtime Companion* (1989) illustrate the early paranoia that caused even healthy gay men in monogamous relationships to reject sex out of fear of contracting and spreading HIV/AIDS. Their influence as some of the first AIDS-themed films cannot be minimized, and as the predecessors to *Philadelphia*, they convey fears that were expanded upon years later. The anxiety of the body is shown

in *Longtime Companion*, in which two lovers lie in bed and wish for the epidemic to end so they could resume their sex life. The film's title is derived from a *New York Times* article on the gay partners left behind when their lovers die of AIDS, and as the first widespread film on AIDS, it remains highly regarded within gay cinema.

It is not surprising that homosexual Caucasians comprise the majority of Hollywood's portrayals of AIDS, especially in the first decade of the epidemic. AIDS gained traction with gay white men in San Francisco and New York, and many of the first writers to conceptualize the virus were middle-class white men. Pastore suggests that "the preponderance of white, middle-class, gay, issues central to the concerns of AIDS activists can make it difficult for other perspectives to get a fair hearing" (23). Nonetheless, Tyler Perry's *For Colored Girls* (2010) shows the changing face of the epidemic and perhaps the impact of closeted homosexuality on the African American community. The film, based on Ntozake Shange's experimental play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975), was not a critical or commercial hit upon its release. However, its approach to masculinity and sexuality as it relates to AIDS fits into an argument that will be discussed in more depth later in my thesis. The scope of my project will address some of the complex issues of sex and identity prevalent in different forms of literary AIDS.

The first chapter focuses on the "sexual depression" that occurred within the gay community following the largely guilt-free promiscuity of the sixties and seventies. Even after testing negative for HIV, a number of homosexual men felt the need to reject any form of sex to assure that they will not contract "the gay plague." My focus will be on how several novels and films conceptualized the drastic change in perception of the human body in the early days of AIDS and the notion that, for the first time in decades, sex came with the risk of serious consequences. All of a sudden, the body went from something glamorous to be explored for sexual pleasure during the sexual revolution to something that should be feared and avoided, if possible, in the eighties. Several of the earliest works of literary AIDS, including *Babycakes* and Samuel R. Delany's semi-autobiographical fantasy novel *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* (1985), address the celibacy that some gay men adopted in the first decade of AIDS as the ultimate form of "safe sex." Several works of African-American literature have addressed another form of

prevention also based on misconceptions about the virus, and this theme will be the basis of the second chapter.

Openly gay, Harris and Sapphire construct homosexual or bisexual black characters who believe they are protected from contracting HIV/AIDS as long as they reject any notion that they are the “faggot figure” in their homosexual relationships. These hyper-heterosexual men play into what could be described as masculinity as performance. They brag about their sexual prowess with women and rely on homophobic language to belittle the flamboyant men with whom they have sex, all in an attempt to dispel any suggestion that they might also be gay. Relying on the fallacy that only “faggots” are susceptible to AIDS, Basil Henderson in Harris’ *Invisible Life* (1991) and its sequel *Just As I Am* (1994) and Abdul from Sapphire’s *The Kid* (2011) seek to establish themselves as strong “brothers” impervious to the prevalent homophobia within the black community. Carl, one of the few male characters in *For Colored Girls*, takes a similarly misguided approach. However, all three physically fit characters are too naïve to realize that their attempts to live a double life as black men on the “down low” have actually put them in closer contact with AIDS. This chapter will explore the complex issues of black masculinity and homophobia that are openly mocked in the works by Harris and Sapphire. My arguments will build upon analytical texts by Johnson and Riggs, as well as media accounts of an AIDS crisis within the African American community that has gone underpublicized. While the first two chapters focus on fears and fallacies held by gay or bisexual men, both black and white, the final section shifts the project and delves into a threat to healthy, straight individuals.

As previously discussed, homosexual men in the early days of AIDS stripped sexuality from the body and began to view it as a possible carrier of this new, unknown virus. A perception existed that the body, especially one infected with HIV/AIDS, is a major threat to public safety and thus should be distanced from the healthy population. The final chapter plays on the notion that a person with AIDS has the capability to cause mass destruction, with different forms of revenge narratives portraying contaminated blood as the ultimate biological weapon. In particular, Zimmerman’s *Hostage* conceptualizes AIDS as a tool for three characters in the final stages of the disease to gain a sense of vengeance and force a change in public policy by injecting a syringe filled with their tainted blood into United States congressman Johnny Clariton. They become AIDS terrorists, kidnapping Clariton and

informing him that his homophobic views and calls to cut AIDS funding will shift once he has the same virus as them. They embrace the destructive possibilities of the body, even as theirs are gradually breaking down due to the effects of AIDS.

Jim Valentino's *Shadowhawk* series also illustrates the violence of AIDS, as an assistant district attorney is transformed into a tortured crime fighter in the same vain as Batman after being injected with AIDS as payback for not dropping a case against mobsters. Writers of AIDS revenge narratives play with body politics to, in part, shock readers into changing their behaviors. The war on AIDS is taken outside of the body and used to fight back. In doing so, the portrayal of the AIDS figure is transformed from seemingly innocent men in the eighties to more defiant characters who seek to reject the notion that they are victims by using their own virus against others.

While the volume of AIDS literature and films have steadily declined since the eighties and nineties, important works on the virus continue to stream out in the hopes of keeping the epidemic in the public consciousness. *The Kid* was published in 2011 to much anticipation, though it has received harsh reviews and failed to gain as much of a following as *Push* (1996), the novel that began Sapphire's line of AIDS-themed novels. With the medical community still searching for a confirmed cure, an AIDS-free generation appears to be a ways off, giving writers, filmmakers, and scholars more reason to continue their discussion of the epidemic. When asked if *Hostage* might have been written differently had he started the novel now instead of in the nineties, Zimmerman gave an answer that speaks to the importance of literary AIDS studies. He stated, "Don't for a minute think that the fucking AIDS epidemic is over." The following thesis will address complex issues seen in society, conveyed in literature, and examined by those scholars who preceded me.

## Rejecting Sex In The AIDS Era: The Forced Celibacy of Homosexual Characters In Early Works of Literary AIDS

Unable to fall asleep, Fuzzy (Stephen Caffrey), a character in Norman René's film *Longtime Companion* (1989), turns to his lover in bed and asks for his opinion on what happens when they die. Willy (Campbell Scott), cracking a grin, replies, "We get to have sex again." Willy then rolls over in bed, and taking a more solemn tone, concludes his answer with a weak "I hope." Neither man has tested positive for HIV, and their fears should be mitigated by their place in a monogamous relationship. While their friends from Fire Island contract AIDS and succumb to it one-by-one, Willy and Fuzzy remain as two of the three original protagonists who survive at the end of the film. Nonetheless, Willy's remark signifies the notion that the body as a sexual entity is diminished in early examples of literary AIDS and replaced with the view that it is a "diseased" carrier of the "gay plague."

A fallacy arose in the early days of the AIDS epidemic that any physical contact with an infected person could be fatal, including an act as innocent as a handshake. All of a sudden, the perception of the human body shifted from that of a highly sexual form to something more like a biological weapon capable of spreading a deadly virus. In *If Memory Serves* (2012), which attempts to redefine queer theory, Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed quote openly gay novelist Andrew Holleran as writing, "AIDS has been a massive form of aversion therapy. For if you finally equate sex with death, you don't have to worry about observing safe sex techniques; sex itself will eventually become unappetizing" (32). This builds on Susan Sontag's argument in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989) that AIDS leads people to think of sex as a form of suicide or murder (72). Prior to the disease's arrival, Sontag suggests "contraception and the assurance by medicine of the easy curability of sexually transmitted diseases (as of almost all infectious diseases) made it possible to regard sex as an adventure without consequences" (72). AIDS dramatically altered that carefree attitude of the eighties, with people viewing an HIV-positive test result as a death sentence.

In her seminal work *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), Sontag suggests that cancer is viewed as a "disease of the body" because it can "strike anywhere" on a person, revealing that "the body is, all too woefully, just the body" (18). Likewise, AIDS reveals the limitations of the body; it presents the dynamic that bodily fluids so closely associated with life—blood and semen—can spread death in the form of a



sexually transmitted disease. Willy's bedside comment in *Longtime Companion* suggests that the body is something that should be avoided in the midst of a global epidemic, and those who give in to their sexual desires run the risk of contracting a virus that has been perceived by some as punishment for homosexuality. Some critics in the eighties took a "blame-the-victim approach," arguing that gay men who contracted AIDS deserved it because they continued to partake in risky behavior even after the cause of the disease was well known. As perhaps a response, writers of early AIDS-related literature constructed gay characters who either ignore their desires and stop having sex entirely or save physical contact for monogamous relationships that go against the gay liberation movement of the late sixties and seventies. After a period of seemingly uncontrolled promiscuity, gay men faced the realization that sex often came with dire consequences, passed from body to body. Intimacy is therefore discouraged, an attitude illustrated further in *Longtime Companion* when Fuzzy states that even kissing between gay men might be avoided because HIV has been found in saliva. Later in the film, Willy profusely scrubs his face with soap and water after getting a kiss on the cheek from a friend who has been admitted to a hospital because of AIDS-related complications. Characters, who are not privy to today's knowledge about the transfer of AIDS, treat intimacy as if it is literally a "kiss of death," with a friend's lips acting as tools to spread the virus.

The arrival of AIDS led many gay men to reevaluate their longstanding views of sex, particularly the promiscuity that once defined gay liberation. In *The Epidemic* (2006), a detailed history of the AIDS epidemic, Jonathan Engel suggests that gay men have viewed promiscuous sex as "the defining act of community building" (13). It was not uncommon for a gay man living in San Francisco in the early eighties to have hundreds of sexual partners in a year and thousands in a lifetime (12). Furthermore, journalist Randy Shilts notes in *And The Band Played On* (1987) that promiscuity was central to the sexual freedom that homosexuals felt they had earned following the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York, when drag queens fought back against police harassment (15). Shilts suggests, "Promiscuity was rampant because in an all-male subculture there was nobody to say 'no'—no moderating role like that a woman plays in the heterosexual milieu" (89). AIDS provided that resistant force. While promiscuity helped to define gay communities in major American cities, these sexual practices crippled them followed the introduction of the epidemic. This led to a response that is commonly portrayed in literary works

about an epidemic killing off members of a community: people willingly surrendered their everyday freedoms in the hopes of not get infected.

For some gay men, that meant choosing celibacy or dramatically reducing the number of partners they slept with in the eighties, a decade often defined by its excess. In *And The Band Played On*, prominent playwright and gay activist Larry Kramer advocated that homosexual men should be told that “if they wanted to survive, they should just stop having sex” (210). Sontag expands on this suggestion in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*: “After two decades of sexual spending, of sexual speculation, of sexual inflation, we are in the early stages of a sexual depression” (76). AIDS opposed attitudes of free love in the sixties and seventies, though they have since resurfaced with the advancement of AIDS medications that can prolong an infected person’s life and give the false perception that the virus is a manageable disease that should no longer be feared.

Novelists Armistead Maupin and Samuel R. Delany, serving as early commentators on AIDS, reduced the sexual identity of some of their gay characters. In Maupin’s *Babycakes* (1984) and Delany’s *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* (1985), two novels of dramatically different tones and genres, healthy, middle-aged gay men refuse to have sex, exhibit a fear of it in the presence of mass death and are portrayed as being either celibate or sexually inactive in comparison to the high number of partners they had in the days before the virus. Characters make up for the absence of sex by emerging themselves in the lives of their gay or bisexual friends who make no secret about either their desires for physical satisfaction or monetary gain through male prostitution. The celibate figure can remain at a safe distance from AIDS, if such thing is possible in large gay communities in the eighties, while still talking about sex with those friends who put themselves at risk of contracting the virus.

Taking a postmodernist approach to *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, Delany turns himself into a character who comments on the promiscuity that homosexuals practiced even during the first years of the AIDS epidemic. He is a social commentator looming over his novel, which frenetically jumps back-and-forth between a prehistoric barbarian civilization dealing with a nameless, AIDS-like disease and New York in the early eighties. Delany notes that “a moderately good looking gay man in his twenties or thirties can have two or three [sexual] contacts while he’s in the subway on his way to the doctor’s to see if he has AIDS” (215). Like many writers of literary AIDS, Delany and Maupin have been open and

outspoken about their statuses as prominent gay men. They write with an intimate perspective of the massive toll the virus has taken on gay communities on opposite sides of the United States. Delany uses his barbarian race to conceptualize what he witnessed as a single gay man living in New York, while Maupin relies on melodrama and humor to comment on his adopted hometown of San Francisco in *Babycakes*, the fourth installment of his popular *Tales of the City* series.

In this chapter, my focus will largely be on *Babycakes* and *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* as examples of early works of literary AIDS in which gay characters fear sex to the point where they reject it during the epidemic. By taking this approach, it can be argued that Maupin and Delany hope to accomplish what Judith Laurence Pastore states in *Confronting AIDS through Literature* (1993) as one of the educational goals of early literary AIDS: to preach the need for safe sex (3). Gay characters briefly discuss the importance of condoms during a scene early in *Babycakes*, but it is suggested that nothing ensures total protection from AIDS like celibacy. The safest sex is masturbation, as a character in *Babycakes* suggests. Furthermore, Nick (Steve Buscemi), who serves as the gay celibate in Bill Sherwood's film *Parting Glances* (1986), jokes that masturbating is his form of daily exercise. The rejection of sex is viewed as a survival mechanism for some gay men in the eighties.

Maupin and Delany do not mask their hopes that their texts are seen as didactic, with Delany going as far as to include the New York mailing address for the Gay Men's Health Crisis and the phone number for the AIDS hotline in the appendix to *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*. However, he is insistent that his fantasy novel should not be viewed as an official source of information on AIDS and AIDS prevention. He pleads in the first sentence of his appendix for readers "not to misread fiction as fact," adding that his novel is a work that largely documents "misinformation, rumor and wholly untested guesses at play through a limited social section of New York during 1982 and 1983, mostly before the 23 April 1984 announcement of the discovery of a virus (human t-cell lymphotropic virus [HTVL3] as the overwhelmingly probable cause of AIDS" (361). The novel, more than anything, attempts to capture the fear and uncertainty that was prevalent in New York's gay community during the same period of time portrayed in *Babycakes*, which opens in 1983.

Delany has attempted to downplay his contributions to what he perceives as real AIDS activism. In *A Sense of Wonder* (2004), Jeffrey Allen Tucker's analysis of Delany's approach to race, sex and

identity in his work, Delany is quoted as saying that he has “done very little” for AIDS education “outside of writing and writing related activities,” such as lecturing on college campuses (233). Tucker, however, gives Delany more credit for his role in the AIDS movement: “Delany, of course, is not just any [science fiction] writer; he is a gay man who has written of gay life before and after Stonewall, and before and after the discovery of HIV. And he is an African American, a member of a racial demographic that is disproportionately affected by the syndrome” (253). Like Maupin, Delany was born in the early forties and gained prominence as a writer while gay men, including himself, felt a newfound sense of freedom in the sixties.

Maupin’s intentions with *Babycakes* are to simultaneously entertain and inform, stating in a 2011 article in *The San Francisco Chronicle* that “these characters were invented as they were needed. But I was very aware that as a gay person, I was participating in a social revolution.” His remark echoes what Pastore suggests is a major theme in Sarah Schulman’s novel *People in Trouble* (1995): “It is impossible to write a gay book without discussing AIDS in some depth” (16). Maupin and Delany were drawn as middle-aged gay men in the eighties to address the arrival of AIDS in their fiction, showing a social consciousness long before it became socially acceptable—even for President Ronald Reagan—to discuss the virus. When viewed together, *Babycakes* and *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* are similar in their pessimistic takes on both promiscuity and monogamy for gay men, a weird dynamic that illustrates the confusion that was rampant in the first decade of the epidemic.

Even trying to define what constituted promiscuous behavior in the eighties could be difficult and subjective. In *Beyond Sexuality* (2000), Tim Dean argues, “One paradox of promiscuity is that while it tends to be discussed in absolutist terms, sexual promiscuity is necessarily a relative concept” (159). Dean adds that perceptions of promiscuity shifted from around ten to twenty sexual partners in 1975 to five hundred in 1980, a year before the first domestic cases of AIDS were identified, providing more serious consequences for uninhibited sex. The opening of bathhouses and gay clubs catered to these new notions of promiscuity and allowed sex to be “dehumanized,” with trysts often occurring between men who did not know each other’s names and had no need to see their faces. However, for several gay characters in *Babycakes* and *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, their identities and personal health are dependent on abstaining from sex instead of enjoying the abundance of it taking place all around them.

Michael Tolliver is the celibate figure in *Babycakes*, which continues the storyline that Maupin began as a regular series in *The San Francisco Chronicle* in 1976. The novel opens more than three months after Michael's longtime lover Jon has died from an AIDS-related illness. Hoping to shake his sense of self-pity, Michael agrees to spend a month in London, the city where he admits to having found as a teenager "how simple and comforting and beautiful real life could actually be" during his first sexual encounter with a gay man (102). He came out of the closet there. When he returns sixteen years later, he feels a loss of innocence and a hesitancy towards intimacy, illustrating the shift from the sexual liberation he felt in 1967 to Sontag's sexual depression of the eighties.

Michael states unequivocally that he is celibate after Mary Ann, his San Francisco neighbor, finds some condoms prior to his departure for London. He insists he does not need them: "You guys can use them more than I can" (93). Michael's remark suggests that while heterosexuals are free to indulge in their sexual desires, such pleasures are off limits to him as a gay man. His sex life remains in his past, and proof that he was intimate at one time is only revealed through brief flashbacks and short conversations about past lovers. His celibacy goes against even the more prudent measures that many gay men took after being made aware of AIDS. In *The Epidemic*, Engel notes, "Few desisted from sex entirely, but rather most changed their sex practices, or reduced the number of partners with whom they copulated" (16). Michael expresses his disinterest in sex the night he meets a gay teenager named Wilfred in The Coleherne, a real-life bar that was once a popular London hangout for homosexual men in leather. When Wilfred propositions the much older gay man, suggesting that they go somewhere for "a go," Michael responds, "Thanks, but... I'm off the stuff for a while" (144). Michael's use of the word stuff in place of sex implies that physical contact with another man is like a self-destructive drug, often referred to in slang as the "hard stuff." However, Dean refutes similar drug-to-sex metaphors in his analysis of safe-sex education in *Beyond Sexuality*. He argues that while unsafe sex "appears as inconceivably self-destructive behavior" as smoking, drinking and drug abuse, a person could get infected with HIV from a single sexual encounter instead of the prolonged practice usually needed for alcohol, cigarettes and drugs to cause harm (139).

For self-preservation, whether to protect himself from AIDS or the emotions brought on by the death of his lover, Michael views sex as something that should be avoided entirely despite the obvious

pleasure associated with it. He admits that he has not been horny lately, a notion that makes little sense to the carefree Wilfred. The teenager, a sexually charged character who talks openly about masturbation and wanting a one-night stand, asks Michael why he would visit The Coleherne if he were not interested in a sexual tryst. In *Babycakes*, AIDS is confined to the United States and has yet to cross the pond. London's thriving gay community in Earl's Court is untouched by the virus, and free of death and paranoia, men cruise gay bars that remind Michael of San Francisco's Castro Street. Maupin, who lived only a few blocks from the Castro in the eighties, portrays London as having a pre-AIDS nightlife in which homosexual men dressed in tank tops and leather have no fear of casual sex: "Disco Madness (circa 1978) was alive and well in Earl's Court" (143). It is still Swinging London, as the city was dubbed when Michael visited the first time as a teenager. The attitudes of free love from the sixties and seventies remain strong in Maupin's 1983 London. The British belief is that there is nothing to fear with promiscuous sex, and sex lives go on as normal. An announcement for a charity garage sale, posted on a bulletin board inside one of the bars Michael visits in Earl's Court, suggests that the only segment of the British gay community in need of help is deaf lesbians.

The AIDS epidemic was slower to spread through England than America, which explains the lack of public fear in London for the virus upon Michael's arrival in the spring of 1983. In *History of AIDS* (1993), Mirko D. Grmek notes that there were 267 confirmed AIDS cases in Europe by October 1983, with most of them being reported in France (42). Although Grmek states that that number would multiply over the years, it was low in comparison to the 3,000 AIDS cases reported in America by the end of 1983 (41). In a 1987 interview with CBS Radio's Don Swaim, Maupin agreed that AIDS brought an "underline sense of horror" to major cities such as San Francisco and New York. He noted that the epidemic resulted in "enormous behavior modification," specifically in terms of more gay men practicing safe sex: "I have nothing but pride for San Francisco and my neighborhood in the Castro because we've literally been taking care of our sick and dying for five years now." However, in the London that he portrays in *Babycakes*, the gay community has yet to learn about the epidemic and there is no reason for the promiscuity of Disco Madness to end.

Maupin's London is dramatically different than what Michael left behind in San Francisco, where the epidemic has produced a paranoia that has caused gay men to abandon some of their usual hangout

spots. The Check 'n Cruise, where homosexuals left their coats and shopping bags before "prowling the streets of the ghettos" for new sexual partners, has closed and disappeared (81). In his volunteer work at the AIDS hotline, Michael hears stories about landlords evicting gay men and lovers rejecting each other, making sex even more difficult for homosexuals. Furthermore, a waiter confesses to Michael that he no longer frequents Folsom Street, which has long been the center for San Francisco's gay leather community, for fear of contracting the virus that killed his ex-lover's lover. The waiter, also named Michael, says, "It really scares me. ... I've given up Folsom Street completely. I only go to sweater bars now" (21). While it would be a stretch to assume that the waiter has decided to refrain entirely from sex like Michael, his comment suggests that he does not seek the same type of sexual partner as he did prior to AIDS. His words also illustrate the suggestion that people surrender their freedoms for what they perceive will be the good of everyone during an epidemic.

The waiter does not sacrifice his right to have sex, but instead stops visiting the leather bars where he went to look for sex. He believes more upscale sweater bars are safe from AIDS, though as Maupin notes, "Michael would have told him that disease was no respecter of cashmere" (20). Sex becomes equated more with death than pleasure, an argument that Sontag makes in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. She suggests that "cancerphobia taught us the fear of a polluting environment; now we have the fear of polluting people that AIDS anxiety inevitably communicates" (73). Both Michaels have a fear of sex built on having seen their former lovers die from AIDS, which Sontag notes is "understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity" (26).

AIDS is not a crisis, or even known about, in London. Without knowledge of the virus, gay men are free to seek out promiscuous sex as usual. When Michael asks Wilfred if he knows about AIDS, the teenager shakes his head. Michael responds, "It's this thing that gay men are getting in the States. It's a severe immune deficiency" (160). Wilfred admits to having possibly read about AIDS, but he does not recognize the disease by its well-known acronym. Additionally, Michael's frank description of Jon's physical deterioration from a big man to a "ghost, this pitiful, pitiful thing" prior to his death does not discourage Wilfred from trying to get the older man in bed (160). It is apparent that the teenager has not been scared away from intimacy by the site of men dying of AIDS. Michael responds, "I just don't feel like being with anyone in that way. ... I'm not afraid of sex or anything. I just haven't been horny for a long

time" (160). Only a few pages later, though, Michael provides an answer that suggests that he has had sexual urges but is fearful of breaking his celibacy in the early days of AIDS. After being hit by his father for having a pornographic magazine with pictures of naked men, Wilfred asks Michael if he has ever purchased one. Michael answers, "Oh, sure. It's pretty popular at home right now. It's a lot safer to have sex with a magazine" (170). His response proposes that gay men in San Francisco have not lost their sexual desires entirely, but instead choose to partake in masturbation over sex to remain AIDS-free.

Heterosexual characters get to enjoy passionate, impulsive sex in *Babycakes*, while gay characters are forced to abandon their sexual identities to maintain their health. For Brian and Mary Ann, the married couple whose relationship comprises one of the novel's major subplots, the most pressing issue in their lives is whether to conceive a child. Life for straight characters continues mostly uninterrupted by AIDS, and they keep having sex during the early days of the epidemic. The virus goes unmentioned in the bedroom until after sex, when Brian tells his wife how he punched a waiter earlier in the day for suggesting that Brian had contracted AIDS from eating a French fry off "a faggot's plate" (27). It is worth noting that the only sex scenes that Maupin describes involve heterosexual pairs—Mary Ann and Brian or Mary Ann and Simon, the British Naval officer she has an extramarital affair with in the hopes of getting pregnant.

Meanwhile, intimacy amongst homosexuals in *Babycakes* is portrayed as something to be feared, or at least taken with much caution. This sense of reservation is illustrated in an advertisement that Michael notices in an issue of the gay magazine *The Advocate* for jewelry that features the phrase "I'M SAFE." The ad reads:

Dating is growing more and more complicated every day. Herpes, AIDS ... If you are socially active it can be awkward and embarrassing to ask. How do you let someone you're interested in know that YOU ARE SAFE? Now you can let others know simply by wearing your 'I'M SAFE' ring or pendent. (81)

The "I'M SAFE" ring is like a Scarlet Letter for homosexuals, except in the eighties the sign does not expose an adulterer but rather serves as a public announcement that a gay man is AIDS-free. In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Sontag argues that anyone who contracted AIDS early in the epidemic was revealed as being either gay or an intravenous drug user and "a member of a certain 'risk group,' a community of pariahs" (25). She notes that the virus "flushes out an identity that might have remained



hidden from neighbors, job-mates, family, friends" (25). The "I'M SAFE" ring does not expose a gay man's sexuality to the public, but instead sets up a misguided culture in which people who do not wear their clean bill of health on their hands could be perceived as AIDS patients. Therefore, the dating pool for homosexuals in San Francisco could be reduced, making it more difficult for men looking to avoid promiscuity to find serious relationships and safe sex.

In a dynamic that now seems outdated considering the universal spread of AIDS, Maupin portrays condoms as something used only by gay men to prevent infection. In his depiction of San Francisco, heterosexual characters continue to have sex without the hassle of contraception or the paranoia of testing HIV-positive. Two scenes, one early in the novel and one toward the end, illustrate the contrasting views of condoms for heterosexuals and homosexuals. During a camping trip in Death Valley, three gay men are surprised when informed that someone brought condoms to the desert, even though it was apparent that couples were going to have sex. Douglas, one of the gay campers, shrugs and responds, "They don't call it a crisis for nothin'" (50). This promotion of safe sex is abandoned later in the novel when Simon suspects that Mary Ann's rationale for having an affair with him was for reproductive purposes only. Simon believes rightfully so that it was merely an attempt by her to get pregnant without informing her husband Brian that he is infertile. When Simon confronts Mary Ann about his suspicions, he mentions how she never mentioned "one word about contraception," which he finds odd from a woman trying to get pregnant. Mary Ann responds, "I think you don't know shit about romance, Simon. That's what I think. What did you expect me to do? Ask you if had a rubber or something?" (258-59). Maupin sets up a case in which condoms are portrayed as a life-saver for homosexual men while being nothing more than a nuisance that interferes with spontaneous, romantic flings between heterosexuals. With the use of condoms, sex between gay men, even in committed relationships, is stripped of another layer of intimacy.

In his 1987 interview with Swaim, Maupin said he and his gay friends in San Francisco had been practicing safe sex for five years, "long before the American press decided to say anything whatsoever about the AIDS epidemic." He noted that gay men in his adopted hometown had modified their sexual behaviors, creating a culture where other homosexuals "are now coming to find out what to do in the [AIDS] crisis." However, the San Francisco that Maupin portrays in his literature is by no means a utopia.

Furthermore, *Babycakes* and other early works of literary AIDS set up a dynamic in which gay men are likely to contract the virus unless they either abstain from sex or save it for monogamous relationships (which are portrayed as boring and impractical for gay men raised on sexual liberation).

Following the opening credits of *Parting Glances* (1986), Robert (John Bolger) initiates sex by sneaking up on his longtime lover Michael (Richard Ganoung) as they enter their New York apartment. They are a sexually active couple that still has passionate encounters in bed and in the shower, with shoes kicked off and clothes tossed around the room. However, Sherwood, who died of AIDS-related complications four years after the release of the low-budget film, makes it clear that Robert is unsatisfied in his relationship with Michael. They are an “Ozzie and Harriet” couple, a term that AIDS writer Paul Reed is credited in *And The Band Played On* with coining to describe gay men who settled in monogamous relationships during the AIDS epidemic (377). Robert admits to Michael that he engineered his two-year transfer to Africa for work because their relationship had “gotten too settled, predictable” and “a break” could help break the doldrums. Boring as their relationship might be, it has, in a way, insulated them from the epidemic that will soon claim Nick (Buscemi), Michael’s former lover.

Robert and Michael are AIDS-free, and despite their active sexual lives, they have not put themselves at risk of getting infected by remaining faithful to one another. When Michael admits that he has never had an affair, Betty (Yolande Bavan), a middle-aged socialite, responds with a joke that plays off the suggestion by Maupin and Engel that gay men altered their sexual practices following the arrival of AIDS. She says, “Gay men in this town have become very proper.” Nick, on the other hand, has AIDS at the start of the film, presumably while out enjoying the New York nightlife. He tells his father in a video will that he is recording that he stopped having sex “cold” when AIDS started “going around.” It just was not soon enough; he says he had already been infected. However, he is insistent that he was not a careless, promiscuous gay man—a “gonzo, kamikaze dick” as he puts it— prior to contracting the virus. The validity of monogamy as a practical practice for homosexual men is also questioned in *Babycakes*.

Michael tells Wilfred that he and Jon had a relationship in which they were free to date and have sex with other men while they were away from each other because of work. But they no longer slept together. Michael states, “The sex wore off. We were too much like brothers. It felt ... incestuous” (213). Sex is removed from their relationship, creating an almost passionless—even celibate— arrangement

similar to the one in *Longtime Companion* with Willy and Fuzzy after the arrival of AIDS. However, Michael makes it clear that he and Jon remained sexual individuals separate of each other, adding that they maintained a relationship that other gay men would know as married. He says, “We had great sex with other people and great companionship with each other. It wasn’t what I had planned on, but it seemed to work better than anything else” (213-14). However, Jon’s need to go outside his relationship for sex—to “hang around with the pissy queens,” as Michael says— seemingly condemns him to a death sentence (83). These unflattering representations of monogamy stand in contrast to today’s gay culture, in which homosexual couples are legally able to marry in nine states, as of March 2012. Several other state legislatures have considered passing similar measures.

Same-sex marriage, which seemed like wishful thinking at the time that Maupin was writing *Babycakes* in the early eighties, is now a polarizing political issue that has rapidly made its way before the U.S. Supreme Court. After four decades of sexual freedom that produced a reluctance to settle down, many gay men have rejected promiscuity in favor of domesticity. In fact, Maupin married his partner, Christopher Turner, the founder of the gay dating website *Daddyhunt.com*, in October 2008, a month before California voters passed the controversial Proposition 8 ballot measure that banned same-sex marriage. As Maupin stated in a 2011 article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*: “Elton John has a 'civil partner'; I have a husband.” However, gay men partnering up seemed less ideal and far from an issue worth taking to the Supreme Court in the eighties. Monogamy flew in the face of the gay liberation movement that homosexual men fought for and earned following the Stonewall riots.

In *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, Delany portrays himself like other homosexual men incapable of living within the confines of monogamy. He confirms this notion during one of the many diary-like entries that he intersperses throughout his fantasy novel. Afraid that he is experiencing several of the telltale symptoms of AIDS, Delany visits a doctor, who asks for an estimate on the number of sexual contacts the novelist typically has in a year. Delany responds, “Till now... maybe three hundred on the average. That’s not counting my steady relationship, which can vary from three times a week to once every two weeks. We’re not monogamous” (269). Delany’s declaration that gay men are not prone to monogamy goes along with Engel’s suggestion in *The Epidemic* that some homosexuals in the eighties considered “traditional views of monogamous, or at least near monogamous sex” as a “colonialist

hangover, whose time, like that of slavery and human sacrifice, has passed" (13). As self-destructive as promiscuity might be, particularly in the midst of an epidemic that has traditionally equated sex with death, the practice of it seems to be the norm in Delany's gritty, violent portrayal of New York.

He writes, "When sex is as available as it is in New York, monogamous gay relationships tend to be the exception" (237). Despite his admission to having hundreds of sexual encounters per year, Delany should be viewed as a highly unconventional celibate figure in *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*. He does not practice abstinence like Michael in *Babycakes*, though they share a similar fear of sex in the midst of AIDS. Furthermore, Delany admits to having had "an active gay life" even while in a long-term heterosexual relationship with poet Marilyn Hacker (215). However, he notes that his sexual encounters include oral sex, never penetration. When Joey, a john who supports his street life by having sex with men for money, asks Delany why he has not died from AIDS, Delany confirms his refusal to have traditional sex: "I don't use needles. And I don't take it up the ass, period" (365). The remark signifies that Sontag's argument that AIDS has made gay men view sex as a form of suicide is very much in play in Delany's sword and sorcery story. He has a belief that he is protecting himself from AIDS by refusing anal sex, though individuals who give and receive oral sex are still susceptible to contracting HIV.

In *A Sense of Wonder*, Tucker notes that Delany "has been called irresponsible and even 'a murderer' because of his arguments" that more research is needed to determine the risk of contracting HIV through unprotected oral sex (272-273). Tucker argues that Delany's AID-influenced novels *The Mad Man* (1994) as well as his essays and speeches on the epidemic "should not be construed as declaring unprotected oral sex to be safe; they are, respectively, discourse-critiques that argue for more research" (273). However, in the appendix to *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, Delany suggests that gay men refrain from anal sex—at least unprotected anal sex: "Ass-fucking is your biggest risk. Don't take it or give it, to men or women, without a condom—ever!" (363). As Dean explores in *Beyond Sexuality*, issues of safe sex and the refusal by some gay men to practice it go beyond simply the notion that sex without a condom is more intense.

With sexuality serving as the basis of their identity, Dean argues that gay men don't "take sex lightly," as one might assume considering the promiscuity that occurs within the community (166). He notes that homosexuals place exceptionally high expectations on sex, and that the fantasy of having

unprotected anal sex “suggests the physical barrier” of condoms “may stand for other obstacles of connection” in their lives (150). Dean argues that “by seeking recognition, narcissistic gratification, community membership, and even ideological affiliation through sex, we use sex as a medium for accessing what we’re having difficulty obtaining elsewhere—the Other’s love” (167). At the same time, Dean suggests that many of today’s homosexuals do not dread contracting AIDS, but rather view HIV-positive men as being “gayer” than those who are uninfected: “Unfortunately, seropositivity has become the final ingredient in a complete gay identity” (147). The high regard that some homosexuals hold men with HIV has led to a sexual fetish known as “bug chasing,” in which men actively search for infected partners with the hope of contracting the virus through intercourse. Though not as drastic, celibacy is regarded by some within the gay community as a more unnatural practice than safe sex or monogamy, especially in the midst of a gay liberation movement that encouraged bed hopping.

Nonetheless, Delany confesses to a female friend that he is willing to become as monogamous as possible for him in attempt to remain AIDS-free. He is unable to ignore his sexual desires entirely and live a celibate lifestyle, but a fear of contracting AIDS causes Delany to modify his behavior. He tells his friend that he would “put some sharp curtailments on sex outside my main relationship” (237). He adds that he has been “very careful” since February of 1982 (237). It is worth noting, though, that Delany contradicts this notion of self-control in the novel’s appendix, when he states that his “oral-receptive encounters” numbered “between 150 and 300 a year” up until 1990 (366). While monogamy is an outdated, ineffective practice for some gay men, including Delany, promiscuity makes this same group vulnerable to contracting HIV. It is presented as a Catch-22 for gay men in the eighties.

In *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, Delany does not provide graphic details about his own sexual encounters as he does in his autobiography *The Motion of Light In Water* (1988). In one hookup described by Delany, he writes that “on the way up to the Bronx, when I got off at the 175<sup>th</sup> Street station, I decided to stop in and see what sort of sexual activity was going on in the subway john there” (99). Delany presents his sex life in more general terms in *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*. He offers portions of conversations with friends that include him declaring how many men he has been with in a year. He stresses that promiscuity remains an essential part of the gay lifestyle, no matter how unreasonable it might seem during a global epidemic.

Delany argues that AIDS officials attempting to track the number of sexual partners that a promiscuous gay man could have in a single year are extremely low in their estimates. He suggests that trying to put an exact number on promiscuity in the early eighties is impossible, a point he stresses during a scene set in July 1983. When Peter, a volunteer at the AIDS hotline, mentions that he does not know anyone in his personal circle who has contracted AIDS, Delany surprises himself with an outburst that shows he is willing to insert himself—even as a character—into the debate about gay sex. He suggests it is easy to have more than three hundred sexual contacts a year considering that “you can easily have three contacts involving semen” just stopping by a movie theater on a Tuesday night or a public bathroom after work on Friday. He tells Peter that “you know as well as I do, you can keep up an eight-hour-a-day job, an active social life, have three hundred contacts, and not even be late for dinner” (215). He adds that the “straight people dealing with AIDS ... simply have no notion of the amount of sexual activity that’s available to a gay male in this city!” (215). Not all of the gay characters in *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* welcome the opportunity to have spontaneous sex.

Along with Delany’s refusal to engage in anal sex, a friend named Ted swears to become celibate after recalling a story in which he nearly picked up a stranger. Ted admits to being horny, but ends his discussion with Delany by emphatically stating, “I’ll tell you, Chip. I’m not doing anything with anybody anymore. This AIDS has got me really upset!” (268). Ted wants to deny himself sex. This discussion is preceded in the novel by a scene in which others attempt to all but take sex away from gay men. It also provides one of the clearest examples that Delany understands one of the central arguments of Sontag’s *AIDS and Its Metaphors*: Elaborate metaphors—which often borrow from science fiction terms—can be used to conceptualize AIDS.

The Bridge of Lost Desire stands as the main structure in Nevèrÿon and the pathway that takes those barbarians looking for reckless fun to the city’s seedy subculture. Characters seek out their guilty pleasures by crossing to the dark side of the bridge, where prostitutes wait for costumers and homosexuals have random sexual encounters. It is figuratively a gateway to “deviant” sex. Delany describes the scene that awaits barbarians at one end of the bridge like a prehistoric version of Pleasure Island in Disney’s *Pinocchio*: it is a place where boys can go to act out their fantasies without any regard for the consequences that might come with them. A school head master tells Toplin, a gay barbarian

student who has faced rumors that he sells his body to men, that “we cannot have our students running about the Bridge of Lost Desire like a bunch of barbarian ragamuffins, doing things even a barbarian would hesitate over!” (185-186). Delany not so subtly presents the bridge as a metaphor for the bathhouses that sprung up in San Francisco as a response to the gay liberation movement of the late sixties and seventies. From his place in New York, Delany seems to be commenting on the Castro neighborhood that Maupin is so familiar with.

As with the Bridge of Lost Desire, bathhouses offered gay men the freedom, selection and anonymity to have multiple sexual encounters whenever they wanted them. There was not as much a loss of desire at the bathhouses, but rather a “dehumanization of sex,” as Shilts puts it (58). However, when AIDS hit San Francisco in the eighties, bathhouses became a symbol of sexual freedom taken to excessive and dangerous heights, triggering a push to have them shut down as a form of public protection. Engel notes that “the bathhouses, correctly or not, were identified by public health advocates and gay leaders as the sexual nexus of the communities, and thus attracted the attention as the transmission point for AIDS” (15-16). Many within the gay community saw the push to get bathhouses closed as a fight against their sexuality and an attempt to limit the amount of sex they had. This attitude was stated in a protest sign that, as Engel reports, a person brought to a 1985 civic meeting in San Francisco: “Today the Tubs, Tomorrow Your Bedrooms” (19).

The Bridge of Lost Desire as a metaphor for the bathhouses is made overt during a confrontation that begins when a barbarian man begins swinging a stoneworker’s hammer at the structure. He ignores a joyous crowd gathered on the bridge and proceeds to crack the wall with each strike. His intentions are to destroy the bridge, which he perceives as the primary site for gay sex and therefore the source of the AIDS-like disease. Delany notes that the first person to observe the vandalism is an older gay actor, offering perhaps a nod to the fact that the theatre was initially regarded as the leading producer of literary AIDS. When confronted by the actor, the hammer-wielding barbarian states that he is tearing down the bridge—an “overground cesspool”—in an attempt to “protect myself and the other good people of this city from this sickness that kills all who catch it” (264). The barbarian continues, “This is where you all come! You can be sure, here is where you give it to one another, like a deadly secret you whisper in the dark from this one to that” (264). As the crowd cheers around them, seemingly oblivious to destruction going

on nearby, the barbarian and the actor engage in an argument that mirrors some of the rhetoric that came out of the heated debate over the closure of bathhouses in San Francisco.

The actor argues that he would have already taken a hammer to the wall if its destruction would prevent the spread of the barbarian form of AIDS. He states, "You can't take that on yourself ... to protect us from whatever foolishness you think we indulge, no matter how deadly" (264). His argument remains that gay men, regardless of if they are barbarians or presumably San Francisco residents in the eighties, should be free to have sex wherever they want and with whomever they choose despite the well-known health risks. The barbarian counters, "Aren't I doing you fools a favor in the bargain, those too stupid and indifferent to take up a mallet beside me?" (264). The barbarian suggests he, like health officials who called for the closing of bathhouses, knows what is best for homosexuals. In a twist, Delany reveals that the barbarian did not lose a male family member to the fictitious disease as the actor thought, but rather his young lover. The barbarian is, in fact, a gay man who believes he can put an end to the practice of promiscuous sex, which has long been the cornerstone of the gay identity, by destroying the site of such encounters. He wants to literally shatter Engel's notion of sex as a "community builder."

In the closing scene of *Longtime Companion*, which has been discussed in other texts, Willy, his lover Fuzzy and their straight female friend Lisa (Mary-Louise Parker) stroll along the beach while discussing the impact the AIDS epidemic has had in its first decade. At one point in the conversation, Fuzzy, who has repeatedly rejected Willy's sexual advances in the bedroom, asks, "Do you ever wonder if they ever do find a cure if people would go back to sleeping around?" The image on the front on Fuzzy's T-shirt is of two men locked in a passionate kiss and underneath it is the phrase "Read My Lips," which President George H. Bush made famous while pledging to Americans that he would not raise taxes during the 1988 Republican Convention. Willy, looking clearly annoyed by Fuzzy's hypothetical question, responds: "I just think whether people do or don't sleep around or what they do, it's just not the point. I'm sick of hearing people pontificate about it." Early literary AIDS writers undoubtedly did their share of pontificating through their work in the eighties. However, as Willy's remark suggests, it is all just part of the never-ending discourse on gay sexuality, which only became more complex with the arrival of AIDS.



## The Safe Sex Position: A Denial of the 'Faggot' Figure In African-American AIDS Literature

Unconvinced by her husband's denial that he has never had sex with another man, Jo (Janet Jackson), a domineering magazine editor in writer-director Tyler Perry's film *For Colored Girls* (2010), asks Carl (Omari Hardwick) if he is gay. With his shaved head and muscular physique, Carl embodies a traditional representation of strong black masculinity, made popular by the militant Black Panthers of the sixties and violent blacksploitation films of the seventies. Like Jo, Carl is a character created by Perry for the loosely based film version of Ntozake Shange's experimental play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975), which is told through spoken word poetry presented by seven female characters.<sup>5</sup> While rape, promiscuity and domestic violence are issues addressed in the play, homosexuality in the African American community goes unmentioned until the film version released thirty-five years later.

Carl is nothing like stereotypical portrayals of flamboyant gay black men, referred to as "snap divas" in *Tongues Untied* (1989), Marlon Riggs' documentary about black queer culture. Carl does not "sashay across the movie screen" or use double entendres for laughs like black "eunuchs," which Riggs calls these openly gay characters in his essay "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen" (155). Still, Jo confronts her husband about his sexuality, asking him, "How do you marry a woman and then turn around and let a man bend you over?" Carl's defiant response—"Ain't nobody bending me over"—confirms Jo's suspicions about his homosexual affairs and illustrates a notion often presented in African American literature: to preserve a sense of masculinity, it is imperative to some black men that they are the ones not being bent over during anal sex. "Real" men have power in the bedroom, and as long as these African American characters can deny that they are the "faggot" figure in a homosexual relationship, they can assume that they are not at risk of contracting AIDS.

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<sup>5</sup> *For Colored Girls* received lackluster reviews from film critics who felt Tyler Perry failed in his attempt to turn Ntozake Shange's fragmented play into a cohesive plot. *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert wrote, "Shange's award-winning play is justly respected, but I'm not sure it's filmable, and I'm pretty sure it wasn't a wise choice for Perry."

In these texts, projecting masculinity is perceived as a better form of protection than condoms and unprotected anal sex is safe for the “dominant” man on top. This notion suggests that the only African American men who die of AIDS are those flamboyant “queens” who do not attempt to hide their homosexuality, like Angel from Jonathan Larson’s Broadway musical *Rent* (1994). It is worth noting that while other characters have contracted HIV, Angel is the only one to succumb to it during the play, leaving the more masculine gay men to mourn his death along with his lesbian and heterosexual friends. Snap divas and heterosexual women tend to be the only African American characters whose health deteriorates because of AIDS, further giving the impression that the virus is somehow tied to masculinity. Kyle proudly refers to himself as a “faggot” in E. Lynn’s Harris *Invisible Life* trilogy, and in turns dies because of his promiscuity. In *For Colored Girls*, Jo is bothered by a persistent cough, which the audience later learns is caused by HIV, while her husband appears healthy despite being the one who infected her with the virus. Jo even coughs moments before revealing to Carl that, because of his secret homosexual flings, she is HIV-positive. Still, Carl is adamant that he is not gay even as he admits to enjoying sex with men. To the end, he presents himself as a strong African American man who should be immune to AIDS for no other reason than he is traditionally masculine.

Carl insists that he does not cuddle with another man in bed or hold a man’s hand as they walk down the street. He says, “That’s gay, okay. That ain’t me. ... I’m a man everyday of the week. I’m a man. I’m just a man who enjoys having sex with another man, Jo.” He asserts that he is still a “man” as he partakes in homosexual extramarital affairs that, while physical in nature, do not involve any form intimacy. His rationale is that he is not gay because he avoids being intimate with the random men he has sex with in parked cars and in places around town. Handholding is an act reserved for those times when he accompanies Jo to the theater, though even then he cannot help but suggestively make eye contact with an attractive male audience member.

In his essay “From Beyond The Down Low: Sex And Denial In Black America,” Keith Boykin suggests that some African American men reject labeling themselves as “gay” or “bisexual” because they “equate those terms with white men” (341). They want to establish their own identities outside of a perceived “racially insensitive white world” (341). However, Carl’s refusal to call himself gay is more about rejecting the attitudes of a traditionally homophobic African American community, including his own,

than establishing an individual identity. He would rather blend into a black macho culture and avoid doing or saying anything that would expose his true identity. His denials have consequences, though. Jo reveals to her husband that she has contracted HIV from him before storming out of the room, her wedding ring left on top of her HIV test results: "When I get back, I want you gone and take your HIV with you." Jo's declaration makes it clear that the HIV that is causing her health to decline does not belong to her; it's Carl's virus and his secret gay lifestyle that has put her in harm's way. The scene provides a dramatization of what many have discussed as a harmful byproduct of bisexual black men living on the "down low."

While Boykin argues that it is hard to create a universally accepted definition for the "down low," the slang term, known also by the abbreviation "DL," generally refers to African American men who are in relationships with women while maintaining secret lives in which they have gay sex on the side. Harris' essay "What I Did For Love," a friend of the novelist defines the down low as "just brotha's who can't admit they love men's asses and a little dick every now and then" (425). While the down low is more complex than that, it has been cited as one factor for the explosion of AIDS cases in the African American community over the past decade. Despite composing only fourteen percent of the United States' population in 2009, African Americans accounted for forty-four percent of all new domestic HIV infections, according to information provided on the website for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The same data revealed the disproportion of African Americans contracting HIV to Caucasians, with black men estimated to be more than six times more likely to get infected than white men. It is not surprising then that Phill Wilson, founder of the Black AIDS Institute, called AIDS "virtually a black disease by every measure" in the ABC News special *Out of Control: AIDS in Black America* (2006).

Talk about the down low is nothing new, but the term became more mainstream in the early 2000s, with media outlets reporting on its possible contributions to the spread of AIDS. In his 2003 article "Double Lives On The Down Low" for *The New York Times Magazine*, Benoit Denizet-Lewis suggests that the down low is a product of "a black culture that deems masculinity and fatherhood as a black man's primary responsibility—and homosexuality as a white man's perversion." However, Boykin questions the media's obsession with the down low as well as the suggestions that bisexual black men have infected many unsuspecting heterosexual black women. He writes:

To some in the media, the down low seemed the missing link to explain the AIDS epidemic in the black community: HIV was spreading more rapidly among black women than in almost any other demographic group, and if these women were unknowingly having sex with black men on the down low, that could explain the overwhelming problem. (333)

Boykin suggests that black women have been “deputized as down low detectives,” reading books that teach them what signs to look for to determine if their boyfriends or husbands are engaging in sexual affairs with men (334). Harris’ novels, particularly his popular *Invisible Life* trilogy, would be included in this canon of down low books. The novelist, who was open about his bisexuality prior to his death in 2009 at age fifty-four, helped make visible black men who are in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. He also presented an affluent urban world populated with different types of gay characters, pitting stereotypical snap divas with masculine men on the down low. They have sexual flings and business relationships with one another, and for several characters, maintaining a double life is too much to handle and come out of the closet. However, as I will discuss later in this chapter, Kyle, who is open about his homosexuality, is the only major gay character to die from AIDS in the first two books of the trilogy. Other characters stand around and watch Kyle succumb to the virus, much in the same way that the flamboyant Angel is alone in his death. In doing so, it could be argued that Harris furthers the notion shared by one of his misguided characters that only those gay men who lack traditional masculine traits open up themselves to contracting AIDS. But Harris’ view of the epidemic, as expressed in his novels, is much broader.

In his memoir *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted* (2003), Harris states that the concept for his debut novel *Invisible Life* (1991) came after he watched an episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* on closeted bisexual men. All but one of the male panelists were white, and the lone African American guest was “the stereotypical fierce, finger-snapping queen” who would have been easy to identify as gay (228). As Harris notes, “After the show, several of my closest gay friends called to talk about it and how women didn’t have a clue when it came to spotting closeted gay men” (228). *Invisible Life* is Harris’ attempt at informing those African American women in beauty shops who read his novel about the possibility of unknowingly contracting AIDS from their bisexual boyfriends and husbands. The conflicted characters *in Invisible Life* are more difficult to identify as bisexual than the guest who appeared on *Oprah*.

In his article “Ralph Ellison’s ‘Invisible Man’: Invisibility, Race, and Homoeroticism from Frederick Douglas to E. Lynn Harris,” Michael Hardin argues that black men who attempt to masquerade their homosexual identities are no different than those biracial men and women in previous generations who attempted to “pass” themselves as Caucasian to avoid discrimination. Of course, there was also a sexual fear with “passing,” in that a white woman would unknowingly get intimate with a light-skinned African American man. Hardin refers to the down low, this new deception, as “homosexual ‘passing’” (114). The down low allows a gay black man to avoid being regarded as an outcast two times over; he can be in a relationship with a woman while keeping his homosexual identity a secret in a way that he cannot hide his race. Hardin argues:

The real problem arises when one defines homosexuality as a product of ‘white’ society; one cannot express homoerotic desire and be ‘black.’ Even within the Harlem Renaissance, David Blackmore notes, ‘While ‘fairies’ were tolerated and even considered amusing because they were seen as ‘third sexes,’ more traditionally ‘masculine’ gay men were considered far more threatening to the Harlem social order and therefore forced either to repress their homosexuality or to live double lives. (98-99)

Riggs expands on Hardin’s argument, writing that he is a “Negro faggot”: “Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black. A strong, proud, ‘Afrocentric’ black man is resolutely heterosexual, not even bisexual” (152). Riggs argues that the homophobic attitudes in the African American community stem from a desperate need by some black men struggling with their identities to find “an Other” within the community to measure themselves against and “by comparison seem strong, adept, empowered [and] superior” to them (152-153). Fearful of being perceived as inferior, men on the down low play into what could be described as masculinity as performance. It involves deception, like a magic trick meant to sell others in the black community on the illusion that a closeted gay man is a strong, masculine brother instead of a “faggot” to ridicule. By hiding their homoerotic desires behind closed doors, these gay or bisexual black men can maintain the perception that they are straight, allowing them to avoid the hatred directed at openly gay men.

As a history teacher, who is referred to by the pseudonym R. Dioneaux, tells prominent black queer theorist E. Patrick Johnson in *Sweet Tea* (2008), “If we’re going to hate quote faggots, then don’t be surprised if, by social evolution, that these faggots are going to mimic what you say should be a successful brother” (376). The mimicry goes as far as men dating and marrying women, who are either

unaware of their partners' secret homoerotic desires or choose not to accept that they exist. The false identity of the down low man is built on projecting a powerful, often hyper-heterosexual persona that matches the kind of traditional lifestyle that those in the black community expect. Harris writes in *Invisible Life*, "The women they lived with usually had no idea of their secret lives because of their great sexual prowess. These women thought there was no way these men would mess around with a sissy or a punk" (171). Characters such as Carl in *For Colored Girls*, Abdul in Sapphire's novel *The Kid* (2011) and Basil Henderson in Harris' *Invisible Life* and its first sequel *Just As I Am* (1994) would never view themselves as sissies or punks. To do so would shatter the macho images they have constructed for themselves and dispel the notion that their over-the-top personas have made them immune to HIV. Physically fit and braggadocios, these characters work under the assumption that only "faggots" are at risk of getting infected. They are unconcerned about contracting the virus, feeling that they can have sex indiscriminately with both men and women as long as they act masculine, take part in gay-bashing and never admit to being the "receiver" of anal sex.

With the rapid spread of AIDS through the black community, a fallacy arose that the virus is somehow tied to a lack of masculinity. After Earvin "Magic" Johnson announced in 1991 that he was retiring from the Los Angeles Lakers after testing positive for HIV, some African Americans had trouble believing that he contracted the virus through heterosexual sex. A rumor spread that Johnson was gay, seemingly in attempt by some people to reconcile the notion that the iconic black male figure was HIV-positive. They wondered whether Johnson must have engaged in homosexual sex, and therefore be less of a "man" than his former Lakers teammates, if he contracted HIV. The day after his retirement announcement, Johnson insisted that he was straight during an appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show*. In "Magic Johnson and HIV: The Lasting Impact of Nov. 7, 1991," *TIME Magazine* reporter Sean Gregory notes that Johnson's declaration that he is not gay caused the show's live audience to cheer wildly, "as if Johnson had just won another championship, or announced he'd been cured." Johnson helped change perceptions about HIV, and it is no surprise that African American novelists who released AIDS-related literature after 1991 focused on complex issues of black masculinity and its connection to the epidemic.

Certain bisexual characters believe that as long as they remain the "dominant one" instead of the "faggot" in a homosexual encounter, then they are immune to AIDS. This flawed thinking is based on the

notion that those gay men known as “tops,” who insert their penises into “bottoms” during anal sex, are incapable of contracting the virus. For black men who subscribe to this misconception, it very much matters as to who is “doing the bending” and who is being “bent over,” as Carl in *For Colored Girls* vocalizes. As long as they believe they are in the power position in the bedroom, they can continue to view themselves as masculine and not susceptible to contracting AIDS. As absurd as it might sound, there is some truth to their logic. The City Clinic, San Francisco’s only municipal sexually transmitted disease clinic, states on its website that a “top” is around ten times less likely to contract HIV during sexual intercourse than the “bottom,” though there is still a risk for both partners with or without the use of a condom. Being “on top” during anal sex, which can be perceived as the masculine position, is not a foolproof way to prevent the transmission of AIDS, as Carl and Abdul imply.

Even Harris admitted to temporarily subscribing to the belief that masculinity affected the possibility of contracting AIDS. In *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted*, Harris recalls a story in which he was shocked to learn that a friend named Deric was HIV-positive because “there was a feeling that the only people getting AIDS were bottoms (passive men), and from outward appearances and what I had picked up from conversations with Randy, there was nothing passive about Deric” (176). Harris admits that he, at one time, made a correlation between a gay man’s preferred sexual position and his chances of contracting HIV. His insinuation, though admittedly flawed, suggests that a segment of the black community had shifted its perceptions of AIDS. The belief in the early eighties that only gay white men were at risk of contracting the virus had shifted a decade later to one that suggested that only flamboyant gay men could get infected.

Addressing a topic such as AIDS can be tricky for African American authors given the homophobic attitudes prevalent in their community. It also does not help that, as Judith Laurance Pastore notes in *Confronting AIDS through Literature* (1993), “many African Americans are convinced that the AIDS virus was created by whites as part of a deliberate policy of genocide” (27). Social commentators point to the controversial Tuskegee syphilis experiment, in which six hundred black men with syphilis went untreated by health officials studying them, as a factor for the black community’s mistrust of the government and the belief by some that AIDS was developed to eradicate African Americans. The *Washington Post* reported in 2005 that more than one-quarter of the 500 African Americans surveyed

believed that AIDS was created by government scientists. Twelve percent of those surveyed held the belief that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) created AIDS and spread it.

Misconceptions about AIDS within the black community have led authors such as Harris and Sapphire to create texts that are undoubtedly didactic. Characters in Sapphire's highly successful debut novel *Push* (1996) and its sequel *The Kid* unknowingly share well-known fallacies about HIV, allowing the reader to see how such misinformation—particularly about the spread of the virus through anal and homosexual sex—can contribute to more African Americans getting infected. Harris, meanwhile, often ventures from his stories of successful black men and women in their twenties and thirties looking for love to give tutorials on AIDS education. Of course, male narrator Raymond Tyler Jr., not Harris himself, presents the information to the reader in *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*. As Raymond states in *Just As I Am*: “When Candance died, I didn't know a lot about AIDS. It hit her so hard and quick that there was little time for me to get AIDS educated” (212). Hoping to prevent more of the same, Harris attempts to educate his largely African American audience on AIDS by speaking through Raymond like a ventriloquist.

For Harris and Sapphire, AIDS education becomes a part of their New York-based stories, regardless of if their novels focus on black characters living in inner city projects (Sapphire) or affluent Manhattan (Harris). There is a sense of urgency to their writing, that after years of the media largely ignoring the AIDS crisis in the black community, it is up to African American novelists to shed light on the problem. Sapphire told National Public Radio in a 2009 interview that “I had the intense feeling that if I didn't write this book, no else would.” Much of the fiction written about AIDS has focused on white, gay men, who were hit hard when the epidemic began in the United States in the early Eighties. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998) updates Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) to have a gay white character battling AIDS instead of posttraumatic syndrome brought on by war. And with thousands of gay white men in San Francisco and New York City succumbing to the fatal virus, many of the first writers to address AIDS were gay white men, including Armistead Maupin with his popular *Tale of the City* series.

AIDS was considered a “white boy's disease,” as Raymond comments in *Invisible Life*, and those African American men who died from the virus in the early years of the virus had to be “snow queens” who only dated Caucasians (170). The African American voice was largely ignored in literary AIDS,



though openly gay science fiction author Samuel R. Delany addresses the epidemic in several of his novels. Still, in his essay “Eloquence and Epitaph: Black Nationalism and the Homophobic Impulse in Responses to the Death of Max Robinson,” Phillip Brian Harper suggests that discussion of homosexuality and bisexuality in the black community remains taboo. He argues:

Even today, response to AIDS in black communities is characterized by a profound silence regarding actual sexual practices, either heterosexual or homosexual, largely because of the suppression of talk about sexuality generally and about male homosexuality in particular that is enacted in black communities through the discourses that constitute them. (132)

As an unnamed female panelist suggests in *Out of Control: AIDS in Black America*, this practice of silence by African Americans dates back several “generations of abuse,” to a time when slaves did not tell when they were raped by their slave masters. There is no denying that the influence of Christianity on a religious black community has limited talk about AIDS.

Ministers have spoken openly against homosexuality, and they have been reluctant to address AIDS with their congregations. Harper suggests that black community leaders—and ministers in particular—have refused to acknowledge the existence of homosexuality: “Homosexuality ran counter to the basically conservative morality code of the black church, and to the image of the community” (113). After President Barack Obama voiced his support for same-sex marriage in May of 2012, some black church leaders expressed disappointment at such acceptance for something that had been condemned by many in the community.

However, *Washington Post* columnist Rahiel Tesfamariam wrote in an online column, published not long after Obama’s endorsement, that the president’s controversial support for gay marriage could help redefine the perception of masculinity in the black community: “Obama’s performance of black masculinity—thoughtful, adaptable, and even progressive (if we consider the stance on same-sex marriage)—has given many male rap artists the cover to explore the nuances of their manhood.” Nonetheless, rapper Jay-Z, who has emerged as a cultural icon and influential voice in the black community, expressed his support for same-sex marriage in spite of the possible backlash from hip hop fans. Novelists Sapphire and Harris have offered their own contributions to the complex discussion about black masculinity, particularly how it relates to AIDS.

Both openly bisexual writers, they create chauvinistic male characters who go to great lengths to deny that they are homosexual in any way. These characters feel that their gay bashing and promiscuity with women will prevent them from being considered “faggots” and therefore shield them from contracting AIDS. Harris states in his memoir that *Invisible Life* came out of his attempt to document the “pain and job of being black and gay” (230). It was a subject that he had intimate knowledge of prior to his death, leaving many readers to wonder if Raymond, the successful attorney at the center of the *Invisible Life* trilogy, is a fictitious version of Harris<sup>6</sup>.

Sapphire has made no secret about the connection of her AIDS-related texts to reality. In her 2009 interview with NPR, she said her time as a remedial reading teacher in Harlem inspired *Push* about an overweight teenage girl named Precious who is twice impregnated by her father and contracts AIDS from him. Sapphire said a student told her that she had children with her father, grounding her novel in a bleak reality. *Push* highlights the lack of AIDS education in the black community, with Mary, Precious’ abusive mother on welfare, declaring that she could not have received AIDS from Precious’ father because we never had sex “in the ass” like “faggots” (86). Mary mistakenly believes that AIDS is transferred only through anal sex. Furthermore, when Precious is informed that her father died of AIDS, she wonders why she should care before realizing that she, too, could have the virus.

*The Kid* opens on the day of Precious’ funeral and several years after she learns of her HIV-positive test toward the end of *Push*. The story, which matches *Push* in its graphic, violent and often disturbing descriptions of sex, chronicles the early life of Precious’ second child as Abdul—also referred to as J.J. at times—goes from being a victim of sexual abuse to a sexual predator who struggles with his identity. However, Sapphire does not consider *The Kid*, which is dedicated to “the 16 million and still counting orphaned by HIV-AIDS,” to be a traditional sequel. In a July 2011 interview with SFWeekly.com, the author said *The Kid* is “a sequel in the sense it continues to look at the profound and devastating effects of AIDS on the African-American community.” While several characters from *Push* make an

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<sup>6</sup> In *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted*, Harris acknowledges that he borrowed from his own life while writing *Invisible Life*. For instance, Harris enjoyed an experience similar to an early scene in the novel, in which Raymond and Kelvin have a romantic time together in the snow. Harris writes, “In real life, a situation like this had happened with Mason and me after the fall semester. We had both returned to Fayetteville early so we could spend some time alone” (231).

appearance in *The Kid*, Precious' story is over with at the opening of the novel and the reader's attention turns to Abdul, whose struggle with poverty is far from inspirational like his mother's.

Abdul and Basil Henderson in Harris' *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am* are bisexual characters who, as black men living on the down low, create hyper-heterosexual personas that they believe will protect them from AIDS. They use their toned bodies in their professional lives; Abdul finds an outlet for his anger as an interruptive dancer while Basil feels a need to hide his homosexuality as a professional football player. They each freely use the term "faggot" to describe the boys and men they have sex with, allowing them to feel superior to their so-called weaker lovers and maintain a false sense of masculinity while longing for gay sex. They believe they hold the power in their gay relationships, and in their warped logic, this means they are incapable of being deemed "faggots" no matter how many men they get intimate with. Furthermore, both characters have sex with random women, feeling that such promiscuity, viewed highly by some in the black community, will confirm that they are unquestionably straight. They are oblivious to the realization that their homoerotic desires, which they try to deny, put them in close contact with AIDS.

Despite engaging in homosexual acts, first as a boy in a Catholic orphanage and later as a promising dancer looking for money and acceptance, Abdul rejects any suggestion that he might be gay. He is adamant that he is "no faggot," even as he lies in bed contemplating whether to molest Jamie, a friend and fellow boy at an orphanage (66). Abdul justifies sneaking into Jamie's bed by claiming he just wants to have "fun," and as he begins touching his friend, Abdul adopts homophobic language in an attempt to dispel the notion that what he is doing to another thirteen-year-old boy is anything but overtly masculine.

Since Abdul narrates *The Kid*, it is as if he is trying to convince both the reader and himself that he is not gay. If anything, Jamie's rape makes Abdul feel more like a man; he refers to himself as both a "father" and "king" during the sexual assault and in the moments immediately afterward. Abdul internalizes, "He's like a little child. I'm like the big father. He's such a small boy, a faggot child, I guess" (66). "Faggot" in Abdul's mind does not equate to gay; if it did, it would be hard for him to not see himself as one as he forces himself on Jamie, opening his pajamas and performing oral sex on him. Abdul instead sets up a dynamic in which "faggot" applies to any boy or man weaker than him. The derogatory

term denotes power, not sexual orientation. This makes it possible for Abdul to still perceive himself as very much heterosexual as he partakes in a homosexual encounter that he initiated.

During the rape, which Jamie is too small to fight off, Abdul tells the reader, "He comes in my mouth. I swallow him, he's mine now. ... I didn't hurt nobody, do nothing bad. I'm not bad. I'm a good king" (67). For Abdul, power, not homoerotic tendencies, dictates which men are regarded as "faggots" and which ones are not. As long as he perceives himself to be in the position of power during a homosexual encounter, he does not regard himself as gay. Therefore, it is imperative that he presents Jamie as the "faggot" in the situation; his false sense of masculinity depends on it. Abdul's rationale is no different than Carl in *For Colored Girls* claiming that he is not gay because no man bends him over.

Abdul's use of the word "faggot," not just in his rape of Jamie but also in other homoerotic encounters in *The Kid*, plays into an issue that Harper addresses in his essay about Max Robinson. Analyzing the response to the AIDS-related death of Robinson, who was the first black news anchor on U.S. network television, Harper suggests that the use of "fag" in the African American community reaffirms that "verbal facility becomes proof of one's conventional masculinity and thus silences discussion of one's possible homosexuality" (124). That is exactly what Abdul and other black male characters in prominent works of AIDS fiction attempt to do, as if homophobic rhetoric can distance themselves from those openly gay brothers who are perceived to be carriers of AIDS.

Harper writes in his analysis of Geneva Smitherman's examination of "the language of black America" that Smitherman "acknowledges the 'power' with which the spoken word is imbued in the African-American tradition (as in others), especially insofar as it is employed in masculine 'image-making,' through braggadocio and other highly self-assertive strategies" (124). With his dark skin and muscular dancer's body, Abdul in *The Kid* is all about creating a different persona through his unreliable narration. He is no longer the helpless young child exploited for more welfare money in *Push*. As soon as he is done raping Jamie, Abdul returns to his bed admitting that he feels like both Michael Jordan and a king. He repeatedly envisions himself as a modern-day Crazy Horse who is unlikely to contract the virus that killed his mother.

Power is a central aspect of Abdul's warped belief on AIDS prevention. As he sees it, only weak "faggots" contract the virus, perpetuating a myth that his grandmother expresses in *Push* when she scoffs

at the suggestion she could be HIV-positive. She insists that she could not have contracted the virus from her longtime lover Carl Jones because they she and Carl never had sex “in the ass” like “faggots” (86). Her remark shows a lack of basic knowledge about the transmission of AIDS, though it mirrors a perception by some in the black community that AIDS is only a gay man’s disease. In *The Kid*, Abdul takes this concept a step further, claiming that he cannot be HIV-positive because “kids don’t get it” and that he is not even gay in the first place (217). He fails to make the connection that his mother was a teenager when she contracted HIV from her father (who is also his), disproving his theory that a person’s age and sexuality determines whether he or she gets infected. As for Abdul’s occasional trips to the park, where he lets older men perform oral sex on him for money, that is just “unzip, pure vanilla, that’s it” (217). In Abdul’s mind, the sexual encounters are harmless and natural, making them nothing worth worrying about and by no means “gay.” He reiterates that he and the other boys who sell themselves in the park are “not homos,” just kids (217). Therefore, there is innocence to Abdul’s actions, allowing him and the reader to perceive his solicitation as a form of experimentation and not his homosexual desires coming to fruition.

Like Precious, Sapphire presents Abdul as a character who is an amalgamation of social issues seen in the black community. He is the child of a single mom, raised on welfare and in broken homes, who grows into an angry teenager willing to embrace violence and commit crimes to support himself. He has physical and artistic talent capable of getting him out of the inner city, but it is wasted as he struggles to overcome racism, poverty and a self-destructive personality. Sapphire creates what could be considered an African American Everyman, with his confused sexuality only adding to his representation of social problems facing young black men nowadays. Or as *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani wrote in a review of *The Kid*, Abdul “often seems less like a coherent individual than a cobbled-together pastiche of a focus group of tormented teenagers.”

Abdul allows Roman, an older dance instructor, to perform oral sex on him because it is an easy way to make money. The arrangement, which allows Abdul to live rent-free in an apartment despite his assertion that he has never received anal sex from Roman, gives the teenager a sense that he is the one in control. Abdul is inconsistent in his views on power, and they shift to fit to his unwavering belief that he is not gay. While a preteen Abdul feels empowered as he “swallows” Jamie during the rape at the

orphanage, an Abdul on the verge of adulthood is bolstered by the notion that Roman has performed fellatio on him. This is made clear when Roman returns to the apartment he shares with Abdul and reveals that he has tested positive for HIV.

Abdul acts unconcerned, as if he has no reason to get tested himself; his view is not swayed by his mother's AIDS-related death. He feels he is not at risk and instead views Roman's admission as a lie intended to get the young dancer so upset he gets into a fight. Abdul sees the HIV admission as a power play by Roman to get the teenager arrested: "And then I realize he wants me to jump up and almost beat him to death so he can call the police, have me locked up, and then visit me in jail with the wham-whams and zoo-zoos. I'll still be his, a 'you boys'" (244-245). Abdul never considers the possibility that, like his mother, he has contracted HIV from an older man. He instead believes he is being set up, and rather than worrying about his health, he is focused more on maintaining power over Roman. To do this, Abdul resorts to belittling the older man by calling him a "faggot." After all, only faggots get AIDS and Abdul leaves no doubt that Roman is the "faggot figure" in their arrangement.

Regardless of if he is the one performing oral sex or receiving it, Abdul refuses to let his actions dictate that he is homosexual and therefore susceptible to contracting AIDS from Roman. He states, "I ain't even kiss this faggot in four years, much less let him butt-fuck me. So if I got it from this midget sucking my dick, then I just fucking got it" (245). Abdul is adamant that Roman, not he, is the one who has relinquished power during their sexual relationship. Borrowing from the flawed logic of Carl from *For Colored Girls*, Abdul makes it clear that Roman has "bent" over to pleasure him, not vice versa. At the same time, Abdul feels empowered by the notion that he has outsmarted Roman, using the survival skills he learned on the streets to get the older man to support him.

Abdul is an unreliable narrator, unlike his misguided mother in *Push*, and he shows this by trying to convince the reader that he has spent four years in a relationship with Roman without ever kissing him or returning any of the sexual favors. He wants everyone, including himself, to believe that he is not gay. However, it is hard to believe that he remained in a lengthy relationship with a male dance instructor simply so he could live in his apartment. Abdul has set up a dynamic that makes it almost impossible for him to admit his full involvement with Roman. If he confesses to performing oral sex on Roman, as he did with Jamie, then Abdul would have a more difficult time denying that he is gay. Furthermore, he cannot

admit to having had anal sex with Roman without accepting the possibility that he, too, could be HIV-positive. His warped views about his masculinity and health depend upon him maintaining his lies to the reader. While he expresses apathy throughout the novel to the possibility of someday contracting AIDS—“I could just walk out of here, run away, live on the street, be a park boy till I get AIDS or killed or some shit” (176)—Abdul remains convinced that he is HIV-free without any proof of it beyond his belief that he is a “real man” who likes women. He does not need an HIV test to confirm he is clean.

In *Push* and *The Kid*, Sapphire strips romance from sex and instead presents it more as a way for men to exert their dominance over partners that they deem weaker and insignificant. It is a power struggle played out behind closed doors or in secluded places where inappropriate and often time illegal romps could be had. Priests molest orphaned children, bullies rape smaller boys, and an abusive father forces himself on his unstable wife and infant daughter. Sex scenes are described in graphically violent terms that critics have been quick to point out in their reviews.

When *The Kid* was released in July of 2011, *Washington Post* book critic DeNeen Brown wrote in a review of the novel that “the images are so graphic that by the end of the first chapter a sensitive reader may want to put the book down and turn away.” However, where *Push* offers a sense of hope through a teenager learning how to read, write poetry and be a mother, *The Kid* seemingly deflates any chance for redemption. In *The New York Times* review of *The Kid*, Kakutani notes that “while the reader felt enormous sympathy for Precious ... it’s hard here not to feel revulsion” for Abdul. Precious and her son are each victims of sexual abuse, but their responses to it is significantly much different. Precious hopes to improve her life and that of her children, which she had after being raped by her father. Abdul, on the other hand, learns through his molestation that he can use sex—and nonconsensual sex in the case of Jamie—to gain power over others.

However, Abdul shows during his failed attempt to have sex with a white dancer named Amy that his hyper-masculine persona cannot mask his homosexual tendencies. While Abdul envisions himself as a forceful, black king while raping Jamie, he proves to be much weaker physically with women. At his core, his sexual desires are for men, even if it is the result of the sexual abuse inflicted upon him as a kid at the orphanage. Lying in bed prior to having sex, Amy quietly asks Abdul if he is gay. His angry response leaves no doubt that he is offended by the mere suggestion: “No ... and don’t ever say some

shit like that again" (250). Even after Amy admits that she is bisexual, providing Abdul with an invitation to be open about his sexuality, he refuses to classify himself as anything but heterosexual. It does not matter that he has had plenty of homosexual encounters, some voluntary and others forced upon him: "I don't care what anyone else is. I'm telling you what I am, OK?" (250). However, the rather graphic sex scene that Sapphire portrays between Abdul and Amy only illustrates that he cannot dismiss at least a part of his homosexual identity. He is determined to prove that he is not gay by having powerful sex with her, but he cannot keep an erection for her. He believes he can use his sexual prowess to dispel any notion that he is a "sissy" or "punk." Yet, he is unable to perform with Amy as he continues to have sexual thoughts about men.

When Amy touches his penis for the first time, he internalizes that it feels "right, like Jamie only righter because it's a girl" (251). He adds, "I kissed Jamie, no big thing, but I didn't like it" (252). As his excitement with Amy builds, Abdul is reminded of when he would masturbate with Brother John, who molested him at the orphanage. Stumbling through sex, Abdul licks the side of Amy's face, mimicking what he admits he saw Roman do when he would lick a scar on Abdul's face. However, Abdul goes flaccid only moments after he and Amy start having sex, infuriating him and making him only more determined to prove his masculinity by using his "mad equipment" to have sex with "this bitch" (252). He asks for Amy to roll over in bed, and while it is not stated, it is implied that his intention is to have anal sex with her like he learned from older other men. He narrates, "I know my dick would get hard if she would suck it or let me in the back. I'm used to that" (252). It is worth noting that as Abdul attempts to mimic the type of promiscuous sex that might be proof of his manhood in the black community, he actually wants Amy to perform the homosexual positions he is more accustomed to for stimulation. Abdul is never able to regain his erection, and as he lies in bed, he closes his eyes and wills himself not to cry. He wishes to disappear or be an invisible, which is a feeling often expressed in AIDS-themed works produced by gay black men about gay black men.

They express a feeling of nonexistence that comes with having to live in the shadows because of the stigma that much of the black community has towards homosexuality. In his documentary *Tongues*



*Untied*, Riggs<sup>7</sup> offers a poem about moving to San Francisco that includes the lines: "In this great gay Mecca, I was an invisible man. I had no shadow, no substance, no place, no history, no reflection. ... I was a nigger still." In this case, Riggs is both a "faggot" and a "nigger," making him a minority within a minority. He refers to this dual citizenship as "negro faggotry" in "Black Maco Revisited: Reflections Of A Snap! Queen," his critical essay on the portrayal of black masculinity and homosexuality in entertainment (151). He argues "blacks are inferior because they are not white. Black gays are unnatural because they are not straight" (153). Even in his own community, he feels does not exist: "Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black" (152). However, *Tongues Untied* brought the "invisible" out for public viewing, with the landmark film highlighting the issues facing Riggs and other black gay men faced.

In his essay, Hardin argues that the terms "faggot" and "nigger" are similar in that both are "meant to dehumanize, to remove the self, to create the same invisibility that Frederick Douglass encountered" (116). However, a difference between the two derogatory terms exists. While African Americans have been forced to hear racial slurs from white racists, black men who come out of the closet must deal with the possibility of being called "faggots" by those in their own community. As a result, some gay black men turn to the down low for protection from this type of discrimination. They would rather "pass" as straight and have social standing, even if the public face does not match the truth, than be ostracized for who they really are. Raymond, the bisexual narrator in *Invisible Life*, refers to the concept of passing while describing the dual life lived by black men on the down low: "Many of us passed in and out of their worlds" (254). For their own good, they feel they must remain closeted and float undetected like ghosts between the black community and their homosexual lifestyles. It is a complex sense of dual citizenship, which Johnson examines in *Sweet Tea* through his extensive interviews with gay black men in the South.

In one interview, R. Dioneaux states that the African American community does not hate "gay people," as is commonly assumed, but rather "we hate those who we think are gay" (375). The man on the down low can avoid being detected as gay, but in the age of AIDS, this type of deception has been cited as a cause for the rapid spread of the infections in the black community. African American women are unknowingly contracting HIV from their bisexual male lovers. In *Just As I Am*, Nicole, the female

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<sup>7</sup> Riggs died at age thirty-seven from an AIDS-related illness on April 5, 1994. He was working on the documentary *Black Is... Black Ain't* (1994 at the time of his death. The film was completed by two of his crew members.

narrator who fell in love with Raymond in *Invisible Life*, makes it clear that she is hesitant to again date black men after her friend's AID-related death. Her best friend Candace contracted the virus from her cheating, bisexual husband, and Nicole suspects that all African American men are secretly gay, putting her at risk of getting AIDS from them and being another female victim of the down low. She confesses, "I was angry at what they were capable of. The dishonesty, the outward perfection that caused women to fall for them without knowing the whole truth" (194). Nicole's use of the phrase "outward perfection" indicates that she is well aware of the false identity that these attractive, intelligent men project in an attempt to mask their insecurities about being black and gay. She learned all about it through her relationship with Raymond and her friendship with Kyle, who later dies of AIDS despite his refusal to conceal his homosexuality like other gay characters in the trilogy.

Harris' overt warning to unsuspecting women begins in *Invisible Life* and continues through *Just As I Am*. Hardin argues that "the ability to 'come out' is crucial for Harris" because, as others have stated when it comes to the AIDS epidemic, there is a danger to "silence" (116). While Sapphire writes convincingly about a teenager on the down low, Harris had intimate knowledge about it, bringing believability to his early novels. He was an authority on the topic. With *Invisible Life*, Hardin writes, "Although AIDS is not an uncommon factor in gay fiction of the nineties, its importance here is tied directly to the invisibility of African American gay and bisexual men" (116). *Invisible Life* takes its title from this need by gay or bisexual black men to keep their homosexual relationships "invisible" to everyone but the two lovers taking part in it.

As with Carl in *For Colored Girls* and Abdul in *The Kid*, a muscular, braggadocios brother denies his homosexuality while putting his unsuspecting girlfriends at risk of contracting AIDS. Basil Henderson lives recklessly, sleeping indiscriminately with men and women as if he is not at risk of contracting HIV because he is too much a man for that. It is a gay disease after all, and Basil is adamant that he is not a "flaming faggot," as he calls Kyle in *Invisible Life* (165). Harris introduces Basil in *Invisible Life* as one of Kyle's secret lovers, but his place as a cautionary figure is more apparent in *Just As I Am*. It is worth noting that his introduction in the sequel comes when Raymond is assigned to represent Basil in a potential civil lawsuit for punching a gay man who is HIV-positive. Basil is exactly the type of closeted bisexual man that Nicole warns female readers about; he is reckless enough to contract HIV from his gay

romps and then unknowingly spread it to his female groupies and girlfriends. However, he rejects the notion that he is gay and punches a man who reminds him of it.

Basil has no problem having sex with a “sissy” as long as he is not mistaken for one. He is a well-known professional football player who feels he must keep his homoerotic attractions a secret to protect his career and reaffirm that he is straight. It does not matter what he does on the side; he is not homosexual in any way, or so he believes, and avoids kissing other men on the lips during sex. As he puts it in *Invisible Life*, “I deal sometimes, but I consider myself straight” (165). Basil uses the terms “deal” and “kicking it” to refer his homosexual encounters without acknowledging them for what they really are; doing so allows him to distance himself from the act. He wants to make it clear that he is not gay or even bisexual, as he does the morning after a night of passionate sex with Raymond. Basil tells Raymond, “You know I love pussy. In fact I’ve had so much pussy I could give you some” (114). Basil’s skirt-chasing persona is a house of cards, and he does everything he can to prevent his deception from being exposed. He reverts to it as soon as he is done seducing Raymond.

When Basil feels his masculinity has been threatened by a “faggot” looking at him in a nightclub, he strikes, punching the man in the face. It is discovered that the victim, a twenty-nine-year-old unemployed schoolteacher named Charles Marshall, is taking the AIDS drug azidothymidine (AZT). In doing so, Harris sets it up for Basil to be that reckless character who is too ignorant to realize that his double life as a man on the down low has put him in close contact with AIDS. As he and Basil wait to meet with Charles to discuss a possible settlement, Raymond expresses his curiosity to see AIDS up close, telling the reader, “I wanted to know what this guy looked like without the markings and if he already was suffering from AIDS or if he was just HIV positive” (88).” Basil, on the other hand, is more concerned with settling the case and keeping it from going to trial, where his double life as a bisexual man would be publicly exposed. He has a real fear of being “outed,” not contracting AIDS.

Raymond has to convince Basil to take an AIDS test after punching Charles in the face: “Basil said he didn’t remember seeing any blood on his hands but agreed to be tested anyway” (83). For braggadocios characters on the down low, there is a sense that they have no need to take an AIDS test, regardless of the circumstances. In *The Kid*, Abdul assumes he is clean despite Roman’s positive test results. He never tells the reader if he has contracted the virus. Meanwhile, Carl in *For Colored Girls* is

unaware that he is HIV-positive until his wife tells him that she wants him gone and that he should “take your HIV with you.” These male characters treat an AIDS test as a waste of time since they insist, or never admit, to being “bent over” during gay sex. They believe that they will be protected from the epidemic as long as they maintain their hyper-masculinity. It is no surprise then that they each go to great lengths to prove their manhood, though Carl contract HIV regardless.

Unlike Basil, Raymond is well aware of the risk of men on the down low in the age of AIDS; his former lover Kelvin unknowingly infects his wife Candace toward the end of *Invisible Life*. However, Raymond questions whether a society with homophobic tendencies is partly to blame for the spread of AIDS from the gay community to women like Candace, who are unsuspecting victims of the down low. He wonders if the discrimination that gay men face forces some of them to join a “secret society” that marries women in the hopes of being able to continue their “secret desires” (253-254). Raymond, expressing opinions that are arguably those of Harris, asks the reader if Candace’s death would have happened “if society had allowed Kelvin and I to live a life free from ridicule.” He continues, “Was it our fault for hiding behind these women to protect our futures and reputations?” (254). However, Raymond does not believe that men on the down low are entirely innocent, either, and he questions the harmful effects of his sexuality throughout both *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*. He figures it was only a matter of time that their deception, ignorance and reckless behavior—with both male and female sexual partners—would contribute to the rapid spread of AIDS through the black community. As Raymond states in *Invisible Life*:

AIDS was hitting the black gay community with devastating force, and with all the closest black gay men out there like Basil, it would soon hit the heterosexual community with equal force—not all black men were IV drug users, as the media would have had us believe. (170)

Raymond’s decision to single out Basil instead of a handful of other closeted characters is worth noting. Raymond could even point to himself as an example of a man whose homosexual encounters could result in more straight black women contracting AIDS. After all, he engages in a serious relationship with Nicole while still admitting to being sexually attracted to other men. However, Raymond chooses in this passage not to identify himself or his bisexual friends as potential health risks. His choice of Basil illustrates that Raymond views the closeted football player as more of a threat to the black

community because of his brazen attitude, promiscuous ways and ignorance to the spread of AIDS. Unlike Raymond, who is selective with whom he sleeps with during his search for love and acceptance, Basil's intent is to validate his manhood by having as much sex as possible; gender is not an issue for him. He works under the notion that as an African American man—as well as a professional athlete—he is expected to be promiscuous and then get married. As Raymond puts it in *Just As I Am*, Basil lives in a “sexual Disneyland,” where he refuses to admit he is gay or even bisexual despite his sexual flings with men, including Raymond (126).

In an attempt to dispel the notion that he is anything but heterosexual, Basil brags about his sexual prowess with women while on dates with Raymond: “One night he suggested we both call an attractive young lady we met to see who could bone her first while the other one looked on from the closet” (127). Basil still wants his gay lover present when he has sex with a woman, and as much as he boasts about his numerous female conquests, he cannot maintain the deception at all times. When he is alone in the bedroom with Raymond, away from anyone who would expose him, Basil shows he can be intimate with another man: “In private, when the lights went out, Basil became a totally different person. Passionate, giving, and affectionate beyond belief” (127). This is much different behavior than Carl from *For Colored Girls*, who claims that by being “man everyday of the week” he refuses to cuddle or hold hands with his gay lovers.

The film does not show Carl in the bedroom with another man, but his declaration that he is not intimate with his gay lovers suggests that his homoerotic desires are only for physical pleasure. He simply enjoys having sex with other men, as he states, whereas Basil feels an emotional connection with Raymond. Even after Basil gets engaged to a woman, he rejects the notion of ending his relationship with Raymond, showing a vulnerability that contradicts his black macho persona.

In asserting that closeted gay men are responsible for helping to spread AIDS to the heterosexual community, Raymond makes a connection between Basil and men like Carl. Basil has not contracted HIV from any of his numerous homosexual affairs, but working under the assumption that they continue, Raymond suggests that Basil has the potential to someday unknowingly infect a female partner like Carl does with Jo. *Just As I Am* was published sixteen years before the theatrical release of *For Colored Girls*, so Harris' novel was clearly not influenced by Tyler Perry's film. However, the concept of men on the

down low and its health risks for both homosexuals and heterosexuals have been present for some time. Boykin argues that the down low was old news by 2001, adding that “as a nation, we would rather talk about ‘the down low’ than to talk candidly about sex, homosexuality, masculinity, racism, homophobia, and AIDS—and about our collective responsibility to find solutions for these problems” (331). Others, including Riggs, have criticized the way masculinity and homosexuality have been portrayed on television and in films. Riggs writes that he expects “obstacles set before [him] by whites,” but he is angered by “the traps and pitfalls planted by my so-called brothers” who refuse to embrace him as one of their own (152).

Discussion about black masculinity in AIDS-related fictitious works tends to be spoken by African American men with homophobic beliefs. There is Abdul from *The Kid*, an unreliable narrator who is simultaneously a victim and sexual predator; his psyche is a mess by the end of the novel. Even attorney Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), the only major African-American character in the landmark AIDS film *Philadelphia* (1993), equates homosexuality with a lack of masculinity. He makes it clear that someone cannot be both a “man” and gay: “Those guys pumping up together, trying to be macho and faggot at the same time, I can’t stand that shit.” Furthermore, when Joe feels his masculinity is questioned, he reverts to homophobic language, referring to gay men as “faggots” in an attempt to reinforce his manhood.

Basil relies on the same type of rhetoric, though in his case the use of the word “faggot” is an attempt to distance himself from those flamboyant gay men he often sleeps with in different cities. During one of their first encounters in *Invisible Life*, Raymond notices that Basil “would use the word faggot effortlessly as one sprinkled salt on hot buttered popcorn. ... I got the impression that it was part of his everyday vocabulary” (166). Like Abdul in *The Kid*, Basil uses the term “faggot” to insult men whom he feels are inferior and less masculine than him; sexual orientation has little to do it. Even as he is involved in a secretive relationship with Kyle in *Invisible Life*, he tells Raymond, “Well, let’s face it, Kyle’s a flaming faggot” (165). This, in Basil’s logic, makes Kyle susceptible to contracting AIDS. Basil, on the other hand, continues to deny that he is gay or bisexual, even as he tries to pick up Raymond shortly after the two met at Kyle’s apartment. Raymond scoffs each time Basil utters “faggot.” Raymond echoes Harden’s argument that the term faggot is “in the same category as nigger” before asking Basil, “Besides, what are you?” (165). Basil’s response: “I deal sometimes, but I consider myself straight” (165). As absurd as

Basil's logic might be considering his sexual past with men, his refusal to identify himself as gay protects him from AIDS—at least in the novel.

Meanwhile, Kyle, the finger-popping, openly gay man who proudly refers to himself as a “faggot,” dies from an AIDS-related illness. He seems to pay for his uninhabited, flamboyant behavior. Death, however, does not come to the more masculine gay and bisexual black men in *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*. Even Kelvin, who contracts AIDS from a homosexual extramarital affair, remains alive as his wife Candace quickly succumbs to AIDS at the end of *Invisible Life*. While there is no evidence that a person's masculinity has anything to do with the mortality rate of AIDS, African American authors, playwrights and screenwriters often make a correlation between the two. Snap divas such as Kyle and Angel die from AIDS while more masculine gay characters remain healthy, or at least do not show any signs of being sick. This is not by accident.

In *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted*, Harris states that with *Invisible Life* he wanted his story “to be one where women, if they decided to read it, would think about the choices they made when it came to men” (231). His work continues in Boykin's suggestion that black women are being deputized as “down low detectives” capable of spotting when a man is bisexual. Basil is much harder to identify as on the down low than the closeted bisexual guest Harris saw on *Oprah*. Furthermore, Abdul, with his defiant attitude and violent nature, is far from the flamboyant “court jester” that Riggs argues is the typical portrayal of gay black men in films and plays. Riggues suggests, “Strong black men—‘Afrocentric’ black men—don't flinch, don't weaken, don't take blame or shit, take charge, step-to when challenged, and defend themselves without pause for self-doubt” (157). However, as Perry illustrates with Carl in *For Colored Girls*, traditional black masculinity cannot protect men on the down low—and their unsuspecting girlfriends and wives—from contracting AIDS. As much as these over-the-top male characters attempt to fool themselves and others into believing that they are not gay, it does not matter if they are the ones being bent over or the ones doing the bending during their private homoerotic encounters. With AIDS, being masculine is not an effective form of safe sex.

## The Biological Weapon From Within: Issues of the Body and Language In AIDS Narratives

Tired of being ridiculed by his friend Kyle for testing positive for HIV, Cartman realizes in an episode of Comedy Central's satirical adult cartoon *South Park* that his infected blood could be used as a weapon to end the childish teasing. In "Tonsil Trouble," which first aired March 12, 2008, Cartman contracts HIV after doctors accidentally give the bigoted fourth-grader a tainted blood transfusion during routine surgery to remove his tonsils. He immediately replaces his traditional winter outfit for a gray scarf and baseball cap with the letter "P" on the front following his HIV diagnosis. Savvy viewers will recognize Cartman's new wardrobe as a cartoonish copy of the one Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks) wears during his visit with attorney Joe Miller (Denzel Washington) to discuss bringing a discrimination lawsuit against his former employers in *Philadelphia* (1993), the landmark AIDS film. Cartman, however, is far less rational in his attempt to fight the ridicule he receives for being HIV positive. Elementary school kids do not get back at each through litigation, even in the pop culture-obsessed society satirized in *South Park*.

Fed up with hearing Kyle laugh at his misfortune, Cartman decides to climb through his friend's bedroom window as he sleeps and get revenge by infecting Kyle with HIV. While meant mostly for comedic purposes, Cartman's transformation from victim to violator is similar to what other characters with HIV/AIDS experience in literary works that are firmly revenge narratives. Not every character with AIDS is willing to sit quietly and await the physical deterioration and eventual death that comes with the disease. In some extreme cases, individuals attempt to fight the harsh realities of having AIDS by trying to infect others. In "AIDS and Revenge: The Body as Silent Weapon," Jodie Parys argues that those characters who knowingly contaminate others with the virus understand that their "weapon is the infected body itself, utilized in an attempt to force another person to experience the same loss of control which led to the dominator's rage in the first place" (7). These infected characters should not be mistaken for "gift givers," a slang term used to describe HIV-positive men who have sex with healthy partners. Likewise, the intended recipients in AIDS revenge narratives do not seek out the virus like gay men known as "bug chasers," who look to fulfill a sexual fantasy by contracting the disease during anonymous, unprotected sex. Power, not sexual pleasure, is at play in such texts.

Parys examines several works of South American literature, including



*El vuelo de la Reina* by Argentine novelist Tomás Eloy Martínez, to better understand the rationale of AIDS characters who seek to regain a sense of power by spreading their illness to unsuspecting victims.

Parys suggests:

Consequently, the carriers are thrust into a paradoxical existence whereby they are physically weakened and incrementally destroyed by the virus, but it is precisely due to this experience with the destructive potential of the virus that they recognize the power they possess within to wreak that same destruction on another being if they choose. (6)

The characters explored by Parys use sex, including rape, as their form of “deliberate transmission of HIV” (1). In the *South Park* episode, however, Cartman avoids bringing any issues of sexuality into his attempt to give Kyle the same disease that has caused him to be ridiculed on the playground. Cartman is more interested in getting payback than asserting power through sex. If anything, he is desperate to regain the false sense of power he feels as a school bully who mocks others for their physical handicaps. He fills a syringe with blood from his arm, and as stands over his sleeping friend, Cartman tells Kyle, “You think HIV is something to be laughed at. Well, let’s just see how funny it is now, asshole.” He then injects his blood into Kyle’s mouth, infecting him and causing both foul-mouthed kids to spend the rest of the episode searching everywhere—including Magic Johnson’s bedroom—for a cure for AIDS. The plot, shown through intentionally crude animation, skewers a perceived lack of public concern for AIDS in the United States following the widespread paranoia triggered by the epidemic in the eighties and nineties.

Nonetheless, the notion that AIDS can be satirized for a popular cable-network show illustrates the diminished place of AIDS in the social consciousness; viewers would have a difficult time laughing at Cartman’s absurd revenge plot if the threat of contracting and dying of AIDS was still regarded as a major health crisis. However, since the fear of an outbreak has subsided in large part over the past thirty years, it is acceptable for *South Park* writer Trey Parker to turn AIDS into comedic material by twisting the military metaphors regularly used in AIDS rhetoric. Rather than pathologists, politicians and community leaders “waging war” on the disease, as they have done, a fourth-grader uses a few drops of his contaminated blood as a biological weapon in his schoolyard fight with a classmate.

Susan Sontag and Parys have gone to great lengths to analyze the war metaphors that public health officials and biomedical research scientists have adopted to explain in simple terms the effects of

HIV/AIDS on an individual and society. Everything about how the virus functions once it enters a person's body and overwhelms the immune system, the body's ultimate line of defense, has been described in military terms. Such war metaphors are prevalent on AIDS.gov, a website sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services to provide information about federal HIV programs and policies. The website states that HIV "invades" T-cells, which are dubbed the "generals" of the human immune system because they coordinate the defense against "intruders" to the body. HIV turns T-cells against the body, using them to replicate the virus before destroying them. In *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), Sontag suggests the virus is seen as "an invasion of alien organisms, to which the body responds by its own military operations, such as the mobilizing of immunological 'defenses,' and medicine is 'aggressive,' as in the language of most chemotherapies" (9). Considering the military jargon used to describe how the disease functions, it is not surprising that government agencies, both domestically and internationally, have "declared war" on AIDS as if it is a mission to be won. In *AIDS and the Body Politic* (1996), Catherine Waldby argues that the "language of militarism" exists in every aspect of AIDS, noting:

Warfare analogies, concepts of attack and retreat, triumph, and defeat, infiltration and discovery, are drawn upon to describe the machinations of the virus at every level of scale, from the microscopic to those of community and nation. (2)

As a cancer survivor, Sontag was well aware of the military metaphors often used in discussions about diseases, arguing that they "contribute to the stigmatizing of certain illnesses and, by extension, of those who are ill" (11). However, like Cartman in *South Park*, several characters in some unconventional forms of literary AIDS take the war outside of their body boundaries and use their tainted blood to fight back. The perceived enemy, though, is not necessarily the virus itself. The carriers feel a great injustice has taken place with their infection, and the only way to correct the balance is to either spread the virus to their oppressors or cause pain to strangers who are wasting their health. Parys argues "at the moment of infection, the violators know that the route to their revenge is entirely through the interaction of two bodies—one infected, one soon-to-be infected" (5). Their intent to spread the virus creates a new threat to the paranoia that has existed since the early days of the epidemic of people having accidental contact with contaminated blood.

R.D. Zimmerman explores blood as a weapon in *Hostage* (1997), which was conceived following the novelist's own scare with AIDS. The premise of the novel is like that of an offbeat Hollywood thriller: three characters suffering through the final stages of AIDS—two gay men (Matthew and Elliot) and a single mother (Tina)—conspire to kidnap conservative United States congressman Johnny Clariton and inject the likely presidential candidate with their infected blood. They are a band of AIDS terrorists intent on forcing Clariton to alter his homophobic views on the epidemic by giving him the same virus that is causing their bodies to break down. As Tina puts it:

I want Johnny Clariton to be elected the next President of these United States of America. I also want him to contract HIV, and I want him to develop full-blown AIDS. He's been going around saying the epidemic is over, but let me tell you, if he got sick, then he'd find out it really isn't. (22)

Their plot amounts to forced rehabilitation through infection. In an email interview, Zimmerman attempted to describe the hemophobia (fear of blood) that was prevalent in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, stating, "Everyone, straight and gay, was afraid of open blood then, particularly/especially blood from gay people. Sadly, it reinforced people's hatred of us: Be afraid of gay people. They're contagious. It's catching" (Zimmerman). When this fear is taken to the extreme in *Hostage* and Jim Valentino's *Shadowhawk* comic book series of the nineties, healthy characters have more to worry about than contamination by touching an object handled by a person with AIDS. In the texts I will discuss in this chapter, blood stops being presented as a symbol of life; rather it becomes the ultimate weapon produced naturally and in large supply by the body. Additionally, only a small amount is needed to trigger a gradual deterioration that mirrors the one the violator is experiencing. The attackers do not need to tamper with infected blood to get it ready to cause mass death: the lethal mixture occurred when the HIV virus was introduced into the body.

Contemporary readers will likely find some of the language in *Hostage* and *Shadowhawk* dated since medical science has advanced to the point that many people no longer view AIDS as a death sentence in the same way that it is portrayed in both texts. This lack of urgency is what the creators of *South Park* poke fun at while at the same time giving them the freedom to use AIDS as the setup to a joke. However, in the more desperate tone of *Hostage* and *Shadowhawk*, characters do not express any optimism that they can "live" with the incurable disease, as I will discuss later in this chapter. Their

attitudes illustrate the dramatic shift in the public perception of HIV/AIDS since Image Comics published the first issue of *Shadowhawk* in August of 1992, nine months after Magic Johnson announced he had tested positive for HIV. One reason the creators of *South Park* chose to satirize Johnson is because the former professional basketball player has appeared healthy in public since his revelation. However, his longevity with the virus is not expressed in either *Hostage* or *Shadowhawk*, where infected characters go to extreme measures to seek revenge because they fear they have only a limited amount of time remaining. They rush toward violence because they work under the assumption that they will not be alive long enough to face any punishment.

Paul Johnstone adopts the persona of *Shadowhawk*, a tortured crime fighter in the same vain as Batman, after mobsters attempt to make an example of him by injecting him with a syringe “dripping death (1). An assistant district attorney, Paul’s punishment for his refusal to lose a criminal case is the forceful infection of HIV administered by two hired men, with one holding him down and the other inserting the needle. After learning that he has tested positive for HIV, Paul, consumed with rage and a sense of loss, rushes out of a doctor’s office and engages in his first violent act. He welcomes a fight when confronted by two street thugs and reveals what will become his mission as *Shadowhawk*: to punish criminals who waste their health. As he lunges at the thugs, Paul internalizes, “Precious life within their veins, yet they cared not one whit for it. Not for theirs and, especially, not anyone else’s! And something inside me just snapped!” (5). His driving force after being diagnosed with HIV is to achieve a semblance of vengeance, even if it comes through violence against those who had nothing to do with the plot to have the virus forcefully injected into his body. His calling card is extreme: he snaps the spinal cords of criminals. He leaves them paralyzed, forcing them to suffer through an irreversible medical condition in the same way that he is helpless to the deadly virus inside him.

*Shadowhawk* patrols his city at night like Batman while wearing a metallic mask and bodysuit that makes him resemble Wolverine, another antihero fueled by his temper. Not to be ignored is Valentino’s decision to make *Shadowhawk*’s secret identity that of a heterosexual African-American man who worked in the district attorney’s office before he was infected with HIV. The character joins a small group of minority crime fighters who have appeared in the often Caucasian-dominated world of comic books, and his race and heterosexuality further illustrate how far-reaching the epidemic has been since the early

eighties. Shadowhawk works against the notion that only gay, white men are at risk of contracting HIV, and in a unique twist to the comic book medium, he is shown to be an antihero capable of fighting everything but the microscopic virus in his body. He dies from an AIDS-related illness in a 1995 issue of the comic.

Valentino has been open about his intent to present Shadowhawk as a vigilante whose frustration with having HIV mirrors what his young audience felt in the early nineties. In "The Anti-Hero," an article that appeared in *Orange Coast Magazine* in November 1994, Valentino explained that Shadowhawk is aware that his crime-fighting methods are immoral at a certain level. Valentino noted:

He's very tormented about what he does because he knows deep down inside that it's wrong. But he's frustrated to a point where he doesn't know what else to do. And what really pushed him over the edge was his discovery that he has HIV. He's running out of time. (96)

Interestingly, Paul wishes that he would bleed on the street thugs while getting beat up by them in his first fight after learning of his positive HIV test. Lying in a pool of his own blood, he prays that some of it would get on the thugs and "make them die" (6). In the same way that tainted blood was used as a biological weapon on him, Paul hopes to spread HIV to the thugs since, as he internalizes, "they were the ones who deserved this" (5). There is a sense of hopelessness in Shadowhawk. He is not presented as a moral superhero, but rather a desperate AIDS patient searching for a cure and payback for being infected with the deadly virus. The forced contamination transforms Paul from an incorruptible assistant district attorney to a flawed crime fighter being tortured by "the monster within," a phrase used throughout the comic book series to describe HIV. When a god-like superhero questions Shadowhawk's "unheroic" method of crippling criminals in an issue entitled, "I'd Rather Be In 1963" (1994), Shadowhawk comments on how he protects a violent world that exists in the "shades of gray" (18). He says, "My methods may seem harsh by your standards... But we had to change, those of us who seek justice" (18). As much as Shadowhawk looks to obtain a warped sense of justice, he also seeks justification for his own violence on the body; he intends to cripple criminals before AIDS destroys him from the inside.

Such revenge narratives dramatically alter the portrayal of the AIDS figure, who is often depicted in the arts as a "kind of everyperson ... presumed to be innocent," as Richard Goldstein suggests in "The Implicated and the Immune: Cultural Responses to AIDS" (298-299). People with AIDS, however, have

not enjoyed a position of innocence since the first documented cases of the disease in the United States in 1981. Federal anti-discrimination laws have been passed over the past four decades to protect people with HIV/AIDS from being fired from their jobs and evicted from their homes. Nonetheless, some conservative lawmakers and religious leaders have expressed a belief that those individuals who contract the disease are to blame for their own misfortune. Their addiction to intravenous drugs or sexual deviance, whether it is homosexuality, promiscuity or unprotected sex, so these prominent figures claimed, caused them to test positive for the virus. It is a simple blame-the-victim approach that does not take into account more complex issues of sexuality, identity, and race.

However, this limited attitude is not necessarily reflected in the protagonists who populate much of AIDS literature, which should come as no surprise considering many of the writers who address the epidemic have intimate knowledge of it as openly gay men<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, their characters with AIDS tend to be more sympathetic figures who remain upbeat despite their physical decline and certain death. While often vilified for the life choices that led to them contracting AIDS, they are presented in the arts as anything but villains. The decision to cast the likeable Tom Hanks as Andrew Beckett in *Philadelphia* suggests that the film's producers sought for the charming attorney from a loving suburban family to be viewed even more as an "everyperson" with AIDS. Nonetheless, Goldstein argues that artists have struggled to create infected characters who have much "fully human complexity," adding that they are "struck at random and often rendered more, not less, typical by the disease" (298-299).

*Hostage* and *Shadowhawk* take much different approaches to the subgenre. Infected characters are presented as antiheroes spurred by their anger over having a disease that is still without a cure. Their revenge plots make them atypical AIDS figures who are not intended to appear "innocent" in texts written as quick reads for the masses. They freely break laws, evade capture by the police, and squander much of the sympathy they garner for having HIV/AIDS with their violent ways. With *Shadowhawk*, Valentino simultaneously presents the crime fighter as victim, violator, and vigilante. Comic books such as *Shadowhawk* belong in this discussion about AIDS literature presented as revenge

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<sup>8</sup> Armistead Maupin, author of the popular *Tale of the City* series, has been open in interviews about watching friends die of AIDS and seeing the virus take a massive toll on his adopted city of San Francisco. He goes into detail about the effect of AIDS on his neighborhood, the Castro, in his novel *Babycakes* (1984).

narratives. An epidemic that involves complex issues of race, sexuality, and identity does not lend itself easily to pop fiction. Nonetheless, Judith Laurence Pastore notes in *Confronting AIDS through Literature* (1993) that “because AIDS is so different—because mass death is being described in the midst of the epidemic—writers are having to find new words and new ways to respond” (22). Comic book writers have responded to the AIDS epidemic in much the same way that playwrights, novelists, and screenwriters did before them, though they have relied on strong images, colorful panels, and thinly veiled metaphors to draw mainstream attention to the issue.

In a 2010 interview with the website Comics Alliance, writer Peter David said he decided to add a controversial AIDS-themed storyline to *The Incredible Hulk* series in the early nineties because he wanted to show the frustration and helplessness that was felt at the time about there not being a cure for the disease. To do so, though, David presents a moral dilemma that questions whether there is an even more powerful bodily fluid to avoid than AIDS-infected blood. In the landmark issue entitled, “In the Shadow of AIDS” (1994), Jim Wilson, a gay character dying of AIDS, asks the Hulk for a possibly life-saving blood transfusion. The Hulk—himself a former doctor before his transformation—expresses major reservations about helping his friend, stating, “My blood isn’t some magic cure-all” (14). Without saying it, the Hulk alludes that his radioactively altered blood could cause more damage than good, a notion David expressed in his interview with Comics Alliance nearly twenty years after the issue’s release. The writer said the Hulk’s blood is “this incredible Pandora’s box of problems,” illustrating the potential risks facing those people in the early nineties who raced blindly to find a cure for AIDS. Still, there were some readers within the Hulk’s loyal fan base who criticized the storyline:

Some people felt it was stupid that the Hulk had absolutely refused to give a blood transfusion to Jim Wilson because certainly anything was better than dying, whereas I thought I answered that pretty well in the story, which was, no, not necessarily because what if Jim Wilson transformed into a colossal, berserk monster and went around killing hundreds of people.” (David)

Despite his sporadically uncontrollable rage, the Hulk shows he is not set on avenging the destruction of his body like the violators in AIDS revenge narratives. While he, too, struggles to come to terms with the dramatic physical transformation forced upon him—in this case through exposure to radiation, not deliberate transmission AIDS—the Hulk refuses to subject others to his pain. He is

resigned to let his friend die rather than possibly transform him into a monster like himself. It is worth noting that Valentino refers to the HIV inside Shadowhawk as “the monster within,” illustrating its ability to cause destruction once released into society.

Comic book writers have infused their social commentary about AIDS—and some of the misconceptions that people have about the epidemic—in quick reads targeting a younger audience. Of course, they have received backlash from some fans who feel there is no place for AIDS in comic books. Much of the literature written about the epidemic over the past four decades would not fit neatly into a comic book or thriller, in which readers expect fast-paced novels for entertainment purposes. However, Zimmerman stated that he was not reluctant to write an AIDS-related thriller in *Hostage*, adding that he felt qualified to do so after watching “too many” people he knew die from AIDS. To express his frustration, Zimmerman turned to “the only way I know how to write: story, action, plot. Suspense. Mystery<sup>9</sup>” (Zimmerman). In *Hostage*, AIDS is not presented as a “silent” weapon in the same way that it is in the South American literature that Parys explores. In contrast, the kidnappers want to share their intentions to infect others with the virus, ensuring that the epidemic will continue. Zimmerman amplifies AIDS to the level of a biological weapon that remains only a needle’s prick or bite mark away from causing mass death. With the revenge plot, it is no longer a matter of people fearing accidental contact with blood following the arrival of AIDS, “whether Christ’s blood or your neighbor’s,” as Sontag puts it in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (73). The kidnappers instead go through extensive planning to intentionally expose Clariton to AIDS drawn from their own veins. Along with having boxes of food stashed at their hideout inside a portion of a megamall, they have a video camera ready to document the moment when Clariton contracts HIV.

Despite the closeness of their names, Zimmerman does not present Clariton as a fictionalized depiction of President Bill Clinton, who was beginning his second term in office when *Hostage* was published in 1997. While Clariton is a politician setting himself up for a likely presidential run, his homophobic views and positions on a limited federal government put him on the opposite side of the

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<sup>9</sup> Zimmerman said in his interview that he received “virtually no criticism from anyone” regarding the message of *Hostage*. He added, “I only knew then that if I didn’t handle all the anger and the medical stuff correctly, if I didn’t portray it honestly, people would have skewered me for exploiting a serious, sensitive topic” (Zimmerman).



political spectrum as the left-leaning Clinton. It is worth noting that, while the spelling differs by one letter, Clariton shares his name with Claritin, an antihistamine that was approved for sale in the United States in the mid-nineties. The correlation stands out since so many characters in the novel are overcome by an outpouring of bodily fluids.

The first indication that Zimmerman gives that gay police detective Steve Rawlins is HIV-positive is a bad sinus infection that he cannot shake. He seems unaware that some people experience flu-like symptoms that last a week or two shortly after being infected with HIV, according to the Centers for Disease Control website. Rawlins, who is later held hostage along with Clariton and helps save the congressman's life in the end, learns he has contracted the virus after going to a doctor for what could be simply a bad cold. As Rawlins enters the doctor's office, he prays, "Please let there be a simple explanation why I can't rid the infection from my head, please let everything be all right" (65). It is not.

Vivid descriptions of blood and snot run throughout *Hostage*, and their presence foreshadows doom for those characters who find them. As an AIDS patient whose own health is on the decline, Elliot realizes that something is wrong when Tina, who should be guarding Clariton, refuses to emerge from a bathroom. She then informs Elliot that she cannot stop her unexpected bleeding, shouting, "There's so much blood!" (147). She never emerges from the bathroom alive. Her life literally drains from her body as she bleeds out, leaving "streaks of blood coming from the bathroom" (160). *Hostage* is drenched in blood, with characters in different stages of HIV/AIDS losing large quantities of it through nearly every orifice. As each instance occurs, Zimmerman describes the tainted blood in such horrific terms that it becomes almost like that of a weapon of mass destruction finally released on the world after being contained for so long.

As soon as Rawlins removes a shard of glass from his hand following an accident on the day he learns he is HIV positive, "a deep, rich flow of blood started pouring out" like an "uncorked a bottle" (113). When Todd Mills, a TV investigative reporter and Rawlins' lover, notices the cut, it is made clear through language that the tainted blood can cause death, not sustain life. Zimmerman writes, "Looking at Rawlins's bloody hand, [Todd] didn't see the stuff of life dripping out of his lover. He saw poison gushing, oozing out" (113). In a moment of clarity, Todd crawls toward Rawlins, determined to hold his partner and not abandon him following his positive HIV test. However, Todd abruptly stops himself, realizing that he

is getting within striking distance the closer he gets to his partner: “As if Rawlins had just pulled a gun on him, Todd jerked away, staring at the ribbon of blood as if it were some sort of hideous secret weapon, the plague to end all plagues” (113). Zimmerman’s over-the-top language leaves no doubt of his intent to assign warlike metaphors to HIV-infected blood. He transforms Rawlins’ blood, which is incapable of harming anyone else as long as it is not introduced into the public sphere, into a weapon that could be used to hold a lover hostage. In *Hostage*, blood serves little function, at least to the AIDS terrorists, other than to be sprayed and injected into a healthy person’s body like bullets from a gun.

Furthermore, the doomsday language—“the plague to end all plagues”—often appears in AIDS literature written in the first two decades of the epidemic, before medical science had advanced to the point where there now exists a perception by some that the disease is contained and not as much of a risk as it once was. In *Hostage*, Zimmerman uses war metaphors that Sontag opposes to portray AIDS as a destructive force that will only pick up speed if homophobic attitudes remain, AIDS funding diminishes, and social behaviors do not change.

Zimmerman said he did not make a conscious decision to turn blood into a theme that runs throughout the novel. He admitted he was more concerned with the pace of the thriller. Still, he acknowledged, “Blood, contamination, AIDS, it was just on my brain” (Zimmerman). He stated that the incubus for *Hostage* stemmed in part from his own brief scare with AIDS years ago, when he discovered a blood blister above his eye. A doctor casually diagnosed the blister as a symptom of Kaposi sarcoma (KS), which is a form of cancer that develops in people infected with HIV. Zimmerman said the doctor “nonchalantly identified it as KS and started boasting that he often was the first to discover AIDS in people” (Zimmerman). Already fearful as a gay man, Zimmerman confessed that he panicked after receiving the diagnosis. However, his doctor was wrong and the mark above Zimmerman’s eye turned out to be nothing more than a blood blister. He stated, “Nevertheless, a week later a friend of mine discovered a very similar type of bump on his arm, which in fact did turn out to be KS. And a year later, he was dead. The drama of all that, the sorrow and the anger, seemed to morph quite easily into thriller format” (Zimmerman). The novelist’s anger is conveyed through his band of AIDS terrorists.

Nothing about the kidnappers’ attempts to get revenge on Clariton is hidden. Full disclosure is needed for them to add a level of psychological torture to the physical breakdown that they hope their

victim will soon experience. The sick kidnapppers matter-of-factly inform the congressman that they plan to videotape testimonials about how they contracted AIDS before they inject him with a syringe full of blood drawn from their own shriveling veins. They feel the only way for Clariton to understand their pain is to literally give it to them, and they want the deliberate transformation to be a highly public affair broadcast on televisions around the world. Matthew, a homosexual man with AIDS and the no-nonsense leader of the kidnapppers, reveals this revenge plot to a TV reporter in the hopes that she will spread it to both her viewers and law enforcement officials. He tells her:

Now, listen carefully so you can spread the word. We are Americans, we are acting independently, and we are all three dying of AIDS. We are appalled by Congressman Clariton's position on the AIDS epidemic. After we give the congressman a small dose of our lives, so to speak, we intend to release him. (80)

Matthew's choice of words is worth noting. In describing the kidnapppers' contaminated blood as "a small dose of our lives," he makes it clear that the immense physical and psychological agony that they experience as AIDS patients can be contained in a few drops of blood, which could then be injected into the congressman for revenge. As they see it, their bodies—though gradually beginning to fail on them—are like weapon factories capable of producing tools to use against others. In *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), Jasbir K. Puar explores the association that some critics have made between homosexuals and suicide bombers in the age of AIDS. Citing Leo Bersani's influential 1987 article "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Puar writes, "In its close association with AIDS, Bersani argues, anal sex has come to figure, for heterosexuals, as a destructive self-annihilation, a dark side ascribed to the jouissance of ecstatically forsaken bodily boundaries during sexual exchange" (72). Puar builds on Bersani's argument and that of Judith Butler, suggesting that anal sex "not only kills oneself, but also, through the demolition of the self, kills others" (72). The suicide bomber acts in the same manner, with their literal demolition of self intended to advance a political cause by killing as many people as possible. In both instances, the body is shown to have the potential to cause massive destruction, whether strapped with explosives or infected with AIDS.

Matthew, in particular, inhabits an identity in *Hostage* where he is presented as suicide bomber intent on killing one self and others, first by having unprotected anal sex with other gay men and then by resorting to terrorism to spread his calls for AIDS acceptance. He is both the ringleader of the rag-tag

terrorist group and an unapologetic man who is unfazed by the news that he spread HIV to Rawlins. When Rawlins reveals that he contracted the virus from Matthew during a drunken one-night stand two years earlier, Matthew cracks a smile and laughs. He is uninterested in providing emotional support despite his own drastic attempts to draw national attention to the plight of people with AIDS; he instead is more entertained by the realization that Rawlins has not heard of Clariton's kidnapping. He tells Rawlins that his positive HIV test is "exactly what millions of others would pay dearly to learn—simply, you found out how you're going to die" (144). Matthew lives a life seemingly based on Bersani's argument of "destructive self-annihilation," and the pleasure he gets from crossing what some heterosexuals regard as "forsaken bodily boundaries during sexual exchange" leads to Rawlins getting infected with HIV. Whether through anal sex or attempts at forced infection, Matthew shows the destructive power of the virus, giving it almost weapon-like qualities.

This is illustrated during the novel's climax, a hostage standoff inside a megamall that has Matthew holding a syringe of contaminated blood against Clariton's neck while pointing a gun at Rawlins. The blood inside the syringe came from Rawlins after Matthew forced his former lover to give a "full dose of the Supreme Cootie" (262). Rawlins, in his attempt to end the standoff, asks Matthew with a sense of desperation, "You gave me a death sentence, Matthew. You passed HIV to me. So why don't you just do it? Why don't you just shoot me and finish off what you started?" (269-270). For the second time in *Hostage*, AIDS blood is presented as being not much different than a gun when put in a violator's hands. Matthew has a syringe pointed at one man's head and a gun aimed at another person, with both hostages at the mercy of an AIDS patient intent on getting some sense of justice.

When a hostage rescue team is brought into the mall to end the standoff, team leader Wayne Morrish makes it a point to remind his fellow officers that they should put on the latex gloves issued to them to protect them. The kidnappers are deemed armed and dangerous by the simple fact that they have AIDS. Morrish states, "Our targets have AIDS and should be considered extremely contagious. You must exercise extreme caution and avoid contact with their blood!" (256). At the time of Morrish's warning, though, Matthew and Elliot do not have any open wounds that would expose the hostage rescue

team to their blood, and therefore the virus<sup>10</sup>. Still, AIDS is not confined to the kidnappers' body; it is removed and brought out into the public space for healthy character to fear like anthrax. Zimmerman's language in describing Matthew after police officers shoot him during the hostage standoff—"his punctured body spurting his poisoned blood everywhere" (274)—further amplifies the bodily fluids of the sick to the level of a weapon. The message is that even after his death Matthew should be avoided; he remains poisonous and a risk to public safety.

The kidnappers shed the perceived innocents that Goldstein finds troublesome in many fictitious portrayals of the AIDS "everyperson." When cornered by a pair of security guards toward the end of *Hostage*, Elliot grabs a female mall employee and threatens to bite her if they move a step closer. All of a sudden, he comes across as an AIDS-infected vampire willing to turn the employee into a victim like himself: "Just look at me! Just look at how sick and scrawny I am! I'll make her like this, I'll give her AIDS" (239). Elliot then takes his threat to the extreme to get the guards to comply with his demands of entering a walk-in refrigerator: "Go on, get in that refrigerator or I'll come after you guys too! I'll slice off my finger and spray AIDS blood all over you!" (239-241). Elliot is unarmed during the standoff, though the hostage and security guards are willing to obey his demands for, as Elliot notes, "the fear of AIDS alone was as powerful a weapon as kryptonite was against Superman" (240). His threats to infect hostages and turn them into victims of the AIDS epidemic fit with Parys' discussion of Elaine Scarry's notions of gaining power through torture in *The Body in Pain* (1987).

Parys argues "the deliberate transmission of HIV through rape and violence is akin to the torture that Scarry examines and theorizes" (4). Parys suggests that "unmaking," as Scarry calls it, includes forms of torture that are intended "to inflict pain on the victim to ultimately deconstruct or 'unmake' the victim, thus creating the perception that the torturer holds ultimate power" (4). Through their plot to infect Clariton with AIDS, Elliot and the other kidnappers in *Hostage* intend to "unmake" the congressman in the most extreme ways. They want to use his body against him to force a change in federal AIDS policy. They believe by "deconstructing" Clariton, causing him to experience the physical and mental torture of having AIDS, he will distance himself from his calls to cut AIDS funding and frantically push for a cure to

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<sup>10</sup> Tina, the third kidnapper and the only heterosexual one, dies toward the end of *Hostage* after bleeding out in a bathroom while battling the final stages of AIDS.

be found. As Elliot says, "That bastard's gonna get sicker than all of us" (130). Elliot wants Clariton to feel his anguish and get a "small dose" of his life. Shadowhawk, himself the byproduct of forced contamination, seeks revenge through different though no less violent measures.

Unlike the more mainstream Batman, Shadowhawk's means of cleaning up his city's streets do not include detaining criminals long enough for the police to arrest them. His methods of snapping their spinal cords put a twist on Parys' suggestion that violators in many AIDS revenge narratives gain a form of justice through "the interaction of two bodies—one infected, one soon-to-be infected." In *Shadowhawk*, the antihero seeks revenge through the interaction of two different types of bodies—his highly functional (though HIV-infected) body and a thug's soon-to-be paralyzed body. Shadowhawk has no intention of infecting criminals with HIV; he wants to prevent the epidemic, not keep it going. In the "I'd Rather Be In 1963" issue, Shadowhawk travels back in time in an unsuccessful attempt to stop a six-legged villain known as Comrade Cockroach from creating AIDS. Unable to rid his body of HIV, Shadowhawk uses violence as his means of releasing the frustration he feels about being given a death sentence in the form of a syringe filled with tainted blood.

In "Through The Past, Darkly" (1993), the first of a four-issue series released in 1993, Shadowhawk stabs a would-be rapist in the face and smashes another attacker's face into the street while trying to make sense of his own fate. He hollers, "Why did it have to be me? I wasn't at risk! I don't deserve this!" (4-5). While Shadowhawk does not mention HIV by name, it is apparent that his positive test results are the catalyst for his violent response. His actions reveal the duality of the crime fighter. Even as he is preventing a woman from being attacked, his motives are self-serving; he wants to get redemption for having HIV by hurting those who deserve it. Valentino makes this connection between HIV and violence even more apparent by presenting, in the page proceeding Shadowhawk's altercation, a massive collage that includes three images of a syringe filled with blood getting larger as it travels through space. The final and biggest image of the syringe has a drop of blood hanging on the tip of the needle; inside the bright red drop is the dark silhouette of a demonic-looking skull bearing its teeth. A series of words accompany the syringe as it emerges from an explosion in space and grows in size on the page. The words state, "It begins as a flicker. A pin-point of light getting closer. Ever closer. Until it takes form. And the needle comes down faster, dripping death" (1). Given the way it is characterized, the impression

is that AIDS has been thrust onto the public with a Big Bang-like explosion, created from nothing to cause death.

The silent nature of AIDS and relatively easy way in which it is transferred has made the virus the ultimate biological weapon in literature; it gives sick, marginalized characters the power to force others to experience a similar destruction of self. To borrow from the military metaphors often used in AIDS rhetoric, these misguided characters “take arms,” using tainted blood from their own arms to try to achieve a sense of justice. However, their hopes for retribution are flawed and often end prematurely. Shadowhawk succumbs to AIDS before he can find a cure for the “monster” inside him, making it clear that he is incapable of returning to his pre-AIDS identity no matter how many spinal cords he snaps. While comic book fans might sympathize with the vigilante and believe that he is justified in his use of extreme violence, Valentino forbids his antihero from achieving total redemption. As Sontag suggests, AIDS by its very nature exposes a person’s “indulgence [and] delinquency,” opening the individual to be judged harshly by society. And if a blame-the-victim approach determines that no person with HIV/AIDS is entirely innocent, then AIDS revenge narratives present desperate characters willing to embrace their criminality to be heard.

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