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Rhetorics of Loss and Living: Adding New Panels to the AIDS Quilt as an Act of Eulogy

Bryant Keith Alexander

My partner and I both love quilts. They adorn every room of our house—draped over chairs, mounded on racks, displayed as slipcovers and wall hangings, and, most important, layered on beds for warmth. And even though we now live at the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains in sunny Southern California, we both grew up in families, homes, class designations, and regions of the country where quilts had a significant meaning, a necessity. Long before the recent kitsch of nostalgia or the emergence of using quilts as decorating centerpieces—for families in West Virginia and Southwest Louisiana, quilts brought comfort on cold winter nights, and, for me, in a house without central heat and with floor heaters whose mystical fire glow offered close comfort but not sustained warmth from a distance—our quilts were cozy companions. These quilts, made by aunts and grandmothers, individually and in quilting circles with family and friends, were stitched with a
particular necessity: patches of layered fabrics, some found, others bartered and bought, but most often reclaimed from garments that had lost their wearable function and drafted into another form of service. These quilts were put to work, washed, worn, and refabricated over and over again.

These quilts, while created for their functionality, were patterned, in the sense of templates, for the ease of creation. With the aesthetic astuteness of care, they were pieced, appliquéd, and sometimes embroidered as a display of pride in workmanship. But their function was clear, and the women in our childhood lives engaged the act of making these quilts for the purpose of use. The thought of quilts as mere adornment would horrify them, and while many of them will now make quilts for pleasure or to sell to local tourists, they understood the intention and process of making quilts as acts of care and necessity. My partner’s aunt has now made a quilt for our six-year-old cocker spaniel, a two-by-three-foot quilt that fits into her puppy bed. It has her name on it, PEPPY, with embroidered dog bones as signifiers of her station, sewn in colors and a fabric that does not show dirt and is easily washed. We playfully extend our family heritage into the life of our canine progeny; the creation of the quilt for the dog is a traditional act of love and care to us.

And while most of the quilts from my childhood have disintegrated with time and use, they have painfully been discarded and replaced with newer and easier to care for modern renditions. We have quilts from my partner’s life before me. Yet I mourn the comfort of my own older quilts, not just for the warmth but also for the care of intent, the intensity of desire, and the act of love that went into their construction. Each quilt was like a symbolic hug from its creator. And maybe this is the reason that my partner and I are forever purchasing quilts from skilled artisans, mostly from West Virginia and Southwest Louisiana, and ritually giving them as gifts to friends and family, a cloak of care.

The aesthetics of quilts are sometimes trapped not only in the warp and woof of fabrics, but also of and in the rhythms of the effort signifying traditional aesthetic uniformity and desirous intent that is as diverse as those whose lives are enveloped in the social construction of the engagement. In speaking of African American women’s quilting, Maude Southwell Wahlman and John Scully suggest the following:
When the colors of the strips are different from the color in the rows of blocks or designs, two distinct movements can be seen: one along the strips and the other within the designs . . . This represents a textile aesthetic which has been passed down from generations among African-American women who were descendants of Africans . . . African-American quilters do not seem interested in a uniform color scheme. They use several methods of playing with colors to create unpredictability and movement.¹

I use this quote, as does Elsa Barkley Brown, to build a framework for conceptualizing. For her it is a key to building a framework of conceptualizing and teaching African American women’s history. She writes, “in my course on African-American women’s history, I seek to create a polyrhythmic, ‘nonsymmetrical,’ nonlinear structure in which individual and community are not competing entities.”² A part of her project is “about coming to believe in the possibility of a variety of experiences, a variety of ways of understanding the world, a variety of frameworks of operation, without imposing consciously or unconsciously a notion of the norm.”³ Quilts, in this sense, become metaphor for social and political constructions of identity made manifest in artifacts of culture.

I also use the quote as a framework of conceptualizing the AIDS Memorial Quilt as a series of individualized panels, individually constructed and aestheticized with personal intentions; isolated panels that are not designed for uniformity outside of the context of its own intent. However, when placed adjacent to other panels embroidered with the same intent, they too formulate a polyrhythmic, “nonsymmetrical,” nonlinear structure in which individual and community are not competing entities, building an image of collective struggle through buttressing and stitching individual expressions of mourning. It is in the moment of joining the panels that a collective vision is presented and the nonsymmetrical nature of the whole develops its own rhetoric. Yet while the individual panels represent the past (lives lost), the collective Quilt “constitutes a set of practices and cultural negotiations in the present” and becomes a collective narrative performing presence, absence, and historical memory.⁴

In presenting this idealistic notion of a collective narrative I also know that the racial representation in the quilt and the politics of the
 quilt of those non-white victims of AIDS has not always been fully present. Hence a more complex intention in using Brown’s quote is to foreground the absence of color, the asymmetries of representation in a project of memorialization; the missing voices of those men of color who have passed from AIDS but also those living with HIV/AIDS—voices that must be heard both to expand the narratives told by the quilt and to invoke the possibility that the quilt as a memorial shrouds. In this light, when as a black gay man I think of the actuality of the NAMES Project as one of the largest community arts projects in the country, I am less taken with the politics of the collective than of the acts of care and compassion that went into constructing the individual panels—self-contained quilts within the larger fabric of the effort. The thought of friends, lovers, and loved ones taking up arms, fabric, and needles, stitching manifestos that are as much political statements as expressions of remembrance and remorse; fabric stitched together with laughter and tears, with memories and dreams; panels offered as arguments and as one last symbolic hug, stretched over the expanse of multiple football fields. This thought gives me comfort in the social politics of love that often run shotgun to governmental politics that link desire and disdain in relation to HIV/AIDS and opens spaces for additional stories.

I am interested in partially reflecting on the historical nature of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, but in a more performative and narrative approach to telling stories of AIDS and HIV-positive status that traverses the boundaries between death and life, between loss and gain, between fear and a powerfully embraced self-determination, between acceptance and regret; and between regret and a righteous transcendence into self-knowing and liberation. And maybe more important, I seek to include voices of black gay men living with HIV/AIDS in the particular discussion of memorializing that the quilt addresses and politicizes.

Critical ethnointerpretive methodology engages a particular focus on critique but uses a highly personalized, reflexive, narrative, and autoethnographic mode of exploring the invested self-implication of the author and those he engages in the telling of the told. This is a form that engages an interpretive ethnography that foregrounds the actual expressions of particular cultural members, while also allowing the researcher
the opportunity to illuminate both his self-implication and his broader cultural membership in the community of interest that he investigates.

Here I present a series of autoethnographic narratives that situate me in the story I am telling as a black gay man and the brother of a black gay man who died from HIV/AIDS. There are also brief ethnographic narratives drawn from ten interviews with black gay men living with HIV/AIDS. Their voices are mournful and hopeful, funny and tragic—yet illustrate the diversity of conditions that inform their situated being. The work of ethnography in this project helps to illuminate the meaningful contributions of these interlocutors. Drawing from D. Soyini Madison’s work on critical ethnography:

As ethnographers, we employ theory at several levels in our analysis: to articulate and identify hidden forces and ambiguities that operate beneath appearances; to guide judgments and evaluations emanating from our discontents; to direct our attention to the critical expressions within different interpretive communities relative to their unique symbol systems, customs, and codes; to demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of power; to provide insight and inspire acts of justice; and to name and analyze what is intuitively felt.⁶

**Constructing a Panel for My Brother: Narrating Remembrance and Remorse in a Panel**

I saw the AIDS Memorial Quilt in its first display on October 11, 1987. I made the pilgrimage to see for myself the carefully crafted insertions and assertions of lives into three-by-six-foot individual cloth paneled tombs that laid down like recalcitrant lovers as memorials—key phrases, dates of birth and death, and character traits, signifiers of being, pictures, diagrams, messages of personal and political intent; mournful displays of remembrance and remorse laid bare in front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.⁷ The display was a “performance environment where we are asked to change from spectator/bystander to witness, where we were asked to make our specific memory into historical memory.”⁸
Yet the Quilt was only a temporarily placed memorial that through reflection of its social significance and the fragility of its substance became transient as a national marker of dignity, a banner of a war symbolizing urgency and necessity—this in comparison to such fixed memorials as the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Memorial, and the Vietnam Memorial. Later I saw the Quilt as a display traveling across America, segmented from the whole to politicize its significance as a mobile sideshow of a political cause. The reduced (re)presentation simultaneously exposed a wider population to the aesthetic and performative politics of the Quilt while diminishing the visual magnitude of the epidemic.

In my viewing of the Quilt in its varying constructions, totality and traveling road show—betwixt and between the nonsymmetrical multiculled panels of the Quilt—I always seem to miss the bodies of color. I did not doubt their existence, as much as how a lack of visibility suggests absence and thus a lack of representation. In 1994, when my brother died from HIV/AIDS, I wanted to create a panel for him, but in the midst of loss and remembrance, and the absence of presence, I was stupefied by the process of reducing a life to a panel on a Quilt; the politics of submission and inclusion, and the manner in which the literal gesture would memorialize my brother in the textile narrative and political gestalt of the quilt of AIDS victims. This panel would reduce him to an enshrined corpse in a perpetual wake—like Vladimir Lenin, Eva Peron, or James Brown. Which, while desperately attempting to hold onto a physicality of presence, prolongs the process of witnessing a slow deterioration of departure.

I resisted then, but now I would like to symbolically insert this narrative rendition of his panel, for I believe that his story, that our story as black gay men, have not adequately been represented in the historiography of both the Quilt and the AIDS epidemic.

**Standing at the Crossroads**

I am the fifth of seven children, the fourth of five boys—born into a social experiment that my parents called a family. In spite of the dynamic social interaction that goes on in a large family, I grew up a very private kid, constantly demanding his own space, his own place, his own identity—separate from my brothers (the athletic brother, the talented
brother, the handsome brother, the younger brother). I always felt that I was at a crossroads between who I was and wanted to be and who they were and the directions their lives were taking them.

The house that I grew up in was located on a corner lot in the center of our neighborhood—at a crossroad between Simcoe Street and 12th Street. All the local kids flocked over to our house. My mother used to say, “with seven kids you’re bound to attract a lot more.” Our yard was the place to be. We had pecan trees and fig trees, mulberry trees and a pine tree. We had a big front porch, a field for football and a dirt basketball court. This was the main attraction. Guys from around the neighborhood would come with their attitude and bravado, fighting over who would be shirts or skins. Sporting their new Converse tennis shoes, these guys would walk into our yard talking a whole lot of shit . . . who would win, by how many points, who would make it to the NBA. These guys performed the pageantry of youthful dreaming and the ritual of growing up. I watched these guys from the side window—one of two in the living room of our house. I would watch these guys, young Olympians in the prime of their manhood—calling up the dirt, swirling in a dust cloud of hopes and dreams, their bodies caked with a mixture of sweat, dirt, and tenacity. The basketball court was a crossroads, a passage into another time, another space—a ticket to another place.

The other window in the living room looked out to the front. The house that I grew up in was located across the street from Syrie Funeral Home. During the evening I would often look through it and see the pageantry of death and the ritual of saying good-bye. In the distance I could hear the mournful wails of those feeling grief. I could see the old men sipping from a bottle of courage near the dumpster. I saw children doing what children do—some playing games, others engaged in solemn social banter. I saw people looking silently, longingly into the distance, standing at the crossroads of their memories and their reality.

On September 7, 1994, I drove from Carbondale, Illinois, to Lafayette, Louisiana, to attend the funeral of my brother Nathaniel Patrick Alexander—who died from complications of AIDS three days earlier. Many asked why I didn’t fly, but I needed the time. In my informed confusion I thought that if I delayed getting there I could somehow suspend time. During that eleven-hour drive I crossed real and imagined
borders—traveling down a road that took me to painfully familiar places. The day he told me he was gay. The day he introduced me to a partner. The day he called me and said, “Are you coming home this summer?” The day I helped him move home. The day I found out he had AIDS. The day he said, “I’m sorry I let you down.” The day he said, “I love you.” The day he died.

As I pulled into Lafayette I reflected on another special day: after a name-calling episode with some of the local boys in which I was the focus of their pro-masculine anti-sissy juvenile male posturing, my brother sat me down and said, “I see me in you. We are so much alike. There are many versions of being a man. Find the one that is best for you that does not cause harm to others. Be who you are, what you are, and how you are, and to shit with them.” I was thirteen. He was seventeen.

I enter my parent’s house at 10:30 p.m. and family immediately surrounds me. I navigate myself through childhood memories and put to rest sibling rivalries. I greet my sisters, my older brother, his wife and children. I talk to the other older brother—on the phone—who is incarcerated in the local jail for drug dealing. He is feeling the pain of his absence in that time of family grief. I hold a strained conversation with the younger brother, who, since dropping out of high school, finds it difficult to talk to me, his graduate-student-teacher-older-brother.

The next day my family arrives at the funeral home early for a private viewing of the body. This is the first that I have seen my brother in months. He looks thin and ashy. Surprisingly, I find myself more angered than sad. I am angry at his carelessness. I am angry that as a black man he carried himself recklessly through the world. I am angry because his hair is combed forward instead of backwards. I am angry because he is wearing a plaid jacket that even he would not be caught dead in. His skin is darkened, his eyes are deep, and the clothes are draped over his body like they are hanging on a rack. His eyes are closed; there is a slight smile on his face—a glimmer of recognition, but no real acknowledgment. I miss him. I miss seeing me in him. This is not the brother that I fought with for years, the brother who helped me to cross over into being.

Later that evening I see faces from my past, all older and a little
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grizzled. I have not seen many of these faces in years. As the resident family recluse and all-around shy guy, I retreated from the neighborhood years before and busied myself with high school, then college, then graduate school, and then teaching. Many of them hesitate when they see me, an adult version of the child memory; the face in the window. Then almost predictably, they comment: “You look like him. You sound like him. You act like him.” It is an attempt to re-create him—it’s a form of celebration and renewal. I smile uncomfortably and welcome them. I see a number of my brother’s friends, gay men who float in on a trail of tears. I know many of them. We greet. We hug. We kiss. And as gay men we stand at the crossroads of our lives. We look at each other searching our faces for some sign, for some assurance—for denial, for escape.

During a novena, a repetitive chanting of prayers, I step out. While standing outside of the funeral home I realize that I am engaged in the pageantry of death and the ritual of saying good-bye. In the distance I can hear the mournful wails of those feeling grief. I could see the old men sipping on a bottle of courage near the dumpster. I can see children doing what children do—some playing games, others engaged in solemn social banter. I am looking silently, longingly into the distance, standing at the crossroads of my memories and my reality.

I look across the street at an empty lot where my childhood house used to stand, long removed. I hear the faint sounds of brothers and sisters fighting and laughing. The trees are still there, but the grass has long grown, covering the arena of boyish dreams—where guys performed the pageantry of youthful dreaming and the ritual of growing up—in the swirl of dust and clouds of dreams. In the distance, leaning against the pecan tree, I see a figure. Standing there is the memory of a boy named Donald, one of my childhood friends, a basketball player—a titan of the court. Now he is a shadow of a man, frail from drug and alcohol abuse. The tree holds him up as he sips a bit of courage before he begins to cross the road to pay his respects. As he approaches me, I see that his skin is darkened, his eyes are deep, the clothes are draped over his body like they are hanging on a rack. He conceals his bottle as he pulls up his pants. I stand there dressed in a tailored suit, manicured fingernails, and designer glasses. When he crosses my path he hesitates. Our eyes meet. There is a glimmer of recognition but no real acknowledgment. I
mourn the loss of Donald. I mourn the loss of my brother. I mourn the loss of young black men and youth-filled dreams.

I am standing. I am standing at a crossroads between my brothers (the married brother, the dead brother, the jailed brother, the dropout brother). I am standing at the crossroads of my life looking through a window to another time—onto a dusty basketball court—seeing young black Olympians in the prime of their manhood performing the pageantry of youthful dreaming and the ritual of growing up. I am standing at a crossroads of my life as a gay man living in the age of AIDS. I am standing at a crossroads looking through the window, seeing myself engaged in the pageantry of death and the ritual of saying good-bye. I am standing at the crossroads between Simcoe Street and 12th Street, between my childhood home and the funeral home, between boyish dreams and adult realities. I am at a crossroads—looking, reflecting, remembering, moving and being moved, but standing still at an intersection in space and a breach in time.

Each panel of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, like the narrative I just told, tells a story, a story often pictorially presented: epitaphs, panels as tombstones; epithets, panels as substitutes for names and lives; effigies, panels as substitutes for bodies; eulogies, panels as remembrance and celebration. Each panel is a narrative of a life in a restricted space allocated by the conventions of time and location. Each panel seeks, like my own more explicit narrative, to tell a story of a life and relationship that has ended in death; a death particularized by the implications of a disease; a disease reductively associated with the politics of gender and sexuality; a disease often relegated to the politics of negligence and self-gratification; a social condition that implicates the politics of medical research and the politics of a community and culture to witness and mourn. The politics of HIV/AIDS are always situated, situated in family, culture, class and society—politics that implicate our sense of knowing ourselves and encountering others in the face of threat and the vulnerability of desire. And while a particular expression of remembrance and remorse, my narrative seeks to illuminate these qualities that are stitched between the fabrics, seams, and emblems of the panels as larger rhetorics of loss and commemorations of life on the quilt. The following ethnoperformative narratives,
like my own, offer the particularity of experience in the face of loss; but unlike in my narrative, the men whose voices are presented speak from a space of affective knowing as they negotiate their own HIV-positive status, constructing and offering counternarratives to the situated panels on the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

**Ethnoperformative Narratives: Living in the Face of Diagnosis**

The ethnoperformative narrative is, for me, a narrative drawn from ethnographic interviews, a personal narrative that stands on its own as a performative expression of desire. It stands as a counternarrative, a self-expression that disrupts and disturbs public discourses or master narratives from the dominate culture by exposing the complexities and contradictions of the unspoken and the cloistered lives that public discourses do not include, revealing nuanced differences in which private lives, usually minority lives, respond to the situatedness of living. In a series of ethnographic interviews with ten black gay men self-identified as either HIV-positive or living with AIDS, I draw the following thematically linked and stitched narrative responses back to the overarching notions of building *rhetorics of loss and living*. While the AIDS Memorial Quilt documents and concretizes a particular history of death, and a political medium of marking such deaths, “the voices [that echo within the Quilt] are full of the weight of a history that cannot be absorbed, full of sorrow that cannot be managed, full of absences that never can be filled, full of contradictions that never can be resolved.” And thus the Quilt makes a resolute contribution to the historiography of HIV/AIDS, but not always to all of the lives affected by the disease, or at least not in equal measure.

Within the following brief and singular utterances from these ten men, my attempt is to offer counternarratives, “short stories” that offer individualized perspectives of experience that are sometimes cloaked and silenced within the official narrative of HIV/AIDS that the AIDS Memorial Quilt seems to signify, pervading social consciousness. I believe that these short stories as ethnoperformative narratives, presented in the active voice of men living with HIV/AIDS, resist the finality of closures in
the moment of their utterance. They may even serve as disidentifications, as practiced positionalities within a lived circumstance that critiques from within, and as a method that seeks to subvert mainstream constructions of queer identities in the particularity of the AIDS Memorial Quilt.11

These stories reveal the limits of manageability. Like the disease with which these men are infected, there is a careful selection of memory, a liberal dosage of invective, and linguistic excess that is palpable within the social economy of their expressions. But the reader and audience of these short stories also can see the fixity of particular features of the disease (psychological, physiological, and sociological) that demands accountability. These expressions do not bear the same weight of a history that cannot be absorbed or a sorrow that cannot be managed in the Quilt. They only offer perspectives on living with the disease and open new spaces of possibility in the ever-present specter of probability.

These are a series of vulnerable stories and subjectivities. They are not vulnerable because they demand empathy or sympathy from the reader. They are vulnerable because they expose that which is always being concealed in the discourse of the AIDS Memorial Quilt—and maybe more important in HIV/AIDS discourse, the positionality of the dead in relation to those living with HIV/AIDS, as well as a particular admission of self-implication in the context of suffering, death, and mourning. As an organizational and interpretative mechanism, a series of themes with brief framing logics emerged in the ethnographic interviews. The themes and the accompanying analytical frames are not meant to override or dominate the voices featured; they are to help the reader contextualize the offerings of the narrative in the larger context of this project and reveal the ways in which the narratives defy and demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, while contributing new insights to its continued power as a trope of HIV/AIDS. The first theme deals with the relationships between individuals, the cultural communities in which they claim membership, and the pressure of being cultural members in the face of HIV/AIDS. The second theme addresses the conundrum of living and dying at the same time. Men infected with HIV/AIDS articulate a sense of living not in the margins but in spaces of liminality, betwixt and between. The third theme provides a brief glimpse
of black gay men who use their HIV/AIDS disposition as an opportunity for public information and activism.

**Stitching Notions of the Individual, Community, and AIDS**

AIDS has its own stigma, both for the particularity of the individual and for the community to which the victim holds membership. Whether through the stigma of the disease or the manner of assumed contraction, sex or intravenous drug use, both the private and the public becomes implicated in the statistical chronicling and the categories of designation that are part of the disease and the marked lives of those infected. I use the preceding heading as a thematic precursor to utterances made by these black gay men as an immediate response and reflection on their HIV-positive diagnosis.

Black gay men’s awareness of the growing number of AIDS cases in the black community, and the still-contested nature of the black community’s orientation to “gayness,” places a particular racial and cultural burden on their self-realization, forestalling their moments of personal grief in the alchemy of race, sexuality, and the mediated space of home. In the interview protocol the question framing this response was “What was your immediate response to receiving the news of your HIV-positive status?”

James: The first thing I said when I got my test results was, “I am a God Damn Statistic!” How many times have I heard the growing statistics of black gay men contracting HIV/AIDS? How many fucking times had I thought of black friends and Black people that I know who got the bug? How many fucking times had I thought about how stupid they must be—don’t fuck without a condom, don’t rim, don’t swallow, don’t share needles, don’t fucking share bodily fluids! And here I am . . . I sat there for a while, in the waiting room of that free clinic and just thought What the fuck? . . . Really as a question, not a statement of fact . . . and because I was sitting in this public space reading something so private and personal . . . made to be so clinical . . . I was also trying to control or maybe contain my response . . . but I saw other stunned, blank, and
worried faces looking down on test results or looking into space waiting for test results and thought . . . how in the fuck did I get here?

. . . And then I began to think about my mother, and my family. I began thinking about how disappointed they would be in me . . . and that somehow they would do what everybody does with this disease . . . just think that it is the ultimate cost of being gay, the payback, the punishment, GOD’s wrath . . . and they are being punished too . . . being shamed. I knew that people would be disappointed in me for somehow voluntarily throwing away my life . . . me the former altar boy, . . . the first-generation college boy who should know better, . . . the one who presumably made “a choice” to be gay, . . . the one who did something nasty, and now I had to pay the price. For black people AIDS was a white man’s disease . . . hell, being gay was for white boys . . . And here I am another black boy with a white man’s disease . . . another black boy lost.

DARRYL: I didn’t know what to say . . . I didn’t know who to tell . . . For the first time I didn’t think that I could go home . . . it was bad enough that I was a black fag, but now to be a black fag with AIDS just seemed like I was a random statistic . . . it was almost laughable . . . Years before, I remember attending the funeral of this older black guy in the community. Nobody ever really talked about Mr. Clyde. My Clyde was never married and had no children—in that way in my community, in which signs of being straight was either being seen in the company of women or having children, as the evidence of being with women. No one really talked about him, he did work in the church and in the community and for those reasons people didn’t talk about his personal life . . . But as a little black gay boy I remember looking at Mr. Clyde and seeing how he looked at me . . . it was that gay look that people sometime called the gaydar. It was a way of looking that suggested interest, but not in that lecherous old man look, but a way of seeing me and letting me know that he really saw me . . . until Mr. Clyde, I didn’t think that anyone saw me as gay. And in some ways I liked that, but I didn’t really want to be seen by others because being seen and being known in this way in the black community was dangerous . . . at his funeral people said nice things about him, but no one broached the subject that he might
have died from AIDS . . . I had seen him in my years of going back and forth . . . and in his face I saw that face of some of my gay friends who had died or were dying with AIDS . . . partially gaunt and hollowed but overly muscular, eyes bulging, and a body trapped somewhere between wasting and gaining . . . I saw it in his eyes and he would see me seeing it in his eyes . . . and I said nothing and he said nothing. Mr. Clyde is like so many black gay men in my childhood—their gayness was markedly real for other black gay men, but somehow invisible to others in the community . . .

When I came out people immediately called me fag, black fag, bitch . . . and I could not go unnoticed and uncritiqued . . . maybe like Mr. Clyde . . . I could have been tolerated, if I just didn’t talk about it . . . then I had to tell my parents I was HIV-positive . . . because I just didn’t want to disappear . . . but when I told them I really became invisible . . . I could see the shame and embarrassment . . . I saw them staring at me and then not seeing me at all. So I left.

Maybe I am just a statistic, not really from AIDS but of the homophobes in the black community . . . I think about Mr. Clyde’s funeral a lot and wonder about the consequences of being out . . . the only difference is that my parents attended Mr. Clyde’s funeral.

The narratives of James and Darryl move me, and I am not surprised by the nature of their talk, which is not exclusively of their own mortality but about the social and cultural implications of their diagnosis. Each addresses the issues of family, culture, and community as key elements in responding to their diagnosis. Each invokes issues of stigmatization, alienation, and the silence in the black community on issues of HIV/AIDS, but they clearly signal the racial expectedness of heterosexuality as a performance of masculinity and of being a black man.

The politics of the AIDS Memorial Quilt invokes the rhetoric of loss, the rhetoric of memorials, and the rhetoric of activism. The sheer expanse of the original display of the quilt was in many ways a piece of visual rhetoric, a political statement on the magnitude of the epidemic and a call for more federal funding for research. But what I am particularly interested in is the potentially unspoken narratives that are also written in the Quilt; narratives of gay men living cloistered lives; narratives of
boys and men being ostracized from their families at the knowledge of them being gay; narratives of family shame and embarrassment at their diseased child that forestalls the immediacy of embrace, leaving men like James and Darryl isolated from family and community at a time when such support might inform the care that they need.

My mother was a nurse’s aid, often caring for sick and dying children on a pediatric ward at a state run hospital in Lafayette, Louisiana. While my brother was not quickly forthcoming with the news of his diagnosis, my mother detected his symptoms. It was she who recommended that he move from his apartment in New Orleans back home to Lafayette. It was she who cared for him in the last year and a half of his life as the disease quickly progressed. It was she who initially called me at graduate school in Southern Illinois and told me of his illness, and, knowing that I too was gay, she told me to practice safe sex. It was she who told me that she was taking an early retirement to care for him and that she did not want me to come until it was over. This was an act of care; this was a precaution to keep from seeing me in the company of him—(like James) her two gay college boys. After my brother’s death my mother began to speak at local churches and town meetings about HIV/AIDS. She spoke to mostly black audiences about the disease, explaining the links between caution, care, community, and culture. I assisted her with her speaking notes and sat once in the back of a partially filled cafeteria as she spoke. These are experiences of HIV/AIDS that are not narrated on the current Quilt but could serve as powerful expressions—those living with HIV/AIDS and negotiating the boundaries between culture and mortality, between compromised health and cultural compromise, and between loss and renewed conviction of possibility.

**Resisting Foreclosure: Conscious Awareness of Living and Dying at the Same Time**

Performance theorist Richard Schechner wrote, “performance is not a passive mirror of . . . social changes but a part of the complicated feedback process that creates change.”14 In the stories in this set, the act of telling is an act of resisting the foreclosure of the told and the actuality of living. The act of telling is a resistance to the limited narrative of HIV/AIDS that
says *you contract it and you die*. The stories told by Jason and Thomas are whimsical and painful resistance to this reductive aphorism in ways that acknowledge the perils of diagnosis buttressed against the reality of being. The oral presentations of thought serve as moments of *therapy discourse*—outing concerns of self and building a “mutating, transitory cultural intelligibility of agency, within the frame of social temporality that renders the . . . self culturally ‘coherent.’”

And while I am using Judith Butler’s construction in this moment, I am less interested in the ways in which such *coherence* is a reference to some link between sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual practice. In these short stories these men are establishing coherence between the reality of illness and the sustainability of their unbroken spirits, who they were and continue to be in the face of the intervening complications of HIV/AIDS. Within these stories, their performance and presentation of self is part of a feedback loop of sustainability that is not just about living, but also about thriving in shifting conditions of being. In the interview protocol the question framing this response was “What is your general outlook on life or living with HIV/AIDS?”

**JASON:** I have good days and bad days, count up/count down, strong and looking healthy/weak and looking sick . . . In some ways I don’t mind being sick. After 10 years of being diagnosed, I’ve come to grips with my situation . . . I just don’t like looking sick . . . you know? The precarious nature of this disease is that it takes over and while I have the choice to care for myself and keep up on my meds—there are things going on in me that are beyond my control—so I am *kinda living and dying at the same time* and each day tells the tale of which side is winning . . . but I am not dead yet. I have a lot of things that I need to accomplish . . . I want to finish my Master’s degree. I want to realize my dream of teaching in a Community College, I want to really fall in love . . . you know . . . to find someone that really loves me and me him . . . not just somebody to fuck—that’s easy, and I think that is what got me like this . . . just fucking.

You know I was one of those rare kids that my parents actually had the “birds and the bees” talk with . . . well it was actually my grandmother . . . The only thing I really remember her saying was something
about sex and marriage, but she said sex in love is the best . . . and the fruits of that love would flourish . . . that’s how I remember that . . . She was probably talking about children—even though I thought that she was the only one that really got me . . . So when I was told that I was HIV-positive I thought that that sex wasn’t love, and if I was in love then, I wouldn’t be sick now . . . I know that’s silly . . . but I ain’t dead yet—so I am still looking for love, and maybe that will make this living hell better.

THOMAS: I went to a party last week and there was this guy that I dated . . . well I just fucked him regularly . . . but I hadn’t seen him in years. He knew that I had AIDS, and I knew that he had AIDS, but we had eliminated the possibility of co-infecting each other . . . he was years ago . . . And when he saw me he said, “You’re still alive?” And I said, “I’m not dead yet!” and we both laughed. It was a funny moment . . . I guess someone hearing that story might think “how sick!” But it was damn funny. We weren’t really laughing at AIDS or being sick—because we’ve lost a lot of friends . . . We weren’t really laughing at being still alive because that would be looking a gifted horse in the mouth . . . I think that we were laughing at the ways in which time and absence has a way of fading memories, almost like death, and somehow in our memories we had killed each other off . . . but in that moment we realized that our memories of each other were very much alive, just suppressed—maybe like my immune system just waiting to be reminded or ignited . . . I guess we were also just laughing because instead of just fucking, we used to laugh a lot . . . and I still like to laugh . . . I haven’t lost that.

I like these narrative moments and enjoyed interviewing these men. Jason and Thomas embraced life, even as they were very cognizant of the realities of their diagnosed condition. Each offered a counternarrative of optimism to the “death sentence” narrative of HIV/AIDS, and the particular reification and reminder of death that the AIDS Memorial Quilt represents—both as reminder for political argument and memorial for those lost. Each invoked the longevity of their lives after diagnosis and a particular zeal for life. Each make a distinction between having sex and being in love as correlate acknowledgments often associated with and
not associated with gay life—in that way in which gay men are depicted as promiscuous without the sustainability of meaningful monogamous relationships. Jason is still searching for love and Thomas gives a sense of interpersonal knowing as a foundation for meaningful relational engagement.

In a practical and biblical sense, my father would always remind his seven children that we are mortal creatures and we are born to die, that the meaningfulness of who we are will be measured in the deeds accomplished in a fixed expanse of living. One of my father’s best friends when I was growing up was a man named Mr. Walter. Mr. Walter worked for the church and maintained the cemetery. Often he would give me a couple of dollars to help him clean graves. Around Easter and All Saints Day people would pay him to scrape their loved ones’ graves and apply a fresh coat of white paint as a sign of their continued care and dedication. Some of my friends thought it morbid, but I enjoyed the work. I enjoyed reading the stories told on each grave. The state of the grave reflected the presence or absence of living relatives. It told a story of care, concern, and diligence. The death markers, birth date, and death date symbolized the longevity of life, and the pictures of the deceased offered a faded glimpse of a life once lived. Some headstones, like obituaries, also listed surviving family: “She is survived by . . .” and then the names of a spouse or children or siblings. These are narratives fixed in stone that the passage of time cannot augment. I often wondered, Is her husband still alive? Are her children still alive? Is she now a grandmother or great-grandmother? The AIDS Memorial Quilt narrates such stories and timelines, but the commemoration of the death is also a commemoration of the disease; on the Quilt, rows of names in fixed plots, like veterans of war taken under the same conditions, establish a linear logic from diagnosis to death. The stories of Jason and Thomas give way to new possibilities in narrating the story of those living with HIV/AIDS. They are storylines that are not as fixed as those told on headstones or on the Quilt. They offer stories that narrate new adventures, stories that resist quick foreclosure because of the disease, stories that tell of people engaging the challenges of living.
Exigencies and Political Necessities, or “(Not) Fucking with Wild Abandon”

When I use the word “exigencies,” I am referencing situations that demand attention, that we ignore only at our own regret or peril. Exigencies straddle the borders between problems and opportunities. In the following short stories, these men comment and critique on exigencies of knowing and doing, offering critical reflections on being and becoming, and of knowing and acting. Their HIV-positive status is reframed as an exigency to act, not merely react. And the notion of fucking (or not fucking) with wild abandon becomes metaphor for a particular level of engagement in light of moral responsibility and reasoned acknowledgment of the potential consequences. While casual in nature, these short stories drawn from ethnographic interviews offer critical expressions within an interpretive community. Lives are laid bare, and responses to the exigencies are both personal and political. In the interview protocol, the question framing this response was “As someone living with HIV/AIDS, do you see yourself having a social role?”

alan: I have heard older gay men tell stories of the heyday of gay life . . . variably marked somewhere in the 60s, 70s, and even the 80s for some. They tell stories of being able to “fuck with wild abandon” in parks, public bathrooms, and bath houses with little fear of painful consequences . . . short of, for them, contracting an “easily treated” venereal disease. I have always been curious as to why these stories are told . . . They are like the opposite of those . . . “we had to walk through sleet and snow, ten miles to get to school kinda-stories” . . . but, in this case, “fucking with wild abandon” is meant to be a story of advantage and not hardship. I used to think that if that was the case, then they were asking for it . . . not knowing what “it” was, and not wanting to say that they deserved to get sick—but shit . . . “fucking with wild abandon” and many of these old shits were now healthier than me . . .

I came out at age twenty. I had my first sexual encounter with a man at age twenty-one, and I was diagnosed as HIV-positive at age twenty-two. I am now twenty-five. I didn’t have a heyday of “fucking
with wild abandon.” Before contracting the disease I was only with two
guys. Being diagnosed made me feel like an object lesson, like someone
was being taught a lesson, and I was the visual aid. I thought to myself
that I did all the right things . . . I don’t remember being careless in any
other aspect of my life and not even in that moment . . . that moment
when I contracted the virus, I didn’t feel that I was being careless . . .
I was making love with someone that I cared about, who wasn’t honest
with me about his own history . . . I now kinda wish that I had been
“fucking with wild abandon,” at least I would have good stories to tell
. . . [laughs] . . . not really, that’s not me . . .

So now I spend time volunteering . . . talking to young black gay
boys who think that it can’t happen to them, boys who “come on to me”
while I am trying to talk to them about safe sex, . . . boys who don’t think
it can happen to them . . . I feel good about what I am doing, and while
I am still healthy (and I plan to be for a long time) I want to dedicate
my life to educating young people about the disease so that they don’t
become an object lesson.

TERRENCE: My mother used to laugh and say that I came out of her
womb gay. “He was just born that way.” That became a family joke that
was librating in some ways—when compared to so many of my friends
who lived their lives in the closet and heard their parents talking about
hating fags . . . But it was not so funny when people didn’t always take
me seriously . . . like being gay was being mentally retarded or . . . being
gay meant being “not all there,” or not a “real man” . . . or assuming that
I did when I didn’t know the first thing . . .

But I have always been out, and for that I am proud that I have never
pretended to be something that I am not. I am happy to have people who
have always loved me for me—even if they didn’t always take me seri-
ously. Now I want to be taken seriously . . . because if they don’t take me
serious—then they don’t take this disease serious and more boys like me
die because no one is taking anything serious . . . and they assume that I
know and I don’t . . . and kids are told “not to fuck,” so they fuck, instead
of being told “if you’re going to fuck, then use a condom” . . . That’s what
people say when they take it serious and they want to protect you.
Of course we all have a social role. A role within the larger matrix of culture and society, family and friends, place and space. But roles shift as the conditions of living change, and as the exigencies for action become immediate and contingent. Each of the men in the interviews paused on the wording of the question. Some asked for clarification, “Do you mean, now that I am living with HIV/AIDS, has my sense of my social role changed?” Each played with what might have been a loaded question that expected a shift in their social consciousness once they became aware of their diagnosis. This was an intentional lead on my part, one that had an anticipated rejection or capitulation as a test of attitudinal shift. The responses varied, but Alan and Terrence offered the expanse of these responses.

Alan’s response reminds me of stories told by elders of any cultural community who reflect on past exploits with a sense of nostalgia that both celebrates and mourns the past. In Alan’s case, the nostalgic turn was invoked by his queer elders in relation to random unprotected sex, even in light of known potential consequences of such actions, both pre- and post-AIDS. Alan playfully mourns an unlived past as he also narrates an alternative construction of gay life that does not invoke promiscuity and play—which are often associated with being gay and contracting HIV/AIDS through sexual transmission. He narrates a story of many gay men whose personal integrity and unfortunate circumstances are overshadowed by the specificity of their illness and the social construction or reduction of that meaning. By informing young black gay boys of the disease, Alan continues to claim and enact a social role of service and information sharing. His narrative helps to dissipate the miasma of the epidemic and the cultural ignorance that leads to young black boys living cloistered gay lives without caution.

The narrative that Terrence offers pivots on the notion of “taking it serious”—taking gay lives seriously, as well as taking the time to seriously talk about HIV/AIDS. Terrence invokes aspects of my own experience as a young black gay boy. In the midst of family friends and neighborhood kids, I remember being taken seriously as a good student and maybe taken seriously as a creative person or a relatively articulate person, but I was not taken seriously as a young man—not in the same ways that the more hyper-heterosexual boys, and even my three straight brothers, were.
That reality in my black cultural community, and maybe in Terrence’s, reinforced a pernicious homophobia. It reinforced a hatred for what is reductively perceived as the feminine in the man, as well as a reductive perception of women altogether, establishing a sense of social value very early in our lives of what it means to be a man (to be straight) and the social positioning of that designation.

While Terrence speaks of a particular joy of having always been out and known, his not being taken seriously as a gay man living with HIV/AIDS presents a huge risk—the risk of the disease also not being taken seriously because of the population it seemingly most affects. Terrance’s call is a social position as well as a political position, one that sits at the intersections of assumed knowledge and necessary action, a place where “fucking with wild abandon” and not taking it seriously has consequences for self and society.

**Self-Constructed Eulogies for the AIDS Quilt**

As Vivian M. Patraka noted in “Spectacles of Suffering,” “no historical referent is either stable, transparent in its meaning, agreed upon in its usage, or even engaged with in the same way by a large group of people.” The AIDS Memorial Quilt means different things to different people. The following short stories are responses to the question “What would you want your panel on the AIDS quilt to represent about you?” The responses are varied, from abject refusal of a panel to playful self-constructions, messages about self and other, self as other, and secret messages to private readers. I press these stories together without interceding analysis. Like the actual panels on the Quilt, they are designed to be read in relation to each other, in opposition to and in tension with each other, as collective and mediated memory of the diverse lives that have been taken by HIV/AIDS. These lives speak in their own voices, and the messages are not about an easy solidarity, but a tensive negotiation of being and the remembrance of being.

**DAVID:** I don’t want a fucking panel on the Quilt . . . I don’t know what that would mean . . . So people could look at my name and my story as a fucking object lesson of what not to do? So my panel could end up
folded in some storage room collecting dust, the lost relevance of both my life and a political movement gone bust? Did you see that article in the LA Times a couple of months ago? That story about how the AIDS Quilt is stacked in a warehouse in Atlanta? There is nothing worse than losing relevance, of becoming commonplace, or even complacent. AIDS for me is a reality—one that is only relevant to the people who are dying from it . . . and that’s sad . . . it [AIDS] has become a part of our national consciousness, something that we have come to live with and die with as if commonplace. There needs to be another great symbol of the disease . . . like a Rock Hudson or Arthur Ashe or Magic Johnson. I am not wishing it on someone, but there needs to be a figure that brings AIDS back into the political consciousness as necessity of concern . . . the quilt was an emotional catharsis whose tears have dried . . . Maybe there should be a public burning of some of the panels . . . not as an act of blasphemy, but as an act of public outrage to mark this anniversary . . . like burning flags—burning banners of hope as a means of igniting a renewed attention.

**John:** My panel would just say, “Be Careful, Protect Yourself, Protect Your Lover! John.” Then the date of my death . . . I’ve thought about more political statements, like, “It’s time for a cure” or “Pressure the Government for More Research,” but in the meantime, people who are having sex just need to be safe . . . no exchange of fluids . . . suck, fuck, lick whatever with a condom or a dental dam . . . don’t swallow . . . don’t let anything in your body . . . I don’t know what to say to those fucks who are sharing needles . . . that level of addiction ignores all logics of safety. If I had a panel I would just say, “Be Careful, Protect Yourself, Protect Your Lover!”

**Dane:** You know that sounds funny . . . [*singing*] “if I had a panel, I’d panel in the morning . . . I’d panel in the evening” . . . [*laughing*]. Do ya get it? [*laughter*]. Okay, I’ll get serious. I don’t know . . . a couple of years ago my brother was killed by a drunk driver, and I helped my mother pick out a plot and a headstone . . . she bought one for me too. My mother knows that I am HIV-positive—and she’s not in good health—so maybe she was mourning in advance for me too. The
Adding New Panels to the AIDS Quilt

graveyard is probably one of the saddest places that I have ever visited, but trying to find words for his headstone was painful . . . born—died. What do you write in the middle? . . . Instead of his birth date and death date, we simply wrote—“He lived and he died.” My mother thought that he would get a kick out that, and we laughed . . .

I feel good, and I am not planning on dying anytime soon, so I really don’t want to plan a panel or a headstone . . . I have seen pictures of the quilt . . . Are they still accepting panels? I think that if I would want anything, maybe it would say, “if I had a panel, I’d panel in the morning . . . I’d panel in the evening” . . . [laughing] just kidding. I want to go laughing. I want to go kicking and screaming. What’s that poem? I want to rail against the darkness. AIDS is an ugly disease that in my experience effects beautiful people, people looking for love and comfort, the dick or the needle . . . There needs to be more research . . . people need to care more about finding a cure, maybe my panel says something like, “Care more about finding a cure.” Maybe it has a picture of my brother’s headstone that reads “He lived and he died.” My brother would like that.

These three brutally honest yet wonderfully endearing narratives offer bracing constructions of the tellers’ orientation to the Quilt, and of the epidemic of HIV/AIDS and their own mortality. David’s response is an act of political resistance against the current utility of the AIDS Quilt, but he also clearly articulates a radical repurposing of the Quilt to reignite a social consciousness about the disease that gives manifest meaning, not to the artifact but to the issue that the quilt signifies. John’s response is a call for personal caution and responsibility that speaks with the power of testimony from an affected/infected party, the type of message that both speaks to and embodies the consequences of its opposite. And Dane’s message is a playful response that invokes the resiliency of the human spirit in the face of terrible odds, and the compassion of care that advocates change.

These short stories serve as counternarratives in the ways in which they give voice to those for whom panels have been constructed. Panels mostly constructed with the best intentions by lovers and loved ones, by family and friends who articulate their own desire, regret, and
remembrance; panels that document the dead and their lives. The brief narratives offered here of men living with HIV/AIDS mostly resist the fixity of the linear construction from diagnosis to death. And while each of these men understand the complications of their situation in relation to current research and the still-stalled race to a cure, they are not resigned to just lay down their lives. John and Dane, who have begun to figuratively construct their own panels for the Quilt, each offered memoirs of their personality and calls for a cure. In contrast, Joseph chose to address the question of his own panel in this way:

JOSEPH: I know that a well-constructed quilt displays the skill of the person or persons crafting it. And I know that the aesthetics of a quilt often suggests or presents a recognizable pattern, a unified whole . . . but I wouldn’t want to have a panel on a quilt like that or even the AIDS Quilt . . . I don’t think I would fit . . . I know that AIDS attacks our bodies in similar ways, but all my life I have been described as a “black gay man” . . . Yeah, of course I am a black man, and I am a gay man, but the distinction of me being a black gay man has always been made—either by my family, who never accepted me as gay, or the general gay community, mostly white, . . . that has used race as a demarcater of difference within community . . . So I cringe when I don’t see the distinction of black gay lives who have died from AIDS on the Quilt, and maybe they are on the Quilt and nothing is ever made of that . . . maybe if I had a panel it would just be a piece of kente cloth that symbolized all the lost black lives . . . maybe that would create a pattern with a pattern.

On Eulogies, Narratives, and Rhetorical Hybrids

I think of the AIDS Memorial Quilt as a rhetorical hybrid, a communicative act with complex and competing intentionalities in the performatve moment of its presentation. Or as Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell state, “rhetorical hybrids’ is a metaphor intended to emphasize the productive but transitory character of these combinations.”20 Jamieson and Campbell are addressing the concept of genre as dynamic fusions in the particular cases of political and presidential rhetoric in the

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context of the eulogy. I want to apply their heuristic metaphor to the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and the rhetorical messaging of its intent and presence as eulogy, as memorial. In particular, what makes the Quilt a rhetorical hybrid is the intertextual quality in which it engages the intensions of eulogies, mixed with the dynamic stillness of an artifact as visual rhetoric to invoke a narrative—both of a disease and the lives lost to that disease, engaging what Jamieson and Campbell refer to as the deliberative quality, an appeal to action. In other words, in its complexity the AIDS Memorial Quilt serves as both memorial (eulogies for the dead and a rhetoric of remembrance), as well as an act of intervention. So while I want to address the contributing qualities of this hybridity, I will not tease these elements out as separate, but always and already as collaborative qualities of the rhetorical and narrative gestalt of the Quilt, “linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite.”

In Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS, David Román writes: “Before the Names Project’s unfolding of the AIDS Memorial Quilt at the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, the most public AIDS memorializations were candlelight vigils.” Hence the AIDS Memorial Quilt served as a particular act of intervention and a performance of protest in the crisis of AIDS to further publicize the disease, to quantify the magnitude of its effects, to take a public stance on needed research/money/legislation in finding a cure for the disease, and to memorialize if not eulogize the lives of the dead and HIV/AIDS infected gay men.

The eulogy as performance fits under the more expansive umbrella of performance as commemoration—which is true of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. In this medium, performance is engaged as a means of documenting the life and character of an absent other, an absent experience, or an absent construct of the self. Specifically, commemoration is an act of remembrance and recovery. Eugene Vance defines commemoration as “any gesture, ritualized or not, whose end is to recover, in the name of collectivity, some being or even either anterior in time or outside of time in order to fecundate, animate, or make meaningful a moment in the present.” Performance as commemoration can include eulogy, testimony, personal narrative, ethnography, biography, autobiography, autoethnography, and
other performances of reflection, remembrance, remorse, and mourning that the AIDS Memorial Quilt both engages and signifies.

Within the expressive ethnographies included in this chapter, we see the ways in which personal experience and the relation to disease, death, and despair are played out as a means of noting absence and simultaneously invoking the absence as presence. In particular, the narratives of men living with HIV/AIDS offer performative constructions that animate the dead and make dynamic their own continued existence as a contested sight of struggle and possibility. Linda Park-Fuller states, “All performances, and indeed all arts give testimony to absences—even as they manifest presence.”

The eulogy is always in relation to an absent other, thus it is a referential (auto)biographical performance that recounts the life of another in relation to the self, the person/circumstance/context of marking the death. In the case of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the individual stories—eulogies and memorials of those who died—are sutured and stitched together to amplify a shared experience or circumstance of death. In literal ways, while the eulogy is often the process of unreading a life text in order to recontextualize the life lived, the stitching of such stories into a collective fabric of social consciousness frames the magnitude of common experience for political purposes. But Della Pollock asks a series of questions that can appropriately be applied to the eulogy as I am now contextualizing it in relation to the AIDS Quilt:

What happens when a story begins in absence? When it takes its momentum from a gap, a break, a border space, or element of difference that violates laws of repetition and re-presentation even in the act of repeating, retelling, [and] representing [a life]? What happens when “the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing”?26

In the case of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the teller of the story, the one who constructed the panel for a loved one or the one left behind, becomes a stand between person, helping others (and the self) to cross over, mediating and bridging the chasm between life and death, presence and absence, or the social reconstructions of memory and desire.27 In fact,
the eulogizer for the individual person/panel is engulfed in the collective eulogy of the Quilt. And like the very nature of Pollock’s query, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, as the moment and mode of eulogizing the dead, becomes the place in which the larger issues of the disease are illuminated.

The Quilt becomes that argument that seeks to halt the momentum; it becomes the public statement that articulates the violation of human laws in the slow responses to the disease. The Quilt serves as suture in the gap, bridging breaks and border spaces that might suggest elements of difference to halt the act of repeating, retelling, and representing the same patterns of disease, death, and loss. But like the experience told by some of the black gay men in this project, racialized difference in the epidemic of HIV/AIDS is not always present in the actual Quilt, though the sentiment of the collective struggle might suggest so. And unlike the oral performance of testimony or traditional eulogies, the silence of this visual rhetoric speaks volumes to the silence in HIV/AIDS research; it speaks volumes to the absent voices unable to speak. Yet their stories are made present in the graphic representation of mourning, an absence made present, a feeling made palpable.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt functions as eulogy, a commemoration of a life. It “responds to those human needs created when a community is sundered by the death of one of its members. In Western culture, at least, a eulogy will acknowledge the death, transform the relationship between the living and the dead from present to past tense, ease the mourners’ terror at confronting their own mortality; console them by arguing that the deceased lives on, and reknit the community.”28 But in the political efficacy of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, a community of the dead is constructed and extended to encompass an entirety of humanity, and the consolation becomes not only that of containing emotions but also of igniting passions and urging action.

The eulogistic requirements can be teased out to show how the AIDS Memorial Quilt disrupts these traditional functions for broader political purposes:

- A eulogy responds to those human needs created when a community is sundered by the death of one of its members.
- A eulogy will acknowledge the death.
• A eulogy will attempt to transform the relationship between the living and the dead from present to past tense.
• A eulogy establishes the relationship between the speaker and the deceased and those on whose behalf the speaker speaks.
• A eulogy may attempt to reconcile the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the deceased.
• A eulogy may attempt to ease the mourners’ terror at confronting their own mortality.
• A eulogy will console the mourners by arguing that the deceased lives on.
• A eulogy will signal shared cultural beliefs about death.
• A eulogy will attempt to reknit the community.

The complex of these requirements of the traditional eulogy is to be accomplished in a manner fit for the solemnity of the occasion. Yet I suggest that the AIDS Memorial Quilt takes these particular acts for more public intentions. Yes, the Quilt responds to those human needs created when a community is sundered by the death of one of its members, but the Quilt takes the private deaths and coalesces them into a collective public mourning that transforms the actuality of death into a political call for action—linking deaths not exclusively to practices but also to lack of governmental action in finding a cure for AIDS. The AIDS Memorial Quilt does not seek to move the reality of death from the present to past tense as much as it magnifies in the present to make arguments for the future. The AIDS Memorial Quilt establishes the relationship between the gay community (those living and deceased) with a larger public and political agenda of human rights and protections.

The Quilt as eulogy reconciles interpersonal relationships between the speaker and the deceased; however, it also uses the occasion of death as a means of unsettling notions of governmental inaction toward the disease, especially as perceivably linked exclusively to the gay community. Hence, the actuality of death and the deceased are engaged in a public awareness campaign for the disease and needed action toward a cure. In essence, unlike traditional eulogies, the AIDS Memorial Quilt as eulogy does not make attempts to ease the mourners’ terror at confronting their own mortality. In fact, the Quilt and the occasion of its display and presence attempt
to ignite renewed awareness of the disease and how it is contracted, as well as force a particular confrontation between mourners and their own potentially unsafe practices (and that of hospitals, in the cases of HIV transmissions through tainted blood supplies).

The AIDS Memorial Quilt in its original construction and subsequent growth served to continually dramatize the disease and its potential to further devastate the gay community and beyond. The collective efforts of organizers and contributors to the NAMES Project invoked collective concerns and cultural beliefs about death, care, and humanity—coalescing a public memory for those who have died of AIDS. Thus the project works toward *reknitting community* through a call for action on the local level of safer sex practices and on the government level of increased funds for researching a cure.

Shifting from the AIDS Memorial Quilt to the NAMES Project redirects the focus of this analysis from the particular artifact (the Quilt) to the larger political project that the artifact signifies. Jamieson and Campbell argue that a “functional hybrid will occur when deliberative appeals are subordinate to the eulogy, when they can be viewed as a memorial to the life of the deceased, when they are compatible with positions advocated by the eulogist.”29 In this construction the reference is to an individual rhetor, one person responding to the particularity of an individual death, linking the death and the occasion of the eulogy to a larger political intent. Yet the NAMES Project is a collective political action offering response to a large-scale epidemic and a multitude of deaths.

The eulogizing and memorializing intent of the NAMES Project uses the Quilt as a vehicle for delivering the message. Hence, the deliberative appeal (in the campaign, in the Quilt) is not subordinate to the eulogy or the act of memorializing the dead. The politicized message and the medium are a coordinated effort. And in effect “deliberative elements fuse to form organic wholes when they are consistent with and contribute to the goals of the eulogy,” or in the case of the NAMES Project, the larger campaign that the Quilt signifies. Jamieson and Campbell go on to state that “hybrids are called forth by complex situations and purposes and, as such, are transitory and situation bound.”30

The epidemic of HIV/AIDS is a complex social crisis that has necessitated complex and concerted information campaigns and calls to action.
HIV/AIDS is still a bound circumstance, and the eulogizing aspects of the Quilt are still fixed—both as historical archive and performative repertoire. It is a host of rhetorical strategies that remember the dead, call for action, and narrate storied lives. The men interviewed in this project present their stories as affective rhetors, men narrating aspects of their own lived and living experience in relation to HIV/AIDS and the AIDS Memorial Quilt, as artifact to the disease and their predicament of living. Their narratives are eulogies for the dead and for the living; the narratives are deliberate and deliberative—intentional and careful, appealing and advocating—both for those who have died and for their own situated being. And, in this sense, their participation in this ethnographic project, like the NAMES Project that gave way to the AIDS Memorial Quilt, is a functional and effective rhetorical hybrid working toward common goals with an emphasis on the future.

The AIDS Quilt as a Continued Performance of Possibilities: A Conclusion

Since the inception of the NAMES Project, and in particular the political campaign that is the AIDS Memorial Quilt, no cure for HIV/AIDS has been found. While the political potency of the project stands as a historical testament to collective political action, both as demand for increased research funding and as an information campaign on the spread of the disease, the Quilt has become archival memory, static and fixed. In The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas, Diana Taylor writes: “What changes over time is the values, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how items it contains get interpreted, even embodied . . . Bones might remain the same, even though their story may change, depending on the paleontologist or forensic anthropologist who examines them.”31 To what degree is the AIDS Memorial Quilt still relevant? How might we, like paleontologists or forensic anthropologists, reexamine the body of and the bodies in the Quilt to find renewed understanding and a renewed conviction to the motivating impulse of the project as a whole, giving continued credence to the roll call of names that the project narrates?
The voices in this ethnoperformative text serve as testimony to desire and the continued efficacy of political activism on issues related to HIV/AIDS research that at once commemorates the historical significance of the NAMES Project while resisting the historicizing of lives still living in hope. Each story and the brief analyses that stitch them together throughout this project serve as hypothetical entries in a renewed NAMES Project; they serve as rhetorics of possibility: strategically constructed communications drawn from ethnographic interviews that articulate the dense particularity of the respondent living in the present, speaking of both the past and the future with the intent to motivate action, assuage the grief of loss, and perform a particular resistance to the social stigma of living with HIV/AIDS.

To what degree might an expanded ethnographic project collecting the stories of those living with HIV/AIDS serve as a foundation to invigorate a new NAMES Project, one that does not memorialize the dead but narrates and expands the repertoire of enacted possibility while meaningfully reinterpreting the archive (the Quilt)? How might such a project celebrate possibility, reanimating the abject bodies of those who have died in relation to their living counterparts, all while reinforcing the continued need for research, not just to extend lives but also to save lives? How might such a project also illuminate the diversity of experiences within HIV/AIDS—including the stories of raced others, accidental transmissions, children born with the disease, rape survivors, women who have contracted the disease from their husbands, men who are intravenous drugs users and/or are living on the down low, and “bug chasers,” those who seek the disease as an act of fatal commitment or activism. As with the men in this study, the articulation of stories that implicate race, culture, and community in the social construction of gendered identities sometimes results in alienation—both before and after diagnosis.

In “Performance, Personal Narratives, and the Politics of Possibility,” D. Soyini Madison identifies a list of prescriptions for a “performance of possibilities.” Madison’s work is grounded in building an ethic for embodied performance as a tool for social change in the realm of performance and critical ethnography. In many ways, the NAMES Project and the AIDS Memorial Quilt engage in performance as critical ethnography. Broadly constructed performance ethnography is literally the
staged reenactment of ethnographically derived notes. This approach to studying and staging culture works toward lessening the gap between a perceived and actualized sense of self and the other. This is accomplished through the union and practice of two distinct yet interrelated disciplinary formations—performance studies and ethnography. Practitioners of performance ethnography acknowledge the fact that culture travels in the stories, practices, and desires of those who engage it. In this sense, the AIDS Memorial Quilt is just that—an aggregate of stories, practices, and desires that provided a particular vision of a cultural landscape. Through the efforts of friends, families, and lovers, the stories of the deceased are told to make real the loss associated with AIDS and to politicize the disease in human terms.

Madison’s construct of a performance of possibilities speaks to the intentions of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in palpable ways. As a performance of possibilities, the NAMES Project functions as a politically engaged pedagogy that never has to convince a predefined subject—whether empty or full, whether essential or fragmented—to adopt a new position. Rather, the task is to win over an already positioned, already invested individual or group to a different set of places, a different organization of the space of possibilities. A renewed NAMES Project that focuses on the voices of those living with HIV/AIDS would reignite political activism that focuses on future possibility and not exclusively on loss.

A renewed NAMES Project as a performance of possibilities would take the stand that performance matters because it does something in the world. And what it does for the audience, the subjects, and those engaged in it must be driven by a thoughtful critique of assumptions and purpose. It must be grounded in politics for social change, both on the level of governmental intervention and personal practice. The voices of those living with HIV/AIDS should serve as the new representative members of the campaign, not a list of names of those lost, narrated for effect by family, celebrities, and politicians—but actual narratives voiced from the embodied place of experience.

A renewed NAMES Project as a performance of possibilities and as an interrogative field would aim to create or contribute to a discursive space where unjust systems and processes are identified and interrogated. What has been expressed through the illumination of voice and
the encounter with subjectivity motivates individuals to some level of informed and strategic action. The voices of those living with HIV/AIDS are the voices most significant to a renewed activism; through embodied, emotional, and affective testimony, the actualization of those living in the liminality caused by a lack of cure and the social constructions of gender and disease can be more effectively illustrated.

A renewed NAMES Project as a performance of possibilities would motivate performers and spectators to appropriate the rhetorical currency they need, from the inner space of the performance to the outer domain of the social world in order to make a material difference. In this sense, as David suggested in his resistance to formulating a panel, whether in a literal or figurative sense, the rhetorical currency of the Quilt as archive can be appropriated as critical reflection on progress in an invigorated repertoire of performative activism.

A renewed NAMES Project as a performance of possibilities is moral responsibility and artistic excellence that culminates in the active intervention of unfair closures, remaking the possibility for new openings that bring the margins to a shared center. Such an endeavor would bring a wider range of cultural others affected by the disease into a more unified presence, thereby truly illuminating the magnitude of the disease.

Invoking the work on U.S. Holocaust museums, “within the physical and conceptual envelope of its democratic discourse,” the AIDS Memorial Quilt offered viewers a display of lives as documentation of the disease; documentation as a death toll, documentation as carefully constructed messages from loved ones that bore the weight of their loss; documentation as formal pieces of writing on cloth that provided information, context, and history of a happening; documentation as evidence of action or inaction; documentation as a database or spreadsheet chronicling the particularity of an experience of loss. The AIDS Memorial Quilt, like the Holocaust Memorial Museum, has become an archive—a museum that reinforces “the ethical ideal of American political culture by presenting the negation of those ideals,” as well as our historical response to them, on public display for inspection, reflection, contemplation, and mourning.

Like the “dilemma of resisting the total erasure of represented absence” that chronicles the brutality of rapes and butchery in Jewish
concentration camps, the short stories in this chapter offer counternar-
ratives to the unspoken stories the Memorial Quilt could not capture. These stories are told in the present voice by mourning subjects who have not fully laid down their burden. They understand the efficacy of struggle and the necessity of survival. In this project, I have offered only a minimal representation of their narratives (coupled with my own story of loss)—narratives that are not trapped in what could be constructed as the “blindly optimistic goal of reconciliation” that is often a response to the public display of trauma. These stories, gathered through ethnographic methods, are everyday constructions of living with HIV/AIDS that do not ignore the infrastructure of culture in the narrating of experience. The stories and, more important, the men who tell them, are active agents in the ongoing narrative of HIV/AIDS. Their voices are like new panels for an invigorated NAMES Project that would promote rhetorics of living.

NOTES

Throughout this chapter I use narrative entries drawn from ethnographic interviews with black gay men living with HIV/AIDS. My initial encounter was through a member of a HIV/AIDS men’s support group who invited me to address the collective about this project. Subsequently, ten members volunteered to meet with me privately for a discussion. Pseudonyms are used to protect their privacy. For a more extended oral history on the experiences of black gay men, see E. Patrick Johnson, Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).


Adding New Panels to the AIDS Quilt


13. Conceptualizing through the work of Barry Brummett, A Rhetoric of Style (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), visual rhetorics can be described as powerful messages that embody a system of signification grounded largely in image, what is seen as a representation of thought and style and its political signaling. Olson suggests that visual rhetorics may have common qualities—a pictorial representation, a motto in the vernacular of the time or situation, and a resulting moral lesson. Lester C. Olson, Benjamin Franklin’s Vision of American Community: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press,
16. Homosexuality becomes the origin of the disease, not a location of its affect, in a homophobic environment, even though gay men are statistically shy of intravenous drug users, babies born with AIDS, and those who contract the disease through blood transfusions.
18. David is referencing “Politics Sewn to Art, Panel by Quilt-like Panel,” Los Angeles Times, June 9, 2007, E12. The article focuses on LA-based artist Andrea Bowers’s video installation, The Weight of Relevance, a piece that focuses on the artist’s “interest in the relationship between art and activism and archival process.”
19. Dane is referencing the old Trini Lopez song “If I Had a Hammer.”
27. In developing his notion of a useful queer mythology, Scott Dillard cites Andrew
Ramer’s construct of the “Stand Between Person.” Suggesting the social positionality of gay people, Ramer states, “We stand between genders. We stand between the living and the dead. We stand between night and day. We stand between matter and spirit. Our job is to scout that terrain for the main body of the tribe, and to bring back all that information for the main body of the tribe.” Scott Dillard, “Breathing Darrell: Solo Performance as a Contribution to a Useful Queer Mythology,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20 (2000): 74–83; Andrew Ramer, “Keynote Address,” First Annual Celebrating Gay Spirit Visions Conference, 1998, www.mindspring.com/~gayspirit/key_1990.htmramer.

29. Ibid., 149.
30. Ibid., 150.