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“Bodies of Water” as an Activist
HIV/AIDS Narrative***

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Bodies, in both their presence and absence, are a central matter to many self-identified queer theorists. Judith Butler devotes an entire volume to discovering Bodies That Matter (1993) and in The Apparitional Lesbian (1993), Terry Castle explores the absence and the ghosting of a queer female body in post-1800s Western culture. In Homos (1995) Leo Bersani tells us that “we are justified in rethinking the ways in which our bodies are culturally mapped and in particular how their boundaries are drawn” (46). The investigation of how, when and if bodies materialize in literary works, can lead to a questioning of how gender and sexual subjects are constructed within Western culture where the white, male, heterosexual body has been made the “norm.” This investigation is important not only to feminist, masculinist, post-colonial, race, and queer theory studies but also to studies about HIV/AIDS. In the eighteen years since the phenomenon was first written about in the June 6th, 1981 edition of The San Francisco Chronicle as simply “a pneumonia that strikes gay males” AIDS, and later HIV, have materialized in North American popular culture in many different bodies: a disease of a gay male body; a disease of an intravenous drug-using body; a disease originating in an African body; a disease of a prostituted and/or promiscuous body; a disease threatening the conservative body politic; a disease threatening the body of the family; a disease decimating the body of urban youth; and a disease of abject, absent, silenced and forgotten bodies.

This essay will examine how the latter body -- the abject, absent, silenced and forgotten body affected by HIV/AIDS -- is constructed and revised in Michelle

Cliff's short-story "Bodies of Water" (1990). While all bodies associated with HIV/AIDS may be at some time abject, absent, silenced, and forgotten, it is interesting how the language we use to talk about HIV/AIDS "ghosts" people living with AIDS. This essay will investigate the trope of "ghosting"¹, which makes bodies absent, and the accompanying concept of silence, which makes words absent, in "Bodies of Water." Cliff's narrative constructs her character Bill as someone to be remembered and his sister Jess as someone to do the remembering. Jess narrates her recollections of Bill's youth, and in particular, his struggle within their family to control readings of his "queer" homosexual identity. Through an exchange of letters we learn that Bill is suffering from unnamed illnesses we decode to be late-stage AIDS. The construction of Bill as a memory, the fact that we learn about him through Jess and the absence of his body lead us to read him as ghost-like. The central purpose of this paper is to explore answers as to why HIV/AIDS is defined in Cliff's story by absence and how the physical absence of 'queer' bodies and 'queer' bodies-affected-by-AIDS² connects to the story's gesture that these 'queer' aspects – homosexuality and AIDS – are unnamable secrets only to be spoken and written about in codes and coverings. To borrow from Michel Foucault in The History of Sexuality: Volume One, Cliff's story can be used to begin an exploration of North America's "triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence" (4-5). In this context of exploring the ghosted body and the unnamed identities, Cliff's story can be read as activist, as it shows us how we read and write HIV/AIDS and the stories about it.

The Trope of Ghosting

In the April 18th, 1983 edition of Newsweek Vincent Coppola constructs HIV/AIDS as a consequence, albeit unfortunate, of gay liberation's "life in the fast lane" when he writes: "ironically, the freedom, the promiscuity, the hypermasculinity that many gays declared an integral part of their culture have come to *haunt* them" (italics mine; 80). HIV/AIDS is constructed as a ghost haunting a "lifestyle" that it itself kills. In "When Plagues End," which appears in

the November 18th, 1996 edition of New York Times magazine, Andrew Sullivan describes his HIV diagnosis as an “experience [that] can never be erased. Blurred, perhaps, and distanced, but never gone for good” (62). The Oxford English Dictionary (1955) defines “ghost” as:

1. The soul or spirit.
2. An incorporeal being.
3. The soul of a deceased person, spoken of as inhabiting the unseen world and/or as appearing to the living.
4. An apparition or spectre.
5. An unsubstantial image; hence, a slight trace or vestige.
6. One who secretly does artistic or literary work of which his employer takes the credit. (791)

“Ghostly” is further defined as: “pertaining to the spirit or soul; spiritual. Opposite to bodily or fleshly; occas. to natural” (791). In the pieces from Newsweek and The New York Times Magazine HIV/AIDS itself is written about as ghostly. As introduced, in “Bodies of Water” the character Bill, who we can read as having HIV/AIDS, is written about as if he is a ghost; however, the narrative never tells us if Bill is living or dead. We may therefore read him as being made into a ghost precisely because he is living with HIV/AIDS.

In Bodies That Matter Judith Butler asks, “what qualifies as a viable body?” and goes on to ask “what challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as ‘life,’ lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?” (16). The representation of HIV/AIDS and the HIV+ /AIDS-affected body as a ghost and/or as a ghost-like memory in journalism and literature may signal that there is no linguistic space wherein the material, living HIV+ body can fit into the “symbolic hegemony” of North American culture. The exclusion of the HIV+ body in this “symbolic hegemony” may be attributed to the fact that this body is not only diseased, it is ‘queered.’ After all, an HIV+/AIDS affected body is a ‘queered’ body in at least three ways: 1. the cultural memory of HIV/AIDS as a “gay disease” is still apparent in many of the ways HIV/AIDS is figured in popular culture, scientific study, activism, and art; 2. any body that is HIV+ is ascribed a new, and

potentially queer sexuality of being threatening to the 'norm,' because it is viewed as polluted, degenerated, and contagious; and 3. until the recent development of protease inhibitor drug-therapies in 1996 AIDS was largely viewed as a fatal disease, and this constructed the AIDS-affected body as a body in limbo between life and death, which can be referred to as "narrative of irreversible decline" (See Kruger, 73 & Sontag, 28). All of these queer readings of the HIV+ body may signal that the HIV+ body may be constructed as absent because it is often not recognized in North America as a body that matters.

In Cliff's "Bodies of Water" the story begins and concludes around ghosts. The narrative opens with the words "an old woman is sitting in the middle of an ice-bound lake." The description of this old woman is mystical and apparitional: "as she sings, mist escapes her mouth" and her voice could be "lost" or "caught in the winter light" (Section I, 121). A younger woman watches the older woman on the lake as she "fancies a shape, not able to make it out, the wind swirls it so" (I, 126). The story ends with a narrator, Jess, writing "I thought for a moment I saw your ghosts" and then ripping up her page (VI, 149). The story also begins in winter, a season conventionally associated with death, and the older woman is fighting "sleep," which is often used as a literary metaphor for death. The ethereal opening description of the older woman is soon connected with her queerness, as the older woman recalls how a niece "had erupted most recently when another old woman, died, and her aunt was named – for all the world to read – in the weeklies and dailies of the valley as the 'sole survivor'" (I, 124), to which the niece's husband assured her "any reasonable person will see for what it is . . . Two old maids. That's all" (124). Cliff's opening immediately establishes the older woman's lesbian relationship and identity as unseeable, as "any reasonable person will see it" for precisely what it is not. If one refuses to see something, one essentially 'ghosts' it as one makes it "an unsubstantial image; hence, a slight trace or vestige" (Oxford English Dictionary, 791). Not only does the story ghost the older woman's lesbianism but by representing the older woman's relationship with "it", the story establishes queerness, specifically homosexuality, as unnamable.

The association between queerness and apparitionality is established and explored in Terry Castle's introduction to The Apparitional Lesbian. She writes:

when it comes to lesbians – or so I argue in the following chapters – many people have trouble seeing what's in front of them. The lesbian remains a kind of 'ghost' effect in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot – even when she is at the center of the screen. Some may deny she exists at all. . . The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night. She is far away and she is dire (2-3).

Coupling Castle's argument with the previously-quoted passage from Butler's preface to Bodies That Matter, it is possible to see why dominant Western culture would construct queer bodies as ghosts: if queer bodies are made absent then they do not have to be acknowledged, respected, or 'dealt with.' The older woman is not only described as ghost-like, and not only is her relationship with her long-time partner misread and made invisible, but she identifies with what she believes to be ghosts. She pours her "whiskey-laced tea" on the frozen lake "as libations for the spirits, the manifestations", she wonders how the "ladies of the lake" "occupy themselves in their watery parlours", and she imagines a ghostly community of women where "widows and glamour girls [are] together forever" (I, 126). However, the older woman asks, "how do they get along with the others?" (I, 126), and thereby complicates the cohesiveness of this fluid community. The others, presumably those women like herself who are not widows nor glamour girls, who may be childless (124), who may be "queer," are souls who "collide" with the widows (of husbands) and glamour girls under-water. Even as ghosts, these "others" are neither defined nor included in the community. Cliff's passages about the "ladies of the lake" associate femininity with immateriality, spirituality and water, as well as establishing the lesbian body as outside the community of "ladies."

While Cliff may gesture us towards a Castle-inspired reading of an apparitional lesbian in the beginning section of the story, she complicates this gesture by bringing the body very much into play. We are assured that this older woman who we may be tempted to read as apparitional is indeed corporeal, as she drinks the “whiskey-laced tea” she pours on the ice and “she is fighting sleep.” Just as the older woman’s drinking and sleeping establish her as bodily, so does her fear of being institutionalized establish her as more than an apparition precisely because she fears losing control of the body. She describes a retirement home her niece wants to send her to as “a room (shared with a stranger, strangers) where she would be spoon-fed – everything mashed beyond texture or recognition. Probably tied to her bed by night, her chair by day. Where the stench of urine would be as unrelenting as a bank of lilac in bloom” (124). Specifically, the older woman fears not only the loss of bodily control, but she fears losing control of bodily boundaries: she fears what will enter her body, unrecognizable food, and what will exit and surround her body, the stench of urine. There is an implicit connection between the older woman’s observation of institutionalization as a loss of bodily control and the loss of bodily control Bill endures during the course of his two “illnesses”: homosexuality and AIDS.³

Changing Boundaries: Water and Sexuality as Fluid

If, as Butler outlines in her preface to Bodies That Matter “not only [do] bodies [in writing] tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appear to be quite central to what bodies ‘are’”(ix) then we may interrogate how these boundaries move when we are talking about bodies affected by HIV/AIDS. Boundaries are useful when thinking about what HIV/AIDS means to bodies and in interrogating how HIV/AIDS is constructed in terms of boundaries: we talk in boundaries about which bodies are and are not ‘at risk’ for HIV infection, we are obsessed with how to create boundaries between infected and non-infected bodies to prevent transmission and control contagion, we place boundaries upon sexual activities in order to assess these activities as ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe,’ and we draw boundaries to

distinguish different levels of HIV/AIDS infection (Window period, HIV+ness, asymptomatic and symptomatic HIV+ness, ARC, full-blown AIDS, post-protease inhibitors AIDS, end-stage AIDS). HIV/AIDS is also talked about in terms of fluidity: transmission and prevention are talked about in terms of bodily fluids, HIV infection is determined by the presence of antibodies in a sample of blood, and the health of HIV+ people is often determined by the presence of T-cells in the blood. Keeping in mind the complex relationship HIV/AIDS has with uses of “boundary” and “fluid” it is interesting to explore how Cliff uses the lake as a metaphor for sexuality in her story.

The title and opening section of Cliff’s story gesture towards a common HIV/AIDS metaphor of fluidity, and fluidity as it relates to boundaries of the human body. By first introducing sexuality as interconnected to a lake, Cliff establishes a metaphoric relationship where sexuality is natural, secretive, and subversively submersing in the story. We are told that the younger woman is “drawn to lakes, yet afraid of water” as she remembers how at “twelve, or thirteen” the water “laps at her and the black snakes of a mountain lake whisper past her . . . Hard black waterbugs play around her legs. That is the picture in her mind” (I, 122). The description of her “rising womanly from the waters” (I, 122) invests the lake with magical, transformative powers, and perhaps we may go so far as to argue is invested with redemptive and baptismal Christian-biblical powers. It appears that the water has the ability to transform a girl into a woman, to change some sort of bodily boundary, and it does this by lapping and whispering at a girl’s legs. The younger woman also remembers how her mother yelled “Mind! Snakes!” and so she

ran out of the water, convinced a snake had wrapped around her legs; a waterbug made its way into the tangle of her sweet new hair – of which her parents were ignorant – and in that instant, giving way to her mother’s warning, the delicacy of her relationship with snakes, bugs, water, weeds, had been violated, changed. That simple. (I, 122-123)

However, the meanings of this comparison between water and an emerging sexuality are anything but “simple.” The younger woman recognizes that her mother’s warning changes a natural, almost mystical experience into something to be “minded” simply by uttering a warning. As a young girl, the younger woman realizes that her attraction to water and her changing body cannot be discovered by her parents, for then, she too might be sent away to “a tough place” (I, 121) and made absent as her brother is made absent.

The same passage in “Bodies of Water” that connects a changing body with the powers of water, also introduces the male homosexual body as absent. This “image is joined in memory to another,” a memory about reading and about the younger woman’s brother. The younger woman remembers how her brother “reads too much” and how that “summer at the mountain lake he had not been with them. Sent to some tough place, while she had her parents to herself” (I, 122). The younger woman’s brother is introduced by memory, and specifically, by a memory of his absence. It is much later in the story, in the fifth section, that we are told why her brother, named as Bill, is sent away to a “tough place” where “they taught [him] carpentry”(123): he is sent away because he is queer. The younger woman, named in a letter as Jess, remembers that her parents discover 14-year old Bill’s journal, which “in the blank space for subject is written DIARY--PRIVATE PROPERTY,” the absence and presence of the words “I think I am” (V, 140). Bill’s discovery of sexuality shares with Jess’ experience in the lake, as transformation and secretivity mark both; however, Bill’s discovery of sexuality has devastatingly different consequences within their family. Bill is not submerged in fluidity and natural bodily transformation as Jess is, because he becomes dehydrated and loses bodily control. The discovery of Bill’s sexuality leads to his parents to enclose him in a glass porch where the “sun is magnified in the glass . . .there is no shade . . . sweat gathers at his temples. On his top lip. He drips . . . There is no relief in this heat, light. Vomiting orange juice and milk and shredded wheat onto the floor of the porch” (V, 140). Water, with both Jess and Bill, is conflated with the danger of discovering sexuality: it

hides Jess' secret transformation from a child to a woman from her parents, and its absence makes Bill's enclosure on the porch viscerally painful and humiliating. It also provides a place for ghosts to exist, as the older woman describes them as inhabiting the lake. Water, in the form of fog, also "embraces" Bill when he is forced to endure electroshock "treatments" for his "illness" (V, 144).

Homosexuality and Illness

Bill's homosexuality is constructed by his parents treat as an illness: "the father silenced the son . . . A sudden shout from their mother: 'Goddamit! Stop it! 'Goddamit! Stop it! Don't you know it's a sickness?'" (VI, 151). Indeed, Bill's parents not only view his homosexuality, which they assume by reading the words "I think I am" written in his diary, as an "illness" but they attempt to 'cure' his "illness" through electroshock therapy. Jess remembers that "Bill took his treatment one afternoon a week" (V, 143). Jess also remembers how the treatments 'failed', as they led to more questions than answers to the problem of "I think I am"; Bill embodies this when the treatments "curved his spine into a question mark" (V, 144).

Male homosexuality has long been associated with illness, and by extension, death in North American culture. These associations manifest in language and their connections represent the dis-ease of North American culture's constructions of sexuality. Lee Edelman points out in "Equations, Identities, and "AIDS": The Plague of Discourse" that "the culturally specific and phobically inflected identifications of homosexuality with illness and contagion" is "implicated in ideological operations" (80) and claims that "long before the phenomenon of 'AIDS,'" there existed a "historic equation of homosexuality with the unnatural, the irrational, and the diseased" (86). Moreover, the construction of homosexuality as an illness not only gives homophobic culture ammunition with which to delegitimize gay rights, but also enables the dominant culture to try to "cure" and "treat" homosexuality, in other words, medicalize and police homosexuality.

We can see how the discovery of Bill's adolescent epiphany "I think I am" leads to his parents' treatment of him as ill and diseased, and consequently their attempts to contain him on the porch, send him to a place to make him "tough" (and thereby masculine), and 'heal' him with electroshock therapy. We can see in the construction of his sexuality as an illness, how Bill's then-physical illness, which as readers we assume to be HIV/AIDS, is an extension of this imposed belief of homosexuality-as-illness.

In the introduction to Death, Desire, Loss in Western Culture (1998) Jonathan Dollimore explains how the connections between homosexuality, illness, and death manifest as cultural history. He writes male homosexual desire has been regarded in diverse ways by gay people themselves – as death-driven, as revolutionary, as benign, as redemptive, as self-shattering, as impossible of fulfillment, to name but some. Several of these ways of thinking about it clearly disturb those striving to establish an affirmative gay identity politics. And not surprisingly: on the one hand, this connection of homosexual desire and death has been made by those who want homosexuals literally to die; on the other, it is also part of homosexual history, as it is part of a more general cultural history (xi-xii).

Dollimore also explains how these associations between male homosexuality, illness, death have taken on particular political currencies since the appearance of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s. He writes: "in certain hostile representations of AIDS, homosexuality and death have been made to imply each other: homosexuality is seen as death-driven, death-desiring, and thereby death dealing"(ix). We can see how a reading of homosexuality as death-desiring and death-driven can become part of the equation that AIDS is simply an extension of the "illness" of homosexuality," but that AIDS is invariably and unfailingly fatal; the equation becomes homosexuality=illness=AIDS=death.

Silences

We must read Bill's self-ghosting with the absence of naming his two "illnesses": neither AIDS nor homosexuality are ever explicitly named in Cliff's

story. Not only is the “queer” body absent, through the ghosting of Miss Dillon and Bill, but so too is the public assertion, the naming, of the HIV+ “queer” body absent. In “Equations, Identities, And ‘AIDS’” Lee Edelman describes that homosexuality, coded as ‘the love that dare not speak its name,’ was “designated [as such] not only because it was conceived as something lurid, shameful, and repellant, but also because it was, and is conceived simultaneously as something so attractive that even to name or represent it is to risk the possibility of tempting some innocent into a fate too horrible” (87). Because the word “AIDS” is never mentioned, unlike “Cancer” (III, 135), the narrative forces us to associate disease with homosexuality; we realize that because we can deduce Bill is a gay man, and he is ill, and therefore we automatically assume this illness as HIV/AIDS.⁸ In fact, the absence of naming in “Bodies of Water” forces us to realize that AIDS/HIV is constructed as an extension of Bill’s homosexuality which his parents treat as an illness; the narrative tells us “the father silenced the son . . . A sudden shout from their mother: ‘Goddamit! Stop it! ‘Goddamit! Stop it! Don’t you know it’s a sickness?’” (151). Our ability to assume that Bill’s “illnesses” are homosexuality and HIV/AIDS may be problematic to many readers, but nevertheless, this ability and the association of these three signifiers leads to a suggestion that the very words “homosexuality” and “AIDS” are ghosted in Cliff’s narrative. As Foucault explains in The History of Sexuality Volume One,

silence itself – the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies (27).

In this reading of silence as functioning within discourse, rather than opposing it, further allows us to read “homosexuality” and “AIDS” as hovering and haunting the spaces in Cliff’s story.

The unnameability of “homosexuality” and “AIDS” in Cliff’s story may signal the political, social, and personal meanings and consequences these words carry in

North America. There is a very real possibility of violence, loss of employment, loss of family and “friends” when one “comes out” as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or affected by HIV/AIDS in many North American communities. The recent homicide and torture of Wyoming university student Matthew Shepard signals just how murderously material homophobia can become.⁹ Because of the very material threats to our bodies homophobia poses, and because the silence around sexuality “is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, [and] depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and multiple a thing as there is knowledge” (Sedgwick 4), Cliff’s choice to silence the word “AIDS” cannot be read lightly. One could read Cliff as communicating the effects of homophobia by choosing to “ghost” the words “homosexual” and “AIDS,” and this could lead to a rather unhelpful reading of “Bodies of Water.” The ghosting of “homosexuality” and “AIDS” may be an attempt to revise their meanings, and at the least, help readers realize what their constructions of these words entail. Cliff’s choice to leave “homosexuality” and “AIDS” unnamed forces her readers to realize that our language and culture construct “homosexuality” and “AIDS” in ways that are detrimental to those affected by the disease and living with the disease.

In Bodies That Matter, Butler says that naming is “at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm” (7). She also argues that

as much as it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories within discourse. This is not an argument against using identity categories, but it is a reminder of the risk that attends every such use. The expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself: by the history of the usages

that one never controlled, but that constrain the very usage that now emblemizes autonomy (228).

In light of Butler's argument we may read Bill's reluctance to name "AIDS" as a revisionary tactic both within and outside the story to disassociate "AIDS" and "homosexuality" – if "it" is never named then "it" can never be defined. After all, Bill's adolescent writing in his diary "I think I am" (V, 141), "following those speculations with the only word he had ever heard to describe it" (V, 144), leads to electroshock therapy "treatments," containment, and ostracization. It also signals that one forfeits privacy, as his diary is marked PRIVATE PROPERTY, when discloses one's sexuality (whether it is named or inferred). Accompanying this forfeit of privacy when disclosing or defining sexuality is a forfeit of rights, as Bill mutters into his breakfast "And don't I have any rights?" (V, 141). There may be a linguistic space where Bill, by not naming his "illnesses," may be able to redefine the meanings of these words, and thereby not be defined by other people's readings of them.

In addition to reading the ghosting of the 'queer' words "AIDS" and "homosexuality" as a possible attempt at revision, we may also read the ghosting of the queer bodies in the story as a gesture towards revision. As Leo Bersani explains in *Homos* "undefineability is an act of defiance" as in "I can't be oppressed if I can't be found" (32). In "Bodies of Water" this revisionary potential of "undefineability" happens explicitly in the body: Miss Dillon "wishes she could float [away] to the clapboard house" (I, 125) and, as previously cited, Bill tells Jess "You know and I know why I can't say 'died.' So much easier to thinking of passing, floating, dancing on a fucking moonbeam. It's like waiting for a car to crash . . ." (III, 132). A ghosted body after all cannot be contained, "treated," or done violence to; and, a ghosted body can avoid the messiness of dying. A ghosted body will not have to worry about unrecognizable food or the stench of urine of an asylum, a ghosted body will not have to worry about vomiting up orange juice on a porch, and a ghosted body will not have to suffer the affects of AIDS-related illnesses (which could include Kaposi Sarcoma

lesions, thrush, diarrhoea, wasting, cervical cancer, yeast infections, pelvic inflammatory disease, CMV blindness, and lung-drowning pneumonia just to name a few effects of AIDS-related illnesses as defined by the North American Center for Disease Control).

‘Woman’ and AIDS

If we argue that Bill’s self-ghosting in his letter to Jess may be an acknowledgement of the narrative of “irreversible decline”, it may be an attempt to control contagion, it may be read as an attempt at revising the meanings of “homosexuality” and “AIDS,” then we must acknowledge that Jess not only is the very person Bill fears contaminating, but she will be the one left behind to remember him and provide testimony to his revisions. We may ask what Cliff’s story is telling us about the role of ‘the family’ in the AIDS crisis, and more specifically, the role of women in ‘the family’ in the AIDS crisis. Jess’ mother tries to intervene in the father’s interrogation of Bill when his diary is found, and her intervention does potentially more harm than good; her insistence that homosexuality is an “illness” that “he can’t help” leads to Bill’s weekly “treatments” with electroshock therapy. We are left to wonder if Jess is facing a similarly gendered and seemingly futile role in dealing with both of Bill’s illnesses because the story potentially makes her into the caretaker of Bill’s house, and the collector of memories of Bill. After all, the best she can do is “try to raise his scent” from the letter because even in trying to contact Bill in writing she has no forwarding address, i.e. Bill is either dead and in an unaddressable place or she does not know where his body is, and “for the moment she allows this to stop her” from making contact with him (138). Jess is positioned from the very start of the story as an outsider looking-in, (as she watches Miss Dillon on the lake) and we may ask if her position stands-in for the position of ‘woman’ in the North American AIDS phenomenon. The reluctance to acknowledge women’s potential to become HIV+, it can be argued, has led to women becoming one of the highest “risk groups” for new HIV infections in the twenty-first century. As editors

Andrea Rudd and Darien Taylor write in the introduction to Positive Women: Voices of Women Living With AIDS (1992):

[although] today women have more information at their disposal, particularly in North America and some European countries . . . we [HIV+ women] have had to struggle for all of this information. In many instances, we have had to create it ourselves because we live in a society that is in denial about the links between women and AIDS. Women with HIV and AIDS threaten society's ideas about sexuality, particularly the sanctity of heterosexuality with its close ties to reproduction. We raise age-old fears about illness and death (14-15).

The fact that all the ghosts in Cliff's story are women, except for Bill's self-ghosting, suggests that we are supposed to read the "spectres," "traces," and "vestiges" (Oxford Dictionary) in conjunction with 'woman,' and specifically, in conjunction with Jess' identity position as female. Bill tells Jess that the ghosts are "ladies only" (136). Jess' gender, in the crisis of a gendered and sexualized disease, may render her a ghost in the 'fight' against HIV/AIDS. Cliff's constructions of Jess, Miss Dillon, and the ladies on the lake points out that 'woman,' as both affected and infected by HIV/AIDS, is often made into a ghost throughout the whole phenomenon.

Cliff's choice to introduce us to Jess as the "younger woman" suggests that Jess may face in the future the same issues Miss Dillon, the "older woman," faces; Jess will have to remember those who are gone and reconcile her loneliness within the 'family' and the 'community.' We may also suggest that Jess is as powerless and voiceless in helping Bill 'fight' HIV/AIDS as the are the lake's ghostly "tongueless women," are in warning people about the dangers of radium. Bill writes to Jess that "their tongues fell out, rotted in their heads, Sam says, because of the radium they used to dot above the number's on watch faces" (136). We may see the presence of the "tongueless women" as indicating that Jess' work of remembering her brother, who is made absent because of his homosexuality and his affliction of AIDS, could be as difficult to convey, and as

secretive as is the message these women “want to warn people about . . . [because] they can’t speak” (136). Not only may Cliff’s gendering of the ghosts in “Bodies of Water” push us to read Jess as aligned with the “tongueless women” ghosts, but we may also read Jess as aligned with the “civil war widows” (136), indicating that women may be left behind in the ‘fight against,’ in the ‘war’ on, HIV/AIDS.¹⁰

Women have not only been ignored as patients and at risk for HIV, but have often been relegated to the feminized role of caretaker in the short history of the epidemic. North American AIDS-care associations such as Loving Spoonful in Vancouver, Project Open Hand in the San Francisco Bay area, With God’s Love We Deliver in New York City, and Mother’s Voices based in New York city, all associate the traditionally feminized activities of cooking and cleaning with the nurturing healing power of femininity. The NAMES Project, also known as the AIDS Memorial Quilt, created in San Francisco in 1987 remains today North America’s largest and most public monument to and for those affected by HIV/AIDS (See Ruskin). The NAMES Project associates the ‘plague’ of AIDS with the comfort and warmth of maternal domesticity, reaffirming and disturbing what we read when we see a quilt. The NAMES Project becomes a complex narrative which pieces together problems of feminizing and effeminizing story telling, of creating communal and cultural memory, of revising ideas of monument, of naming the anonymous, and of giving voices to the silenced dead. The NAMES Project, as Butler points out in “Critically Queer,” is also a vocal political move to force North America to realize the devastating loss and void HIV/AIDS deaths create. Butler asserts that the memorial Quilt allows “an insistent publicization and politicization of grief over those who have died of AIDS; the NAMES Project Quilt is exemplary, ritualizing, and repeating the name itself as a way of publicly avowing limitless loss” (Bodies That Matter 236).

Cliff may be coding a reference to the AIDS Quilt in the second fragment of the story. Miss Dillon “covers herself with a quilt pieced by another woman, for which she herself cut the template” (II, 128). We assume that the woman who pieced together the quilt is Miss Dillon’s lover, Bessie, so immediately the quilt is

associated with domesticity, femininity, and queerness. Incidentally, Miss Dillon's covering of herself with the quilt is the first time Bessie is named in the story, which in a narrative coded in references to HIV/AIDS, could easily be interpreted as a reference to the NAMES Project. It is also the first time we learn Miss Dillon's first name, Anne. We are told how "on this cold night the snow flies around a mailbox at the side of the road. ANNE DILLON. ISABELLA STRANIERE. She has not had the heart to remove the other name" (II, 129), implying that the erasure of a name would signal a finality Anne is not willing to face. Cliff frames this passage about a quilt in another interesting manner: Miss Dillon's memory of her lover Bessie is the first instance in "Bodies of Water" where activism is mentioned. Anne remembers:

Bessie taught her about quilts. They spoke of cartography, biography, history, resistance. Drunkard's path. Road to California. Underground Railroad. Mohawk trail. Bessie taught her about patterns, taught her how to cut, let her watch as she threaded the needle, leading steel ad thread through cloth, stopping to consider direction, contrast, harmony, shade, colour (II, 128).

Cultural references to North American activist movements are also present in a passage where Jess is remembering Bill, specifically when she remembers that their great-grandmother believed in ghosts (VIII, 146). The story tells us Jess: "tacks postcards to the white wall above the desk: Billie Holiday; Chief's robe from the third phase; The Second Bible Quilt of Harriet Powers; ANC women. See, Bill – also the resisters – and the artists. People like you. How long it has taken for her to say that" (VIII, 146). These passages about activism are also the only times that race is alluded to in the story, and race, like AIDS and homosexuality, becomes coded in references to icons, political movements, and Jess' memory of her great-grandmother's "cinnamon eyes [that] would light up at the memory of a handsome sea captain" (VIII, 146). Jess' post-cards position her as a one-time political activist, and thereby a person with a one-time investment in the process of resistance and its potential for change.

Activism and the Act of Writing

This reading of ghosted bodies and names in Cliff's "Bodies of Water" embraces a challenge outlined by Lee Edelman in "The Mirror and the Tank: "AIDS," Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism" (Chapter Five of Homographesis) where he describes how he intends to

elaborate some of the difficulties encountered in the project of 'writing "AIDS"' in order to open options for the inscription of narratives, and the interpellation of subjects, in ways that differ from those that govern so unyieldingly both the dominant discourse on "AIDS" and much of the contestatory-discourse that defines itself as "activist." (97)

To write a story that can be read as a narrative about AIDS is in itself an activist move. The people and communities who initiate awareness and expose ideological inaction on so-called 'queer' issues are often those who do it out of political and medical necessity; activism generates when the bodies in the community, and thereby the body of the community, are (sometimes quite literally) fighting to survive. Besides answering the activist call to "ACT-UP" and recognize the possibility that "SILENCE=DEATH," speaking out about the ignorances surrounding homosexuality and HIV/AIDS in North American culture is brave. It is easier to be silent, and ignorant, until absolute necessary, and more specifically, until one identifies as a "them" rather than as an "us." Indeed, as Simon Watney points out in "The Spectacle of AIDS" (1988):

at every level of 'public' address and readership, ignorance is sustained on a massively institutionalized scale by British and American media commentary . . . AIDS commentary in the West only serve[s] to manifest a sense of profound cultural uneasiness concerning the fragility of the nationalistic fantasy of an undifferentiated 'general public,' supposedly united above all divisions of class, region, and gender, yet totally excluding everyone who stands outside the institution of marriage (73).

The developments in “Bodies of Water” demonstrate just how complicated it is to name “homosexuality” and “AIDS” in North American culture, let alone take an activist (whether reactive, proactive, or both) stance on either or both of the subjects. Jess expresses this difficulty in a letter to Bill. She writes: “ ‘I am in the world to change the world,’ the grown-up version of that little girl told you once, and you called the words (and me too?) ‘impossibly dangerous.’ Why didn’t I that morning do something? If I could fight for a stranger why couldn’t I fight for you?” (148). Cliff best represents the difficulty of writing about “AIDS” and its surrounding issues in the last section of her story.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in *Axiom 7* in the introduction to 1990’s *Epistemology of the Closet*: “it takes deeply rooted, durable, and often somewhat opaque energies to write a book” and “to make any political commitment that can be worth anything to anyone” (59). She continues on the next page with the claim that in questions about “someone’s strong group-identification across politically charged boundaries, whether of gender, of class, of race, of sexuality, of nation . . . what these implicit questions really ask for is narrative, and of a directly personal sort” (60). Cliff provides us with this narrative of a “directly personal sort” by constructing her story around the exchange of letter writing between Jess and Bill. Both Bill and Jess self-censor their writings, as Bill apologizes for even allowing the ghost of “AIDS” to hover in the ellipses as he writes: “no . . . God . . . I didn’t mean to lay that out here” (III, 131) and assures Jess that “this is the fifth draft of this letter. I am trying not to be morbid. Bear with me” (III, 132). Just as Jess witnesses Miss Dillon on the lake, we witness Jess struggling to compose a letter to Bill. She begins by apologizing for beginning her letter with a mention to Memorial Day, as “nothing like beginning a letter with a *memento mori* – sorry” (IX, 147). Cliff’s story ends with Jess ripping up the letter she has composed for Bill and remarking “I thought for a moment I saw your ghosts” (IX, 149).

Writing as an innermost privacy and sanctuary is challenged in “Bodies of Water” when the discovery of Bill’s private diary “outs” him as queer. The

utterance of 'queer' words, such as "homosexuality" and "AIDS," opens these words up for multiple readings and multiple political implications. The multiplicity of discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS and undefined realm of what makes an HIV/AIDS narrative, has complicated effects on the people those words are uttered in relation to. Jess can be read as questioning "what discourse can this call to discourse desire" (Edelman 87) in the final section of "Bodies of Water." Jess admits she is "not ready to compose an answer" (145) to the unspoken questions implicit in her and her brother's exchange of letters and memories. Jess may not be willing to answer how she will recognize and/or react to the ghosts on the lake; or put down in writing how exactly she will keep Bill's house and manage in his community; or commit to how she will fulfill, resist, or change her role as a woman within the crisis of a gendered and sexualized disease; and ultimately, she may be resisting writing down how she will deal with Bill's absence and his ghosts. By putting these answers in writing she somehow finalizes them or inadvertently opens them up for multiple (and possibly detrimental readings by others). Jess' self-censoring may also suggest another reading of "AIDS" discourse: there may not be a language accessible to Jess, or Cliff for that matter, to talk about the 'queerness' of AIDS and to memorialize those lost to "AIDS" without reproducing the very discourses that lead to threats of containment, ineffective "treatments," and ignorance.

In Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture (1998), Dollimore writes that "Meditation is both about getting things clear and about losing the distracted, obsessive self which, increasingly in Western culture, was the presumption of getting anything clear. Which is one reason we could never remain silent for long: we had to speak, or write the meditation" (59). This leads us to question if personal narrative is what is demanded by a culture that creates multiple identity categories (as Sedgwick also suggests). This claim becomes complicated when we apply it to writing about HIV/AIDS, a subject so caught up in its own silences and unnameability. We have to re-ask if silence, really than equals death, and we have to examine what can we do with our activist/literary impulses that sharing stories will "help" ; as readers and writers we have to be careful that it is not these

very stories that reiterate the “problems” we are trying to solve. It is within their negotiations between speaking out, in writing, and remaining silent, in writing, that Jess and Cliff are the most activist and radical: both women are suggesting that are present activisms, memorials, constructions, and languages we use to talk and write about the ‘queerness’ of “AIDS” is not enough. As Miss Dillon asks of the ladies of the lake: “How many souls collide underwater? Enough” (126). Cliff’s “Bodies of Water” forces readers to first realize that “HIV/AIDS” and “homosexuality” are constructed in North American culture, and then asks us to examine how we, as readers living in a Western culture, have become implicit in these constructions. Through a personal narrative, in a literary text, we readers become part of a community where we struggle along with Jess, Anne, and Bill, as we all find the words to convey the loss and courage implicit in identifying with ‘queerness’ and with being affected by HIV/AIDS.

Endnotes

1 The trope of ghosting appears throughout literature, theatre, journalism, and film about HIV/AIDS. For other narratives about HIV/AIDS which employ the trope of ghosting see John Greyson’s film Zero Patience (1993), Tony Kushner’s play Angels in America (1993 & 1994), Sarah Schulman’s novel Rat Bohemia (1995), and Paula Vogel’s play Baltimore Waltz (1992). Sculman’s novel is particularly interesting because the narrator who is remembering her AIDS-afflicted friend discusses the paradox of the person-with-AIDS as a member of the “living dead.” This narrator, Rita, says: “Even before David actually died, there was a fight over the body” (153) and “David’s closest friends had accepted his death long ago. In fact, most had buried him emotionally while he was still registering a pulse” (156).

Another literary example of the trope of ghosting in talking about an AIDS-like illness is Henry Ibsen’s late nineteenth-century play Ghosts, which ghosts the sexually transmitted, and at that time often-fatal, disease of syphilis. In fact, it would be interesting to explore if any AIDS narratives that write about ghosts directly and/or indirectly cite Ibsen’s play.

2 I am using the term “AIDS-affected” to include people living with HIV/AIDS in multiple ways: people infected with HIV, people suffering from AIDS-related illnesses, people who have lost friends or families to AIDS-related illnesses, people involved in AIDS activism (in any of its forms), people whose communities are affected by AIDS, and people who make life choices based on the reality and risk of HIV infection.

3. While Cliff does not frame Bill to talk explicitly about loss of bodily control associated with AIDS, many other AIDS narratives that incorporate the trope of ghosting do. For example, in Kushner’s Angels in America, the AIDS-affected character Prior talks about his body in the following graphic accounts of loss of bodily control:

Ankles sore and swollen, but the leg’s better. The nausea’s mostly gone with the little orange pills. BM’s pure liquid but not bloody anymore, for now, my eye doctor says everything’s okay, for now my dentist says “yuck!” when he sees my fuzzy tongue, and now he wears little condoms on his thumb and forefinger . . . My glands are like walnuts, my weight’s been holding steady for a week or two, and a friend died two days ago of bird tuberculosis (97).

4 John Gordon and Clarence Crossman discuss the activist reaction to an “AIDS kills fags dead” t-shirt in their essay “ ‘aids . . . kills fags dead’: Cultural Activism in Grand Bend” in Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis, (1992) edited by James Miller.

5 AIDS-dementia is written about in Randy Shilts’ And The Band Played On (1987) – pg. 100, 177, 207, 389, 472 -- and Paul Monette’s Borrowed Time (1988) – especially 329 to the end.

6 In AIDS and Its Metaphors (1989) Susan Sontag uses the term ARC as the second of three stages of AIDS (HIV infection, ARC, AIDS) and also discusses the potential phasing out of the term. In a footnote she explains:

The 1988 [American] Presidential Commission on the epidemic recommended “de-emphasizing” the use of the term ARC because it “Tends to obscure the life-threatening aspects of this stage of illness.” There is some pressure to drop the term AIDS, too. The report by the Presidential Commission pointedly used the acronym HIV for the epidemic itself, as part of a recommended shift from “monitoring disease” to “monitoring infection.” (fn 30-31)

7 Bill also cites Georgia O’Keefe, “our lady of the obvious,” who is known for her paintings of flowers that resemble female genitalia. Earlier in the story, Jess remembers how her mother got mad at Bill for flying the American flag at half mast the August that Marilyn Monroe died (1962). Bill’s cultural references are complicated in what they say about gayness, femininity, and sexuality. In a longer paper it would be interesting to further explore these connections. 30

8 The currency of “risk groups” for HIV infection is demonstrated when the disease goes unnamed in a story or movie and an audience is still able to piece together that AIDS is present. Another example of a narrative where AIDS is unnamed and still present because of the rhetoric of “risk groups” is Robert Zemeckis’ and Tom Hanks’ *Forrest Gump* (1994). The character Jenny is shown in an urban party scene in the 1970’s using IV drugs. In the 1980’s she is sick with a virus no one seems to know much about and she dies as a result of this virus. Her death has been viewed by many as an AIDS-related death, and yet it is never named in the movie as such.

9 Matthew Shepard was a Wyoming University student who was abducted, beaten, and tortured by two student-age men who suspected he was gay. These men tied Matthew to a fence and left him to freeze and die on the side of the road. This incident occurred in the latter months of 1998 and received national media attention.

10 The construction of HIV/AIDS as a battle and a war appears throughout writing about HIV/AIDS. For example, the term PWA (person with AIDS)

sounds eerily like PWO (prisoner of war). For an in-depth explanation of this military metaphor see Steven Kruger's chapter "AIDS and the Battlefields of Masculinity" in AIDS Narratives: Gender and Sexuality, Fiction and Science (1996).

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First Response

An engaged, well researched article which subjects HIV/AIDS to responsible scrutiny in terms of literary representation, The author pursues a contextual reading while respecting the textual singularities and subtleties of Cliff's story.

HIV/AIDS is presented as an ethical issue with profound bearing on contemporary literature (perhaps a greater sense of other literature concerning HIV/AIDS might help focus the particular choice of Cliff). By means of a fluent and cogent argument the author justifies the conclusion that we struggle with Cliff's characters to " find the words to convey the loss and courage implicit in identifying with 'queerness' and with being affected by HIV/AIDS." A useful contribution to the sociological study of texts.