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Rick H. Lee

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Reading and AIDS Literacy in Allen Barnett's Short Fiction

Rick H. Lee

Inasmuch as the history of AIDS is a history of sexuality, governmental indifference, grassroots activism, biomedical research, and alternative forms of kinship and care, it is also a history of literacy, that is, of reading and writing. The centrality of literature and literacy to our understanding of AIDS and the AIDS crisis has come to the fore again recently with the media coverage of the death of Ed Koch, who served three terms as mayor of New York City from 1977 to 1989 and died from congestive heart failure on February 1, 2013 at the age of 88. How did the many remembrances and obituaries represent the life of this closeted gay man who failed to respond to the public health crisis that devastated New York City's gay community during the eighties? How were these texts read? Without a doubt, the critical buzz generated by Koch's death highlights the pace and volume of news being transmitted during our digital age. But the collective engagement with this shared cultural text—of a single man, who led a singular life—also reveals a mode of critical engagement that once characterized gay discourse during the height of the AIDS epidemic. In other words, the recent discussion surrounding Koch is but the most recent example of a longer tradition of "AIDS literacy" texts that have shaped gay male culture for the last three decades. In this essay, I use Allen Barnett's short stories to explore the contours of that tradition, and to think about the enduring role of reading and information exchange in determining how gay men understand the ongoing history of AIDS. As I have argued elsewhere, AIDS "has prevented gay men from creating and sustaining a viable intergenerational culture." For these reasons, revisiting the different legacies of Barnett and Koch goes a long way towards repairing the ruptures of gay "generation trouble" that have been engendered by AIDS.¹

Koch was, and remains, a central figure in the early history of AIDS in the U.S. Recalling his failure to respond to AIDS in a timely

manner, many gay men and lesbians received news of his passing with mixed emotions. Sarah Schulman, for instance, posted on her Facebook wall: “By the time AIDS came around [Koch] earned a place among the long list of Politicians Who Should Be Prosecuted for War Crimes, and if there were ever to be an Iran-Contra, or Cointelpro style Congressional hearing into the 15 years of neglect that produced the global AIDS crisis, he would be one of the first on the dock[et]. His canonization by the *New York Crimes* (I mean *Times*) is more reason to screen [the documentary] *UNITED IN ANGER: A History of ACT UP*.”²

Koch’s refusal to tackle AIDS as an obvious emergency seemed all the more perplexing since many perceived him to have been gay—an open secret that was so pervasive that it was ridiculed in *The Normal Heart* (1985), Larry Kramer’s groundbreaking play about the early years of the AIDS crisis in New York City. Ned Weeks, the character modeled after Kramer himself, berates Koch’s assistant at City Hall for the mayor’s unwillingness to meet with members of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis: “Time is not on our side. If you won’t take word to the mayor, what do we do? How do we get it to him? Hire a hunky hustler and send him up to Gracie Mansion with our plea tattooed on his cock?”³ In an ironic twist, the central elements of Kramer’s drama—the conjoined politics of AIDS and of coming out, the role and responsibilities of the media in its coverage of AIDS (exemplified in the play’s critique of the *New York Times*)—are also at the heart of the recent responses to Koch’s death.

Among the many reflections by friend and foe alike, Andrew Kirtzman’s *New York Times* op-ed offers the most sympathetic account. “History will judge him on the totality of his career,” Kirtzman writes of Koch, whom he knew personally. “His failure to recognize the severity of the AIDS crisis was of a piece with that of most other American politicians of his era. If he was in fact gay and closeted, he failed to make a show of extraordinary courage that could have saved lives. So did hundreds of gay people in positions of power at the time.”⁴ Kirtzman’s defense of Koch, however, neglects to take into account the *lingering* anger, hurt, and sense of betrayal felt by many gay men and lesbians towards Koch. As Richard Socarides points out in the *New Yorker*, at issue is not only that “[m]any believe that [Koch] was reluctant to aggressively address the AIDS crisis for fear of being identified as gay,” but also that “many gay people *are still angry at him* over his unwillingness to say if he was gay.” However, if those rumors were true, Socarides adds, “I would suggest sympathy rather than derision. How difficult it must have been, to maintain that kind

of secret for so long and in the context of such a public life."⁵ In the end, the open secret of Koch's sexual identity will forever remain just that—a secret. As David France matter-of-factly observes in *New York* magazine: "And now Ed Koch is dead. That he took the secrets of his heart to the grave is, historically speaking, meaningless, despite how much speculation has percolated through his obituaries."⁶

And there have been many obituaries. Notably, the *New York Times* obituary of Koch generated as much debate as the subject himself. The "truth" of Koch's personal sexual proclivities was not the only thing missing from the *Times* obituary—also absent, oddly enough, was his notorious non-response to AIDS. Jack Mirkinson comments in *The Huffington Post*:

The *New York Times* revised its Friday obituary of former New York City mayor Ed Koch after several observers noticed that it lacked any mention of his controversial record on AIDS.

The paper's obituary, written by longtime staffer Robert D. MacFadden, weighed in at 5,500 words. Yet, in the first version of the piece, AIDS was mentioned exactly once, in a passing reference to "the scandals and the scourges of crack cocaine, homelessness and AIDS." The *Times* also prepared a 22-minute video on Koch's life that did not mention AIDS.

This struck many as odd; after all, Koch presided over the earliest years of AIDS, and spent many years being targeted by gay activists who thought he was not doing nearly enough to stop the spread of the disease. Legendary writer and activist Larry Kramer called Koch "a murderer of his own people" because the mayor was widely known as a closeted gay man. (Mirkinson, n.p.)

In response to critiques of this significant omission, "the paper's obituary editor Bill McDonald told *New York* magazine that the issue was being 'addressed.' A few hours later, three paragraphs were added in. The meatiest one read, 'Mr. Koch was also harshly criticized for what was called his slow, inadequate response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. Hundreds of New Yorkers were desperately ill and dying in a baffling public health emergency, and critics, especially in the gay community, accused him of being a closeted homosexual reluctant to confront the crisis for fear of being exposed.'" But, even with these additions, the *Times* still got it wrong. Mirkinson cites a tweet: "*Times* revises Koch obituary to report 'hundreds' of New Yorkers sick of [sic] dying of AIDS in the 80s. The number is actually closer to 30,000."⁷

What lessons can we derive from the public conversations about AIDS that have been generated by Koch's life and death? While I agree with the view that it is fruitless to continue to speculate about Koch's sexual identity, I am also fascinated by the sheer number of tributes, both critical and laudatory, to the former New York City mayor. In many respects, Koch has joined the ranks of Rock Hudson, Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Kimberly Bergalis, and Ryan White—individuals whose lives engendered public attention and heated debates during the eighties and early nineties which resulted, in different and unpredictable ways, in raising awareness of the AIDS crisis in the U.S. The fact that Koch died during the age of social media has only accelerated the pace and intensity of this public discussion.

Responses to Koch's death constitute part of the heightened public consciousness of AIDS that has been building up over the last two years on account of the epidemic's thirtieth anniversary in 2011. Last summer, thousands attended "AIDS 2012," the nineteenth International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C., and many viewed the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt when it returned to the National Mall. The year 2012 also witnessed the "second coming of the HIV/AIDS documentary," as several films recounting gay men's experience of the AIDS epidemic were released to critical acclaim.⁸ To the extent that AIDS represents more than a health crisis for gay men, but also a social catastrophe that disrupted the passing of gay culture's aesthetic traditions and cultural practices across generational lines, these films, the Quilt, and the discussions of Koch's death reveal artistic and critical attempts to address that disruption by making sense of the past for the present. Put another way, when read in the aggregate, these disparate but related phenomena remind us to continue the conversation and to confront the fact that the history of AIDS is unfinished.⁹

Though separated by decades, the *New York Times* coverage of Koch appears to have generated a similar level of collective and critical engagement among gay men as Lawrence K. Altman's now infamous article, "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals," published in the *Times* on July 3, 1981. Considered to be the first reporting of AIDS in a mainstream newspaper, Altman's article initiated a public conversation that led to the creation of both imagined and actual communities of readers and interlocutors surrounding what would soon be understood as AIDS.¹⁰ The impact of this *Times* article is immortalized in Norman René's film *Longtime Companion* (1990), which opens with several intercutting scenes of the characters reading and arguing over its contents.

In addition to protesting the lack of attention to AIDS by the government, the pharmaceutical industry, and the mainstream media, gay men and their allies also read a diverse range of texts—turning to literature to discover narratives of love, grief, and survival; to scientific journals to learn about new treatment information; and to the obituary pages to keep track of the passing of friends and acquaintances. In his documentary, *We Were Here: The AIDS Years in San Francisco* (2012), David Weissman highlights the reading of obituaries as an everyday practice: Guy Clark, one of the figures featured in the film, remembers how people began to read and talk about the death notices that started to appear in the *Bay Area Reporter* with alarming frequency. “They went from a few inches to a full page and more,” he recalls. Like *Longtime Companion*, *We Were Here* portrays reading as a habitual and necessary practice, a collective endeavor among friends, and an activity connected to the transmission of knowledge. The critical conversations surrounding Koch—his death, his stance on AIDS, his sexual identity—reveal a similar kind of shared, sustained engagement with the reading of a particular life, along with the texts and contexts that make such a life intelligible in the present.

The renewed attention to Koch evokes his last years in office, when the AIDS crisis was at its peak and reading emerged as an everyday practice with fateful consequences. In a piece aptly titled “Reading and Writing” (1987), novelist Andrew Holleran explores how AIDS has irrevocably transformed gay men’s relationship to the practice of literacy. He makes no secret of his ambivalence. “As admirable as the writing or publishing of books about AIDS may be,” Holleran reflects, “I really don’t know who reads them with pleasure—because I suspect there is one thing and one thing only everyone wants to read, and that is the headline CURE FOUND.”¹¹ He fears that reading can be misconstrued as a superfluous activity not only because the act itself cannot furnish a cure, but also because “the only work that mattered was that of the men [*sic*] organizing social services, taking care of friends, trying to find a microbiological solution to a microbiological horror.”¹² Yet, despite his reservations, Holleran attempts to draw intertextual connections to make sense of the present crisis. He revisits Henry James’s story of truncated life in *The Wings of the Dove*, Boccaccio’s account of the Black Death in *The Decameron*, and “books on the French Revolution and the Terror (which is what most gay men in New York were going through at this time, exactly).”¹³ Holleran’s empathy compels him to keep reading. He recognizes that the bulk of AIDS writing addresses “two sorts of people: those with AIDS and

those caring for people with AIDS," and that "the line between these categories is a thin and shifting one, and merely the passage of time can put one on the other side of it."¹⁴

The short stories of Allen Barnett (1955–1991) provide fictional representations of the textual encounters Holleran describes in his essay. Taking up Patricia Crain's call to discover "new histories of literacies" that "find reading and writing in unexpected places and tease out the historical significance of these newly discovered (or newly perceived) texts," I have identified in Barnett's short stories an engagement with gay reading practices that I call "AIDS literacy."¹⁵ I define AIDS literacy as a subject's dynamic capacity to cognitively assimilate and emotionally deploy different bodies of knowledge, from health and biomedical discourse to high- and popular-cultural texts and frames of reference. Such fluency also involves an ability to translate scientific information into practical use within everyday contexts, as well as an awareness of cultural debates that foster empathy for different kinds of sexual subjects and how they negotiate desire and risk. Two of Barnett's short stories provide compelling evidence of the circulation and practice of AIDS literacy at the height of the epidemic. "The *Times* As It Knows Us" contains two consecutive scenes of collective reading—of a lifestyle piece and the obituaries in the *New York Times*—that fulfill a didactic role for the story's readership, while "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" engages with biomedical discourse to demonstrate how the attainment of AIDS literacy becomes an ethical imperative for people living with HIV/AIDS and those caring for them. I argue that revisiting Barnett's fiction today provides valuable insight into the function of reading and the production of specific narratives and cultural practices in the lives of gay men and their allies. Engaging with the concept of AIDS literacy at the present critical juncture goes a long way towards recovering "the promise of the queer past" and establishing "a history of [gay] readers."¹⁶ Furthermore, to the extent that "literary representations of AIDS may be just as—if not more—valuable to the process of identity formation as was 'gay literature' before the onset of the epidemic," Barnett's stories are especially illuminating when read in the present, supposedly "post-AIDS" historical moment.¹⁷

Since 1996, when researchers at the eleventh International AIDS Conference announced the relative success of protease inhibitors as viable drug treatments for people living with HIV, AIDS has come to be perceived as a chronic but manageable illness.¹⁸ With some notable exceptions, literary responses to AIDS have all but disappeared from the cultural landscape as a consequence.¹⁹ As Richard Canning

observes in the introduction to his anthology, *Vital Signs: Essential AIDS Fiction* (2007), "[a]s the combination drug therapies have saved and changed many—particularly Western—lives, the literature that addressed an inexplicable and/or unredeemable health crisis will have begun, perhaps inevitably, to gain a historical air for some readers." To preempt AIDS becoming a "cultural non-story," Canning argues that it is "not only helpful but vital to look back at what was written at the heart of the epidemic's darkest time of unknowing."²⁰ Canning's suggestion dovetails with one of the central claims of AIDS literary criticism put forth by Michael Denny in his important essay, "AIDS Writing and the Creation of a Gay Culture" (1993). Denny argues that the "immediacy" of the AIDS crisis during the eighties and early nineties "preclude[d] the possibility of [AIDS writing] being a merely aesthetic enterprise. The aesthetic requires distance and the distance is not available, not to the writer, not to the reader."²¹ But because over two decades have passed since the height of the epidemic (when the bulk of AIDS writing was published), there is now sufficient "distance" for critics and readers to revisit the archive of AIDS narratives and to reconsider those texts both for their historical significance and their aesthetic investments.

While Denny rightly calls attention to the urgency that distinguished the first fifteen years of the crisis, E. D. Hirsch, who was writing during this same historical moment, failed to grasp the wide-ranging reach and impact of AIDS on U.S. culture, and he glaringly omits the term in the appendix of his controversial bestseller, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987). The omission of AIDS is surprising not only because HIV, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, had been identified as the causative agent of AIDS in 1986, the year preceding the publication of *Cultural Literacy*, but also because the appendix *does* include references to "homosexuality," "gay rights," and current events making headlines at the time. The absence of AIDS in *Cultural Literacy* literalizes the silence surrounding AIDS in U.S. mainstream culture at the time—an all-pervasive cultural apathy that was especially evident during Ed Koch's terms as New York City mayor, and which led many gays, lesbians, and their allies to form the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in March 1987. With its rallying cry that "Silence = Death," ACT UP galvanized the gay community to protest the deadly inattention of the government, the pharmaceutical industry, and the mainstream media to the AIDS crisis.²²

In the same year that *Cultural Literacy* appeared, the arts journal *October* published a special issue entitled *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cul-*

tural Activism, edited by Douglas Crimp. Two articles in the journal emphasize the interrelations between AIDS, language, and discourse: "AIDS: Keywords," by Jan Zita Grover; and "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," by Paula A. Treichler. Drawing upon Raymond Williams's *Keywords*, Grover presents her list of "keywords" as an "attempt to identify and contest some of the assumptions underlying our current knowledge" of AIDS.²³ For Treichler, AIDS represents an "epidemic of signification" because it is "simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification," in which the "name AIDS in part constructs the disease and helps make it intelligible."²⁴ By examining how AIDS is constructed in discourses ranging from the scientific to the popular, Grover and Treichler implicitly establish connections between empathy and AIDS as they pertain to the idea of victimhood. Differentiating between "PWA (Person with AIDS)" and "victim," Grover asserts that "[t]he PWA's insistence upon naming as a key to identity . . . is primarily an act of self-acclaim" that rejects the status of victimhood.²⁵ Similarly, Treichler seeks to debunk the "containment" argument, which is premised on the misconception that "'[o]nly' gay males and drug addicts will get infected," while "the 'general population' . . . will remain untouched. . . . The fact is," Treichler avers, "any separation of not-self ('AIDS victims') from self (the 'general population') is no longer possible."²⁶ Grover and Treichler insist that AIDS literacy, contra Hirsch, is indeed integral to "the network of information that all competent readers possess," as Hirsch defines "cultural literacy."²⁷

In this regard, we might say that the early history of AIDS is a story of literacy. The emergence of AIDS demanded familiarity with the terms that (at that time) referred to "the AIDS virus." Prior to 1986, three terms were used to describe the retrovirus considered to cause AIDS.²⁸ To resolve this nomenclature dispute, the Human Retrovirus Subcommittee in 1986 recommended that a new term, HIV, be used to identify the causative agent of AIDS. The entry of HIV into the AIDS lexicon had wide-ranging repercussions beyond the medico-scientific establishment and underscored the extent to which the all-encompassing term "the AIDS virus" was dangerously imprecise. As Grover explains, the term "the AIDS virus," used by "the popular press" and by "physicians, scientists, and public health planners," mistakenly "equate[s] infection with death" by "conflat[ing] HIV with a terminal phase of HIV infection—AIDS."²⁹

This nomenclature debate changed the politics of "AIDSpeak," the neologism coined by Randy Shilts to describe the discursive mode in which public health officials, gay politicians, and AIDS activists talked about the AIDS crisis in the public sphere. Shilts introduces the term AIDSpeak in his controversial bestseller *And the Band Played On* (1987), published the same year as Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, Crimp's special issue of *October*, and Holleran's "Reading and Writing." Shilts faults those who use AIDSpeak as irresponsible, arguing that "[w]ith [gay] politicians talking like public health officials, and public health officials behaving like politicians, the new vernacular [of AIDSpeak] allowed virtually everyone to avoid challenging the encroaching epidemic in medical terms."³⁰ Treichler, however, perceives AIDSpeak as expressing a form of "resistance to the semantic imperialism of experts and professionals."³¹ Cindy Patton puts this matter differently by drawing attention to how "science-logic" determines the conceptualization and treatment of AIDS at the expense of "complex folk-logics" and that, in the end, "makes people dependent on the medical bureaucracy instead of pursuing their own strategies for social change."³² These debates surrounding AIDSpeak and competing logics constitute early forms of AIDS literacy, and, more broadly, the interrelations between scientific and cultural literacies.

In his fiction, Barnett engages with the dynamic and multiple conversations taking place within gay and mainstream cultures at the height of the epidemic. Among literary responses to AIDS, his stories stand out not only because they directly address the complex overlaps and disjunctures between high-cultural and biomedical knowledges, but also because they show how reading and cultural literacy helped establish communal belonging among gay men and their allies. His stories illustrate how "gay readers" are constituted during this historical moment: "The Times As It Knows Us" features scenes of collective reading, while "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" juxtaposes AIDS literacy with cultural literacy and compares homosexuals' and heterosexuals' familiarity with medical terminology. Living among the sick and dying, Barnett's characters face a dual challenge: on the one hand, they recognize that familiarity with biomedical information is a necessary survival strategy; on the other hand, they must evaluate whether literary and philosophical knowledge is adequate for helping them cope with personal and collective loss. Barnett's stories underscore AIDS literacy as a set of strategic responses to the epistemological, discursive, and experiential challenges posed by HIV/AIDS. It is both poignant and apt that HIV/AIDS should be the catalyst for such communion. As

Priscilla Wald argues in a related context, a communicable disease such as AIDS “compels attention—for scientists and the lay public alike—not only because of the devastation it can cause but also because the circulation of microbes materializes the transmission of ideas. The interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community.”³³

Barnett’s stories document the ways in which textual archives and the reading practices they foster created imagined communities and institutions of memory during a period of social devastation. “Philostorgy, Now Obscure” and its publication history, in particular, reveal the assumed differences between gay and non-gay readerships as well as the possibilities and limits of communal ties formed between those living with HIV/AIDS and their caregivers. First published in the *New Yorker* in June 1990, “Philostorgy, Now Obscure” was included, along with “The Times As It Knows Us,” in Barnett’s award-winning collection, *The Body and Its Dangers and Other Stories*, published later that year by St. Martin’s Press in its Stonewall Inn Editions, the house’s imprint series devoted to gay male literature.

“Philostorgy, Now Obscure” recounts Preston Wallace’s visit to Chicago to reunite with friends and lovers after being diagnosed as HIV-positive.³⁴ While the majority of the story centers on Preston’s reunion with his college roommates, Roxy Atherton and Lorna Fairweather, it also includes a description of Preston’s reconciliation with a former lover named Jim. In the magazine version, Preston and Jim reconnect in a platonic manner, while the book version additionally describes their reconciliation as a sexual encounter. In an interview, Barnett explains that Bob Gottlieb at the *New Yorker* had recommended he make revisions to “Philostorgy, Now Obscure” on the basis that “[it] is not a story about sex; it’s a story about affection.” Barnett acquiesced, noting: “Now listen, if somebody who has been editing longer than you’ve been alive says something and they’re paying you a dollar a word, you listen.” In the end, Barnett admits his preference for the *New Yorker* version of “Philostorgy, Now Obscure” and its treatment of Preston’s meeting with Jim. “It’s cleaner, and I think it’s even more powerful. It’s the difference between what a gay sensibility thinks something should be and what an outside look might suggest. We’re so, Oh, this is gay and this is the way we are. And you start thinking, Wait a minute. . . . Not all gay people act alike, and not all moments are going to force the same behavior on different people.”³⁵ Barnett values difference, both in distinguishing a “gay sensibility” from the mainstream and in differentiating gay men from one another in particular circumstances.

Barnett's sensitivity to variable sexual behaviors and attitudes is especially germane for thinking about the decisions gay men make when they weigh risk and desire. In the version of "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" that appears in *The Body and Its Dangers*, Preston and Jim meet over lunch and reminisce about their past as lovers. After Preston discloses his seropositive status, they discuss how HIV/AIDS has transformed the way gay men choose their sexual partners. At the end of lunch, Jim suggests to Preston that they consummate their reconciliation. Preston hesitates, telling Jim: "It's too dangerous." But Jim's reply—"I want some say in how you remember me"—convinces Preston to accept the invitation.³⁶ Afterwards, Preston fondly recalls the memory of their sexual union—of "Jim's hand between his shoulder blades, and then later, Jim inside him, which was not something he had expected to feel again" (60). By framing Preston and Jim's reunion as a sexual encounter preceded by apprehension and culminating in pleasure, Barnett calls attention to the ways in which reflections on "the body and its dangers" mediate gay male sex acts. Broaching the politics of safer sex—the HIV-negative Jim is the penetrator, though we are not told whether or not he uses a condom—Barnett foregrounds the importance of gay sex as a means of reconnection (and, in this case, of farewell) despite the lingering specter of AIDS. Retaining this scene for the version in *The Body and Its Dangers*, Barnett not only engages with the controversial debates surrounding safe-sex education—an early expression of AIDS literacy—but he also critiques what Patton calls "a national pedagogy of AIDS, which attracted to itself systems of policing that rearticulated [in the eighties] a 'normal sexuality' in order to reterritorialize [gay] bodies that had gone ballistic in the 1960s and 1970s."³⁷

Barnett is cognizant and empathetic about the different choices gay men make as they negotiate between desire and risk. By omitting this scene from the version in the *New Yorker*, Barnett demonstrates not only a savviness about gay and non-gay audiences, but also consideration for their different attitudes towards gay sexual behavior. These differences in implied audiences play out in the story in terms of the characters' varying degrees of cultural literacy and AIDS literacy. Barnett portrays Preston as someone who is not only fluent with high-cultural texts, but who uses that knowledge to construct his identity as a gay man. After his diagnosis, Preston returns home, begins cleaning his apartment, and finds "two papers he had written in college, one on the Pardoner from *The Canterbury Tales*, and one on Walt Whitman" (47). According to Steven F. Kruger, by including these

literary references, Barnett “emphasizes the need to discover and claim a particular, complicated gay history—one that includes both Whitman and the Pardoner Such a history is complexly related to the present historical moment, with Whitman’s joyous ‘vision’ paradoxically bound up in the experience of disease, and the Pardoner’s anger providing Preston with a model for his own angry response to the diagnosis of AIDS.” Looking “to the violence of the past out of the violence of the present,” Preston expresses “a voice that might angrily challenge or campily subvert the legacies of homophobia.” Although he does not use the term, Kruger is essentially showing how Preston engages with a form of AIDS literacy that augments the (gay) cultural literacy he had acquired in college. For Barnett, I contend, confronting the legacies of homophobia involves an examination of the interrelationship between cultural literacy and AIDS literacy. Thus, I agree with Kruger’s claim that Barnett’s inclusion of these literary references “points up the urgency of historical claiming at a moment in gay life when, under the pressure of AIDS, past, present, and future have all been radically transformed.”³⁸

Preston’s cultural literacy extends to his ability to trace the etymology of words. During his conversation with Roxy and Lorna in the story’s opening scene, Preston reflects on various words beginning with “phil-”: “A philodendron’s name implied self-love, he thought, if one was a tree. *Philo*, love; *dendron*, tree—loving tree, or love of trees. Narcissism seemed to impel this one. Philharmonic, he thought, was love of music; philosophy, love of wisdom; philopolemic (rare), love of war or disputes. Philter was a love potion, philanderer actually meant fond of men. Philostorgy, meaning natural affection, was now obscure” (36–37). It is unclear whether Barnett is suggesting that the term “philostorgy” was itself obscure, or whether it is the sentiment the term conveys—natural affection—that has been obscured or is unavailable. The *OED* defines philostorgy as “natural affection, such as that between parents and children,” and records two appearances in the seventeenth century and, three centuries later, in Barnett’s story. Considering this vast temporal separation, the term indeed seems to be obscure. At the same time, though, Barnett suggests that the feeling of natural affection is available, or, if rare, still worth pursuing. Throughout the story, Preston, Roxy, and Lorna struggle to rekindle their friendship, and they succeed when they become more affectionate with each other, and, in particular, when the women express empathy for Preston’s seropositive status. Preston’s knowledge of the etymology of Greek terms, moreover, is later linked to his acquisition

of AIDS literacy, as the former helps him develop "his fluency in a Greek-like and latinate language of cancers, viruses, funguses, and rare pneumonias" (41).

Considering these examples, it is significant that the story opens with a gloss on the antiviral drug DHPG, or ganciclovir. In both versions of "Philostorgy, Now Obscure," Roxy asks Preston in the opening scene: "Are you going on DHPG?" (*New* 36; *Body* 35). In the *New Yorker* version, Roxy's question is immediately followed by the narrator's explanation that "Preston had told them that he had cytomegalovirus," or CMV, an opportunistic infection that causes blindness (36). In the book version, however, the narrative does not elaborate that the drug DHPG is used to treat CMV. In the *New Yorker* version, Barnett recognizes the need to provide this information to readers who may still be unfamiliar with specific details of the disease (even though some may have read other AIDS fiction published previously in the magazine or elsewhere).³⁹ But there is no need for him to supply this information for the gay readership of *The Body and Its Dangers*. The two versions of the story show AIDS literacy working in both form and function: to the extent that the story's content is about Preston's and Roxy's AIDS literacy, its effect is to encourage readers also to strive for such an awareness.

Like Preston, Roxy is committed to achieving AIDS literacy, and Barnett portrays her as a touchstone for it and for empathy in both versions of the story. From the outset, she is shown to be extremely well-informed about the different symptoms of and treatment options for HIV/AIDS. Fearing that additional "stress [might] blow out whatever's left of [his] immune system," Roxy advises Preston to postpone plans to visit his parents (34). In contrast, Lorna offers the sincere but naïve suggestion that Preston need not "tell [his] mother anything," since he "[will] be the one they'll find a cure for." Registering "the instant and dismissive optimism of Lorna's response," Preston quips back: "As if science were so specific or personal" (35). Exploring the idea that scientific knowledge could actually be "specific or personal," Roxy struggles to reconcile a more technical, functionalist understanding of HIV/AIDS, on the one hand, with a more humane and personalized understanding of the health crisis, on the other. For instance, she is familiar with *both* the medical treatment for CMV *and* its human consequences. She "knew that [Preston's] medication would require a catheter inserted into a vein that fed directly into an atrium of his heart. . . . She knew that the drug had yet to be approved by the FDA and that it was given on a compassionate-use basis. She knew,

too, that nurses would teach him how to administer it to himself. . . . She knew as much about this disease as she could know" (35). Out of empathy, Roxy seeks to translate biomedical information. Engaging with what Robert M. Ariss calls "medical creole," a "linguistic form" that "render[s] scientific information intelligible at a phenomenological level," Roxy learns to achieve "medical literacy."⁴⁰

Barnett's portrayal of Roxy models for readers the need to become literate with the lexicon of AIDS. The narrator describes Roxy's consciousness: "Preston had cytomegalovirus, which most people are exposed to by the time they have reached kindergarten. It could make him go blind; it could become systemic, but there was something Roxy was more afraid of and was afraid to bring up—it was unlikely that a person with AIDS would only have CMV without the presence of another opportunistic infection. Did Preston know that? she wondered. Should she ask?" (39). Here, and elsewhere in the story, Barnett depicts Roxy as someone who actively teaches herself about HIV/AIDS. Worried about Preston's health, Roxy mentally recites the CDC's list of opportunistic infections: "[S]he thought of a list of things that could kill him: *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, Kaposi's sarcoma, lymphoma, toxoplasmosis, cryptosporidiosis, mycobacterium tuberculosis, cytomegalovirus, Hodgkin's disease, multifocal leukoencephalopathy, encephalitis, cryptococcal meningitis—over twenty-five diseases that constituted a diagnosis of AIDS. She thought of wasting-away syndrome and dementia" (48).

Significantly, this list only appears in the book version of the story, and not in the magazine version. Barnett's inclusion of this list in *The Body and Its Dangers*—that is, in a volume aimed at a gay readership—is telling. In articulating her concerns—"Did Preston know that?"—Roxy appears to be ventriloquizing her author's equally urgent concerns about his story's readership: Did *they* know that? Reading these two passages together suggests that, if the main readership of the book version is comprised of gay men, then the inclusion of the list places those readers in Preston's position and enacts a didactic response that covers the possibility "just in case" they *don't* know.

Although Barnett represents Roxy as a touchstone of AIDS literacy, he also establishes a difference between Roxy's *knowledge* of AIDS and Preston's *experience* of AIDS. After showing that Roxy is able to recite the "twenty-five diseases that constituted a diagnosis of AIDS," the narrator goes on to note Roxy's belief that "[s]he knew as much about the subject as anyone could" (48). This qualification echoes the earlier description that Roxy "knew as much about this disease as she could

know" (35). The echo suggests that her *knowledge* of the disease can only approximate the *experience* of seropositive people. Barnett suggests that scientific knowledge may not be "specific or personal" (as Preston's retort to Lorna in the story's opening scene intimates) because there are different degrees of personalization, different registers with which to experience the human consequences of AIDS. Roxy knows all that she could know because her AIDS literacy is based on a familiarity with biomedical information, whereas Preston's is informed by his first-hand experience of living as an HIV-positive gay man. At the OutWrite Conference in March 1991, six months before his death, Barnett reveals an understanding of the limits of *his own* empathy when recalling his interactions with HIV-positive friends prior to his diagnosis: "Taking care of sick friends and watching them waste away, I learned that no matter how great my empathy [was,] that I was outside looking in and writing from that point of view."⁴¹ Notwithstanding the contrast he establishes between Roxy and Preston in the story, Barnett presents both forms of AIDS literacy as valuable and necessary.

By connecting his characters' possession of AIDS literacy with their capacity for empathy, Barnett suggests that it is not enough for Roxy or anyone else just to be literate with biomedical information. For instance, although Roxy knows that "it was unlikely that a person with AIDS would only have CMV without the presence of another opportunistic infection" (39), her empathetic feelings for Preston prevent her from pressing him on this matter until an appropriate moment presents itself. Possessing acute emotional intelligence, Roxy understands the need to use her knowledge of HIV/AIDS carefully and sensitively in specific, personal situations.⁴² Preston also expresses empathy for Roxy, especially after he discovers that she has sought out HIV/AIDS information: "wander[ing] into Roxy's bedroom," Preston "saw a photocopy of an article from *The New England Journal of Medicine*" "[b]eneath the phone on her nightstand," and "[b]eneath that article he found treatment updates out of San Francisco, which Roxy would have had to subscribe to in order to get" (54). By the end of the story, both Roxy and Preston have learned to communicate openly once more with each other. When Roxy finally trusts herself and Preston enough to ask him about his CMV, Preston reassures her that he has not yet exhibited symptoms to indicate that he might have other opportunistic infections. But out of empathy for *her* empathy, Preston does not tell her about the "pain under his arm" (60), a sign that he may have begun to develop lymphoma (36). The AIDS literacy that is evident in "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" comes about not only through the

reading of medico-scientific texts, but also from the affective bonds forged out of empathy.

If "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" portrays how AIDS has transformed Preston's relationship with his female friends, then "The *Times* As It Knows Us" considers how the epidemic has transformed gay men's relationship with each other. The story takes place on Fire Island during a July weekend in 1987, at the height of the AIDS crisis. In the story, Barnett critiques how gay men are represented in the nation's "newspaper of record," and explores how the characters' acquisition of AIDS literacy informs their engagement with each other and with the mainstream media.

The "Us" in the story's title specifically references a select group of urban, educated, middle-class gay men.⁴³ While the title connotes an affinity between the characters, the story instead asks readers to think about the functions and limitations of group identification. In his OutWrite conference speech, Barnett recalls an incident "one weekend, [when] a housemate got sick on Fire Island, and our other housemates—part of the AIDS establishment—took an attitude that nothing was to be done and it was best to ignore it." The need to care for a friend on Fire Island, miles away from medical care and necessary amenities, aptly conveys, both literally and metaphorically, the sense of isolation and neglect felt by gay men at the time. Disappointed with the responses of men who, as "part of the AIDS establishment," should have been more empathetic, Barnett is compelled to write a story about a group of men forced to confront each other's limitations as a result of AIDS. "It took two years to finish—getting my grief and anger under some control over and over again—I finally taught myself to write."⁴⁴ Barnett establishes his own voice through writing a story about a group of friends who, though bound together by fate and circumstance, have very different attitudes and mixed emotions concerning AIDS.

Narrated from the perspective of Clark, who is sharing a house with six other gay men, the story centers on two collective, and consecutive, scenes of reading in which the housemates discuss the contents of the *New York Times*.⁴⁵ The first scene of reading describes a debate over a lifestyle-and-human interest piece the *Times* had published that week in "The Living Section" (68), and specifically over its characterization of a Fire Island household used to illustrate the impact of AIDS in New York City's gay community. The men are angry with their housemate Perry, who was the reporter's source. This debate transitions into another scene of collective reading, in which the men

decode obituaries and fill in information that had been excluded, such as the cause of death. The juxtaposition of these two scenes of reading highlights the connections between representation, misrepresentation, and self-representation.

Even more so than "Philostorgy, Now Obscure," "The *Times* As It Knows Us" references a range of authors, philosophers, and musicians, including Auden (62, 82), Spinoza (62), Vergil (63), Euripides (72–73), Rilke (73), Mozart (73), Dylan Thomas (79), Shakespeare (87, 105), Verdi (88), Emily Dickinson (89–90), Madeleine l'Engle (104), and Elgar, Bach, Barber, and Fauré (111). The first two lines from a poem by W. H. Auden serve as an epigraph: "Time will say nothing but I told you so, / Time only knows the price we have to pay." Readers unfamiliar with Auden would register easily enough the visual and aural resemblance between the "*Times*" in the title and the twice-repeated "time" in the epigraph. Similarly, they would probably note the story's intimation of an already existing audience, as suggested in the first-person plural pronouns in the title and epigraph. Those more familiar with Auden might additionally recognize these lines as the opening of "If I Could Tell You" (1940), a villanelle about the impossibility of predicting the future because only the passing of time will reveal the outcome of events.

Barnett frames "The *Times* As It Knows Us" as a story about reading and literacy, and about memory and loss. Following the epigraph, the story opens with an untitled prologue that connects disparate texts: newspapers, philosophical treatises, and personal marginalia. Beginning with a quotation from Spinoza and ending with one from Vergil, the prologue introduces the story's readers to the topic of reading and offers an implicit, metatextual strategy for reading the story itself. Clark, the narrator, reveals his intention to look up a Spinoza quotation—"With regards to human affairs . . . not to laugh, not to cry, not to become indignant, but to understand"—which his lover, Samuel, used to cite whenever Clark "was raging at the inexplicable behavior of friends or at something [he] had read in the newspaper" (62). It is striking that being annoyed by reading the newspaper should conjure a Spinozian axiom in Clark's mind. It is also striking that Clark has yet to excavate the readerly trace left by Samuel in his books, not least because, as Clark puts it, that "would entail leafing through Samuel's books, deciphering the margin notes, following underlined passages back to where his thoughts were formed, a past closed off to me" (62). Readers are led to assume that the "closed off" past refers not only to a past that Clark once shared with Samuel, but perhaps also to a pre-AIDS past that would be too painful to resuscitate in the present.

But Barnett intimates another reason for Clark's reluctance, namely, that AIDS has required the negotiation of different modes of literacy. In a later scene, Clark expresses his ambivalence about the limitations of his high-cultural fluency when confronted with the harsh reality of AIDS: "Since the deaths began, the certified social workers have quoted Shakespeare at us: 'Give sorrow words'" (105). But for Clark, these lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (act 4, scene 3) fail to provide solace. "But the words we used now reek of old air in churches," Clark laments, "taste of the dust that has gathered in the crevices of the Nativity and the Passion. Our condolences are arid as leaves. We are actors who have over-rehearsed our lines" (105). In his reading of this passage, David Bergman argues that "[t]he old words do not help. . . . Some new style is required—some new mode of speech, or living. . . . [F]or Barnett, this new language will come not by denying or erasing what came before, but by transforming what was most valuable from the past."⁴⁶ For Barnett, I would add, this "new language" involves juxtaposing Shakespeare and other high-cultural references with biomedical discourse and with newly emergent genres of representation such as the AIDS obituary.

Barnett's characters in "The *Times* As It Knows Us" struggle to negotiate the tensions between cultural literacy and AIDS literacy. An especially memorable paragraph illustrates the ways in which AIDS literacy has become part of gay men's everyday conversation. Lamenting the fact that "Babel fell before we had a decent word for death," Clark continues:

And simply speak, disinterested and dryly, the words that fill your daily life: "Lewis has KS of the lungs," or "Raymond has endocarditis but the surgeons won't operate," or . . . "Cytomegalovirus has inflamed his stomach and we can't get him to eat," or "The DHPG might restore the sight in his eye," or . . . "They've added dementia to the list of AIDS-related illnesses," or "The AZT was making him anemic," or . . . "The drug's available on a compassionate basis," or "The drug killed him," or "His lung collapsed and stopped his heart," or "He was *so* young." What have you said and who wants to hear it? (105; original emphasis)

The shift from a Biblical reference—the Tower of Babel—to a fast-paced and exhaustive recitation of symptoms associated with seropositivity underscores the connection between cultural literacy and AIDS literacy. By referencing God's act of confusing the languages, as narrated in

the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1–9), Barnett suggests that AIDS literacy involves an ability not only to sift through medical and scientific information, but also to differentiate between facts and gossip, hearsay, and speculation.

Barnett proposes that cultural literacy can be useful if it is transformed to meet the concerns of dealing with AIDS. Following the passage in which Clark bemoans the empty words of social workers who encourage gay men to “[g]ive sorrow words” (105), for example, Barnett cites from the Book of Sirach: “*Let your tears fall for the dead, and as one who is suffering begin the lament . . . Let your weeping be bitter and your wailing fervent; then be comforted for your sorrow*” (106; original emphases). For Clark, the ability to “[g]ive sorrow occasion and let it go” is possible only by *re*-interpreting these cultural texts. “Find in grief the abandon you used to find in love,” he instructs the story’s readers, “grieve the way you used to fuck” (106). By reformulating the social workers’ invitation to “[g]ive sorrow words,” Clark asserts his desire for self-representation and contextualizes mourning in the age of AIDS as an extension of gay love and sex.

Clark recognizes the value of self-representation as a strategy to counter mainstream media’s misrepresentations of AIDS in gay culture. Thus, AIDS literacy inheres in the story’s engagement with this essential cultural debate. He and Perry find themselves embroiled in a tense exchange over the *Times*’s lifestyle-and-human-interest article. Perry justifies his reasons for agreeing to be the reporter’s source: “I thought we were the best house on the Island to illustrate how the crisis had turned into a lifestyle.” Hearing this, Clark berates Perry, reminding him that “[h]ow we represent ourselves is never the way the *Times* does.” Perry then responds with the claim that the newspaper “officially started using the word *gay* in that article” (65; original emphasis). By contrasting Clark’s and Perry’s responses to the *Times* article, Barnett models for his readers multiple ways of reading—and, in the process, contrasting ways of engaging with AIDS in the public sphere.⁴⁷ Clark and Perry are both gay readers, though they differ in how they respond to a shared text and in how they participate in a shared cultural debate.

Barnett’s portrayal of Perry underscores the different ways that gay men have responded to the AIDS epidemic. While Perry has no qualms about speaking on behalf of other gay men because he views his AIDS advocacy work as his life’s “mission,” Clark and the other housemates are skeptical of Perry’s role and investment in “the AIDS industry” (79). Noah even goes so far as to accuse Perry: “[Y]ou may

have left the theater but you turned AIDS into a one-man show. The more people die, the brighter your spotlight gets" (66). With good reason, the housemates have come to distrust Perry's motivations. We learn that Clark is angry at Perry not only because of the *Times* article, but also because Perry had admitted to reading, without permission, Clark's diary, or what Clark himself calls his "Reluctant Journal," in which he keeps a record of "daily life during the epidemic: who had been diagnosed, their progress, sometimes their death" (80).⁴⁸ Noah later tells Clark that Perry had taken an even greater liberty by "quot[ing] your journal at the last AIDS conference" (85). Perry's unapproved citation of Clark's journal complicates the already vexed relationship between representation and self-representation. By *re-presenting* Clark's diary as "the work of a recent widower," Perry makes *public* an individual's *personal* account of handling grief and loss (86).

Clark eventually forgives Perry for his betrayal. "I was angry with Perry, but it was not the worst thing he could have done. The worst is not when we can say it is the worst" (87). Significantly, Barnett portrays Clark's exoneration of Perry's behavior with an unmarked allusion to Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "The worst is not so long as we can say, 'This is the worst'" (act 4, scene 1). According to Theresa Smalec, "[i]n citing Shakespeare's *King Lear* . . . Clark invests in language as a means of control, as the ground on which we dispute and secure what we know to be 'real.'"⁴⁹ By rendering forgiveness and the painful "real" (a situation is "never as bad as we think" when we think it is the "worst") through a Shakespearean allusion, Barnett provides yet another instance of AIDS literacy—a revised use of a canonical text to reflect the stakes of gay male representation and self-representation during the AIDS epidemic.

To the best of my knowledge, the article featured in "The *Times* As It Knows Us" is a fictionalization. But other details are verifiable and confirm July 1987 as the temporal setting of the story.⁵⁰ Clark's observations—that "the *Times* had just started to use the word *gay* instead of the more clinical *homosexual*," and that, "in the obituaries, they had finally agreed to mention a gay man's lover as one of his survivors" (65; original emphases)—correspond to the changes made at the *Times* concerning its policies for covering the AIDS epidemic.⁵¹

Although his story provides historical verisimilitude in its setting, Barnett suggests that little has changed between 1987 and 1990, between, that is, the setting of the story and its publication. This lack of change is highlighted in the story's second scene of collective reading, one that involves the decoding of obituaries. "We deduced the AIDS casualties," Clark explains,

by finding the death notices of men, their age and marital status, and then their occupation. . . . A "beloved son" gave us pause, for we were all that; a funeral home was a clue, because at the time, few of them would take an AIDS casualty. . . . We looked at who had bought the notice, and what was said in it. When an AIDS-related condition was not given as the cause of death, we looked for coded half-truths: cancer, pneumonia, meningitis, after a long struggle, after a short illness. The dead giveaway, so to speak, was to whom contributions could be made in lieu of flowers. Or the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim. (70)

This passage foregrounds a methodical reading strategy for interpreting the obituaries—a reading practice that contributes to the characters' acquisition of AIDS literacy.⁵² Reading and decoding the obituaries gives the housemates an opportunity to confront and cope with losses wrought by AIDS. "It was good that we had this system for finding the AIDS deaths," Clark explains, because "[w]e also read the death notices for anything that might connect us to someone from the past" (70).

Earlier, I suggested that Barnett includes contrasting responses on the part of his characters to suggest multiple ideas about what constitutes gay readers. Barnett offers another example of contrasting texts and readings in relation to the reporting of the death of a man named Robert Mazzochi. The story includes two obituaries for Robert, both of which are read aloud by a housemate named Stark. Judging from their language, they were written, respectively, by Robert's family and by Milton, a man we learn was Robert's lover (72).

"There's another one," Stark said, his head resting on my shoulder, his face next to mine. "Mazzochi, Robert."

"Oh, God," I said into the open wings of the newspaper.

The newsprint began to spread in runnels of ink. I handed the paper over to Stark, who read out loud, "'Mazzochi, Robert, forty-four on July — , 1987. Son of Victor and Natalia Mazzochi of Stonington, Connecticut. Brother of Linda Mazzochi of Washington, D.C. Served as lieutenant in the United States Army. Came back from two terms of duty in Vietnam, unscarred and unblaming. With the Department of Health and Human Services NYC since 1977. A warm, radiant, much-loved man.'"

"What a nice thing to say," Horst said. "Did you know him well?"

"He was that exactly," I said.

There was another one for him, which Stark read. "Robert, you etched an indelible impression and left. Yes, your spirit will continue to enrich us forever, but your flesh was very particular flesh. Not a day will go by, Milton."

The others sat looking at me as I stood there and wept. (71)

In an author's note to *The Body and Its Dangers*, Barnett explains that some "characters in these stories are named after friends who have died of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome." He means not to "imply any similarity between the real person and the fictional," but, rather, "to keep them alive in [his] imagination, to keep the pleasure of their company as long as [he] could sustain it." And he trusts that his late friends, including Robert Mazzochi, "would be delighted to know their names were used in such a fashion" (n.p.; original emphases). In fact, an obituary for a man named Robert Mazzochi appeared in the *New York Times* on July 17, 1987:

MAZZOCHI—Robert, 44, on July 15, 1987. Son of Geno and Orlando Mazzochi of Torrington, CT. Brother of Linda Mazzochi of Washington, DC. Life partner of Milton Tabbot. With the Department of Health and Human Services NY RPO since 1977. . . . A warm, radiant, much-loved man.⁵³

Barnett draws upon this actual obituary of his late friend as material for his story. By adding the second obituary in "The Times As It Knows Us"—one written by Robert's lover, Milton—Barnett is not merely exercising his creative license, but, more pointedly, highlighting the stakes of representation as well as envisioning the possibility of a more intimate portrait of gay love. Stuart Hall reminds us that "[t]he question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are the many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not?"⁵⁴ Extending Hall's point, I would suggest that Robert's two obituaries illustrate not only who gets represented but also by whom and in what ways.

The first obituary, moreover, is noteworthy for what it both reveals and conceals about Robert. Whereas the actual obituary for Robert Mazzochi in the *New York Times* lists the death date as "July 15, 1987," Barnett's fictional obituary leaves blank the precise date of Robert's death: "Mazzochi, Robert, forty-four on July — , 1987."

More curious still is the fact that Barnett assigns this description to his character, Stark, "who read out loud" what is ostensibly an absence. Barnett presents a theory of active reading in this scene. In *The Act of Reading*, Wolfgang Iser theorizes the function of "blanks" that appear in literary texts as "a suspension of connectability [that] stimulate the reader's imaginative activity."⁵⁵ Although Iser's focus is on the suspension of the reader's expectations during the reading of serial novels, his ideas about textual blanks help illuminate the odd presence of the unspecified death date in Barnett's story. "By impeding textual coherence," Iser explains, "the blanks transform themselves into stimuli for acts of ideation. In this sense, they function as a self-regulating structure in communication; what they suspend turns into a propellant for the reader's imagination, making him supply what has been withheld."⁵⁶ For Iser, the blank represents a structure of textual indeterminacy that stimulates the reader's imagination. There are two orders of textual indeterminacy at work in Barnett's story. On a diegetic level, Stark communicates to Clark and the other housemates an absent referent that would correspond precisely to Robert's death date. As a result, Clark and the other housemates must supply what has been withheld—that is, they must literally fill in the blank. The active form of reading occasioned by this scene literalizes, moreover, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick posits as the "rhetorical power" of obituaries as "speech acts" that "rupture the conventional relations of person and of address."⁵⁷ On another, non-diegetic level, readers of "The Times As It Knows Us" are also invited to formulate their own interpretations of this absence. In my view, Barnett asks his readers to contemplate, through the empty space of a blank date in Robert's obituary, the all too real possibility that the AIDS crisis represents an *enduring* catastrophe in gay men's lives. The missing *day* in the date "July — , 1987"—visually registered with a dash rather than as "a day in July 1987"—at once marks time, but also suspends the story in time. In this way, Barnett underscores how AIDS has transformed gay men's and gay culture's relationship to time.⁵⁸

Earlier in the story Clark had confided that "[w]e read the death notices for anything that might connect us to someone from the past" (70). But the reality is far different from this desire for communion. Clark is moved to tears when he hears the second obituary for Robert read aloud, for he and Robert had once entertained the idea of becoming lovers (73).

The others sat looking at me as I stood there and wept. . . . They were waiting for a cue from me, some hint as to what I needed from them. I felt as if I had been spun out of time, like a kite that remains aloft over the ocean even after its string breaks. I felt awkward, out of time and out of place, like not being able to find the beat to music. . . . Robert's funeral service was being held at that very moment. (71-72)

For Clark, the connection produced through reading the obituaries disorients rather than reunites, produces awkwardness rather than attachment. The collapsing of time—Clark learns of Robert's death at almost the precise moment as Robert's funeral service—leads to the experience of corporeal detachment and temporal suspension. Despite the experience of unmooring and atemporality, Clark's tears make manifest his grieving, feeling body at that specific moment in time and place.⁵⁹

Anticipating the absence in Robert's obituary, "The *Times* As It Knows Us" is marked by grief and loss from the outset. In the story's epigraph, Barnett has omitted a crucial line from Auden's "If I Could Tell You." The entire opening stanza of the poem reads:

Time will say nothing but I told you so,
Time only knows the price we have to pay;
If I could tell you I would let you know.⁶⁰

From its opening, Barnett's story is marked by loss, namely, the absence of this third line, which indicates an exchange between a speaker and an interlocutor. "If I could tell you," the speaker admits to his listener, "I would let you know." This is a curious omission, not only because the first and third lines of the poem are alternated as the final line in the poem's subsequent five stanzas, but also because the poem's final two lines transpose its opening lines. The poem concludes with: "Will Time say nothing but I told you so? / If I could tell you I would let you know." The loss of this third line in the epigraph metaphorically echoes the loss that is expressed in obituaries.

Barnett identifies with the speaker of Auden's poem and his uncertainty, his inability to know or to articulate what time will eventually say or what the passing of time will eventually bear out. At one point in the narrative, Clark confides to Perry his disappointment with the *Times's* coverage of the epidemic. "I always expect insight and consequence in their articles, and I'm disappointed when they write on our issues and don't report more than what we already know.

. . . And sometimes I assume that there is a language to describe what we're going through, and that they would use it if there was" (84). Though "Time" or "the *New York Times*" or "the times" may "say nothing but I told you so," Barnett attempts to say something else in his story, even if he remains uncertain about what the future will say retrospectively about AIDS and gay men during this early moment in the crisis. In other words, the intertextual reference to Auden's poem functions not as an admonishment, but, rather, as a call for empathy for the plight of gay men.

But Barnett offers other expressive practices to compensate for the lack of "a language to describe what we're going through." While the first half of "The *Times* As It Knows Us" highlights an engagement with AIDS literacy through its depiction of scenes of reading, the second half of the story shows the characters enacting that knowledge through performances of empathetic care for Horst, the housemate with AIDS featured in the *Times* article (66), and Enzo, a sick housemate whose symptoms could be indicative of PCP, *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (107–108). In one particularly moving scene, Clark and Stark discover Enzo, who had been feverish all day, "lying in a puddle of [his own] excrement" in the bathroom. Without a second thought, Stark helps Clark lift Enzo into the tub and turn on the shower to clean him up. "Enzo wrapped his arms around my back and laid his hot head on my shoulder," Clark describes. "Our visions of eternal hell must come from endless febrile nights like this, I thought. I gradually made the water cooler and sort of two-stepped with him so that it would run down his back, and sides, and front. The shower spray seemed to clothe our nakedness. If I closed my eyes, we were lovers on a train platform. We could have been almost anywhere, dancing in the sad but safe aftermath of some other tragedy, say the Kennedy assassinations, the airlift from Saigon, the bombing of a Belfast funeral" (98–99). Clark's cultural literacy allows him to draw parallels between being a caregiver in the age of AIDS and other epoch-defining cultural trauma. A bulwark against the "eternal hell" and retributionist rhetoric of the *Times* ("I told you so"), his understanding frames the experience in the context of love and survival. Just as Clark anticipates Enzo being revived by the shower, so too does his vision imagine a future when gay men might survive the devastation of AIDS. The absent lines from Auden's poem—"Will Time say nothing but I told you so? / If I could tell you I would let you know"—haunts this scene's futurity.

But, in the end, the story grounds AIDS as a pressing concern that demands *active responses* in the *present*. Worried about his friend,

Clark accompanies Enzo back to New York City for medical help. He feels compelled to do so out of both necessity and empathy—because, as he puts it, “I am beginning to see what it will be like to be sick with this thing and not have anyone bring me milk or medication because it isn’t convenient or amusing any longer” (109). Significantly, Clark’s recognition of “see[ing] what it will be like” echoes Andrew Holleran’s observation, in “Reading and Writing,” that a “thin and shifting [line]” separates the two primary audiences for AIDS writing—“those with AIDS and those caring for people with AIDS” (77). Just as Holleran values reading to achieve AIDS literacy, so too does Barnett uphold—through his portrayals of Clark in “The Times As It Knows Us” and of Preston and Roxy in “Philostory, Now Obscure”—the need to enact knowledge of AIDS literacy through empathetic and compassionate care. When Clark returns to his apartment after accompanying Enzo to the hospital, he finds messages on his answering machine asking about “how Enzolina is” and telling him that Horst is “feeling much better” (115, 116). It is these final scenes of communion and interlocution—the intimacy of caring for a friend, the phone messages and their invitation to return the calls—that sustain life in a story devoted to AIDS literacy.

Barnett feared that *The Body and Its Dangers and Other Stories* would not find an audience. “Who wants to read this fiction” he wondered to Michael Denny, his editor; “[i]t hurts me to re-read them.” Denny countered Barnett’s objections by proposing that these “harrowing stories remind us that reading is sometimes a courageous act.”⁶¹ From the vantage point of our “post-AIDS” moment, encountering these snapshots of gay men’s experiences at the height of the epidemic in the U.S. reminds us not only of the pain and loss they endured but also of the cultures they forged of empathy and care. Reading these stories requires courage, but it also proves encouraging.

Barnett’s stories model an ethic of care and bequeath a rich repository of ideas about gay identity, reading practices, and rituals of commemoration that can revive our engagements with AIDS literacy. As we enter the fourth decade of the epidemic, it is absolutely necessary to cultivate AIDS literacy in multiple ways—whether by engaging with AIDS literature, by debating responses to Ed Koch’s record on AIDS, or by many other means beyond the scope of this essay. In interrelated ways, these activities renew our consciousness of AIDS as an *ongoing* crisis in the U.S. and abroad. To make AIDS history, we must first encounter the texts, lives, and contexts that constitute AIDS’s unfinished history.

NOTES

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1. Lee, "Generation Trouble," 27. See also my visual essay, "AIDS 2.0: New Media, the 'New' Gay Generation Gap, and the Unfinished History of AIDS," which can be viewed at <http://vimeo.com/48651756> or at <http://www.rick-lee.com/tuhoavideo/>.

2. Schulman's Facebook page.

3. Kramer, *The Normal Heart*, 81.

4. Kirtzman, "A Man of Certitude and Joy," n.p. See Kaiser and Maer for other sympathetic remembrances.

5. Socarides, "Ed Koch and the Politics of the Closet," n.p. (emphasis added).

6. France, "Ed Koch and the AIDS Crisis," n.p.

7. Mirkinson, "New York Times Revises," n.p.

8. Knegt, "Que(e)ries," n.p. These documentaries include: David Weissman's *We Were Here: The AIDS Years in San Francisco*, Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman's *UNITED IN ANGER: A History of ACT UP*, David France's *How to Survive a Plague*, and Jeffrey Schwarz's *Vito*.

9. Recent reports about a meningitis outbreak in New York City and Los Angeles have also raised the lingering specter of AIDS—an absent presence, if you will—in many gay men's lives. In her *New York Times* article, "For Gay Men, a Fear That Feels Familiar," Anemona Hartocollis writes: "A new, casually transmittable infection—a unique strain of bacterial meningitis—has cast a pall over the gay night life and dating scene, with men wondering whether this is AIDS, circa 1981, all over again. Seven men have died in New York City, about a third of diagnosed cases, since 2010. And in the last few months, the contagion seemed to be accelerating. It has targeted gay and bisexual men, and nobody knows exactly why" (n.p.).

10. On reading and print capitalism, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44–46. While Altman's article is considered to be the first reporting in a mainstream newspaper of what we now know as AIDS, the *New York Native* and the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* had published articles about it in May and June 1981, respectively. For readings of Altman's *Times* article and *Longtime Companion*, see Román, "Acts of Intervention," and "Remembering AIDS."

11. Holleran, "Reading and Writing," 78.

12. *Ibid.*, 82.

13. *Ibid.*, 79–80.

14. *Ibid.*, 77.

15. Crain, "New Histories of Literacy," 474.

16. On the promise of the queer past, see Castiglia and Reed; on gay readers, see Bram, xxvii.

17. Piontek, "Unsafe Representations," 136. See Rofes on gay "post-AIDS" identity.

18. While welcome, these significant medical advances have led to the misperception that the epidemic is happening elsewhere, or that it is over. But AIDS continues to spread. In the U.S., statistics from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reveal that, while new HIV infections have declined among both heterosexuals and injection drug users, the number of new infections among men who have sex with men (MSM) is much higher than in the early nineties. The most recent

CDC statistics from 2010 show that white and black MSM account for the most number of new HIV infections. After the introduction of protease inhibitors in 1996, Andrew Sullivan published a controversial *New York Times Magazine* article, "When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic," which generated a heated debate that resembles the critical responses to Altman's article in 1981 and to Koch's death in 2013. For responses to Sullivan, see Harper, "Gay Male Identities, Personal Privacy, and Relations of Public Exchange"; Crimp, "Melancholia and Moralism"; and Román, "Not-about-AIDS." The CDC's statistics are available at <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/risk/gender/msm/facts/index.html>.

19. See Maupin, *Michael Tolliver Lives*; and White, *The Married Man*.
20. Canning, *Vital Signs*, xv, xvi.
21. Denny, "AIDS Writing and the Creation of a Gay Culture," 46.
22. See France, *How to Survive a Plague*; and Gould, *Moving Politics*.
23. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse," 18.
24. *Ibid.*, 32, 31 (original emphasis).
25. Grover, "AIDS: Keywords," 27.
26. Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse," 66.
27. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, 2.
28. These terms are LAV or lymphadenopathy-associated virus, proposed by Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute in France; HTLV-III or human T-cell lymphotropic virus type III, designated by Robert Gallo of the National Cancer Institute; and ARV or AIDS-associated retrovirus, recommended by Jay A. Levy of the University of California at San Francisco School of Medicine.
29. Grover, "AIDS: Keywords," 21.
30. Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 315.
31. Treichler, "AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse," 214.
32. Patton, *Inventing AIDS*, 54–55.
33. Wald, *Contagious*, 2.
34. Barnett's story highlights the support women proffered to gay men during the AIDS epidemic. On women and AIDS, see Hogan, *Women Take Care*; Roth and Hogan, ed., *Gendered Epidemic*; and Treichler, "The Burdens of History."
35. Qtd. in Gambone, "Allen Barnett," 77.
36. Barnett, "Philostorgy, Now Obscure," *The Body and Its Dangers*, 59; hereafter cited in the text.
37. Patton, *Fatal Advice*, 10. The politics of safer sex have emerged in a different way in the last decade, when discussions of gay male sexual behavior have centered on three terms that have complicated the task of cultivating AIDS literacy: "barebacking" (intentionally engaging in unprotected anal sex), "bug chasing" (seeking to become infected with HIV), and "gift giving" (seeking to infect another person with the virus). In "Bug Chasing, Barebacking, and the Risks of Care," Gregory Tomso proposes examining the discursive circulation of these terms in order to "work toward promoting more savvy forms of 'discourse literacy' for gay men and those who care about them" (108). See also Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*; Octavio R. Gonzalez, "Tracking the Bug Chaser"; Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*; and Warner, "Unsafe."
38. Kruger, "Claiming the Pardoner," 118.
39. Prior to featuring "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" in 1990, the *New Yorker* had published several stories focusing on AIDS: Susan Sontag's "The Way We Live Now" in November 1986, Lucia Neval's "Close" in November 1988, and Dennis McFarland's "Nothing to Ask For" in September 1989.
40. Ariss, *Against Death*, 73–74.
41. Barnett, "Dangerous Emotions," 9.
42. See Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*.
43. Barnett, "The Times As It Knows Us," in *The Body and Its Dangers*, 62–117; hereafter cited in the text.

44. Barnett, "Dangerous Emotions," 9.
45. It is fitting that the *Times* is featured prominently in Barnett's story, not least because it published the now infamous article, "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals." Curiously, the date of this *Times* article is misidentified in Barnett's story. Clark has been collecting articles on HIV/AIDS "since they first appeared in the *Times* on a Saturday morning in July several years ago" (68). In 1981, July 3 fell on a Friday, not a Saturday. Notwithstanding this error, "The *Times* As It Knows Us" intervenes in the mainstream media's coverage linking AIDS and gay men.
46. Bergman, "Beauty and the Beach," 112.
47. See Clarke, *Virtuous Vice*.
48. An excerpt from Barnett's unpublished journal appears as "The Reluctant Journal."
49. Smalec, "Subjects at Risk," 184.
50. The closest reference is an article by Philip S. Gutis, "The Talk of Fire Island Pines; Fire Island Pines in Age of AIDS," published in the Travel Section of the *Times* on June 8, 1987.
51. Kinsella, *Covering the Plague*, 81.
52. On AIDS obituaries, see Alali, "The Disposition of AIDS Imagery in *New York Times*' Obituaries"; Bronski, "AIDS, Art and Obits"; Harris, "On Reading the Obituaries in the *Bay Area Reporter*"; Murphy, "Testimony"; and Winick, "AIDS Obituaries in the *New York Times*."
53. *New York Times*, July 17, 1987, D15.
54. Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," 285.
55. Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 191.
56. *Ibid.*, 194.
57. Sedgwick, "White Glasses," 264.
58. On queer history, memory, and temporality, see Freeman, *Time Binds*; and Love, *Feeling Backward*.
59. On grief and the feeling body, see Luciano, *Arranging Grief*.
60. Auden, "If I Could Tell You," 312.
61. Denny, "AIDS Writing and the Creation of a Gay Culture," 45.

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