

Writing as I Lay Dying – AIDS Literature and the Death of Identity

The emergence and the development of AIDS in the 80s and 90s brought forth in the United States a series of crises in medical, ethical, political—and representational—terms. In this context, queer literature and the subgenre of “AIDS Writing” raise the question of the impossible representation of a vanishing subject. It is also both for the poet and novelist Melvin Dixon and for the photographer David Wojnarowicz an opportunity to transcend social identities.

La propagation du sida dans les années 1980 et 1990 a provoqué aux États-Unis une série de crises d'ordre médical, éthique, politique mais aussi représentationnel. Dans ce contexte, la littérature queer, et plus particulièrement le sous-genre de « AIDS Writing », affronte la question de l'impossible représentation d'un sujet qui disparaît. Pourtant, le poète et romancier Melvin Dixon comme le photographe David Wojnarowicz voient ici l'occasion d'un dépassement des identités sociales.

In the recent genealogy of twentieth-century homotextualities, both literary and theoretical, AIDS writing comes as the ultimate stage of the contemporary reflection on gender and sexualities. Concomitant with the advent of queer theory, which has redefined the duality of gender in terms of free identification and positionality, AIDS writing, with the confrontation to the disease and to death, relocates gender and sexualities in the philosophical space of the human subject.

With its cohort of deaths and vanishing bodies, AIDS in the 1980s and the 1990s inaugurated a major conundrum in American homotextualities, both black and white, centring mainly on the question of metaphoricity: while it was generally agreed that linguistic representation could mask the horrors of reality, it was also widely assumed that only a new rhetoric could spur a return to the real. Several pieces by Assotto Saint, a Haitian-American poet and performance artist, were entitled “No More Metaphors” (Saint 1996, 119, 123, 127), or “No Symbols” (131), attempting to bear witness to the life and death of AIDS victims in a very literal, material way, notably by reproducing obituaries, court statements, notes written for the

AIDS Memorial Quilt project, or intimate recollections of the deceased. Some other texts had recourse to a war-like rhetoric, as is exemplified by the titles Essex Hemphill, a poet whose work focused on life as a black homosexual, chose for some of his poems, such as "The Occupied Territories," "The Edge," or "When My Brother Fell" (Hemphill 1992, 72, 161, 31). War on AIDS was the leitmotiv, either massive and launched on a large scale, as in the white photographer David Wojnarowicz's *Sex Series* (1988-1989), or restricted to the intimacy of daily life, as in "Turning Forty in the 90s," where the African American novelist and poet Melvin Dixon describes how "[v]ials of Septra and AZT line the bedroom dresser/ like a boy's toy army poised for attack" (Dixon 1995, 69).

And yet, in this *danse macabre* where the dying and the slain are no abstractions, it seems that the more metaphors are claimed to be rejected, the more they appear to be paradoxically regenerated. The metaphor of the angel haunts Hemphill's poetry (Hemphill 1992, 4-19, 161-63), and for Tony Kushner, most famous for his play *Angels in America*, the angel even becomes an allegory of America's rebirth. A similar ambivalence towards metaphors can be found in George Whitmore's documentary-like narrative *Someone Was Here*, which echoes Judith Butler when she argues that the lack of national mourning for AIDS victims reflects the deep-seated American belief that some lives, because deemed worthless, can be forgotten (Butler 19-49). Whitmore describes several individuals' struggle for survival, using a journalistic prose which, though distanced and paralleled by very informational footnotes, is never bereft of emotion. Powerful metaphors, scattered throughout the text, carry the pathos of these destinies while urging readers to wake up to reality. The most striking is at the outset of the text. It represents, set among many others, a human skull, whose empty eye-socket encapsulates in its black hollow the nothingness left by the epidemic (1-3). But the *vanitas* is not vain and, as the metaphor is being regenerated, it is the text itself that springs from the eye-socket.

With the regeneration of metaphors, one can identify many other formal characteristics recurring throughout these texts: the power of language to derealize through style, the deconstructive representation of reality through narrative strategies, the extended lexical field of vision and perception, an intertextuality that celebrates gay literary forefathers or the systemic call and response between authors. But the politics of forms, the pertinence of a figurative language, differ from all other American literary and poetic movements or traditions aiming at social transformation, and from African American literature in general which, as an esthetics of optics, endeavors to reveal whites' fantasies and reestablish the reality of a racist America. In the 1990s, the world to be transformed, the reality to return to, or to re-establish, is vanishing and to bear witness to this contemporary tragedy and be acknowledged for this dedication is what is at stake for many authors. Going beyond the false opposition between esthetics and politics AIDS writing even takes on, across the color-line, an ethical and existential dimension that is perfectly rendered by the following statement:

I'm not so much interested in creating literature as I am in trying to convey the pressure of what I've witnessed or experienced. Writing and rewriting until one achieves a literary form, a strict form, just bleeds the life from an experience—no blood left if it isn't raw. How do we talk, how do we think, not in novellas or paragraphs but in associations, in sometimes disjointed currents . . . (Wojnarowicz 1999, 235)

To witness and be witnessed in return exceeds the form but does not suppress it. It is possibly the only thing that remains beyond the vanishing of authors and artists—their dying without being remembered as if they had simply not existed. For want of being meaningful in the world's indifference, most of the works in the AIDS era express this obsession with vanishing through both the object and the medium of their representation. Wojnarowicz, who signed an essay for the catalogue of "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing," the controversial November 1989 Manhattan AIDS show, composed a self-portrait where his face disappears while being covered with earth ("Untitled," 1993 [Meyer 273]). The image echoes the work of another photographer, "Untitled," (1991) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, which shows an empty bed with crumpled white sheets and pillows, shaping the hollow of the already absent lover and the memory of Eros (Meyer 269). The photograph is in dialogue with Wojnarowicz's still present lover and its anticipation of Thanatos. The same metaphor of vanishing can also be found in Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time*, where Paul, the narrator, back home from the hospital where Rog, his lover, has been taken to die, stares down at his empty bed "where the sheets still swirled with the shape of his sleep" (Monette 1988a, 334). Time, and means for achieving the impossible representation, are also dwindling to nothingness, as thousands succumb too quickly to AIDS, a human and artistic helplessness that Dixon voices in his poem "One by One":

Another telephone call. Another man gone.
How many pages are left in my diary?
Do I have enough pencils? Enough ink?
I count on my fingers and toes the past kisses,
the incubating years, the month ahead. (Dixon 1995, 59)

Vanishing contaminates everyone and everything: people, art, the possibility and the reason to create. Even literary and artistic works, once they are done, offer no guarantee that they will last, be preserved and fulfil their mission to bear witness. Vanishing also comes in the form of censorship as Wojnarowicz warns before "The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine Over a Mouse Hole." In a note addressed to readers, he explains that the following pages disclose a set of Dakota's recollections, salvaged by his friends, since everything that he wrote, played, shot, and painted had been burnt by his parents when he died from AIDS (Wojnarowicz 1991, 164). Assotto Saint feared the same fate for his works. Of course, censorship, especially when it comes from close relations, gives to vanishing—being dead and not remembered—another, even more

destructive meaning. What it inscribes in life and others is erasure as memory: being dead and being remembered as a non-entity, a non-existence. Linking AIDS and the gay experience, beyond epidemiology and the sociology of sex, this awareness consolidates a crucial dimension of gay consciousness: being dead among the living, being a specter in one's own family and entourage, transparent and seen through AIDS as the vanishing of the vanished. The struggle not to vanish, in the context of AIDS, has therefore to be put in perspective with the life-long fight for existing as gay. Within gay writing and art in general, works about AIDS reproduce the same irrepressible attempt to connect.

For African American novelists and poets such as Dixon or Hemphill, the primary connection is between black and gay experiences. As a member of the black gay writer collective "Other Countries," Assotto Saint took part in this aborted revolution, of which Patrick Moore claims that it "seemed on the verge of bridging the gap between black and gay identities until nearly all of [these writers] were lost to AIDS" (Moore 160). Being black and gay, synonyms of social opprobrium, taken separately, may be deeply alienating when cobbled together, since heteronormativity and homophobia in the African American community are often the reflection of internalized racism, while antiblack racism from whites is in part sexual, both in motive and expression. Poems such as Dixon's "Etymology: A Father's Gift" (Beam 142) or Hemphill's "Family Jewels" (Hemphill 1992, 107), poignant calls for escaping erasure from the collective picture of the black experience, testify to the urge to be acknowledged, celebrated and remembered by the black community. It is the same connection with the group that is sought for in Dixon's short piece "Aunt Ida Pieces a Quilt" (Hemphill 1991, 145-47), where he links together the deceased, the loving African American grandmother, and the fabric which is meant to be integrated in the AIDS Memorial Quilt metaphorizing a national community of which to be part as well.

While radically alienated from the Puritanism and materialism of American society, Wojnarowicz's attempt to connect is paradoxically pursued through warfare and violence which also figure among his favorite literary techniques to convey his atrocious isolation as he dies from AIDS. In a fragment of his diaries, partly collected in *In the Shadow of the American Dream*, Wojnarowicz puts the blame on "the rich," "their armies halfway around the world," and "their useless bank accounts." They hide behind the "shades on their three windows, long black slats of designer materials" under which "[t]hey hear very little of our lives, they hear little of our hollers our screams our hunger our choking." But Wojnarowicz has his weapons—"small explosives and crude brand-name missiles temporarily made from stove matches tinfoil and now small steel cups" (Wojnarowicz 1998, 241-42). His most powerful one, however, is his nakedness which "shows his hunger," "a difficult thing for anyone to ignore," and which he flaunts through the window of his cheap hotel room (Wojnarowicz 1998

241). The warfare is one of violent witnessing and forced acknowledgement, but the intrusion of the gaze of the rich into his room is never actualized. The only intruding viewers are the readers who concentrate on Wojnarowicz's mind's eye—the scene of his destructive nakedness and sexuality witnessed by fleeting peeping Toms. Meanwhile the textual voice hammers the estrangement of the rich and insists, through the anaphoric “they,” on their aloofness. “My image can go where my voice would falter and dissipate,” Wojnarowicz claims (1998, 241-42), but it is the textual voice, with the stylistic markers (the repetitions and coordinations, the opposition between “us” and “them”), that gives the image of nakedness its profound meaning: an ultimate striving, despite, beyond, or along with the desire to murder, to connect, a despair betrayed by the concluding anticlimax: “I wave periodically” (1998, 242).

Subsuming the gay literary and artistic landscape of the 1980s and 1990s, connection at all cost is pursued to the extreme, including as far as in life-threatening and anonymous hard sex in meat-packing warehouses or derelict buildings. They are a recurring setting in Wojnarowicz's diaries (Wojnarowicz 1998, 20, 116-21, 168-70), his memoirs (Wojnarowicz 1992, 18-19, 71-77), and his “Arthur Rimbaud in New York” series (Wojnarowicz 1978-1979). They also appear, more precisely located by the Hudson River, in Dixon's *Vanishing Rooms* (3-4, 208-10), whose title also refers to the rooms where Metro, one of the main protagonists of the novel, enjoys being beaten up. The texts and artistic works of these decades reflect each other through the New York gay underworld of the 1980s. Men's loneliness and tragic attempts to connect in porn movie theaters, described by Wojnarowicz, are also translated into painting by Patrick Angus's 1990 *Hanky Panky* (Weinberg 147), a landscape where shame and self-disgust are never far away, as Saint's poem “Black Fag” also shows: the scene is set in *The Mineshaft*, a sex-club as popular as *The Saint*, whose devil-may-care atmosphere was captured by Marc Lida's 1982 watercolor *The Saint* (Weinberg 146). In “Black Fag” the persona ponders his participation in white gay men's fantasies and their instrumentalization of his blackness:

beyond the dreams of bathing in a thousand white dudes' cum
to wash a dark shade off my skin
beyond the dreams of their fingers grasping my head still
to wave the wooliness out of my hair
beyond the dreams of their golden showers. . . . (Saint 1996, 393-94)

What is to be reached on the other side of the cumulative and anaphoric “beyond,” on the other side of warehouse wall, the screen of porn theaters, is the urge to connect that AIDS and the prospect of a precipitate termination fuels and magnifies.

Writing AIDS is a Janus with two faces—deferring the fatal outcome but also propelling it, making denial sound like a mockery. Before featuring denial as a topic, AIDS writing itself was the subject of denial. Dixon remembers George Whitmore as the writer who had “struck a Faustian

bargain with AIDS: If he wrote about it, perhaps he wouldn't get it" (Dixon 1995, 75). Nevertheless, as Dixon confesses in "I'll Be Somewhere Listening For My Name" (Dixon 1995, 76), if "[o]ne becomes afraid to write because one's wildest speculations may in fact come true," writing, beyond the procrastination of time and consciousness, imposes itself as a tentative reminder of the self, others, and the world, as the only connection left—with one's own vanishing. Vanishing and the corollary estrangements from the self and from others are the basis of Wojnarowicz's artistic experimentations. In *In the Shadow of the American Dream*, which borrows its strong visual quality from Wojnarowicz's photographic art, itself obviously influenced by the narrative dimension of his diaries, one of the final passages gives a minute and vertiginous account of what being aware of the imminence of death entails for the self and for one's sense of identity:

I'm afraid I'm losing touch with the faces of those I love. I'm losing touch with the current of timelessness. . . . Maybe nothing can save me. Maybe all my dreams as a kid and as a young guy have fallen down to their knees. Inside my head I wished for years that I could separate into ten different people to give each person I loved a part of myself forever and also have some left over to drift across landscapes and maybe even to go into death or areas that were deadly and have enough of me to survive the death of one or two of me—this was what I thought appropriate for all my desires and I never figured out how to arrange it all and now I'm in danger of losing the only one of me that is around. I'm in danger of losing my life and what gesture can convey or stop this possibility? What gesture of hands or mind can stop my death? Nothing, and that saddens me. (Wojnarowicz 1998, 229)

Duplicating the loose structure of AIDS as a virus, vanishing is here represented as a network of metaphors—the author's "invisible words," "invisible arms and hands," "the glass human disappearing in rain," the vanishing of physical sensations. Progressively the metaphors disintegrate the text and isolate the opening proclamation of existence and its vain litany of "I am," repeated seven times in four lines. "I am" disappears and dissolves into "[its] new persona as a stranger," itself metamorphosed into objects, more and more ethereal, or sheer abstractions—volume, "blank spot," "a smudge in the air." A transubstantiation from materiality to abstraction, this growing invisibility separates the self from others and from oneself: "I am a stranger to others and to myself." The symptom of this (self) estrangement is the failure of connection and communication: "[I] can no longer speak the right language . . . what I make has meaning that circulates inside rather than outside, which defeats communication other than with myself" (Wojnarowicz 1998, 262-63). With an internal circulation of signification, the text also is bound to disappear as it cancels its own *raison d'être*—being read and connected to the world out there, its context. Unsurprisingly, the author does make thus clear that there is no such thing as a context in death: "I'm not ready. What does that mean; there is no context for that statement." Between the self-assertive first lines, which

rapped out their “I am,” and the concluding “I’m not,” which conveys almost timidly one’s rejection of death, the text has already destroyed itself. Without context to provide either otherness or difference, the “I” has first become a stranger to the self and to others and then a non-entity in a literal and written emptiness. Vanishing within a context that has vanished, the author’s interior space “is [his] location at this time like an invisible map, invisible even to [him] but [he] embod[ies] or carr[ies] it and it is now [his] identity, it is [his] emptiness, it is [his] loss of reflection in the mirror” (Wojnarowicz 1998, 262-63). This is what facing it—death or the mirror reflecting the loss to come—implies: what is perceived in a glimpse by the dying subject, and translated into text, is the death of the self and, in the adherence to one’s own vanishing, the vanishing of mundane identities.

Against its propensity to submerge the voice, the vanishing “I,” and social identities in nothingness, the text also proffers the possibility of a resistance that articulates identification and identity. In a radical alienation, the self is metaphorized into an other, becomes that other, retrieves itself from it and lets the other die. From the “self-as-other” to the “self-is-other,” the transformation exactly follows the development of the progression of AIDS at a cellular level. In other words, the text becomes the virus which destroys it to save its voice. Materializing Arthur Rimbaud’s statement of uncanny revelation “Je est un autre,” Wojnarowicz had already pictured the first stage of this transformation—the “self-as-other”—in his “Arthur Rimbaud in New York” collection of photographs, where a man, a mask of the French poet on his face, wanders around the city, the gloomy and artificial setting of his loneliness, while he exposes himself, masturbates, or uses IV drugs. As in any writing, in *In the Shadow of the American Dream*, the self becomes the other. Especially manifest in the autobiographical mode of diaries and memoirs, this process is here followed by a new stage insofar as the self is the other before being split again into two entities, equal but different, as one dies and the other survives:

I feel like it’s happening to this person called David, but not to me. It’s happening to this person who looks exactly like me, is as tall as me and I can see through his eyes as I am in his body, but it’s still not me. So I go on and occasionally this person called David cries or makes plans for the possibility of death or departure or going to a doctor for checkups or dabbles in underground drugs in hopes for more time, and then eventually I get the body back and that David disappears for a while and I go about my daily business doing what I do, what I need or care to do. I sometimes feel bad for that David and can’t believe he is dying. (Wojnarowicz 1998, 212)

In another fragment, “David, but not me” wears the mask of the child the two Davids once were. In a nightmarish dream the author wanders on the sidewalk of Broadway, suspended in time and space while the neighborhood of his “childhood hustling days” rustles with “movements of bodies, legs, pedestrians from the chest down” (Wojnarowicz 1998, 222-24). As he crawls in the luminous wonders of his dystopian Broadway

dream he finally finds himself at the intersection of 8th Avenue and 7th Avenue. He is now in a

ten-year-old's body and that body is full of life, full of flesh and muscle and veins and blood and energy and it all produces and propels this scream, this scream that comes from twenty to thirty years of silence . . . and it is here in the midst of that scream in the midst of this sensation of life in an uninfected body in all this blurry swirl of dusky street light that [he] wake[s] up. (Wojnarowicz 1998, 224)

The Munch-like scream is ambivalent. It voices the triumph of life over the virus but reproduces the conversion of cells and the progressively blurred lines between them. Expanding and saturating the text through widening circles, the scream equalizes all and everything: the scream and the author, David as an adult and David as a child, the thirty years of silence and the dusky street light. In the struggle between the screaming textual voice and the text, between life and death, the voice seems to have the upper hand and to save the self in an other who supposedly is not going to die but actually founders on reality and its powerlessness—"I wake up." The child was a dream and both are already dead.

In its resistance to a growing indifferentiation, Wojnarowicz's text bears a striking resemblance to a passage from Melvin Dixon's *Vanishing Rooms*. The movement from "self-as-other" to "self-is-other" is more explicitly conceived in the perspective of insanity. Guilty of Metro's rape and barbarous murder, Lonny is one of those lost kids in America who "never had a chance," as his mother kept telling him (Dixon 1991, 57). In the passage, he comes back to the crime scene to lie down on the asphalt, in the space left by Metro's body, now vanished. The contrast between the stark reality referred to by Lonny's confession and the matter-of-fact style, with its verbless short sentences and its repetitions, gives to Lonny's hallucinatory narrative a harrowing dimension. Madness creeps in under the form of talking autumnal red leaves which give voice to Lonny's troubled conscience. To escape from the leaves and allay his conscience, Lonny thinks of inhabiting another body, the empty space of Metro's corpse:

So I walked around the outline, seeing it from different angles. How funny to see something that fixed, protected from people or from falling leaves or from the slimy drippings from sides of beef. The outline wasn't Metro. It was somebody like me. (Dixon 1991, 68)

Soon the metamorphosis is finalized:

The chalk shape was glowing like crushed jewels under the streetlights . . . I crossed the barricade and sat inside the chalk. The glow was on me now. It was me. I lay down in the shape of the dead man, fitting my head, arms, and legs in place. I was warm all over. (*ibid.*)

But, as in Wojnarowicz, the change is of no use. The old self continues to fall into October red leaves and madness while, for the new Lonny, regenerated from a dead body, only rape and prostitution loom on the horizon.

In their common attempt at transcending identity in face of imminent death, Wojnarowicz's *In the Shadow of the American Dream* and Dixon's *Vanishing Rooms* both stand out as remarkable literary pieces of the 1990s. The connection between them is all the more powerful since they are bound together by a tie which, in *Vanishing Rooms*, has vanished. To my knowledge, AIDS has never been a prism through which the novel has been read, the 1975 setting allowing to avoid the issue (Joyce and McBride, xxi).

But one may contend that it is precisely in the shadow of the AIDS epidemic that *Vanishing Rooms* shines the most and proves Paul Reed wrong when he argues that "no single, major masterpiece of fiction has yet emerged from the AIDS epidemic to take its place alongside the great novels of illness—Albert Camus's *La Peste*, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*" (qtd. in Pastore 93). In its very form and structure the novel conveys the invisibility of the virus and its undercurrent process of general vanishing, a *tour de force* reflected by the novel's disintegration—its collapsing, polyphonic structure. First, the different characters' narratives are juxtaposed and all narrate the central event of Metro's rape and murder, followed by their consequences. Progressively, the narratives sound alike and, as they contaminate each other, one voice merges with another, erasing from the quilt-like fabric of the text the seams and stitches separating self and other. Indifferentiation stemming from AIDS is structural but also thematic. In *Vanishing Rooms* AIDS may be seen as an allegory of American interraciality, as the contemporary invisible disease that ravages all spaces, including those felt as the ultimate refuge, such as love and friendship across the color line.

The paradox of indifferentiation in AIDS writing, which signals the subject's death and, as a result, the possibility to transcend identity, to a certain extent fits Melvin Dixon's understanding of African American literature. Throughout *Ride Out the Wilderness*, he studies the recurrence of spatial metaphors in relation to survival and resistance against racism, classifying wilderness, the underground and the mountaintop as major tropes of black American regeneration (Dixon 1987). With its vanishing rooms, AIDS can very well be added to the list. But even in indifferentiating AIDS, American literature of the 1990s retains race as the irreducible point of difference. Race remains the reductive metaphor of the black lived experience and the condition of a phantasmatic white survival as in Paul Monette's memoirs and poetry (1988a; 1988b). While in both Wojnarowicz and Dixon the self failed to beget an other to be sacrificed in its place, thus paving the way towards the death of identity and its literary transcendence, most AIDS texts are enmeshed in American racial antagonism, betraying a return to the unavoidable reality but also, for AIDS literature and its esthetical and political pretensions, an insuperable limitation.

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