

“I GOT THE CELL COUNT BLUES”: DANEZ SMITH, HIV, AND THE LEGACY OF THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper connects Danez Smith’s collection of poems *Don’t Call Us Dead* (2017) to writing by the poet’s predecessors in the Black Arts Movement. I argue that Smith’s expression of HIV in their poetry continues and updates the denunciation of mass incarceration of, as well as structural violence against, non-white US citizens. My goal is to analyze intertextuality and the main topoi in Smith’s poetry as elements contributing to the extension of the BAM’s attempt to raise awareness and create Black self-determination and nationhood (Neal 1969). To do so, I read Smith’s work in light of contemporary thought, focusing on Judith Butler’s (2004) ideas of grievability, indefinite detention, and the hierarchies of death.

Keywords: Danez Smith, Black Arts Movement, HIV/AIDS, mass incarceration, indefinite detention

Our past is bleak. Our future dim. But I am not reasonable. A reasonable man adjusts to his environment. An unreasonable man does not. All progress, therefore, depends on the unreasonable man. I prefer not to adjust to my environment. I refuse the prison of ‘I’ and choose the open spaces of ‘we.’
Toni Morrison

STRANGE FRUIT, BLACK ROOTS

Years after the progressive dissolution of the Black Arts Movement after the 1970s, cultural production by, as well as social representation of, African Americans has continued to increase exponentially. Toni Morrison’s 1993 Nobel Prize, for instance, or the Academy Award for Barry Jenkin’s *Moonlight* (2016) as Best Picture are but the veneer of slow yet deep-rooted social progress. However, in spite of the hope held by many that Barack Obama’s presidency would bring real change for racialized citizens, his two terms from 2009 to 2017 proved unsuccessful in ensuring that equity was real for people of color. Even worse, today, white supremacy is spurred further on under Donald Trump’s administration. According to unofficial sources such as MappingPoliceViolence.org, US police killed 1,164 people in 2018, Black citizens being three times more likely to be victims of this type of violence than white citizens. To date, police brutality against Black Americans continues to materialize latent racism, thus reaffirming the importance of grassroots movements such as #BlackLivesMatter to demand real change in the United States of the 21st century.

In this context, Danez Smith’s poetry plays an essential role. The poet’s work tackles the issues of Blackness, racial discrimination, and the much-ignored persistence of HIV increasingly affecting queer African Americans long after the peak of the AIDS crisis at the end of last century. Inscribing their¹ words into the strong fabric of work by Black writers

¹ This article respects Smith’s identification with the gender-neutral pronoun “they.”

such as James Baldwin, Sojourner Truth, or bell hooks, Smith stresses the persistence of racial injustice well into the present day while also highlighting the intersectional relevance of sexuality to the experience of Black identity. With this in mind, it is my purpose here to suggest that Smith’s writing rekindles a much-needed denunciation of not only direct violence, but also cultural and structural violence against Black Americans. But how to bridge the gap between those artists in the 1960s and the poets of today? Is it reasonable to read Smith’s work—Smith being Black American indeed, but also queer and HIV positive—alongside, say, Amiri Baraka? As I will argue, Smith not only takes over, but also updates the denunciation embodied (yet far from concluded) by the Black Arts Movement. In order to establish the proposed cross-temporal connections, I will be reading Smith’s 2017 collection *Don’t Call Us Dead* in comparison with work by BAM authors and in light of Judith Butler’s notions of grievability, indefinite detention, and the hierarchies of death.

Smith has frequently linked their work to various voices of dissent who attempted to bring visibility to the gross inequality experienced by African Americans in the second half of the twentieth century. Smith’s connection with Sonia Sanchez, for instance, is evident in “strange dowry” or “poem where I be a house, hence, you live in me,” where the young poet’s exploration of domestic, more “feminine” spheres highlights the importance of a politics of mutual care. Moreover, Smith’s first collection [*insert*] *boy* (2015) resonates with Audre Lorde’s belief in the political power of sex, particularly in poems such as “craigslist hookups,” where queer sexuality is embraced religiously, or “i cast out my tongue,” where pleasure is celebrated as a transforming energy: “my mouth is busy asking / storm of flesh in front of me // I cast out my tongue like a key / strung to a kite, wait for thunder” (86). More explicitly, “dancing (in bed) with white men (with dreads),” uses Lorde’s surname to deify her in a situation of intersectional disorientation due to cultural appropriation. Having had sex with a white man with dreadlocks, the lyric I struggles to find peace: “Lorde, forgive me / for not grabbing the shears the night // I let him stay in my bed after he said race wasn’t real” (74). Most significantly, though, Smith’s work mirrors the leading figure of the Black Arts Movement, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. Juxtaposing Smith to Baraka is nearly inevitable in that not only does Smith’s Spoken Word performances ring with vitality, strength and a sensuous musicality rarely reached after Baraka’s readings, but their understanding of art as political action also reignites the spirit of the movement. Smith bursting into song during their performance of “genesissy” at the 2013 Soap Boxing Poetry Slam, for example, inevitably recalls Baraka’s reading of “Why Is We Americans” for Def Poetry Jam in 2002.

Five decades spread out between Danez Smith’s post 9/11 United States and that of the Black Arts Revolutionary Theatre/School at the heart of Harlem, yet, the parallelism is inevitable. In his heartfelt article “The Black Arts Movement,” Larry Neal (1969) famously described the many cultural expressions taking place at BART/S as the “aesthetic and spir-

itual sister” of Black Power (187). Their writing, music, painting, and plays were, Neal explains, a cultural reaction willing to “confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man’s experience in the racist West” (188). This understanding of art as an essentially political tool, I will be arguing, could not be more relevant to our reading of Smith’s work. Equally central to our interest here is Neal’s interpretation of Black Arts Movement (BAM) poetry as coming to “stand for the collective conscious and unconscious of Black America—the real impulse in back of the Black Power movement, which is the will toward self-determination and nationhood, a radical reordering of the nature and function of both art and the artist” (191).

There is a variety of reasons why Neal’s words about Black Power could perfectly refer to Smith’s poetry today, a connection that can be divided into four main points. First, there is a clear historical awareness—the “collective conscious” referred to by Neal—that pervades every single page in *Don’t Call Us Dead*. Smith’s homages to Emmet Till in “dream where every black person is standing by the ocean,” to Michael Johnson in “recklessly,” or to Tamir Rice in “every day is a funeral & a miracle,” to mention but a few, prove that the poet feels a strong connection to the African-American experience of today as much as of the past. Second, alongside such explicit references to Black history, Smith’s collection also engages in a wide variety of intensely symbolic imagery. From sea-crossing to Black Pentecostal testimony and down low culture, to gospel, blues music, and rap, each new explored context powerfully appeals to a shared “unconscious of Black America.” Third, both the dream-like utopia explored in the long poem opening *Don’t Call Us Dead*, “summer, somewhere,” and the lyric I’s “search for darker planets” in “dear white america” evidence an unquenched thirst for nationhood which I aim to expand on further down. And last, if most decisive, Smith’s illustration of HIV in its relation to racialization, and as a both external and internal force to fight against, fits perfectly into that “will toward self-determination” that Neal attributes to the BAM. This fourth point is probably the most problematic, since reading Neal’s reference to self-determination as a metaphor for freeing oneself from the constrictive nature of HIV may seem to be stretching his words beyond their original meaning. Yet, as I am about to claim, it is precisely the seropositive condition—understood as both the origin and a form of violence—that weaves the tightest bond between Smith and their predecessors.

A PROPHECY FULFILLED

Neal’s reflections on the artistic movement follow a clearly optimistic perspective, most visibly in the uplifting question he finishes his writing with: “If art is the harbinger of future possibilities, what does the future of Black America portend?” (202). More often than not, however, the take on Black life expressed by BAM writers, presented a combination of Neal’s hopeful vision with an acute awareness of their daily reality. Sadly, this duality finds its reflection in Smith’s own body of work today. As early as in the first pages of their *opera*

prima [insert] boy, Smith's lyric I wonders "How do you describe a son set / course to casket from birth?" (19), to then lament

you came out the womb
 obituary scribed on the backside
 of your birth certificate. you're nothing new
 they've seen this before. you're a rerun
 a dull flash in this earth. lightning in a ghost town (20)

Exposure to a violent death, Smith laments, is a common fate for Black Americans, frequently assumed as inevitable. It is disheartening to read such recent poetry and be faced with the persisting insignificance of Black citizens to those institutions that should protect them.

Back in the days of BART/S, though, LeRoi Jones's (1964) *Dutchman* already showcased the same unmasked racism and blatant impunity with which Black lives were ended in the U.S. In this one-act play, Clay, a young Black man, meets Lula, a playful white woman, on a New York subway train. After being teased and made fun of for most of the action, Clay's apparently naïve innocence turns into a verbal outburst which seems to respond to years of repressed anger. The white temptress then proceeds to stab the young man in front of a motionless crowd. Adding to the tension surrounding the scene, the other passengers on the train do not react until, having pulled the dying body over herself, Lula demands that the Black boy's corpse be taken off her. The normality with which the onlookers witness the murder in *Dutchman*—just as the multiple deaths in Smith's poetry—highlights the worthlessness of Black life in the eyes of far too many an American.

The third poem in *Don't Call Us Dead*, "it won't be a bullet" illustrates the same idea. Death is inevitably interwoven with the experience of Blackness in the United States: "in the catalogue of ways to kill a black boy, find me / buried between the pages stuck together / with red stick. ironic, predictable" (28). The lyric I's awareness of their disfavored situation is not in any way softened or evaded. Rather, early death is confirmed as "predictable" for Black people, and murder assumed as natural to the extent that there is even a "catalogue of ways to kill a black boy." With Foucauldian undertones, death is expressed in Smith's poetry as a quotidian fact, a procedure both surveilled and supported by the medical institution: "the doctor will explain death / & i'll go practice" (28). The speaker's foretelling intuition in "for black boys" puts it plainly: "a cold black boy body is a prophecy fulfilled. you have always been a dying thing" (20).

"ANYTHING SCARY & AFRICAN"

More than half a century separates Smith's work from Jones's, yet, to date, racialized violence and the impunity it is met with persist. What is new about Smith's poetry, though, is

their exploration of the *poz*² condition in its close connection to both death and Blackness. Regarding these two issues as explicitly approached in *Don't Call Us Dead*, one could attempt to establish a division between those poems specifically concerning racialization and those expressing the experience of HIV. In fact, on September 14, 2017, Smith explained that the collection was originally conceived as two separate books: “one that held a lot of poems written in the year following my positive HIV diagnosis and another written around the continuing narrative of state-sanctioned and home-grown violence against Black people in the USA” (Williams). To the editor’s suggestion, however, the poet decided to merge both collections into a larger project, one dealing with “many different thoughts on mortality and living” (Williams). The poems are thus not organized into chapters but instead resemble a rather chaotic amalgam of interconnected writing, a three-dimensional constellation of words that flow across images and motifs. Although some of the poems contain a majority of references to police brutality and others engage more in contagion and seroconversion, it would be completely impossible to separate *Don't Call Us Dead* into two distinct, individual volumes. Indeed, the issues of racial discrimination and serophobia overlap constantly in the volume, and they often appear as inseparable from each other.

Smith is not the first to daringly associate HIV infection to racial injustice in the United States. Back in 1993, Philip Brian Harper’s “Eloquence and Epitaph: Black Nationalism and the Homophobic Impulse in Responses to the Death of Max Robinson,” famously established connections between death and Blackness, adding AIDS to other forms of violence against African Americans:

Somehow the enormity of the morbidity and mortality rates for black men (like that for gay men of whatever racial identity) doesn't seem to register in the national consciousness as a cause for great concern. This is, no doubt, largely due to a general sense that the trajectory of the average African-American man's life must 'naturally' be rather short, routinely subject to violent termination. (117)

Alonso and Koreck (1993), too, pointed out this disproportionate amount of non-white victims of HIV/AIDS in “Silences: ‘Hispanics,’ AIDS, and Sexual Practices.” And even within the literary domain of poetry, Smith also pays homage to a path taken by Essex Hemphill’s (1992) spearheading *Ceremonies*, and Jericho Brown’s (2014) more contemporary *The New Testament*. Yet, despite the historical relevance of these writers—which Smith honors and explicitly acknowledges—the craftsmanship in Smith’s verse is unrivalled in its unrestrained political content.

In Smith, the connection between a particular racialized position and HIV contagion is so present that even before the poet’s own seroconversion, the possibility of contracting the illness is already expressed as an unavoidable fate for a queer, Black man. So much so that this awareness is already articulated in *[insert] boy*, where HIV is not yet a central

² The poet frequently uses this abbreviation over the more medical term “seropositive.” This linguistic decision has the twofold effect of both focusing on the “positive” side of the condition, and depathologizing those living with HIV. In order to avoid excessive repetition, both terms appear in this text indiscriminately.

issue. In “10 rentboy commandments or then the white guy calls you a nigger,” for example, the speaker, a Black sex worker, notes how a white client thinks of them “as a lion or AIDS / or anything scary & African” (56). Social prejudice against Blackness is indeed a key element influencing the lyric I’s own self-perception. Moreover, Smith’s inclusion of prostitution and class inequality add to racism and serophobia in the poem to exemplify a model case of intersectionality. Further on in the poem, this complexity is even intensified:

he still called you a nigger
but so what? You still gonna get paid.
(*respect or groceries?*) you still gonna answer
next time he call. (*this is money.*) you still
broke? Still piss (on him) poor? you got clothes
on your back, brandy in your coffee mug.
(*drink.*) is it worth it to stop this history
if you ain’t gonna eat? (56)

Great difficulty is faced when attempting to fragment neatly a position in society in which manifold tangents of identity intersect and overlap. This initial “tension”—to use Smith’s own word regarding [*insert*] boy in their interview with González on December 25, 2018—between the intertwining identitarian layers, sections, or “communities” represented in the first collection is further explored in *Don’t Call Us Dead*, where seropositivity is confirmed: “Is there a word for the feeling prey / feel when the teeth finally sink / after years of waiting?” (63) However expected it may have been, an HIV-positive diagnosis comes as a new burden to bear.

“THE DIAGNOSIS IS JUDGEMENT ENOUGH”

As I have mentioned above, while it might seem historically anachronistic, it is precisely through Smith’s inclusion of HIV as a central *topos* to their work, that the distance separating their poetry from previous writing in and around the BAM can be bridged.³ It is true that the first diagnoses at the onset of the epidemiological crisis were made public in 1982, years after the early dissolution of BART/S. However, *Don’t Call Us Dead* succeeds in breaking historical barriers. In the collection, HIV is many times referred to as a form of imprisonment, and it is in this sense that the experience of discriminatory incarceration imbuing voices such as Jones/Baraka, Angela Davis, Eldridge Cleaver, or Malcolm X’s is present in Smith’s verse. Even decades after what has come to be known as the era of mass incarceration, the poet repeatedly alludes to the harrowing experience of inhabiting a body helplessly perceived not as a sheltering haven, but rather as a constricting prison.

³ The issue of homophobia within the movement could definitely be held as a counterargument against the connection I attempt to establish here, especially when considering key figures in Black Power such as Eldridge Cleaver. However, the incorporation of sexuality and non-normative sexual experiences by “second generation” BAM writers I have mentioned above such as hooks or Lorde debunks the idea. For a general consideration of homophobia in African American writing, see Charles Nero’s (2014) “The Souls of Black Gay Folk.” For a more specific account of the matter, concerning Jones’s plays in particular, refer to José Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) queer reading of the author in the fifth chapter of *Cruising Utopia*, titled “Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity” (83-96).

References to imprisonment pervade Smith's "recklessly" in a compelling exploration of guilt, mourning, and a recently discovered perspective on the self. In the first section of the poem, a luminous collage of Black music culture, the speaker expresses a state of complete shock. The HIV-positive diagnosis generates a flood of images and ideas producing a disorienting effect:

the bloodprison leads to prison
jail doubles as quarantine
chest to chest, men are silent
you're under arrest, under a spell
are you on treatment? PrEP? (wats dat?)
venom:sin:snake:cocksize
I got the cellblock blues
the diagnosis is judgment enough
...
i got the cell count blues
inside a cell: a man/inside his cells: a man
can you keep a secret?
a history of blood: from sacrament to sentence
the red the white the blue of my veins (41)

Engaging in dialog with references ranging from Langston Hughes's "Weary Blues" to R&B music by Beyoncé, the poet uses a number of wordplays and metaphors to convey the prison-like character of the *poz* body. For instance, the word "cell" is in this fragment used as a dilogy, being interpretable either as prison units, or as T lymphocytes—also known as "T-cells," the deficiency of which is caused by HIV, and the number of which must therefore be counted to check patients' health status. The same term is also used to express the peculiar alteration in the perception of physical limits or intersubjective connection: "inside a cell: a man/inside his cells: a man" (41). Smith generates a Russian-doll effect, an almost pictorial feeling of continuity deceiving conventional logic, as in one of Escher's maze-like drawings.

After various stages of initial bewilderment, however, the fifth section of the poem stumbles towards acceptance in an active exercise of self-forgiveness and atonement:

it's not a death sentence anymore
it's not death anymore
it's more
it's a sentence
a sentence (45)

Striving for inner peace, Smith's efforts to relativize the effects of illness closely resemble prayer. It is almost a mantra, quietly uttered to assimilate HIV, a hopeful attempt to deconstruct the condition and turn it into mere linguistic signs on a page. The lyric I struggles to reassure themselves that being HIV-positive does not necessarily imply developing AIDS, that it is now possible to live with HIV. The obtained result is nevertheless not entirely trustworthy.

It is true that thanks to medical advances HIV may not entail a necessarily painful, unavoidable death, but the ability to face seroconversion depends greatly on the geopolitical situation of the patient.⁴ From his racialized, working-class background, treatment affordability continues to be an unspoken, socially-unquestioned barrier, yet Smith's speaker valiantly resists defeat. They refuse to cast a blind eye on the political interests in not dealing with the persisting issue of HIV in the US. Even if it may not be a "death sentence anymore," society has still not truly changed its perception of the disease, and this Smith must denounce. The death sentence that the poet tries to dismantle seems to mutate in uncontrollable ways, even under their cropping will. Uttering the "sentence" may no longer signify legal punishment, yet the author knows perfectly well that it entails social stigma. Does the last line in the poem, then, refer to the fact that HIV diagnosis can be reduced to a mere utterance? Or is the speaker defeated in that HIV might not necessarily involve legal punishment but still engages a public form of imprisonment?

On a different note, it is also interesting to read Smith's verse in light of Tim Dean's (2008) highly controversial article "Breeding Culture," where he attempts to engage in an optimistic viewpoint on HIV. Dean daringly envisions the condition as having the potential to connect seropositive bodies to one another in a community-like network he names "blood brotherhood." Unsurprisingly, Smith's lines do not fail to convey such unexpected interconnectedness:

i hate my husband
 he left we with child

i cut his awful seed out of me
 but it always grows back (51)

However, while Smith's poetry does sometimes ring with notes similar to Dean's utopian perspective, it evidently shows that the punitive character of a socially stigmatized illness is stronger than any bond, imposing isolation—if not death—on the *poz* body.

After attempting to come to terms with the "death sentence" of HIV in "recklessly," the lyric I in "it began right here" accepts their fate: "they say it's not a death sentence // like it used to be. but it's still life. i will die in this bloodcell. / i'm learning to be all the space I need" (55). Were that to be true, though, could HIV still be some other form of penalty, maybe an even more terrible one?

THE PRISON OF 'I'

As Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* did in the 20th century, Smith's poetry presents the frequent practice of unfair incarceration of Black people in the US. In Baldwin's novel, father-to-be Fonny is falsely accused of rape, arrested and jailed before trial, thus being forced to leave Tish go through pregnancy without him. Smith's verse, on the other hand, rather

⁴ On this particular aspect of living with HIV, see Joshua Pocius's (2016) "Of Bodies, Borders, and Barebacking: The Geocorpographies of HIV."

than present a similar, updated case, reconceives the whole penitentiary system. Besides the added element of a disease as both cause and effect of imprisonment, what strikes the contemporary reader about Smith's work, is the fact that, as opposed to their predecessors' fierce claim to innocence, the lyric I hesitates to set themselves free of guilt. Rather, Smith illustrates how the HIV+ subject is made to feel responsible for their own health status. Building up on the moral approach to the disease, which insists on seeing it as a punishment for one's own reckless behavior,⁵ the HIV positive are made to assume the consequences of their "sin." Just as Baldwin presented his readers with innocent men taken to jail for crimes they had not committed, Smith suggests a type of inward incarceration for the seropositive. Not only responsible for their acts, those infected with HIV also pose a threat to others. This is plain in the self-annihilating observation taking place in the outstanding sonnet corona "crown:"

my blood a river named medusa. every man
i touch turns into a monument. i put
flowers at their feet, their terrible stone feet.
they grow wings, stone wings, & crumble. (57)

That is what Smith means by "the diagnosis is judgment enough," that the religious discourse preserved within the generalized perspective on the epidemic leads its victims to shame and self-repression under in the name of public wellbeing and healthcare. In the 21st century, Smith seems to point out, the penitentiary mechanism works differently from the 60s. Back then, suspects were falsely accused of crimes, then jailed without a trial. Today, HIV is a self-imposed type of penalty: it is the victims themselves that created a conception of their bodies likening them to jail cells.

In *Topologie der Gewalt*, Byung-Chul Han (2016) notes that in contemporary Western societies, violence, rather than having disappeared, has been internalized. Long gone are the days of "obedience societies" where an almighty ruler would impose his will on his subjects. Today, Han explains, ours is an "achievement society" in which explicit violence is no longer necessary to implement social control. Following the models of success blasted on the media, propelled by the ideal of self-sufficiency promoted in the American Dream, and guided by magical voluntarism, achievement-subjects do not need a master to actively impose punishment upon them. For it is the subdued who set themselves slave-like conditions in order to climb the ladder. Hegelian dynamics consequently persist in formerly unsuspected, subtler forms. Hence the philosopher's remark that the achievement-subject's "paradoxical freedom turns them into both victim and butcher, both master and slave" (193). While Han's arguments are at times overgeneralizing about a deceptively homogeneous Global North—factors such as race, gender and other minoritizing aspects do not enter his analysis—his dialectic metaphors do illustrate an expanding symptom and, in our

⁵ See Leo Bersani's *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (2010).

case, serve to explain a phenomenon revealed in Smith’s poetry. The discriminatory mechanisms theorized by Han often materialize in the social contours depicted by Smith, resulting in the inescapable feeling of guilt pervading *Don’t Call Us Dead*.

In contemporary U.S. society, Smith shows, seropositive individuals are made to assume responsibility for what is seen as their own self-destruction. In “litany with blood all over,” too, guilt is expressed as one’s own creation:

the test results say i am the father
of my own end

& i am

a deadbeat (49)

The link between specific segments of society and HIV transmission certainly proves useful to turn whole communities into victims of racist, homophobic discrimination. And what better way to refuse social or institutional help than attributing responsibility to the affected?

It may very well be that HIV does not necessarily imply death in a strictly literal sense anymore—as long as the needed medical assistance is provided, of course. However, *Don’t Call Us Dead* evinces a terrible truth: that of excessive self-consciousness resulting in self-restriction around sexual intercourse. While the subject in Smith’s work is not physically imprisoned, a feeling only comparable to incarceration is constantly referred to. But when can self-imposed imprisonment end? In this regard, Smith’s situation presents a form of self-imposed “indefinite detention,” in terms coined by Judith Butler (2004) in *Precarious Life*. Taking the case of Guantanamo prisoners as an example, Butler argues that certain subjects occupy a social position that goes against the will of power. These persons’ lives are understood as undesirable, so they are kept away from their right to liberty. Locked up in jail indefinitely, without a prospect to be unchained anytime soon, the victims lose all hope of “livability.” Taking the reader back to the ideas presented in “recklessly,” Smith’s lyric I in “it began right here” states the awareness of such a cruel fate: “they say it’s not a death sentence // like it used to be. but it’s still life. i will die in this bloodcell. / i’m learning to be all the space i need” (55). Smith’s lines present inevitable analogies with Butler’s notion of indefinite detention. “To be detained indefinitely,” Butler explains, “is precisely to have no definitive prospect for a reentry into the political fabric of life, even as one’s situation is highly, if not fatally, politicized” (68).

By losing their livability, then, the seropositive lose any form of agency, as possibilities of social involvement are nullified. Self-imposed detention as expressed by Smith thus illustrates how an HIV+ subject becomes a no-subject. Significantly, Smith’s lyric I is both the master and the victim of their own judgment, so that there is no prospect of ever leaving their own “bloodcell.” As a racialized outlaw, the *poz* self must submit themselves to indefinite detention. Briefly yet eloquently, Smith expressed Butler’s paradoxically politicized state of being unable to access “the political fabric of life” when, in the aforementioned

interview with Williams, the poet denounced that “we internalize the justice system.” Once the body has become a “bloodprison,” once “justice” has become part of oneself, little hope is left. By means of the developed penitentiary imagery, and strengthening the link between prison and the police as agents of serophobic violence, Smith again wonders:

now, what
to do with my internal
inverse, just how
will i survive the little
cops running inside
my veins, hunting
white blood cells &
bang bang
i'm dead (65)

Such a notion as internalized police agents must inevitably take us back to the days of BART/S when, as William J. Maxwell (2015) explains in *F.B. Eyes*, the FBI monitored BAM lectures, meetings and publications. Under Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency, J. Edgar Hoover ensured environments liable to instigate political movements continued to be strongly surveilled. In the 21st century, Smith testifies to the fact that invigilation has been perfected to the point of it being skillfully integrated within the self. The inclusion of police agents “running inside” Smith’s lyric I’s veins both recovers and updates the condemnation of deliberate racial discrimination carried out by BAM writers. However, discrimination is now intensified by the assumption of twofold responsibility by HIV+ subjects, since seropositivity implies an obvious danger to the self and it is also depicted as a potential threat to the general public. HIV is seen as a both inward and outward threat. No wonder, then, that the police—and, by extension, the penitentiary system—intrude into the HIV-positive, working from within the victim’s veins. As repressive forces are integrated within one’s own system, the act of surveillance is both embodied and performed by the very victims of the epidemic. Repression and control are thus interiorized by the seropositive. As Han rightly argues, achievement societies such as the United States produce subjects who inevitably become both victim and butcher. Indeed, *Don’t Call Us Dead* showcases the invisible workings through which the dominant discourse turns the HIV-positive subject into a living—dare I say dying?—panopticon.

“THEY SENT A BOY WHEN THE BULLET MISSED”

Having fully experienced their position as a Black, queer person in contemporary US society, Smith’s speaker, too, grows more and more critical. *Don’t Call Us Dead* conveys a sharp awareness that aggressions against the position it speaks for, despite their increasingly disguised and subterraneous ways, are the result of the current system of oppression. Smith’s reader is thus faced with the fact that, as Doug Meyer (2015) laments in *Violence Against Queer People*, violence “comes with the job” of being Black and gay in America (54). It comes as no surprise, then, that the lyric I in Smith’s work asks themselves whether HIV might

actually be inflicted not only deliberately, but also with full support from the state’s institutional power. Adding their work to a seemingly never-ending list of voices demanding justice for US citizens of color, Smith reminds us that HIV is still used, even today, as a weapon against the non-normative:

i got this problem: i was born
black & faggoty
they sent a boy
when the bullet missed. (66)

Having been through innumerable situations of pain, the speaker concludes that the violence suffered for being Black on the one hand and HIV-positive on the other must be linked:

do i think someone created AIDS?
maybe. i don’t doubt that
anything is possible in a place
where you can burn a body
with less outrage than a flag (65)

How far removed is Smith’s complaint from the Black Power posters literally depicting policemen as pigs inflicting merciless violence on Black civilians? The connection established between patriotic iconography and violence in Smith’s “every day is a funeral & a miracle” is significant in how criminal justice in the United States is linked to HIV. Growing to understand this issue as institutionalized violence against the non-normative, the speaker comes to realize his own country is in fact not interested in helping. Further down in the poem, the speaker juxtaposes victims of police brutality—Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, John Crawford—to their own body’s organs—liver, kidneys, lungs—in a same, fatal list to then realize: “some of us are killed / in pieces, some of us all at once” (65). The lyric I is thus depicted as yet another drop of water in an ocean of murderous crimes. And it is this conception of the self as a part of a larger reality that makes Smith’s work speak for so many. In “it won’t be a bullet,” the singular subject undergoes an unexpected transformation into a plural:

i’m not the kind of black man who dies on the news.
i’m the kind who grows thinner & thinner & thinner
until light outweighs us, & we become it, family
gathered around my barely body telling me to go
toward myself. (28)

The singular subject is suddenly developed into the plural forms “us” and “we”. The *poz* body grows so dangerously emaciated that, indeed, his individuality disappears, joining a community of those affected by violence as is the speaker in *Don’t Call Us Dead*. In “I’ve Got a Testimony” (2016), McKinley E. Melton marks how the works of both James Baldwin and Danez Smith “collectively give voice to their humanity, while simultaneously confirming the reality of their communities, in all of their nuanced complexity, with their trials and triumphs, beauty and flaws” (23). Indeed, kinship and community-making play a crucial

role in political struggles. Just as members of the Black Power movement believed in the impact of traditional fictive kinship terms “brother” and “sister” to strengthen bonds among Black Americans, Smith’s poetry leads the reader from the individual to the communal, from “I” to “we.”

THE OPEN SPACES OF “WE”

As we have already seen, the poet’s work carries on not only the BAM’s radical art, but also a tradition of Black critical thinkers questioning their belonging in US society. Thinking about the lives of other HIV+ Black men as Hemphill or Saints, Smith commented in an interview with Kate Kellaway for *The Guardian* on March 21, 2018,

I think about them all the time. They were gay, black and passed away in the 90s. They had such a clear vision about what it meant to survive with this disease. I want to sit with them and ask what their perfect world would be. I want to know what they think of this current moment.

Moments of acknowledgment to precedents are indeed perfectly explicit in *[insert] boy* as much as in *Don’t Call Us Dead*, where James Baldwin and Audre Lorde are quoted alongside John Singleton and Drake. In terms of content, Smith’s powerful “dear white america” is somewhere in between Langston Hughes’s “Let America Be America Again” and Amiri Baraka’s “Why Is We Americans.” However, while Smith’s piece does not aim to recover what Hughes perceived as the original, all-englobing freedom in the America of Whitman’s pioneers, neither does it demand compensation for the damages suffered, as Baraka’s poem fiercely claims. Instead, Smith’s is a direct acknowledgement of the reality of African American experience, past and present: “we did not build your boats (though we did leave a train of kin to guide us home). we did not build your prisons (though we did & we fill them too). We did not ask to be part of your America (though are we not America? Her joints brittle & dragging a ripped gown through Oakland?)” (25). Rather than complain, then, Smith’s poem creates a utopian space in “darker planets” where Blackness can be lived fully: “i’ve left Earth to find a place where my kin can be safe, where black people ain’t but people the same color as the good, wet earth.” Once in this new Promised Land, the speaker makes sure to claim

this life, this new story & history you cannot steal or sell or cast overboard or hand or beat or drown or own or redline or shackle or silence or cheat or choke or cover up or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or ruin this, if only this one, is ours.

Climaxing the final polysyndeton, the alternation of jailing and shooting again takes us to the deadly state of indefinite detention referred to above. Most significant, though, is the urge to claim this new experience as “ours,” which indicates that “will toward self-determination” that Neal recognized and found hope in within the Black Arts Movement. This connection to BAM as described by Neal is also true of Smith’s “summer, somewhere,” which invokes a new, dreamlike, inhabitable space:

here, not earth
nor heaven, we can't recall our white shirts

turned ruby gowns. here, there's no language
for *officer* or *law*, no color to call *white*.

if snow fell, it's fall black. please, don't call
us dead, call us alive someplace better. (3)

Concluding the first section of the opening poem in the collection, Smith's words certainly ring with that Nealian dream of a shared “nationhood.” Regrettably, reality differs from the utopian aspirations in Smith's work. Often, the collection presents pain beyond measure, even reaching the point of considering suicide. Devastatingly, Smith's lyric I remembers: “America might kill me before I get the chance. /my blood is in cahoots with the law” (66).

Aware of the importance of media as an institutionalized expression of power in the United States, Smith's aforementioned claim “i am not the kind of black man that dies on the news” (28) exemplifies Meyer's statement on selective media coverage. As Meyer declares, “stigmatized aspects of LGBT people such as being HIV-positive are frequently hidden from public view, while normative aspects such as being white, male, and middle class become part of the representation” (6). Whereas representation of HIV in the media is not an issue I aim to approach in this paper, it should be noted that Smith's line highlights the persistence of a terribly unjust situation. Back in 1987 Simon Watney's now canonical work *Policing Desire* denounced that “what we read [in the media] is a literature of containment, endlessly policing human sexuality, as if the powers of the police themselves were insufficient to contain the dangers of deviance, henceforth to be branded indelibly with the ideological skull-and-crossbones sign of Aids” (12). More than thirty years after the publication of Watney's insightful text, Smith's poetry plays an updating twist on Watney's idea. It is not so much that “the powers of the police” are “insufficient” to contain AIDS—or its currently prevalent previous stage: HIV. It is, rather, that the United States has used the pandemic as a substitution for a part of the interventions formerly carried out by the police. As George Ayala and Patrick “Pato” Hebert (2012) protest in “The Soul of Our Work,” “it is not a coincidence that HIV in the States is hitting hardest with black gay men and Latino gay men” (131).

“PLAGUE AND GENOCIDE”

This intricate, racializing connection is presented most blatantly in *Don't Call Us Dead*. As “1 in 2” reminds us, data estimates that “1 in 2 black men who have sex with men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime” (61). Smith's verse has the courage and the skill to beautifully sum it up in one painful line: “*plague* and *genocide* meet on a line in my body” (63). While the biblical reference to a plague refers to guilt in the seropositive subject, the added notion of genocide adds the idea of being a victim of a perfectly conscious mass massacre, thus making a clear accusation against the US. The concepts of genocide and

plague, Smith shows, are not contradictory. In fact, they “meet on a line” in the speaker’s body. *Don’t Call Us Dead* thus documents a struggle against guilt by making a bold accusation: that HIV/AIDS was not a crisis. It was, and still is, a genocide.

On this note, Smith’s significant reference to HIV as a “genocide” takes us to Ann Cvetkovich’s (2003) spearheading work *An Archive of Feelings*, where she insists on the need to re-examine the idea of trauma and conceptualizes it in relation to everyday experiences of race, gender, sexuality and AIDS. Taking Blackness as an example, Cvetkovich’s proposed revision of the notion of trauma allows for a broader use of the term to refer to subtler, if equally devastating, situations of the non-normative:

Whether the language of trauma is used or not, the project of investigating racial histories needs to be part of an interdisciplinary trauma studies. Everyday forms of racism, many of which are institutional or causal and thus don’t always appear visible except to those who are attuned to them, are among the effects of longer histories of racial trauma. (6)

Yet even more illuminating to Smith’s work is Cvetkovich’s statement when she reflects that “trauma histories are frequently taken up as national urgencies, histories that must be remembered and resolved in order for the nation to survive a crisis or sustain its integrity” (36). In contrast with this need, she protests that, just as any major event claiming the lives of thousands of citizens, AIDS should be treated as a national issue. In her own words: “AIDS has thus achieved the status of what I call national trauma, standing alongside the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, World War I, and other nation-and world-defining events as having a profound impact on history and politics” (160). Smith’s work is crystal-clear proof that the AIDS crisis, not to mention the current state of HIV, has not yet been understood as a trauma in mainstream, heteronormative US culture. It has never been seen as an urgent, nor national issue.

Just as crime was generally taken as an excuse for incarceration in the times of the Black Arts Movement, it may very well be, Smith illustrates, that institutionalized power now manipulates and brandishes HIV as a crime in itself in order to continue its systematic oppression of certain sectors in society. The state could be dealing with unwanted minoritized subjectivities, Smith warns the reader, through the systematic spread—or the equally harmful lack of prevention—of HIV/AIDS. Smith’s claim does not follow an impression. After firing the president’s HIV advisory council, in February 2018 the Trump administration proposed budget cuts of \$800 million to HIV/AIDS programs. What to make of this when 73% of those living with HIV in the United States contracted it in same-sex intercourse? When three quarters are non-white people?⁶ When a disproportionately large portion of HIV patients depend on such an increasingly neglected public healthcare system as Medicare? Apparently, under President Trump’s tenure, not even future victims of HIV are a concern.

6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. 2017 Statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/overview/ataglance.html>

Smith's voice is essential in so far as it testifies to the fact that, long after Susan Sontag's (1998) *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, serophobia continues to propagate and to affect a large and suspiciously segmented portion of US citizens. Besides the multiple accusatory suggestions in their poetry, Smith themselves has also made public declarations regarding this issue. In their interview with Kellaway, the poet was not shy to point fingers when they stated: "I hope Trump will move poets who have long thought of poems as apolitical to reconsider."

Immersed in the 21st century, Smith's blues boldly accuses US force and penitentiary institutions of the disproportionate repression of racialized bodies. What can easily be deduced from the timeliness of their voices throughout decades in recent history is a confirmation of Butler's daring statement that a "hierarchy of grief" is taking place in the United States. Following on from her notion of livability as explained above, the philosopher condemns that in her country "certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war, while other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable'" (32). If a life is not livable, rarely will it be seen as grievable, and vice-versa. James Baldwin's narrative depicted how insignificant African Americans were to institutionalized power during the second half of the 20th century. Danez Smith's poetry illustrates that, today, racialized Americans continue to occupy non-grievable—and, by extension, non-livable—positions in contemporary society. Critical writing examining the connection between Blackness and discrimination has certainly existed for a long time. Yet, time after time, such criticism sadly continues to prove necessary.

WHO COULD WE BE?

Despite the apparent disconnection of HIV/AIDS from the cause fought for by different artists included in and working around the Black Arts Movement, Danez Smith's poetry comes to show that it is precisely the disease that can allow such a cross-temporal link. Smith's expression of HIV as a form of imprisonment within one's own body is in direct dialog with the experience of negritude as a cause for incarceration developed by their precedents as a response to the disproportionate amount of racialized US citizens affected by mass incarceration. What differs from the earlier examples of this type of discrimination, though, is the fact that violence has successfully been invisibilized in the 21st century. These days, *poz* subjects—the majority of whom are racialized in the US—are taken as rebelliously nonconforming and, thus, made to assume responsibility for their condition through self-imposed, indefinite detention.

Exploring this new form of incarceration, Smith's verse in *Don't Call Us Dead* attempts to fight the sentence imposed on the seropositive which denies them their right to a livable life. Bridging the gap between minoritized communities, Smith demands recognition. Yet, "to ask for recognition," Butler argues, "or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for

recognition for what one already is” (44). Rather, “it is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other.” So who is that “Other?” And who is that “us” Smith wants readers to recognize, to give life back to in *Don’t Call Us Dead*? It is many people in one group, many groups in one word. It is the collective consciousness Black Arts Movement writers had dreamed of, it is their envisaged self-determination, their longed for nationhood. And still, that expansive “us” unites the body in the poems to that of diverse communities, too. Queerness, Blackness, as well as seropositivity, all play a role and unite the lyric I to a larger network. Stemming from a line in “summer, somewhere,” the title to Smith’s collection manages to project an individual experience onto a broader stage. The pluralized pronoun enables a necessary claim of non-exclusiveness. As in the Black Arts Movement, a community politics is praised and envisioned as an ark of salvation, as the North Star to orient those who refuse to be lost.

In a beautifully nostalgic conversation with Peter Mishler on September 27, 2017, Smith refused to remain stuck in the past, or even in the present. Envisioning a promising world of possibilities ahead, the poet reflected, “[w]hen I am building a world in a poem, I think ‘Who could we be? What must I leave recognizable so we can see ourselves here and where do I have room to play?’” And it is precisely that wide realm of possibilities that gives Smith’s verse the room for a hope to go along with the pain. Repressive forces in the US might seclude *poz* subjects into a life-long sentence, yet, across space, through cell bars, the poet gives voice to a community of millions. Danez Smith’s collection is a desperate call to recognize a silent plurality, but it is also a rightful claim to life, a call to self-determination, an appeal to community-making, to re-gain nationhood. Out of Smith’s pages a mighty roar refuses to go unheard: Don’t call us dead!

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