

“Born dying:” Cultural Futures, Social Space, and the Reproductive Economy in Southern
African AIDS Narratives

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“If you don’t acknowledge something how can you fight it? But as I sit there I wonder how on earth you can acknowledge something you cannot see” (81).

“yet stubbornly
does a nauseating stench
hang in the air
as those to whom
the future belongs
perish” (149).

“love still finds me here
in the post-colonial hour,
here
among the politics of viruses
and neo-liberal economic policies, [...] here in Fanon’s no-man’s land
we are beginning to learn
how to make everything
out of nothing again” (179).

An essay that takes as its object of analysis an anthology of stories and poems from southern Africa titled *Nobody Ever Said AIDS* wouldn’t be worth its salt without ever asking what it means to *say* AIDS, in 2004, in southern Africa. But I aspire to little more than highlighting the enormity and seeming impossibility of finding an answer to that question. As Kay Brown’s narrator wonders: how can you acknowledge the invisible? Does AIDS have a face? Is it possible to *imagine*? This representational dilemma is present in the very ambiguous reference to “HIV/AIDS” common in everyday parlance. The Human Immunodeficiency Virus is a ~~living~~ organism impossible to confront in its singularity. It functions as a group, transmitting itself through human society, continually reproducing, evolving and adapting to its environment (Goudsmit 15). Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome is a diagnosis, a breaking point of HIV repro-

duction within the body. As such, AIDS was born in a laboratory, and is subject to its own epistemological terrain and a medical discourse from which it is indissociable. The line between AIDS and not-AIDS is drawn by science. At the same time however, a body infected with HIV will contract opportunistic infections, and only display physical signs of its HIV-status through this sickness. So our acknowledgement of HIV is doubly deferred: first through a medical discourse which understands it only in its similitude with the viruses studied in a laboratory setting, second through the body infected, indicating its infection only through the presence of other infections. Representations of the first variety cannot avoid their association with scientific truth and positivism, and postcolonial critique. They have understandably encountered vociferous political opposition in South Africa and elsewhere. The second representation on the other hand tests the very limits and representational resources of language and culture.

Attempts to *say* HIV must therefore navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of socio-politics and culturo-linguistics. *Nobody Ever Said AIDS* is less, as the compilers suggest, a project to remedy this silence than it is a meditation on the very possibility of speaking HIV and AIDS. This dilemma is further complicated by a lack of knowledge about the differences between HIV and AIDS, which leads to frequent conflation of the terms. Thus, the short pieces in this collection confront both of the above representational difficulties head-on, in overlapping ways. This essay reads several of the pieces, and attempts to uncover a space of possibility for representing HIV, which, as Brown reminds us, is a prerequisite to fighting it, or at the very least living with it. I hope to suggest that questions of representing, fighting, and living with HIV are also always questions of culture, and that therefore developing a cultural imaginary of and response to HIV is essential to the longer-term human objective of “becoming with” HIV as a species. That is to say, progress in biomedical research and global health projects cannot and should not conflict

with cultural responses to the epidemic. In fact, I will show through a number of examples that the presence of a cultural imaginary for representing life with HIV makes that life meaningful, and conversely the absence thereof forecloses the possibility of meaningful life. This cultural imaginary includes not only semiotic representability, but also the capacity to understand futures, and to transform spatial locales into inhabitable place. These themes are indissociable, and thus will be interwoven throughout. Roshila Nair speaks to the urgency and absurdity of this project, as quoted above. South Africa must “make everything / out of nothing.” HIV demands that an impoverished region—post-apartheid South Africa—in “the post-colonial hour” (we might ask, following Homi Bhabha, if this is really a time at all) marshal its cultural resources to overcome corruption, poverty, globalizing and neocolonial power, as well as a virus group continually evolving to identify and seize upon any vulnerability within the human body. These aims, I would contend, are not unrelated. Even so, amidst this uneven and harrowing terrain, “love still finds us here,” and despite J.M. Coetzee’s assessment of a South Africa “as irresistible as it is unlovable,” this love emanating from within has its own healing power.

I. Imagined Futures in Economies of Desire

Set near the border of Mozambique at the Pousada Monte Neve, a makeshift brothel-cum-rest stop for truckers and other migrant workers, “Girls in the Rear-view Mirror” narrates the story of trucker Luis Pereira and his experience with AIDS. First coming to the Pousada Monte Neve at the age of thirty, Luis pays for the sexual services of Jotinha, a young prostitute whose eyes captivated him. Despite reminding himself that he has a wife and three daughters waiting at home for him, Luis quickly forms an emotional bond with Jotinha that lasts for five years. This information is given retrospectively, as a series of moments that Luis remembers. The diegetic level of narrative finds Luis a year after Jotinha disappeared from the Pousada Mon-

te Neve, at the night of her return. Luis is shocked to discover that Jotinha is barely recognizable, sickly and emaciated, due to her contracting AIDS. A friend of Jotinha's comes to find Luis with urgent news, but he avoids her and leaves. He returns a few weeks later with his own sense of urgency, only to be confronted with the empty room where Jotinha had died days before, a dress of hers she left him, and an infant boy. The story ends with Luis leaving his child to die by the side of the road, and keeping the dress with him as he drives away.

At work in this narrative are the complex and interwoven themes of masculinity, socio-cultural spaces, futurity and memory, all circling centrifugally from the absent presence of HIV at the story's center. The Pousada Monte Neve functions as a liminal space positioned in the interstice of social possibility, a space inhabited only temporarily by truckers and girls alike:

Soon after the first truckers had arrived, other people began to appear. They would come in groups [...] talking graciously to the drivers [...] as they batted their lashes at them.

After a while, they would climb down from the trucks, or they would emerge from the building, with money clutched in their hands as they straightened their short dresses and moved on.

Much like the disease that begins to trouble the narrative through its erasure, the transactional aspects of the Pousada Monte Neve remain the very condition of possibility for this liminal space, the social ties created within, and the disease that circulates along these ties. The rooms in the rest stop are rented, much like the girls and alcohol, but this site of consumption is fueled only by a prior economy: the truckers themselves are paid to sustain their unstable and migrant lifestyle, and their own capital is what in turn sustains this space: a similarly unstable confluence of society that exists only moments at a time. So Luis' first impression of Jotinha, that she "looked completely *out of place*. As if she wasn't meant to be there at all" (23, my em-

phasis), both calls into question whether any inhabitant of the rest stop can be said to belong there, and reminds the reader that she very literally is outside of *place*, if we understand the term to mean any space that becomes *culturally inhabited and inhabitable* (Tuan 3-7). This definition coincides with the particular definition of culture I will emphasize, which is, “the sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences [...] the giving and taking of meanings, and the slow development of ‘common’ meanings” (Hall 59). Place is inhabited space, and culture is the fabric of common meanings that allow that space to be inhabitable. Such habitation in this case is made impossible due to the temporally limited duration of the social ties that exist at the Pousada Monte Neve, paired with the impossibility of representing culture through an economy of exchange, which is the truck stop’s *raison d’être*. In fact, the liminal qualities of the Pousada Monte Neve, and its estrangement from cultural place, remind us of the hidden machinations of capital that evacuate non-essential meaning, and create this moment of crisis for Luis in the narrative. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, capitalism’s ideological success is less due to the innovation of the most preferable or most equitable system, than through the erasure of its own history, and the rewriting of social life in terms of capital. “Only capitalism constitutes a social formation—that is, an organized multiplicity of people—united by the absence of community, by separation and individuality” (Jameson 16). Once the commodity form has taken hold, all social actors are rewritten as consumers, and all meaning becomes circumscribed through capital and consumption.

The identities that survive in this space are precisely those which function at the unit-level: a masculinity which produces an insatiable desire for consumption, and a femininity which is conterminously produced as the object of desire, both individuating the identities in the text and masking their position in the social network. “It was just sex, he told himself, just sex. And

he was a man, with a man's needs" (AIDS 24). The masculinity articulated here not only produces the desiring subject, it becomes a self-referential fabrication of its own ahistorical creation. The needs make the man, and a man is one who fulfills these needs. Luis bemoans his lack of a son throughout the story, and is reminded of this fact every time he sees his nephew, Joaquim, whom he travels with. Luis "hated the fact that he was watching his brother's son become a man, and not his own" (30), and while this becoming is framed as an inevitable coming-of-age, it is written as closely married to a performative participation in this economy of desire at Pousada Monte Neve. Before his first experience with Jotinha, Luis had "been left alone, leaning against his truck with his hands in his pockets, much like Joaquim did nowadays," when his companion Filipe "had already disappeared into the inn with a girl on his arm" (23). Earlier, Luis calls Joaquim useless because "[e]very time they came here he acted like he'd never seen this place before" (22). This inadequacy of Joaquim is continually foregrounded by Luis' own participation as a *man*, a title assigned retroactively to those fulfilling "man's needs." The rationalization of his infidelity continues:

And all around him there were other men, most of them had wives too, enjoying themselves in the back seats of their trucks or in a room in the inn [...] For two weeks, the only other voices he'd heard were Filipe's and the other truck drivers' [...] Nothing but men. Men's voices, men's company, men's laughter, men's jokes. He was a man, and any normal man needed women, damn it (24).

Of note is the conspicuous slippage into the plural *women* when describing the needs of a *man*. This brand of masculinity must necessarily be polyamorous, and therefore must participate in this economy of desire and consumption. Moreover, this economy becomes the site of exchange for homosocial relations, both financial and fraternal. Luis' lifestyle—his being continu-

ally surrounded by other men—must be supplemented by women in order to be normal. In other words, it is not the lack of cultural place, of community, or of family that is abnormal about this lifestyle, it is homosocial relations absent the circulation of female objects of desire. This masculinity not only reconstitutes the precarity facing the truckers' lifestyles to necessitate promiscuity, it produces a sexuality that normalizes an individual estranged from community ties as having needs that legitimize the existence of this exchange, and therefore of the ordinary estrangement. The navigation of Luis towards a stable emotional relationship with Jotinha should make evident the fabrication of commodified desire at work in this masculinity, as well as an attempted return to a community place.

These two levels of desire—first a desire for return to place, and second a desire for consumption of sexual objects—are both rendered visible when in conflict in the text. This conflict most visibly occurs when Luis is confronted with the excess of his sexual gratification: in his choice not to use a condom, and his choice to abandon his newborn child. These scenes resist the casting of relations of desire as Symbolic and monological, with the former level of desire returning as excess, overwhelming the latter's attempts at closure in signification. Cultural place includes the representational resources of the semiotic, which are multivocal and metaphoric. But the transactional space at Pousada Monte Neve lacks these resources. When Luis is first about to penetrate Jotinha for the first time, she gives him a condom to put on. His masculinity persuades him to resist: "He'd never used [a condom] before, and he didn't want to start now. Filipe had told him all about them [...] He said it felt like you were in a plastic bag" (24). Despite the necessary consummation of desire associated with this masculinity, there is also a desire for 'real' contact, pleasure beyond the limits a condom would impose. This excess desire proves fatal to the continual survival of the economy, for Luis "felt ready to pay anything" for sex without a

condom (25). In other words, the desire for place, for ‘real’ contact, for return, becomes substituted for condomless sex, and its origination within the family—Luis uses sexual contact with his wife as the blueprint for all sexual contact—marks an impossibility for signification in the economy of desire at Pousada Monte Neve; there is no price Luis could pay which would represent an equal exchange value for this contact.

In the second scene of conflict, Luis is given an infant child who is, unlike Joaquim, biologically related to him, “‘He’s yours, Luis’. He didn’t say anything, just picked up his son [...]” (32). Immediately, a biological relationship with the child indicates for Luis the legitimacy of his symbolic relationship. Despite having never met the child, he is immediately Luis’ *son*. But this filial relationship is another excess of meaning that cannot be figured within this masculinity, as the conflict makes necessary. “‘The baby ... is going to have AIDS’” (33). This fact changes Luis’ relationship to the child: “‘Well he’s not mine either,’” he asserts soon afterward (34). He attempts to give the child away to other women at the stop, only taking him when every other option is exhausted. The eventual abandonment of the child wasn’t premeditated either, but came at the conclusion of Luis’ failure to care for the child, and realization that his migrant lifestyle made such a lifestyle impossible: “‘Here they were, two men in a truck, parked by the side of the road, with a baby. He tried to imagine the days of journeying that lay ahead, tried to imagine going back home, tried to picture the look on his wife’s face’” (36-7). Luis’ impossibility to imagine a future for the child stems from his status as a masculine individual, both unable to draw on experience to provide a life for the child, and similarly unable to integrate the child into his preexisting family structure. While he craves normal relations with Jotinha, even going so far as to feel unfaithful to her when he had sex with other women, his masculine identity forecloses the ability

to attain his desire, a son; represented in the text as a biological fact, while at the same time effaced by the inability of Luis to actually father the child, and consequently disposing of it.

The inability of Luis to imagine a future for the child, once it is said to eventually have AIDS, returns us to the site of liminality: Pousada Monte Neve as a cultural interstice. This highlights two phenomena in the text: First, the necessity of culture for an understanding of futurity, and second, the representation of excess desire and normal cultural relations as a *haunting*. The change in Luis' attitude toward the child is abrupt: "A few years. That was what his son's life was going to be. It was going to end just as it was getting started. A few years of getting sicker and sicker every day" (37). The drastic reduction in the possible life span and quality of life of the child strikes Luis once he discovers the child's HIV-positive status. Life ending *as it starts* signals another slippage in the text, where Luis' ability to imagine a life for the child centers around what life in this context means: "A few years of living in a house with a mother that wasn't yours, a father you saw for a few days every month and three older sisters who would probably never accept you as their brother. Luis realised that nothing made sense" (37). Entrance into Luis' already existing family was foreclosed for the child, because it is caught in the liminal space within which it was born. The traditional problem of the bastard child, given birth to outside of the family setting, denies the child place. A life on the road is similarly unimaginable, because Luis doesn't have the ability to care for the child, and there is nothing about that environment that would make the child's life worthwhile. Thus, because the child cannot live its life within a cultural imaginary, its life ends as it starts; the child cannot be said to live at all. The initial biological definition of fatherhood is radically uprooted in the text, and in its place remains the lack of a son that Luis cannot fill because of his precarious social position.

HIV functions in the text as an ever-present absence: it exists only as negation, stealing life and love, but it makes *visible* the incongruities between the individualizing masculine economy of desire and the underlying familial cultural community the former attempts to replace. In this sense HIV haunts the text, because its representation in the text is both empty and effacing, while it emerges as the visual *appearance* of that which previously remained invisible. This phenomenon is most apparent, perhaps, in the figure of Jotinha in the text. After her absence from the Pousada Monte Neve for over a year, Luis finally sees her again; “suddenly she was there, like a ghost, standing in the corner of the room” (26). What becomes clear, however, is that this ghostliness is not merely wordplay to signal her return. The Jotinha that Luis sees in the bar is nothing like the one he remembers, due to her living with HIV for so long: “her fingers felt his jaw line. And yet he just stood there, staring down at her, feeling as if she was out of reach. She was like a dream. A dream that had gone wrong” (26). This Jotinha seems unreal to Luis, and more importantly, less real than his memory of her. Luis *cannot believe his eyes*, because the visual representation of her is untrue to the image he has in his mind. In Terry Castle’s parlance, Jotinha becomes “spectralized” in Luis’ mind, and the ravages of AIDS, the bodily manifestation of HIV, bring her corporeal body back to haunt him. AIDS in this instance makes visible the incongruity between living in this liminal space, in the presence of disease, precarious and without future, and living in an insular community, where the insularity becomes a promise of normalcy.

AIDS also makes visible the homosocial bonds that Luis is caught performing. In a rehearsal of the uncanny fears that frame Freud’s reading of gothic texts, Luis’ first experience with AIDS is similarly haunting:

And then a picture that for years he had been trying to forget came to him – a man lying on a mattress in the corner of a dark shack, wearing nothing but a baggy white shirt, and

skinnier than anything he could have imagined [...] He had been so scared he had left, afraid that he had caught something from that man, simply from being in the same room as him. The same uncertain fear came back to him every time he thought about it [...] He was holding a piece of thread in his mind, trying to tie things together, but he couldn't (31-2).

What haunts Luis is the fear that he could catch HIV from this man without making *contact* with the man, simply by being socially connected to the man. But what the text makes evidently clear is the tangible connections that bind every man in this economy of desire. The women are not the only thing exchanged, HIV is transmitted as well. The text doesn't make this connection explicit, but the imagery of the thread signals the point after which Luis sees a visible social network of contact: "The thread began tying itself into a perfect knot. He tried to undo it, tried picking it with his fingernail, but it was too tight. There was suddenly a whole line of things, a whole network of people connected" (33). This is the same thread referenced immediately after the image of the emaciated man haunted him. HIV haunts the social through its presence, even while it is erased in the text, unable to be signified.

II. Abject Life, Life without Place

Felix Mnthali's "Our Diseased World" speaks from the edge of abyss about the end of world and the end of time. It begins simply: "Our world" (121). The first line of the poem inhabits its space on the page in an act of worlding that pronounces a beginning as it prophesies an end. In this world, "we are dying like flies," from "diseases that float in the firmament / in acts of affection and acts of begetting; / in acts of growing up and in simply / getting old and perhaps living well!" (121). This is a world of abjection, a world of precarity. The firmament is not a heavenly place, it is a border: dividing waters from waters. And it is infected, collapsing inward.

From within the very boundaries that establish acts of love, reproduction, and sexuality as such, a disease emerges that troubles those boundaries. Love brings death, futures past, pleasures pain. Mnthali's soothsaying is a "panic hallucination of the inside's destruction, of an interiorization of death following the abolishment of limits and differences" (Kristeva, 159-60). But where Kristeva's Janus-faced maternal figure is infected with the fever that brings an end to her own body, HIV ensures that the reproductive act itself is self-destructive. Just as Luis' son is born, so his life begins to end: "The children were born dying," as Eddie Vulani Maluleke writes (17).

Julia Kristeva takes up the psychoanalytic constitution of self through mutual acts of distancing: ab-jecting and ob-jecting (4). For Kristeva, before the subject/object divide comes the self preserved through a desperate ab-jection: a thrusting away of that which threatens the integrity of self. She invokes the same Hegelian worlding present in Mnthali's poem: "How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present [...] it is now here, jettted, ab-jected, into 'my' world [...] I behold the breaking down of world that has erased its borders" (4). The movement *beyond* the present into an imagined future, and subsequent *return to* the present, is only made possible by a bounding process, a Hegelian "worlding," which is always a discursive-semiotic practice. Kristeva understands the abject self as "deprived of world," in the same language of privation that Heidegger provides as the boundary between the *Dasein* (human self) and the animal (Derrida 47-8). The disease contained in the firmament which leads to the collapse of borders inflicts psychic harm on the people in question. This discursive border is necessary for the possibility of imagining a future, and thus necessary for any livable, meaningful present as well.

Rather than prompting an Oedipal crisis, this insidious threat spells the end of time itself, foreclosing a cultural imagining of any future. "You wait and you pray for wonders / knowing

that the end has / like the beginning crept upon time” (121). Just as Kristeva later suggests, religion attempts to purify and sacralize this impurity, and she correctly forecasts the inability of religion to deliver finally, turning instead to art for a more lasting healing. After this hope for wonders deferred, where does Mnthali turn? He speaks to his grandfather’s day, how, “Some say all these diseases / were there” but there was always “a cure at hand” (122). He evokes a cultural loss, a cure that is foreclosed just like any future: “some even say / you had herbs for such ills / and that we in our foolishness / have lost them all and even sold / quite a few / for a bag of salt and a sack of sugar” (122). Just like the sexual economy at the Pousada Monte Neve, here the cultural tools necessary for survival were commodified and lost in transaction. Important, too are the items obtained in return, in their triviality. They are confectionary, lacking meaningful substance, unnutritional, and soon consumed (*a bag, a sack*). But while the narrator is hopeless, there remain these others, these some who tell this narrative of loss. Unlike the ending of the world and time itself, this narrative of loss and forgetting is reversible, signaling hope for a future future.

Nor does this reversal necessitate an ahistoric return to origins. In a very literal sense, there was a loss of southern African cultural practices that could arguably have prevented the epidemic to begin with, and would certainly drastically reduce its continued spread. *Changing Men in Southern Africa* helps document the transition from tribal and rural masculinities to an increasingly-homogenized urban masculinity, placed in a homosocial masculine hierarchy demarcated by material success (Pisani 157-172). Conterminous with this change, and situated in the socially liminal space of the South African gold mines, was a transition from indigenous cultural practices of non-reproductive sexuality and fluid gender roles into a hyper-sexualized and insatiable masculinity that demanded “skin-on-skin” heterosexual contact (282). T. Dunbar

Moodie incisively identifies this homosocial and heterosexual masculinity as intimately intertwined with the Imperial project, “*reproduced* all over the Empire” (299, my emphasis). Moodie contrasts this with Mpondo masculinity, which managed to “maintain the commitment of young men to the rural life-world, and [bridge] the cultural gap between mine and country life” (301). They did this through the practice of *ukumetsha*, ejaculation by rubbing the penis between the thighs. What is interesting about *ukumetsha* is not simply the non-reproductive construction of genitality that it suggests, but also its cultural malleability.

Moodie describes the Mpondo transition from the homestead to the mines, and the practice that developed among the miners of taking ‘wives’ of other men (303-6). These wives would provide both companionship and sexual gratification to their ‘husbands’ (usually in exchange for money, wisdom, and status) but existed as a temporally delimited gender role. Wives that obtained enough money and status would become husbands, and take their own wives in turn. The currency acquired was not spent in cities or other economies, but rather taken home as remittances, often allowing wives to purchase their own homestead, and consequently have a family even before their husbands. This currency flow exemplifies the bridging of life-world between rural and mine life that Moodie outlines above. It parallels the seamless continuum between homosocial and homosexual desire that in many contexts is unimaginable today (Sedgwick 2). The mine becomes culturally practiced and inhabitable, and thus is integrated into the cultural future of the Mpondo community. Contrast this with the increasingly homogenous urban masculinity that replaces it, which came accompanied by moral injunctions against homosexual practices, fixation of gender roles, and the insatiable desire of multiple (hetero)sexual partners (Pisani 307-10). In her analysis of a series of surveys collected from contemporary migrant workers in the mines, Catherine Campbell explicates a sense of powerlessness, lack of agency, and absence of future in

the workers interviewed: “We live for dying,” one says (278). Campbell associates this morose outlook with the dangers of working in the mines, but that doesn’t account for the very different perspective Mpondo workers had half a century ago. In the latter case, the dangers of the mining lifestyle led to the practices outlined above. With the former, it led to a radical evocation of “manhood,” associated with promiscuity, heterosexuality, and an utter inability to imagine a future.

This account also helps to illustrate the malleability with which HIV comes to be signed in different cultures, due in part to the adaptation of the virus itself. The AIDS discourse portrayed most often in the South African context is heterosexually specific, which contrasts sharply with the AIDS discourse during the US epidemic, which figured HIV as a “gay disease” (Cherniavsky 375). This contrast becomes even more interesting with the above example, which suggests that certain homosexual practices actually help avoid transmission of the virus. Rather than to suggest some idealized ‘before’ of untainted sexual practice and gender identity, I have included this account to help dispel the notion that scientific progress is the only future that HIV allows for. Contrarily, ever dollar or minute spent on HIV/AIDS research has done nothing to integrate the life-world of these migrant laborers or reduce their risky sexual practices. That is not to say that this research is in vain, but merely that it can only address one aspect of a network of difficulties. It remains a necessity that southern African culture can develop the resources to heal the damage done to its people by HIV.

III. Predicaments of Critique in South Africa

There is an obvious danger in choosing to analyze an anthology of short fiction unself-consciously. By its very nature, an anthology is formed through exclusion. The voices therein are made to speak only by silencing other potential voices. In essence, an anthology is a simultaneous presentation and evaluation of a work of art. Ashraf Jamal’s *Predicaments of Culture in*

South Africa references a similar dilemma in his lengthy comment on the state of South African cultural production, citing Vaclav Havel's assessment of the "moral determinism that all too often dogs the evaluation of a work," which, once overcome, "can potentially release the ethical nature of a particular artwork" (5). If our goal is to explore possibilities of culture for healing the wounds of a material condition, as I set out to do in this paper, it is essential that we find a way out of this common critique-of-critique, especially in the context of southern African art. If scholarship in the humanities considers evaluation of art off-limits, then a project such as mine is completely untenable. To elaborate on Jamal's view; a work of art is seen as necessarily fettered by any judgement passed upon it: "Because it is all too often shaped by an *a priori* agenda [...] criticism lays claim to meaning and, thereby, closes the agency of a given work" (6). It is unclear in Jamal's argument why so much credit is given to the critic, but an even more pressing concern about his argument comes from the assumption that meaning closes agency. If a work loses its agency once it acquires a "meaning," then we must assume one of two things: Either there is a moment where the work is free of any meaning, before it is critiqued, or art from its very formation lacks agency. I would argue that the abstractions at play in this conversation make it impossible to determine whether there is any space at all for agency, and what, indeed, Jamal might mean when he invokes the concept. Perhaps this is why he resorts to Bhabha's ~~concept~~ (non-concept, according to Bhabha) of the stammer as possibility for overcoming the paradox of epistemological-change-through-epistemological-rupture. But Jamal's perspective demands a critical encounter, because it is so widely held in the South African academic community.

With the example of *Nobody Ever Said AIDS*, a work clearly driven by an *a priori* agenda, it should be readily apparent, according to Jamal, that the art itself is enslaved by a deterministic closure of meaning. Yet three things should be made clear: First, South African author Albie

Sachs, whom Jamal aligns closely with, fails to see any redemptive qualities with South African visual and literary arts, instead crediting South African music with the “new consciousness” (9). Jamal himself seems to have trouble imagining what a ‘successful’ literary piece would look like, beyond Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K*, which only attains this status due to the presence of K, a character whose muteness and stubbornness are granted “ontological primacy” by Coetzee and serve as an “ethical depth-charge that moves culture” (9). Beyond a procession of silent cast-members, there doesn’t seem to be a vision for South African literature. This suggests to me that Jamal understands “meaning” reductively, and doesn’t acknowledge the presence of art as always meaningful (an almost ubiquitous view in contemporary semiotic thought).

Second, the determinations Jamal himself makes about the failure of the arts in South Africa serve to reify a conceptually-problematic understanding of art as bound by critique, and ironically reinforce the same closures of agency Jamal’s work is written to address. This critique-of-critique seems an untenable model for thinking oneself out of an epistemological bind, and suggests to me the necessity to rethink the terms that serve as preconditions to his argument. Third, this rethinking must involve the dangerous atemporality and spatial vacuousness of meaning as such. For criticism to “lay claim to meaning” *itself*, not *a* meaning, or even *the* meaning, but the very act of meaning-making, assumes a discursive primacy of criticism that denies art the very ability to speak itself in the first place. In other words, the “silence of art” Jamal invokes becomes a rhetorical necessity to imagine a space for art in a world where every discursive resource is occupied.

Perhaps this fatalism is itself the result of a lack of boundaries symptomatic of the South African cultural condition that Jamal describes: “It is this turning inward, this devolution of the self from an active agent of change to one that reactively reinforces the pathology it would re-

nounce [...] which comes to mark the failure of the imagination in South African cultural production” (159). I will avoid any attempts at a broad cultural diagnosis, which would surely be overly-reductive and misguided, but cannot hesitate to point to the moment of turning inward as a critical moment, and thus absolutely necessary for the maintenance of ethical considerations. I consider it more useful to understand this failure Jamal describes, rather than pathologically, as a lack of articulable borders, an inability to imagine a future for oneself, which is a problem of degree, not of kind. Rather than deride any cultural production that does not succeed in creating an epistemological break that critique itself seems entirely unable to accomplish, it is incumbent upon literary critics to make ethical contact with the work, and open up dialogic rather than monologic forms of meaning. As Rita Felski notes: “Theory’s affinity for a modernist rhetoric of marginality and negativity prevents us from seeing that a text’s sociability—that is, its embedding in numerous networks and its reliance on multiple mediators—is not an attrition, diminution, or co-option of its agency, but the very precondition of it” (Felski 589). Rather than thinking of the critique and the artwork as antagonistic objects, it is perhaps more useful to think of them as embedded in the same network of meaning-making, in other words, part of the same culture.

Contact and dialogue occur in space over time, and thus also require a conception of temporality. It is no coincidence that Homi Bhabha’s discussion of cultural hybridity at the beginning of *The Location of Culture*, which Jamal borrows greatly from, is heavily dependent on the power of cultural tradition existing on the periphery of authorized power to “restag[e] the past [and introduce] other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition” (2). The “hither and thither” of cultural temporal movement that Bhabha describes is dizzying, but resides in a conception of the present as something *bounded by imagined futures*, and the fluidity

of the present relies on a continual *return* to the present as a place where “*something begins its presencing*,” that is, where actions informed by futures are enacted (5). Indeed, as Kristeva reminds us, any understanding of the present that is meaningful relies on this concept of the return. The present restages the past through its *presencing* of a future that is imagined to be different. I find this conception of temporality to be missing from Jamal’s formula for epistemological rupture. There is no recipe for such a break. Instead, hybridity occurs as the activity of difference on the site of the same. For cultural production to succeed in making life livable, that culture must restage the past, in other words, *perform* the past in the space of the present, with a different outcome. *Nobody Ever Said AIDS* is not, contrary to the implication of the title, a procession of silent characters with ontological primacy. In fact, silence itself, whether used literally, or to invoke a state of noncompliance with the currently dominant epistemology, is a woefully inadequate solution to the problem of living with HIV. Rather, this anthology is an attempt to broach the doubly-deferred topic of HIV, and imagine a cultural future wherein HIV can be lived with.

IV. So Where and When Does that Leave Us?

As I mentioned in the introduction, biomedical and global health solutions to HIV/AIDS have not been solutions at all. That is not to say that a cure is not possible, or even that treatment and education programs have not drastically improved the way of life for millions of southern Africans. Rather, an ignorance of the role that culture plays in the response to an epidemic will forever stymie sustained and comprehensive solutions to that epidemic. The history of AIDS denialism in southern Africa is an excellent example of this phenomenon. As Eileen Stillwaggon identifies, the prevailing view of HIV/AIDS in South Africa in the 1980s and into the 1990s focused almost entirely on a colonialist narrative depicting Africans as hypersexual and primitive. Similarly, certain work, such as Nicoli Nattrass’ “Mortal Combat: AIDS Denialism and the

Struggle for Antiretrovirals in South Africa,” paints President Thabo Mbeki’s ‘AIDS denialism’ as unjustifiable and morally repugnant, but for Stillwaggon, Mbeki “had the temerity, as some Western scientists viewed it, to ask how conditions of poverty in Africa affect the development of HIV/AIDS. It was a very conventional epidemiological question, well within the bounds of standard research. His question was treated, however, as heresy by at least a vocal minority of mainstream scientists” (Stillwaggon). The tendencies of scientists to disregard empirics and generalize research data became a reenactment of the Western colonialist agenda over the past hundred years. Stillwaggon and others have recently begun to recognize Mbeki’s stance as reactionary to this agenda, implicating dogmatic impositions of biomedical results in the atrocity that followed. Much of the research cited in this present paper uses alternative methodology to revisit previously-held assumptions about the status of HIV/AIDS in Africa. Indeed, not only did the HIV virus group adapt substantially for better heterosexual and perinatal transmission, it was given an ideal social climate for this transmission and evolution. South Africa from 1970 to 1997 was the only world region to experience a decrease in food production and calorie supply per capita for a number of reasons, from famines to free trade (Stillwaggon). Gender inequality and the social tendency for the circulation of female partners proved ideal for HIV transmission, since male-to-female transmission is by nature far more likely (Pettifor et al. 1). Migrancy of Gold mine laborers and other workers has created an ideal situation for the transmission of HIV as well, due to the inability of these workers to form long-term sexual partnerships, their low income levels, the particular age demographic they are a part of, and their repeated transnational travel (Williams and Gouws 1).

A virus’ entrance into society serves to influence the form that virus takes; its virulence, mortality rates, mode of infection, speed of adaptation, and even zoonotic tendencies (Goudsmidt

xvii). Plug the same virus into different settings, and its sociological footprint is vastly different. We've seen this phenomenon at work with HIV in the last few decades. While classified as one species, it has manifested itself in vastly different ways across continents and social groups. That is what makes Stillwaggon's critique so necessary. "The question is straightforward: How is AIDS different in Africa? Instead of being addressed with mainstream methods of scientific inquiry, the AIDS-in-Africa debate was hijacked in the 1980s by an extreme behaviorist explanation that transformed the question into: How are Africans different?" (Stillwaggon). The reason that cultural critique is so necessary to this crisis is that through it we are able to refuse problematic narratives that hamstring cultural production. While southern Africa is still only beginning to develop a cultural response to HIV, the primary barrier to that response is the colonialist tendency to marginalize such culture, and the primary tool we have to avoid that marginalization is cultural analysis and critique. At a time in academia when critique is seen as "running out of steam" (Latour 225), it is essential to preserve these critical tools in service of broader existential objectives. In this light, recent polemics directed toward the humanities suggesting the obsolescence of critique appear particularly shortsighted and dangerous. The HIV epidemic in southern Africa is a struggle that requires a response from every mode of thought, and only through a unity of purpose and clarity of voice can we hope to overcome this challenge.

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