Policing, Politicizing, Poeticizing the Virgin/Whore Split: Contemporary American Women's Poetry about AIDS

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Abstract:
This article looks at four women poets: Lesléa Newman, Marie Howe, Tory Dent and River Huston and the impact their work has had on the literary, poetic construction of HIV/AIDS. Implicit in their poetry and their activism is a constant wrestling with their own subject position in relationship to HIV/AIDS.

1 In her groundbreaking 1978 essay "Illness as Metaphor," Susan Sontag argues that the language of disease is particularly damning for patients. She writes, "Any disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious [. . .]. Contact with someone afflicted with a disease regarded as a mysterious malevolency inevitably feels like a trespass; worse, like the violation of a taboo" (6). Diagnosis, all too often in medical history, has been the proxy of blame. While illness, stigma, and social exclusion are not new to HIV/AIDS, the social stigmas associated with HIV transmission have created a new iteration of blame and reward that is particularly gendered.

2 Inherent in the treatment of women within the history of HIV/AIDS is a history as old as Lilith and Eve. I would like to posit two cultural conceptions of "woman" which inform the reaction to women in the AIDS community: the "virgin/whore" split, the cultural constructions of La Virgen de Guadelupe and La Malinche.[1] Or, to put it another way: the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. This dichotomy is a convenient social construction that reinforces women's social positions. Women who tend to those who fall ill are romanticized as philanthropic and noble; women who fall ill are social pariahs deserving of their illness because they have transgressed social boundaries. Despite their intentions and their subject matter, even twenty-five years into the pandemic, both of these constructions are important to the women poets of AIDS.

3 In the first decade of HIV/AIDS, women were virtually invisible except in care-taking roles. Playing into some of the oldest stereotypes for women, these care-takers represent the "good girls" who seek to help the unfortunate. They were present, but voiceless, in a pandemic in which they participated. Women positive for HIV were almost never mentioned.

[1] The archetype of the virgin/whore split is abundant in literature. One particularly useful discussion and explanation of it is in Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands/La Frontera. See especially pages 16-18 and 28-34 (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

Katie Hogan and Nancy L. Roth comment in the introduction to their 1998 anthology, Gendered Epidemic, "An explosion of what theorist Cindy Patton calls a 'new visibility of 'woman' in discussions of HIV infection has occurred in the last five years" (xiv). "[T]his new visibility of 'woman,'" however, Hogan and Roth continue, "no matter how crucial, hard won, and necessary cannot explain the deeply entrenched historical silences and gendered distortions that characterized the first decade of the HIV pandemic, and that often continue to structure HIV/AIDS prevention efforts targeted toward women and representations of women and HIV/AIDS" (xiv).

4 According to Cindy Patton, the many white, straight, middle-class women serving as caregivers represent the Reagan/Bush years, during which charities began to fulfill services previously that were the purview of the government (Inventing AIDS). At the same time gay men were blamed for their illness at the beginning of the pandemic, women who sought to help them were culturally rewarded for their philanthropy.[2] They are blameless and honored for their work with the "unfortunates" of society. Yet their philanthropy often contributed to an extension of stereotypes and cultural roles rather than interrupted the dominant social paradigms to work for social change. As Cindy Patton explains, the arrival of this group of women represented a move within the AIDS community from activism to charity. The "good girls" of charity are culturally positioned in opposition to the "bad girls" living with HIV.

5 Culture's insistence on prescribed gender roles, however, has perpetuated the stigma of AIDS even more significantly for positive women than for women caregivers. Poet River Huston and photographer Mary Berridge transcribed oral histories of women positive for HIV in A Positive Life: Portraits of Women Living with HIV and took photographs of the women's family lives. Their stories emphasize the AIDS generation's virgin/whore split. Culturally, to test positive for HIV means that a woman has either defied cultural conventions by sleeping with too many men or is an "innocent" victim on whom such a horrible atrocity has been inflicted. Karri Stokely, who tested positive in 1996, explains: "People decide if you're worthy of empathy depending on how you were infected. It's really judgmental. Like you deserve it if you slept with 50 men, but you're an innocent if it was only one. People have turned it into a moral issue" (Positive 44). Society judges a woman positive for HIV on several levels: first, did she "deserve" to "get" it? And secondly, if the woman positive for HIV is a mother, there is a second, more compelling judgment: did she willingly abandon her child through her

[2] In Inventing AIDS (New York: Routledge, 1990), Patton outlines the need for activism versus charity. She writes, "AIDS activists — many of whom had themselves received an AIDS/ARC diagnosis — worked with gay and heterosexual PLWAs in the context of community organizing rather than altruism, and understood their work in terms of political resistance rather than compassion" (21).

reckless behavior? While questions of blame are not specific to women (early HIV/AIDS literature is full of examples of social ostracism and blame for those living in the gay community), the inclusion of women's voices chronicling their HIV/AIDS experiences has added to our understanding of the stigma of HIV/AIDS.

6 Here, I will look at four women poets: Lesléa Newman, Marie Howe, Tory Dent and River Huston and the impact their work has had on the literary, poetic construction of HIV/AIDS.[3] Implicit in their poetry and their activism is a constant wrestling with their own subject position in relationship to HIV/AIDS.

7 The book-length works of Lesléa Newman and Marie Howe, published between 1995 and 1998, speak to the virgin/whore dichotomy as they redefine the elegy describing the AIDS pandemic as women caregivers. Writing as the "good girls" of AIDS, as friend and sister, respectively, these care-givers are left to witness to HIV/AIDS in a different way than the gay male community. Close enough to HIV/AIDS to know the social stigma, to have maintained a constant vigil at the deathbed, they are also always outsiders to HIV/AIDS, living in the seronegative world. Newman and Howe thus write from a particular moment of privilege in the HIV/AIDS pandemic. They are certainly affected by HIV/AIDS through their own losses and by their continued interactions within the HIV/AIDS community, but they are at a different distance than others in the HIV/AIDS community. As women, differently than their gay male counterparts, they don't see themselves as at risk for HIV/AIDS. Instead, because of the early ignorance around transmission — something that changed radically with a better understanding of the virus — AIDS was something that happened to people they loved. The grief inherent in their work differs from the grief-stricken and terrorized subtext of gay writers like Paul Monette and Mark Doty — my lover, then me?

8 What characterizes this poetry, and much early HIV/AIDS poetry in general, is the framing of a life. Howe and Newman are left behind with the responsibility for framing and defining the life and loss of the person they loved. Their books — much like other early collections such as Ron Schreiber's John or Paul Monette's *18 Elegies for Rog*-document the earliest HIV/AIDS era in the United States, but they do more than simply eulogize. In *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin posits that "a chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (254). While the

[3] This article focuses on four poets. Some other U.S. women poets writing significantly about HIV/AIDS include: Rachel Hadas, Sonia Sanchez, Joan Logghe, Belle Waring, Joan Larkin, Marilyn Hacker, Jean Valentine and Charlotte Mayerson. Michael Klein's *Poets for Life* (New York: Persea Books, 1989) and the sequel, *Things Shaped in Passing* (with Richard McCann. New York: Persea, 1997), are good places to begin to explore the wide range of HIV/AIDS authorship in the U.S.

seronegative caregivers are immediately removed from the situation of HIV/AIDS, their nevertheless intimate contact and participation in the HIV/AIDS community serves to establish a different kind of gendered witness to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Their role, as caregivers and as poets, is to act as a translator for HIV/AIDS. Living in the seronegative world, these poets understand and take in HIV/AIDS at a distance.

9 Accordingly, they can relate to those in society who are also negative for HIV and believe they are in no way at risk for the virus. However, the caregiver — here, Howe and Newman — also stands in proximity to HIV/AIDS, understanding the course of the illness and the social stigma arising from it. They are able to chronicle HIV/AIDS outside of one person's lived experiences and posit HIV/AIDS in a world that extends beyond the life of a loved one. Walter Benjamin believes the task of the translator is "finding the intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" (76). He differentiates between translation and poetry through language: the language (linguistics) is the aim of the poet while effect is the goal of the translator. For the poetry of HIV/AIDS, however, caregivers are mid-way between these two juxtapositions. They first translate HIV/AIDS for the community-at-large, which believes that it has no direct connection to the HIV/AIDS community. As poets, they seek to affect their readers and provide a translation of the experience of HIV/AIDS through language.

10 Ironically, then, while Newman and Howe are perceived socially as "virgins" in contrast to the women positive for HIV, by their very subject position they are immersed in the world of HIV/AIDS. They are removed from their subject matter by the distance of direct experience, but they are also closer to their subject matter than those outside of the HIV/AIDS community. Their translation becomes the easiest entrée into the world of HIV/AIDS for the outside world. How much more palatable is the book of a woman care-giver than the book penned with the righteous anger of a gay man mourning to devastating losses in his community? Their position as translators gives them an incredible power for social change as they add their voices to the HIV/AIDS community because they are able to speak to the "outside" community.

11 These writers also wrestle with a grief, perhaps guilt, of living, something that characterizes the virgins/good girls of HIV/AIDS. The witnesses to HIV/AIDS, here the caregivers, continue life. That continuance, however, is yoked to HIV/AIDS everyday. The survivors ask the pressing questions of who dies from HIV/AIDS and why? They explore social inequalities of class, race, gender, and sexual preference, seeking to demonstrate the way in which these inequalities continue to affect access to HIV/AIDS services. The task of

the caregivers is to find meaning from HIV/AIDS and recreate HIV/AIDS, lest the dead be forgotten and history rewritten.

13 Lesléa Newman is the author of many books, including three with HIV/AIDS-specific content, a children's book entitled *Too Far Away To Touch*, an anthology of remembrances of loved ones lost to HIV/AIDS, *A Loving Testimony*, and *Still Life With Buddy: A Novel Told In Fifty Poems* (1997), a book of HIV/AIDS poetry dedicated to Newman's three "buddies," Gerard Rizza, Stan Leventhal and Victor Fane D'Lugi, who form the composite for the "fictional" Buddy in the poems. Newman's 1997 Still Life with Buddy is representative of the pre-protease poetry of HIV/AIDS, working to eulogize those lost to HIV/AIDS. The subtitle of *Still Life With Buddy: A Novel Told in Fifty Poems* reveals Newman's system of organization for this book. She seeks to represent not just an illness, but also an entire life as part of the HIV/AIDS narrative. This rhetorical strategy, to represent a whole life is common in HIV/AIDS narratives, extending even to the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt which represents people's lives through artifacts — photographs, clothing, loved objects, written narratives — incorporated into the Quilt. The retelling of a life takes on particular significance because it urges the reader to think beyond the stigma of "HIV/AIDS" to the ramifications of a life lost and to make connections between the specific life lost and their own.

14 Embodying the loss of HIV/AIDS, Newman's book begins with "Prophecy:"

> When you get in the nineties, my grandmother said
> all the people you know are already dead
> In 1990 I turn thirty-five
> most of my friends more dead than alive. (3)

With this epigraph-like note to the book's beginning, Newman establishes herself as a particular kind of survivor: part of the surviving and much diminished gay and lesbian community in the 1990s left to grapple with the dying and death of so many loved ones.

15 Newman's book shares similarities with Doty's *My Alexandria* and his other HIV/AIDS poetry as she presents HIV/AIDS in the context of the gay community, struggling to make sense of so much loss in a society which seeks to marginalize homosexuals. In "The Politics of Buddy," part one, Newman and Buddy visit Macy's to try on make-up. When sent away by the salesclerk, Buddy responds:

> "Is it a crime for a boy
> to wear make-up?" Buddy shouts
> "Or is it a crime for a boy
> to look so good in it?" (10)

Buddy, as Newman reveals here, challenges social norms in both obviously public moments as well as more private ones. This moment of societal disapproval — that boys shouldn't wear make-up — captured in the encounter between Buddy and the salesclerk, is quickly followed by part two in which Buddy and his lover, Guy, walk down the street in front of Newman. While Newman makes a point of telling the reader that "They do not touch," their physical proximity nevertheless draws a reaction from passersby who slow their car (10). Newman records the moment, stating that "Ugly faces leer/ 'Hey, faggots,' 'Hey sissy boy,'/ 'Hey, you goddamn queers'" (10). She follows these two moments of blatant homophobia with a subtler one.

16 In part three of the poem, Buddy and Newman visit Gay Pride. He is in a wheelchair:

> A woman bounces up to us
> "Where's your red ribbon?" she asks,
> fishing out her supply.
> Buddy says no thanks
> and when she insists he pricks
> his thumb with her safety pin.
> A thin trickle of blood oozes down his skin.
> "Here's my ribbon. Is it red enough for you?" (11)

Here, Newman speaks to the presumption that everyone in the gay community must automatically support HIV/AIDS activism. She suggests that the realities of living with HIV are complicated; not everyone wants to be the poster-child for HIV/AIDS by wearing the now ubiquitous red ribbon. In fact, as Newman wrestles with her own subject position in relation to HIV/AIDS, she finds that she is more a part of the community than people like the red-ribbon distributing woman. She identifies with both the alienation and the ostracism Buddy endures. While she knows that she will always be at a distance from HIV/AIDS as someone who is seronegative, she also wants to clearly identify as part of that activist community and hence, at least by association, with the whore/bad girl side of the community.

17 Newman presents activism and the challenges of addressing HIV/AIDS in society in all of its complexities. "Oscar Night" presents a world in which celebrities seek solidarity with the HIV/AIDS activist community by wearing red ribbons on their clothing. Newman observes:

If I had a dollar
for every red ribbon
pinned to every jacket
and every gown
worn by every movie star
whose billion dollar smile
lit up my living room tonight
I'd be very rich

and Buddy would still be dead. (58)

Red ribbons continue as a symbol, but a symbol of what? By juxtaposing the "bouncing woman" early in the book with the "billion dollar smile" celebrities, Newman asks just what the red ribbons mean. For Newman, the HIV/AIDS community is not a glamorous fashion show, but a real space where people struggle and, in the earliest years of the pandemic, die. As part of the community, Newman seeks to criticize those outside of the community who want to step in for a moment. Think of it as some kind of activist tourism.

18 She shows us the daily events of life with Buddy, from medications to hospital rooms while also offering glimpses of life before HIV/AIDS when she, Buddy, and Guy lived life differently, unaffected by the constant presence of death. Buddy chose not to wear the red ribbon at Gay Pride, yet Newman's narrative places him firmly in the grips of HIV/AIDS, representative of life with and without HIV/AIDS.

19 The title poem, "Still Life With Buddy," demonstrates the realities of life without Buddy in the context of the book, which shows life with Buddy. In six short lines, Newman addresses the constant concern in HIV/AIDS poetry of juxtaposing the living and the dead:

> mahogany table top
> hand-made doily
> fluted crystal vase
> sprig of forget-me-nots
> photo of Buddy dressed to kill
> leaning against his ashes. (49)

Newman shows the material world of mahogany tables, doilies, crystal vases, and photographs against the natural, sprigs of flowers and ashes, and the spiritual, memories represented in the forget-me-nots. This tension, between abstract memories and palpable realities, marks much of the poetry of HIV/AIDS. While the flowers are poignant reminders of the beauty and fragility of life, the ashes, conversely, are an all too visible reminder of the fact that people die. Memories, ghosts, grief, and loss are not particular to HIV/AIDS, but HIV/AIDS represents tragedy, a life cut short, most often during what should have been the most vibrant years of life. For this, Newman writes the youthful photograph of Buddy, a tangible reminder of his absence, into the poem.

20 If Newman seeks to identify with those who are sick (and to some extent, one could argue, wants to be a part of the whore/bad girl world), if her counter-poetics lie in a desperate and angry attempt to critique the glaring homophobic and AIDS-phobic 1980s, Marie Howe's second book, *What the Living Do* (1998), represents almost the opposite. Written for her brother, John, the entire collection of poems is a book-length meditation akin to Newman's

"Still Life with Buddy." But, more than simply chronicling the dead, Howe transgresses her virgin/good girl status by exploring sexuality.

21 Her collection establishes several levels of complexity. First, it is a collection about coming of age, a female *Bildungsroman*, which emphasizes sexuality. This sexuality is almost always violent, unwanted attention from either the neighborhood boys or the father figure in the book. Later in the text, Howe's "I" narrator discusses her adult sexuality, which is a powerful counterpoint to her younger sexual experiences. Sexuality, then, becomes both ominous and celebratory, depending upon the parameters in which it is enacted, a powerful commentary on sex in the age of HIV/AIDS. As Howe explores her brother's process of death and dying from HIV/AIDS-related complications, however, it becomes clear that she links her own sexuality to that of her brother's to demonstrate the way in which heterosexuality is complicit in so many gay, HIV/AIDS-related deaths. As Howe immerses her readers in a sensual language of sexuality, she signals her desire, like Newman, to transgress the social norms required of her as a straight woman. She willingly becomes the bad girl of her own text, seeking to reclaim sexuality — both for herself and her brother — and turn what was previously taboo into something beautiful.

22 "Sixth Grade" marks the beginning of the sexual poems. Howe writes of "The afternoon the neighborhood boys tied me and Mary Lou Mahar/ to Donny Ralph's father's garage doors, spread-eagled" (16). Howe and Mary Lou, out-of-sight of parental intervention, have to rely on Charlie, Howe's brother's friend to stop the boys as "Donny got the deer's leg severed from the buck his dad had killed// the year before, dried up and still fur-covered, and sort of/ poked it at us" (16). This entryway to the sexual differences between young men and women, with women literally held up as sexual spectacles, bears an eerie similarity to a porno movie in which women are splayed out to be poked and prodded.

23 If "Sixth Grade" represents one side of Howe's sexuality, "Practicing" presents another. "I want to write a love poem for the girls I kissed in seventh grade,/ a song for what we did on the floor in the basement," writes Howe (23). Here, she offers the reader an episode in sexual curiosity. She writes of the experience of exploring sexuality at a slumber party with "maybe six or eight girls," and thus establishes powerfully, and poetically, a link to her brother's world (23). In "Practicing," Howe's only lament is the shame the girls felt after kissing. The girls don't discuss "Practicing" outside of the basement. In her poem, however, Howe acknowledges the possibility of desire for someone of the same gender. This poem, the hinge between her world and her brother's, marks the collection's two distinct halves: Marie's and Johnny's. "Practicing" is a love poem for the girls the "I" narrator kissed, but also for her

brother. Importantly, in a society filled with stigma, Howe sets down her ground rules for *What the Living Do*: they love and understand and live.

24 Howe's ease in connecting her own culpability presents readers with a challenge to connect their own lives to HIV/AIDS in a palpable way. Howe is both chronicler and participant in the HIV/AIDS pandemic. She does not separate herself as "other" from HIV/AIDS but rather as a ready, though unwilling participant (because shouldn't we all be unwilling to participate in HIV/AIDS?).

25 Howe doesn't run from the difficult moments; as a participant in her brother's death, she chronicles the poignant and the disturbing. Howe exposes the community between herself, her brother and his lover, Joe in "A Certain Light." The confident voice of the poet names the new vocabulary of the medications, the system of keeping them straight, the physical repercussions of the medicine on the body in an attempt to establish how intimate this community is; to participate in someone's death is the ultimate act of love.

26 Howe and Newman, by virtue of living in the seronegative world, serve as translators of their experience. In writing about Johnny and Buddy, they seek to pull down the barriers between the "positive" and the "negative" worlds, by examining the received social and cultural notions of sexuality and identity. Howe's languid sensuality insists that readers connect their own sexuality to a world of HIV/AIDS. Howe, not her HIV+ brother, becomes the sexual center of this book, inverting the expectations of the reader. Similarly, Newman uses her own identity as part of the lesbian and gay community to mediate between the "positive" and "negative" worlds.

27 While Newman and Howe seek to undermine the virgin/whore split implicit in HIV/AIDS as they seek to enter into the HIV/AIDS community with socially transgressive verse that confronts the heteronormative and patriarchal constructions of women, Tory Dent and River Huston, as positive women writing about their own HIV, create a powerful poetic witness against stereotypes as they seek to confront and rewrite cultural norms.

28 Tory Dent is the author of three book-length collections which address HIV/AIDS, *What Silence Equals* (1993), *HIV, Mon Amour* (1999) and *Black Milk* (2005). The recipient of the Academy of American Poets James Laughlin Award, the Eric Mathieu King Award, a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, and grants from the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, the Whiting Foundation, and the PEN organization, Tory Dent writes about the complexities of living with HIV in a post-protease world. Rather than accepting the cultural rhetoric of "miracle drugs," Dent's work has consistently questioned those drugs and

their effects on women. Dent's poetry also confronts the social constructions of women, as she boldly challenges assumptions and neat categorizations for women who are positive for HIV.

29 In "The Deferred Dream," an essay about the complexities of wanting children and being HIV+, Dent echoes many of the sentiments the women in *A Positive Life* maintain about gender and HIV. She writes:

> Stricken by a disease that affected so many gay men, as well as living in NYC where the disease was politicized and protested in the context of gay rights, the underlying prejudice against homosexuality exhibited in the passivity of the Reagan/Bush administration, I came to forget I was a woman in a way. I felt both caught up in the tidal urgency of HIV/AIDS activism and yet utterly isolated in my position as a heterosexual female, wanting to delineate my own path of reaction and response that was not only just true to myself but respected the integrity, the solidarity of the persecuted class. I was not a gay man. As a woman I had experienced the expectations of a patriarchal society. I knew I was subjugated, robbed of rights and privileges, but my fight was a different fight from that of homosexuals. (125)

Women, Dent posits, are in a very different subject position than men, particularly gay men, positive for HIV. They are at the margins of an already marginalizing disease. Dent, like many other HIV+ women was neither a part of the early HIV/AIDS community nor wholly separate from it. Yet gender is dismissed, forgotten, ignored as an important part of the construction of HIV/AIDS in the United States. Dent continues, offering her observations on the issue of women and culpability:

> The closest I could come to understanding would be to witness the hardened faces and accusatory looks, the implicit repulsion when I revealed that I was HIV-positive. More often than not, I encountered this tenor of recrimination in the medical community, from nurses and technicians and even doctors. Then people would ask me how I was exposed (I wondered how often they would ask a gay man that). I would answer that I had a boyfriend who was a hemophiliac who died of AIDS in 1984 […]. "I don't see why it matters," I would add. After a while, I would decline to answer when they asked how I was exposed. I know I was opting for the rougher attitude by not complying with their need to know if I was one of the "true" victims, but it didn't much matter since life had become so much rougher anyway. (125)

Dent's books speak to her unusual courage, to her facility in creating a form to address HIV in society and her life, to her recognition of the need to speak out about the position of a woman living with HIV. As the passage above indicates, women living with HIV confront a different set of prejudices and stereotypes, all of which reflect social constructions of womanhood; a "woman" has a certain place in society, with prescribed social and sexual roles to fulfill. What Dent gives to her reader, in a dialogue that begins in *What Silence Equals* and extends to *Black Milk* is a poetry speaking out of the tradition confronting silences surrounding socially constructed sexual roles.

30 The title poem of Dent's first collection, "What Silence Equals," pits "wild grass" against the power of farming to conform the land. "Homogeneous, wild, quiet/Homogeny in a pretense of superiority," Dent writes (19). The land, and in particular "the wild grass," as a metaphor for the body of a woman, must all be the same, homogeneous; homogeneity, as the "superior" and commodity-driven concept defines the thrust of the poem. The machinery of farming, masculinized as "Plow, conform, unharrowed/Like strong men at the circus with handlebar mustaches" make such a commodification possible (19). The patriarchal construction of the plow develops the relationship between the masculine machinery and the feminine earth: "The plow will conform into manageability the unharrowed" (19). While the relationship between women's bodies and farming/planting/fertility is not unusual, it is Dent's subject position as a woman living with HIV that makes this connection all the more sinister. The "wild grass" must conform to social constructions of woman and the roles she plays in society.

31 Dent catalogs the images of silence, each as hurtful as the next. She measures and defines silence as: a plow furrowing under the earth, presumably into silence; a "saber-toothed plow of silence" reminiscent of a tiger; a phone call greeted by silence; and a locked Chinese box. "If we're not better than you, what are we better than?" asks Dent (19). This judgment is implied in the silence greeting the speaker of the poem. The homogeneity of the earth is silence opposed to the noise of the speaker, first, on the phone. The speaker observes someone making a phone call out of desperation, only to have that same call greeted by silence and a paralysis. Extending the idea of the essentially unanswered phone call, Dent writes "Ugly angels like buzzards circle overhead./Your prayers, their prey, they carry clenched between their teeth" (20). Even prayers, uttered in despair, remain unanswered and greeted by silence. Like the paralysis of the people receiving the phone call, the angels are sinister, silencing prayers by holding them, like hunted animals, in the mouth.

32 In poems like "Only Human," that homogenous society takes shape in the judgment of a lover who rejects the speaker. The woman speaker, HIV+, is categorized as other than woman; an altogether new category is created for this woman-transgressor within a diagnosis. The repeating phrase in the poem "human" and "humanness" seems to emphasize, on the part of the speaker, the need for the lover to recognize her own humanness. Definitions of humanness based on interactions and communication, on what they had shared before the revelation of a diagnosis change radically afterwards and redefine the possibilities for interactions and love:

> It was the way I changed hallucinogenically before you,
> my wood-colored hair matted and graying,

my blue eyes circling like crazy dice in my head.
All that materialized before you was somebody HIV positive,
another one of those silhouetted figures interviewed on David Susskind,
my true self, ghostlike, condemned to the back of your mind. (30)

The speaker becomes "somebody HIV positive," rather than a lover, a "somebody" — note the distancing effect of the language — relegated to a space of casual, unimportant thoughts; the location of the woman moved from the bed to the mind, left in the reader's mind with haunting exactitude.

33 Dent's formal approach to poetry is striking on the page. Her long lines evoke Whitman and Ginsberg. Dent's lines become even longer in her second collection, *HIV, Mon Amour*, which seems a lyric extension of the conversation begun in *What Silence Equals*. *HIV, Mon Amour* is a more sophisticated collection than *What Silence Equals*. Broken into three sections, "The Pressure" with fourteen poems, "Cinéma Vérité," a long, sustained poem, and "HIV, Mon Amour," thirty-five connected poems reminiscent of Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen*. Dent continues the thematic challenges in the new collection, working to activate readers. Each of the poems in the collection is balanced between emotion and intellect.

34 "Fourteen Days in Quarantine," the first poem in the collection, places the poet-speaker, struggling with the meaning of HIV/AIDS, in an unfriendly world. Formally, the poetic structure is broken into a series of fourteen related poems, presumably one per day. Dent overpowers her reader with images as she continues, in this poem and this collection, to place the body at the center.

35 She describes her own body, in a hospital bed as if it were a painting: "Hospital gown worn backwards, thus open at the neck, and I think what a great/Nan Goldin portrait it would make — 'Tory, New York Hospital, January 1996'" (3). The distance between the speaker and her own body develops the difficult relationship between HIV and the body in which it resides. The body becomes "other," something to be looked at, monitored, and cared for. In that respect, the woman's body is not so different than the portrait Dent proposes; the body, here, is an object.

36 While all bodies affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic — and other diseases — become objects, the relationship between a woman's body and society is different; the history of art, religion, marketing, and fashion, among other things, centralize the role of the woman's body in society; women's bodies are looked at and constructed as central images in society. For the woman living with HIV, with a body ravaged by the effects of the virus, the gendered, and specifically female body as object takes on a much more central importance. Inherent in

the HIV+ female body are all the transgressions of the woman, all the ways in which the woman, this woman, does not live up to her prescribed social role.

37 Dent emphasizes this through her continual negotiation of the body. She describes the motion of her body, moving "until I receded in sync with the daylight/from chair back to bed as if falling backwards in slow motion, the way/a display dummy does during a rehearsed car crash" (4) The body is like a "display dummy," an inanimate object on which tests are conducted to ensure safety for other bodies. The metaphoric implications of this connection are obvious; Dent's body provides safety for other, future bodies. Living in quarantine secures that safety.

38 Also at the heart of Dent's work, an issue connected to the body, are questions of sensuality and intimacy. The constructions of desire and sexual gratification, often theorized in gay men's writing, are central to Dent's work. She writes,

> But the pleasure of touch I never refused when he
> climbed gently into the narrow cot with me, winter jacket still on, the sudden
> cold of his earlobes against my cheek, the thick cardboard material of the
> quarantine mask which we would defiantly indent in order to kiss. (9)

Dent's voice, speaking for a sexuality within HIV/AIDS is an important — and controversial — view. Again, the implications of sexuality for a woman living with HIV, culturally, are different than for a gay man living with HIV. However, I would argue that in practice, the implications are the same. Dent, ostensibly, is to blame here by embracing her sexuality *living with HIV and in quarantine*. The Puritanical constructions of female sexuality almost demand that Dent repress her sexuality because of HIV; in essence, this is a prescription for life before the women's rights movement in the same way HIV/AIDS-era sexuality for gay men has been constructed culturally as pre-Stonewall. This element of Dent's work is crucial and something created out of the silences surrounding women and HIV/AIDS.

39 *Black Milk* picks up where *HIV, Mon Amour* leaves off and is one of the most interesting recent collections of post-protease AIDS poetry. *Black Milk*, as the virus continues its path through society, and as the government becomes increasingly regressive about HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, begins to take on a militancy that post-protease AIDS poetry, from 1995 to the early 2000s had lost. Dent continues to be consumed by the disease. As HIV continues to progress in her own body, *Black Milk* presents a collection of poems that are angry, defiant, and accusatory. Here, Dent unapologetically writes her own epitaph, one which challenges any of the easy cliches society has come to use around HIV/AIDS.

40 Dent says, "My death began on April 12, 1988,/over a pay phone at an artist's colony in upstate New York,/in a windowless, wainscotted phone closet, where a single bare

bulb/suspended above me, the enucleated eye of some god surveying its work" (6) In this poem, Dent continues the work of *HIV, Mon Amour*, as she writes her rotting body onto the page. She is merciless in her transcription of physical deterioration. She writes, "Each level of the disease, the gradations of physical recession,/the lungs, the gut, the eyes, the brain — systems of torture,/instigated by an interrogator I cannot target beyond the decoy glare" (7). This physical demise is the counter to the angels. Death, as Dent writes it, isn't a beautiful, miraculous passing.

41 Dent's disease is painful and presents itself with many different symptoms and iterations of AIDS related complications. After waiting for an entire year, Dent is eligible to try a new drug and within a week it fails her. For the first time, the physical pain of the body overtakes Dent's language. What in *HIV, Mon Amour* was a connection to sensuality and sexuality here becomes useless. She can't describe her pain and she's "almost glad" that words fail her.

42 Dent also uses her poetry to subvert the heteropatriarchal expectations of her place in society. Dent lays blame for HIV/AIDS at the doorstep of a government that ignored the virus in the early years. And so, Dent explains her own illness in the limited terms she believes exist to define women's lives experiences and lives. She says,

> I was laboring — for survival is like having a baby,
> my legs spread apart, my head thrown back — I was laboring but it was not
> optimistic, a stillborn birthing in which death is forced out
> from deep inside you, forced out with an effort excruciating and formidable,
> your dead body that threatens soon to become you. (18)

The act of survival is an every day laboring where, Dent graphically records, she must force out death. So, with her legs splayed, she works at survival, a "stillborn birthing" where the dead fetus is death itself, momentarily displaced from the body.

43 Dent, in these three collections, provides the most comprehensive and poetically aggressive presentation of women and HIV/AIDS. In her work, we find the confrontation and then acceptance of the idea of sexual transgression. By embodying sexuality and disease in her poems, Dent challenges readers to consider who isn't a whore/bad girl of society. In her poetic narrative, she suggests that she is, in essence, every woman. In the social construction of HIV/AIDS, she should be writing the poems Newman and Howe write; instead, her counterpoetics embody the living of a disease, the confrontation with the mystery of illness, and a serious challenge to the heteronormative and patriarchal expectations of her. It is an oeuvre that fully encapsulates the complexities of life with HIV/AIDS while also immersing the reader in the sensuality and desire of language.

44 Like Tory Dent, River Huston's work speaks out of the silence created for women living with HIV. Huston, as I have mentioned in previous chapters, is dedicated to women's issues and HIV through her two poetry collections, *Jesus Never Lived Here* (1993) and *The Bones of Susan* (1995); her column on women's issues in *POZ*; public lecturing at HIV/AIDS conferences; educational lectures in schools; and projects like *Living with HIV: A Book of Questions and A Positive Life*. Huston confronts the stereotypes about women and HIV/AIDS by incorporating and deconstructing vernacular language in common usage.

45 In "Those People," Huston responds to an article about HIV/AIDS. She writes:

> An article lies on the dresser
> about an upcoming lecture
> the writer quotes the lecturer
> "*Those people*" (Meaning homosexuals and intravenous drug-users,
> meaning faggot, queers, homos, junkie, parasite, scumbags,
> meaning lowlife disposable garbage
> less than human types
> those people.) (*Bones* 22)

Huston's poetic dialogue is created often in response to something written or said; she writes poems as moments of repose and response. Like Dent's "another one of those silhouetted figures," Huston seeks to reconcile "those people" with herself. Implicit in the stanza quoted above is Huston's reappropriation of a vocabulary used to label, dismiss, and disempower those it describes. Huston's poetic move is to use the very same language as the basis of the vocabulary for the poem as she reveals:

> I am that upcoming lecturer
> since I said "*Those people*"
> the way I always do
> in a sarcastic way
> in an angry way
> not a cut and pasted way
> to crucify
> justify my publicly perceived innocence
> in black and white
> in a local paper in Michigan. (22)

Huston embodies the terms she uses in the poem by claiming them as an extension of her self-identification, in contrast to "my publicly perceived innocence." She tells the reader:

> for the record
> I was a prostitute
> an intravenous drug user
> I was homeless
> ate out of garbage cans
> I asked you for money
> in Washington Square Park

I took that money
and bought quarts of
Colt 45 drank it from a brown paper bag
I robbed homes
went to prison
I danced naked for strangers and money
I slept with women
I slept with men
slept with both of them at the same time
I have trained men to bark like dogs
and dance in high heels
wearing pink tu-tus. (22-23)

Huston's embodiment of "those people" creates a symbiotic relationship between the reader and poet. Casual comments used to distinguish "us" from "them" become here, in Huston's verse, a means of defining "us" as "them." The reader is implicated on several levels from the "you" who gave money in Washington Square Park to those who so misunderstand HIV/AIDS and those it affects that they might invoke some of the language Huston deconstructs. Huston separates "those people" from a casual news headline or a CDC report by giving those people an "I" who shares in their lives, their pain. The "I," who takes on the identity of "those people" moves the reader from casual observation, the perennial postmodern move from "eye" to "I," to implication.

46 In this poem as well Huston cleverly defines her terms, presuming an audience unfamiliar with her vocabulary. She writes "I didn't share my works/(works — needle paraphernalia that lowlife junkie scum use to/get high with)" (23). In two lines she both tells readers about "works" and what they are while also, again, presenting the cultural implications/associations/judgments that accompany "street" vocabulary. The activism of Huston's poetry here is the constant motion between education and implication. She seems to say to the reader, "if I'm implicated in this, so too are you..." Perhaps the implication, as I said earlier, is using the very vocabulary Huston exposes. Huston turns the poem a third time, from "those people" to the speaker as "those people" to what the reader might not (Huston again deconstructs readers' expectations as they read the poem) expect of "those people." "Did I tell you I graduated from college?" she asks (24).

47 The "I" of the poem, one of the "those people" becomes, presumably, one of the readers as well; the speaker invokes a class-specific lifestyle, from college to writing books, suggesting a very different lifestyle than the one lived by "those people." This connection between reader and poet creates a moment of interruption in the cultural perception of HIV/AIDS. Huston continues:

> I advocate for women's rights to the treatment of their choice I volunteer at prisons, and drug rehabilitation centers and I cry at night and now in the morning in a hotel room somewhere in Michigan I cry for them, the other those people I cry for myself. (24)

At work in all of Huston's poems are moments like these, where she creates a connection between poet and reader which challenges many of the ideas people hold about those living with HIV/AIDS. The ending lines of this poem, with the poet in tears for "those people" who are ultimately herself, and the readers' other selves, confront readers with the ugly realities of prejudice and discrimination and the very attitudes that create the silence surrounding HIV/AIDS.

48 "101 Ways to Die Without Doing It" calls on many of the same poetic and emotional devices. Many of Huston's poems are conversational, something informed by her wide use of poetry in performances; early on in her poetry career she used to give out copies of the poems she had read in plastic baggies with condoms. She believes that all poetry should be exciting and interesting; her own work is always emotionally charged and accessible. Even more than these characteristics, however, Huston's work is brave as she opens her life through confessional poetry to expose the social stigma of HIV/AIDS.

49 "101" plays on the rhetoric of HIV/AIDS; one common talk that HIV/AIDS educators are often asked to give is "AIDS 101" (now a course offered by the Red Cross in which one can receive an official certification for giving HIV/AIDS education talks). Huston makes a catalogue in this poem of the "ways to die without doing it." One of the most horrific moments in the poem is revealed early on as Huston tells readers one of the ways is to:

> Stand in front of two-thousand first-year college students
> have them laugh
> when I tell them about the time
> the doctor tried to break through the anterior surface of my ilium
> and told me
> it would be easier if my ass wasn't
> so fat. (11)

Here, Huston as poet is exposed, revealing to the reader the difficulties of disclosing public intimacies in the age of HIV/AIDS; students are corralled into an auditorium to hear a speaker when they see no connection between her life and theirs. Huston's other suggestions for "101" include: "Make friends with someone with one T-cell left" and "Be told that I am vulgar/for saying the words vagina, vaginal secretions, oral sex,/anal intercourse" (11-12). This poem also puts the rhetoric of "101" in conflict with society; "anal intercourse" and "vagina" are "forbidden" words, yet part of Huston's own regular vocabulary in giving lectures. Likewise, Huston presents the difficulties of negotiating people who believe they share a vocabulary

with Huston, but do not have the emotional intimacy to invoke it. One of the other "101" ways is "When I am asked if I want my name on the Quilt" (12). Huston points out the conflict between the questioner's focus on death and Huston's focus on life; this tension makes conversation difficult, impossible. Like Huston's other poems, the power of "101" lies in her ability to simultaneously share her own personal experience, use the language invoked against HIV/AIDS in order to expose it, affect the reader emotionally, and work poetically to create vivid images and clear, concise language.

50 Both Dent's and Huston's work establishes a potent activist voice by writing to revise the perceptions of women living with HIV. Significantly, their work fills in the gaps of a story often untold story; here are the stories telling the story opposed to the stereotype, the poems written out of frustration and anger at presumption and prejudice. In a literary tradition filled with poems that speak of an experience so different than that of women living with HIV, Dent and Huston redefine issues of equality and access, pain and desire. Characterized by society as the bad girls of HIV/AIDS, their counterpoetics embody a desire to ask how they are different than any other woman in society. In essence, they become all women and as such, they reject the social categorization of whore. Moreover, in demonstrating how common their experiences are, what it means to live and die, and to challenge the prejudices of society, they suggest that perhaps the entire equation of good girl/bad girl, whore/virgin is a misconceived social construction.

51 In fact, the inversion of their perceived social roles characterizes all four women poets discussed here. Their poetry provides an active witness to the gendering of HIV/AIDS. As women writing about AIDS approach their subject matter, they have to confront the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. Often overlooked, the women poets of AIDS provide an important and compelling perspective to the age of AIDS in the United States by resisting those social constructions that would limit their cultural and social authority. Their work begins to fill in the void of the first decade of HIV/AIDS literature by gendering it and giving voice to both the experience of the caregiver and those women positive for HIV. The culture of HIV/AIDS has created specific roles for women within the pandemic. By writing, as women in other generations have done before, out of the silences created by those gendered stereotypes, these poets interrupt the stereotypes. This crucial work lays the groundwork for a new literary tradition: the women poets of HIV/AIDS.

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