



On Not Living With AIDS: Or, AIDS-As-Post-Crisis

Matthew Sothern¹

School of Geography & Geosciences, University of St. Andrews, UK
email: mbs10@st-andrews.ac.uk

Abstract

Advances in antiretroviral treatments mean that people are living longer with HIV and that the spectacular and politicized deaths characteristic of earlier moments of the AIDS crisis are less prominent. New cultural understandings of AIDS-as-post-crisis see AIDS as a “manageable” illness. A contradiction has emerged between HIV prevention work based on an explicit Othering of the HIV+ body and advocacy programs on behalf of Persons Living with AIDS (PLWA). The space of the HIV+ body, therefore, simultaneously is *and* is not ‘just like everyone else.’ This paper offers a reading of “Negative Role Model,” a recent HIV prevention campaign aimed at Gay men launched by the New Zealand AIDS Foundation (NZAF) that was an attempt to overcome this contradiction. “Negative Role Model,” unlike earlier campaigns that rested upon an image of the PLWA as diseased, sinister and always already dead, sought to provide a positive example of the benefits of remaining HIV-. This attempt to avoid the contradictory representations of the PLWA by shifting the representational burden of prevention work away from the PLWA ultimately fails. Drawing on the work of Douglas

¹ Matthew Sothern, 2006.

Crimp (2002) and William Haver (1996) it is argued that the body of the PLWA is paradoxical site that is not reconcilable with the gay identity politics that emerged in relation to the politicization of AIDS deaths.

‘Americans can’t deal with death unless they own it.’
(David Worjnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 1991)

1. AIDS-as-post-crisis

In 2003 there were 183 new HIV infections in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This was highest number ever recorded and the majority, some 93 infections, were the result of male same-sex contact (Ministry of Health 2006). In response to these record numbers the New Zealand AIDS Foundation (Te Tuuaapapa Mate Araikore o Aotearoa, hereafter NZAF) launched a new HIV prevention campaign aimed at Gay, Takataapui (Maori for “devoted partner of the same sex”), and Bisexual men to combat what they called the “undue optimism” surrounding HIV/AIDS. NZAF believe this undue optimism emerged from the erroneous idea that HIV was now a chronic and “manageable” illness. NZAF worry that Gay men are no longer scared of HIV and that this is in part because the spectacular deaths characteristic of earlier moments of the AIDS pandemic in the West are less prominent. In this paper I use the term AIDS-as-post-crisis to refer to two recent interrelated changes in the epidemiological and political scripting of AIDS. The first is the rise of antiretroviral treatments (if only for a privileged few, even in advanced Western economies) that have re-scripted the temporality of living with HIV/AIDS. Antiretroviral’s have stretched the compressed temporal horizon of HIV; where once diagnosis promised swift death now persons living with AIDS (PLWA) expect to live for many years. As a result there is now discussion of a “safer sex fatigue” amongst gay men at the same time as there are a burgeoning number of PLWA, this combination is contributing to the rise in HIV infections in much of the developed world (Tun et al 2003). The second change I am using AIDS-as-post-crisis to flag is that the political efforts surrounding HIV/AIDS, and the role of many AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs), has shifted beyond trying to prevent the spread of the disease and promote AIDS research funding to now include substantial advocacy programs and service provision for PLWA. Agitating for an end to discrimination against PLWA has emerged as a central preoccupation for ASOs (Brown 1997). These simultaneous political projects of prevention and advocacy mobilize the figure of PLWA in contradictory and complex ways.

This paper interrogates the contradictions central to the embodied space of PLWA within the dual goals of prevention and advocacy. On the one hand PLWA are the space from which HIV is spread, they are the site of infection and the mechanism of the spatial diffusion of the virus. The dramatic increase in HIV infection in New Zealand ensures that the PLWA remain figured as a space that

must be avoided; the representational logics of prevention require that the PLWA is seen as a space that is inherently Other. Douglas Crimp (1989) has documented how representations of PLWA as either a space of tragedy, premature death and loss or as a space portrayed as shadowy, sinister, and threatening were common to HIV prevention messages of the 1980s. For Crimp these stylized representations provided a kind of “visceral truth telling” that worked to rhetorically Other the HIV+ body by associating it with death, disease and cognition.

On the other hand, however, now that people are living longer with HIV support and activist groups for PLWA have agitated against such representations, arguing the positive images of PLWA are needed for them to live happy and productive lives (Crimp 2002). The New Zealand branch of BodyPositive (an HIV+ support group), for instance, has often criticized NZAF prevention campaigns that rely on representations of PLWA as always and already dead or as threatening, sinister, and dishonest about their HIV status. The relationship between NZAF and BodyPositive has at times been tense as each organization jostled for ownership of the representations of PLWA. In recent years BodyPositive have explicitly lobbied NZAF for advocacy and support programs for PLWA, these programs have now emerged as a central and growing part of NZAF’s work. Just a short decade ago such programs were relatively low profile and small scale as HIV diagnosis promised rapid death, now NZAF’s advocacy programs see PLWA as a site where long-term political claims to inclusion, justice, and rights can be fixed. The PLWA is positioned as productive, useful and deserving of equal treatment and protection. These liberal arguments made in the name of advocacy construct PLWA as happy, healthy and normal, ‘just like everyone else.’

This spatial contradiction of the HIV+ body is perhaps not all that surprising for an organization charged with preventing HIV infection *and* advocating on behalf of those coping with the disease. The first of these missions engenders an Othering of the HIV+ body as a space to be avoided (if only by latex) whereas the second brief requires arguments that construct the HIV+ bodies as ‘just like every body else.’ People struggling with HIV/AIDS are productive and equal, they deserve justice and toleration and *at the same time* they are a threatening, diffusing, polluting Other. Given the ways AIDS has traditionally been overdetermined by discourses of the excesses of gay sexual practice one might appropriate Sedgwick’s (1990) language to analyze this duality as an expression of both ‘minoriotizing’ and ‘universalizing’ tropes within sexual epestimology. Prevention rests upon a foundation of the minoriotization of the HIV+ body that undermines the liberal notions of universality invoked by advocacy. This contradiction is central to the political challenges of AIDS-as-post-crisis. At the same time as HIV infection rates are rising as a result of unsafe sexual practice the mechanisms of encouraging safer sex based on fear of HIV infection has become more politically tenuous, this

junction poses significant political challenges for NZAF's dual goals of advocacy and prevention.

Against this contradiction engendered by AIDS-as-post-crisis NZAF's response to the record HIV infections of 2003 was to launch the new HIV prevention campaign "Negative role model." Unlike previous campaigns based on the explicit Othering of PLWA "Negative Role Model" was an attempt to shift the representational burden of prevention work away from PLWA. Instead of "blaming" new HIV infections on "bad" people spreading HIV, and instead of encouraging the avoidance of HIV by showing PLWA as engulfed in sickness, suffering and death, "Negative Role Model" was built around a positive image of young gay man maintaining his HIV negative status. In this way NZAF hoped to side-step the explicit contradictions of PLWA as both 'just like' and 'not like' everybody else simultaneously. In "Negative Role Model" there is no explicit reference made to the HIV+ body as either a mechanism for the diffusion of the virus or as a warning about the horrific realities of what living with HIV is truly like. In "Negative Role Model" there is no mention of PLWA at all. However, as I argue in the next section of this paper, this move fails to alleviate PLWA of their representational burden within prevention work. The final part of the paper will draw on the work of Douglas Crimp (2002), William Haver (1996), and Thomas Yingling (1997) to suggest that this failure is demonstrative of a complex relationship between Gay identity politics and the AIDS crisis. Work in Queer Theory on the politics of AIDS activism has argued that the AIDS crisis provided a way of consolidating and legitimating mainstream gay identity politics (see Crimp 1988, 1989, 2002, 2003, Altman 1988). The perceived failure of governments, healthcare providers, and society in general to respond to AIDS when it was understood as largely a gay disease provided one of the principal mechanisms that retroactively solidified the political community of Gay identity. AIDS cut across race, class and geography and revealed their common constitution as excluded from a society delineated by the contours of heteronormativity. Early political organizing around AIDS were struggles to name AIDS deaths as such – not random deaths from rectal cancer, for example, but deaths that could be symbolic of the entrenched homophobia to which all gay men were now revealed as subject irrespective of the contours of their other differences. Thus for these authors the identity category "Gay" emerged in part from the ways in which a symbolically elevated AIDS death allowed for the transcendence of other differences. But as William Haver (1996) argues, the production of AIDS deaths as a symbol for Gay identity politics is founded upon a negation or transcendence of the materiality of the HIV+ body. Within the gay identity politics that emerged in response to the AIDS crisis the AIDS corpse was stripped of its specificity along the dimensions of class, race, age and geography. The AIDS corpse was simply the material manifestation of the commonality of Gay men constituted in the state of abjection. The HIV+ body was no longer a literal space, or the space of the individual death, but rather a symbolic space whose death constituted the category it purported

merely to represent. In other words, it was the symbolism of AIDS deaths that allowed for the production of the identity category Gay by affording the transcendence of other differences. For Haver “Gay” exists in the ideal space created by death.

The political work of mourning AIDS deaths provided the degree of representational fixity necessary for constituting the identity category Gay. Leo Bersani (1990:7) puts all this much more simply: ‘the possession of others is possible only when they are dead; only then is nothing opposed to our image of them.’ Insofar, however, as the production of a symbolic AIDS death has been central to the political organizing around Gay identity then the question arises in this AIDS-as-post-crisis moment: what happens to the identity politics thusly constituted when the PLWA refuses to die? This question, I argue, raises important insights into the contractions in the embodied space of the PLWA within NZAF prevention campaigns.

2. “Negative Role Model”

That people are no longer scared of AIDS has become a major concern for ASOs in the developed world (Tun et al 2003). World Health Organization data for Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, the UK, and the US, for example, show that HIV infection rates have been steadily tending upwards for the past five years (WHO 2006). In New Zealand, infection rates during 2003 were higher than they had been at any time since HIV surveillance data began being collected (Ministry of Health 2006). For NZAF this rise was at least partially attributable to what they call ‘an undue optimism around HIV/AIDS’ in the gay community. Importantly NZAF see this optimism as emerging largely from the AIDS culture in Australia and North America, especially Sydney, San Francisco and New York, NZAF worried that the diffusion of these cultures into New Zealand were leading Gay men to abandon safer sex practices.

In 2003 NZAF were not the only ones worried about ‘undue optimism’. That same year *Rolling Stone* carried an article “In Search of Death” (Freeman 2003) that sketched the phenomena provocatively called “bug chasing.” Centered on a young gay New York City man called Carlos, bug chasers we are told are ‘part of an intricate underground world that has sprouted...in which [gay] men who want to be infected with HIV get together with those who are willing to infect them.’ (p. 44). Replete with their own lingo of being ‘knocked up’, ‘bred’, and ‘seeded’ bug chasers form ‘a subculture [that] celebrates the [HIV] virus and eroticizes it. HIV infected semen is treated like liquid gold.’ (p. 44). Freeman finds it incomprehensible that anyone could want HIV and denounces Carlos as some kind of misguided, self-destructive psychopath – albeit one whom we should pity. That same year Louise Hogarth’s (2003) documentary *The Gift* made its way around

Gay and Lesbian film festivals in North America, Western Europe and Australia. *The Gift* detailed the sub-cultural practices of “bug chasing” in San Francisco by following Doug, a young gay man who sought belonging and intimacy in the community of PLWA. After running away from his Midwestern family home to the mean and alienating streets of San Francisco Doug believed that if he got HIV he would finally find the community, belonging and connection he sought. For Doug getting HIV was entry into the promised land of gay community which his flight to San Francisco hoped to realize. Doug we soon realize is the victim of the predatory practices of older HIV+ men. Underpinning each of these accounts of why “bug chasing” emerged as a cultural phenomenon was the attitude that gay men had grown wary of safer sex. Advances in antiretroviral treatment for HIV/AIDS means that the disease is no longer something to be scared of, as Carlos explains “What else can happen to us after this? You can fuck whoever you want, fuck as much as you want, and nothing worse can happen to you...you take a pill and get on with your life.” (Freeman 2003: 46).

To combat the diffusion of such attitudes into New Zealand’s Gay community NZAF shifted the focus of their education and prevention efforts from ‘how to avoid AIDS’ and onto ‘why to avoid AIDS.’ As they stressed in their press release announcing the ‘Negative Role Model’ campaign, the

‘campaign will be making a strategic shift from telling people **how** to prevent HIV infection to **why** it should be prevented...The success of HIV treatments at delaying the onset of AIDS; the continued prejudice and judgment in our communities against men living with HIV; and a glossing over of the often very difficult and unpleasant consequences of HIV infection and treatment have contributed to a silence and/or an undue optimism around HIV/AIDS that has to end if we are to stem this record rise in new HIV infections.’ (NZAF 2004)

Much debate ensued over how ending this silence would be best approached. Initially NZAF talked about producing a series of widespread media images aimed at gay men that would show the ‘awful truth’ of living – and dying – from AIDS. This campaign was to prominently feature images of emaciated and ‘obviously sick’ PLWA as a way of providing visceral counterpoint to the logics of AIDS-as-post-crisis. The politics of this approach, particularly with respect to the possible reaction from New Zealand branches of BodyPositive, meant that NZAF took a different tack. In place of this approach NZAF decided to advocate a “Negative role model” which was embodied in 25-year-old university student Nathan Brown. Nathan, and his parents, are intended to provide a positive “negative” role model as way of promoting ‘living free of HIV as a desirable lifestyle.’ But what exactly is at stake in the images of this attractive, young, healthy gay man and his supportive,

middle-class parents (who, of course, are members of PFLAG² – Fig 1)? Nathan is intended as a liberal body whose vitality is supposed to make the case for remaining HIV negative. Consequently the campaign was to be structured around the production of an ongoing narrative of his struggle to avoid HIV. This is intended as a move that does not reproduce the blaming and scapegoating of PLWA. On the surface, therefore, Nathan is as a figure that moves the representational burdens of prevention work away from HIV+ bodies more generally, thereby avoiding potential conflict with PLWA.



Figure 1 © *New Zealand AIDS Foundation, reproduced with permission.*

Hovering just below the image of Brown familial domesticity, however, the “Negative role model” campaign fails to shift the focus from illiberal HIV+ bodies and instead reworks them as its repressed invisible center. We are told Nathan is 25 and a Film and Media studies major at Dunedin’s Otago University (where his Father also did his Veterinary training). He is president of UNIQ, Otago University’s Gay, Bisexual, Lesbian, and Transgendered students association. We are also assured that despite the pressures of having a gay son his family is ‘a typical Kiwi family with strong values around work, family and community,’ they

² PFLAG, or Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays is a voluntary support organization, largely comprised of parents of lesbian and gay children devoted to the “well-being of Lesbians, Gays and their families.” They have over 500 chapters world-wide (www.pflag.org).

have lived in Dunedin for 23 years. His parents, who are quoted liberally in the NZAF press release, fully support and love their son – to the extent that they are willing expose themselves to ‘negative comments’ and be part of this national campaign. As Nathan’s mother Jaye explains:

I worry about my gay son, just like I worry about my straight son, but the higher presence of HIV in the gay community does mean it figures larger for me when I think about Nathan, his health and his future. (NZAF 2004)

There are several issues that warrant mention here. First, the campaign seems to rest upon and re-inscribe the problematic logics of risk categories (and thus of the exceptionalist arguments of minoritizing discourses of sexuality identified by Sedgwick). Further, this logic not only assumes a ‘normal’, non-gay public that is not at risk but places a rhetorical blame on those gay youth who do seroconvert while simultaneously obfuscating the kinds of race and class privilege Nathan enjoys. Nathan is an upper-middle class Pakeha/European man from a stable family that can hardly be considered the representative figure for gay alienation and familial homophobia. Nathan is unlikely to find himself homeless and alone on the streets of New York City or San Francisco, or Sydney (or Auckland, for that matter) like the protagonists in *The Gift* or in “In Search of Death.” He was never likely to be counted amongst the burgeoning number of new infections in Aotearoa/New Zealand³, which this campaign seeks to stem. Moreover, lurking at the margins of this image – perhaps just beyond the suburban gate at whose threshold Nathan, but not his parents, stand – is the dirty world of sex, populated by bodies that are vectors of HIV, as a threatening, constitutive Other to the familial rhetoric’s in which this image trades.

While this premier image does not make explicit reference to PLWA it does work to position the HIV+ body and sex as a kind of silent diffusing Other. The only way in which this image can become effective as a mechanism of prevention is if one accepts that just beyond the frame of the image are indeed “bad” PLWA. Rather than avoiding implication PLWA, therefore, the spatial logics of “Negative Role Model” implicate them fully as its repressed invisible center. Even more disturbing is that the antidote to the invisibly diffusing HIV+ body seems to be the nuclear, heterosexual family that is produced in the image as so thoroughly white. In this respect it is perhaps no coincidence that the Brown’s live in the regional city of Dunedin and not the urban centers of Auckland or Wellington where the kinds

³ While explicit data is not available NZAF believe that of the 93 new infections in Gay, Bisexual and Takataapui men in 2003 a disproportionate number are located amongst the Maori, Pacific and Asian urban communities of Auckland and Wellington - NZAF November 2004.

of suburban spatial logics of this image might be undermined by the more visible processes of immigration, transnationalisms, and globalization. This kind of nationalism written within the scene of the domestic are always and necessarily tied to the reproductive logics of a hegemonic heterosexuality (see Berlant and Warner 1998, Berlant 1997, Edelman 2003). These same logics impel that Nathan is shown with his parents and not a partner (or fuck-buddy), friends, or other support-network (such as NZAF outreach staff) and at home rather than a Bar, Club, Cursing-ground or Bathhouse – where presumably the struggle to remain HIV negative is most urgent.

“Negative role model” campaign, in its current form, may do little to disrupt the increase in HIV infections because it reproduces a liberal political logic of family, nation, and self-responsibility and ignores the ongoing veracity of structures of race, class, homophobia and displacement. Offering the nuclear “family” as the solution to rising HIV rates ignores that it is often the failure of ‘the family’ to accept their queer children that leads to the socio-economic and cultural deprivation of many gay youth, and thus heightens their risk for HIV infection in the first instance (Weston 1991: 185-188). Above all, however, this campaign is ultimately disturbing precisely because of its benign-ness, its claim to innocence. It does not succeed in avoiding a demonization of PLWA as “bad” vectors of HIV diffusion; rather, it more thoroughly and surreptitiously places rhetorical blame on PLWA which are constituted as ever present in their threatening absence. Thusly constituted as absence there is no place within “Negative role model” for PLWA to claim any space of political engagement; it may not, in this regard, cause friction with BodyPositive but should be viewed with some cynicism nonetheless.

This threatening absence of PLWA betrays the contradiction inherent to claims that the HIV+ body ‘is just like everyone else.’ The universalizing arguments of advocacy for PLWA are ultimately untenable for NZAF because the pressures of prevention mandate that the HIV+ body cannot be allowed to be ‘just like everyone else’. Indeed, insofar as the Brown’s are explicitly positioned as the typical Kiwi family threatened with dissolution by PLWA, “everyone” is revealed as produced by the constitutive exclusion of PLWA as a space in which claims to liberal universality cannot be fixed. The next section of this paper draws on the work of Thomas Yingling (1997), Douglas Crimp (2002) and William Haver (1996) to argue that the PLWA becomes something of an impossible space within the liberal politics of NZAF and that it is this impossibility that informs the negation of PLWA in “Negative Role Model.”

3. On Not Living with AIDS

Douglas Crimp (2002), William Haver (1996) and Thomas Yingling (1997) argue that the symbolic production of AIDS deaths was central to the Gay and Lesbian fight to transform broader heteronormative social structures. For these authors mounting AIDS corpses, and the failure of governments to respond quickly and aggressively, were demonstrative of how little Gays and Lesbians counted to the broader society. AIDS proved that despite differences in class, race and geography that Gay men – and by extension Lesbians – were simply a disposable Other whose death hardly warranted attention (Bordowitz 2003). Government's failure to respond and the media's insistence not to worry because AIDS had not entered the "general" population was demonstrative of just how expendable Gays and Lesbians are. For these authors it was this common state of abandonment and exclusion that transcended other differences to retroactively provide coherence to Gay political identity. In the early days of the AIDS crisis, Gays and Lesbians were revealed as the contemporary equivalent of Agamben's (1998) *Homo Sacer*. Gay men were simply "bare life," not subjects before The Law but those whose exclusion constituted the limits of the political category of the human already defined as heterosexual (Butler 2004, Meeks 2001). If the human are those whose lives are worth trying to save (see Pratt 2005, Mitchell 2006) then AIDS proved the inhumanity of the Queer and the centrality of the laws of heteronormativity in delineating who counted as human (Halberstam and Livingstone 1995, Butler 2004). The key to Agamben's notion of *Homo Sacer* is not that "bare life" reveals some original condition inherent to the body prior to its inscription within the law.

"bare life" should not be confused with natural life, as bare life is what, in Agamben's view, is produced as the originary (both original and originating) act of sovereignty. The production of this bare life thus establishes a relation that defines the political realm and which Agamben calls, following Jean-Luc Nancy (1993), the relation of ban, or abandonment. Bare life is produced in and through this fundamental act of sovereignty in the sense that being included in the political realm precisely by virtue of being excluded.' (Hussain and Ptacek 2000: 496)

"Bare life," therefore, is constituted by the act of exclusion; it is a productive negative relation, what Agamben enigmatically calls "the relation of no relation". For Thomas Yingling (1997, see also Bordowitz 2004) the discourses of AIDS as a disease of gay men, and thus one about which the "general" population should not worry, worked to produce a "general" population as normatively heterosexual by placing gay men in an abandoned and excluded state. Viewed this way, Gay identity politics surrounding AIDS deaths were attempts to restore Gay men to the category of the human, to attach to their bodies rights and a political identity. These are attempts, in other words, to shift the relationship of Gay identity from

being included in the act its exclusion – what Butler (1993) terms the function of abjection in her theory of heteronormativity - into one that is included by virtue of being included. Politicizing AIDS deaths were attempts to accord to gay men as an identity group the status of full subjects/citizens (Crimp 2002, Altman 1998, O’Neil 2001, Duttman 1996). However, insofar as this politics constituted a Gay identity through the symbolic production of AIDS deaths it did so precisely at the expense of the Real of the individual. Symbolic AIDS deaths were not individual AIDS deaths so much as they were deaths demonstrative of the transcendent commonality of the category of Gay political identity produced in the common state of abandonment. Haver insists that this transcendence is at the expense of the corporality of the body:

‘The corpse, that scrap of the Real around which the historicization of every mourning is structured, can only figure for thought as that essentially unthinkable excess or surplus that is materiality in absolute nontranscendence. First, no intersubjective relation with the corpse is thinkable or even imaginable; second, the corpse necessarily figures as what exceeds the integral unity of the Imaginary “body”, precisely because the corpse is that “is what is” of what is. The corpse is therefore the surplus or excess of identity and indeed, of being; in its materiality, the surplus of ideality...The corpse is an absolute resistance to transcendence, the Real that is unsublatable. Insofar as it is a “figure” or “image,” the corpse is the figure or image of the impossibility of figurality. But the corpse is also that without which there can be no work of mourning, no thought of the binary opposition between life and death.’ (Haver 1996: 67)

The key point here is that AIDS corpses were not individual deaths but deaths symbolic of the privilege of unmarked heteronormativity. This transcendence of the individuality of the body achieved through the symbolic production of death is why Crimp (2002), Yingling (1997), Duttman (1996) and Haver (1996) insist that gay identity legitimated itself through the AIDS crisis. But as Haver goes on to worry what happens when AIDS is no longer understood as a moment of crisis?:

‘...the so called phenomena of AIDS has become very much part of the texture of the quotidian, central to our commonsense perceptions of the way the world is, and thereby to our sense of commonality. For example, many of our undergraduates have never known and perhaps will never know, sex without latex; we are now being urged to think of HIV seropositivity, and indeed of “AIDS itself,” as a chronic condition on the order of diabetes; we are, in short, becoming persuaded that AIDS belongs to the normative rather than the extraordinary, that AIDS is chronic rather than a crisis. We have

erected, perhaps in place of other erections, entire structures of intelligibility and comprehensibility on and around the pandemic, structures that themselves render AIDS normative and routine: the business of AIDS, constructed and carried on around an impossible object, has become – like genocide, nuclear terror, racism, misogyny, and heteronormativity (or what I would prefer to call orthosexuality) – business as usual.’

If AIDS is now normative, as the bug chaser Carlos insists, which is to say if the PLWA refuses to die (symbolically at least), then how is an identity politics constituted in relation to the symbolic production of AIDS death possible? This question, I think, is at the crux of NZAF’s effacement of the space of the HIV+ body in the “Negative Role Model” campaign. Insofar as the PLWA cannot be constituted in the space of the ideal, which is to say insofar as the PLWA can never be fully subsumed into an identity category that transcends all other particularities and differences, then the HIV+ body itself reveals the impossibility of gay identity outside of the ideal. Or perhaps it is better to say that identity is itself an already compromised and impossible political function for those seeking ‘reassurance about the parameters of liberal thought and politics’ (Davis 2002: 89).

The relationship between “identity” as a reassuring political category and the PLWA as an impossible space for grounding identity has been of concern to queer theorists (e.g. Duttman 1996, Haver 1996, Yingling 1997). In his very short essay “The Oncology of Ontology,” for instance, the late cultural theorist Thomas Yingling asks what AIDS might mean for the ontology of identity. At first this seems to be something of a simple rhetorical question – surely if AIDS prefigures corporeal death so too must it announce the eventual destruction of the materiality of this identity, even if it temporarily produces the category of PLWA. Yet what might AIDS mean for this as a stable and identifiable “I” and for the body that is presumed to be self-identical to that “I”? While we now speak of PLWA – indeed we anxiously argue for the urgency of their plight – the relationship between the “I” and their body (or vector of HIV) remains under-theorized, as Garcia Duttman (1996) stresses. Psychoanalytically at least the “I” is the supposed discursive transcendence of the body (and thus the becoming of the subject through the entering of the realm of the symbolic), yet the PLWA is always an “I” marked by the body that fails, like all bodies in the process of what Eric Michaels (1997) calls “unbecoming”, to perform this transcendence. The identity PLWA is an “I” that remains entombed in a body for which transcendence into symbolic identity remains impossible. As the body overdetermined by its subjection to the immediate specter of death the HIV+ body impales the subject upon the founding moment of its own impossibility:

‘That is the *thing* of AIDS, it is the signifier through which we understand the cancer of being, the oncology of ontology – not only

in its threat to our being, its announcement that we are moving toward non-being, indeed are already inscribed with it, in it...But also that it itself is deeply not identical, never quite the same, appearing under different guises, none of which is a disguise, following circuitous routes into visibility and action. It is the disease that announces the end of identity.’ (Yingling 1997: 15)

The end of identity, which is to say the point at which the body can no longer sustain the fiction of the “I”, is the radical political challenge of AIDS-as-post-crisis. This is also the starting point for a queer response to AIDS (Edelman 2003). While the cultural politics of AIDS has been understood largely in terms of desire – excessive, deviant, Othered desires as well as the regressive, homophobic, racist desires of the conservative cultural right – Yingling insists we pay attention to the cultural politics of non-identity:

‘we might ask – through Lacan and others – about the mirror stage and the relation of the “I” to its body, for we encounter in living with AIDS the production of non-subjects, people for whom the mirroring illusions of discourse are broken: the host body in this case continually reminds its subject – with every glance in the mirror – of the distance between the “I” and its lesions, and of the fact that the lesions may not be subsumed into any transcendence... [AIDS] foreground[s] the impossibility of speaking the condition of loss being written into (and onto) the body. So it is not desire that is in question, but identity: the whole problem of a disappearing body, of a body quite literally shitting itself away. That is AIDS’ (Yingling 1997: 16).

No language can ever be adequate to the experiences of non-identity. Indeed, can one speak of “experience,” and especially the experience of loss, without presupposing a coherent subject of that experience that is somehow imagined as constituted prior to the loss? Without this imagining can this loss, in any sense, be Real? Viewed this way the political memorializing of AIDS losses (such as the Names AIDS quilt) is an attempt at a recuperation of the possibility of speaking of loss. The political functions of mourning AIDS deaths attempts to confer subjecthood or “humanity” to the space of the AIDS corpse and thereby to the commonality of gay identity that the corpse witnesses. Put too simply, it is in the symbolism of AIDS death that a politics of the affirmation of Gay life emerges (Crimp 2002, Altman 1989).

Insofar, however, as this humanity is achieved through the production of a symbolic death what happens PLWA who does not die? This question, I think, is at the crux of the effacement of representations of PLWA in NZAF’s *Negative Role Model* campaign. It is, as the opening epigraph to this essay (drawn from David Worjnarowicz’s AIDS autobiography *Close to the Knives: a memoir of*

disintegration) suggests, a specifically liberal political move about the ownership of the representations of AIDS deaths. One reoccurring scene in Hograth's *The Gift* demonstrates the need within the political logics of prevention for PLWA to perform their death in ways that ensure they are not seen as 'just like everyone else'. In this reoccurring scene a group of four middle-aged HIV+ gay white men talk about the how efforts not to offend HIV+ people result in a romanticizing of the realities of living with AIDS. They insist that prevention efforts fail because they refuse to 'tell the awful truth' of AIDS – ASO's do not own the representation of AIDS but instead allow them to be hijacked by PLWA and pharmaceutical companies who insist on the idea of PLWA as sexy, happy, healthy, active and 'just like everyone else'. For these four it is both the sex-positive approaches of ASO's and drug companies as well as HIV+ men that are responsible for increased infection by failing to advertise/perform their death appropriately, spectacularly, tragically, and publicly. In their view the problem is that PLWA refuse to play the macabre symbolic role of the exceptionalism of their death, a role that might rescript AIDS as post-crisis. For these four men the problem is that within AIDS as post-crisis death is invisible, it is routine, is it even death at all? For these four men this routinization of death – a routinization performed by claiming PLWA are 'just like every body else' – is ultimately murderous.

Following Agamben's (1998 and 2002) reworking of Foucauldian ideas about biopolitics it can be argued that the specificity of modern regimes of liberal sovereignty rests not the in ability of the sovereign "to make die" but rather in the command "to make live." The governance logics of HIV prevention are a clear example of this – as a shadow state organization NZAF is fundamentally an agent of the liberal biopolitics of the Nation State and as such it seeks to interpolate a population through the political logic of identity (as what Davis (2002) has called a necessary compromise function) who self-govern their sexual practice. In this regard Agamben's (1998: 121) debt to Foucault is evident:

'It is almost as if, starting from a certain point, every decisive political event were double sided: the spaces, the liberties, and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with the central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of the individuals' lives within the state order, thus offering a new and more dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves.'

This 'new and more dreadful foundation' for the inscription of individuals in the sovereign power from which they seek liberation is achieved precisely through the production of a gay identity politics emerging from the AIDS crisis. AIDS deaths proved Gays and Lesbians were not like everyone else at the same time as it legitimated claims for us to seen as 'just like everyone else' (the frequency with which we now hear AIDS does not know difference is demonstrative of this). This

contradiction in identity politics, as Wendy Brown (1995 and 2001) argued presents something of a crisis for political movements that seek to affirm difference. Political claims of identity politics seek to valorize difference while disavowing the political significance of their difference, a kind of claim to difference without difference. For Brown this is something akin to a Freudian understanding of Melancholia because it is a politics that works against the resolution of the political logics of loss, what she has famously called ‘wounded attachments’:

‘where do the culturally and historically specific elements of politicized identities investment in itself, and especially in its own history of suffering, come into conflict with the need to give up these investments, to engage in something of a Nietzschean “forgetting” of this history, in pursuit of an emancipatory democratic project?’ (Brown 1995: 55)

At issue for Brown is that identity politics solidify the liberal sovereign power from which they seek freedom. Sovereignty here is liberalism’s investment in the

‘white masculine middle-class ideal, [without which] politicized identities would forfeit a good deal of their claims to injury and exclusion, their claims to the political significance of their difference...Put the other way around, politicized identities generated out of liberal, disciplinary societies, insofar as they are premised on exclusion from a universal ideal, require that ideal, as well as their exclusion from it, for their own continuing existence as identities’ (Brown 1995: 61-65).

Abandoning a politics of loss is also the point where the politics of Gay constituted through this politicization of AIDS losses is thrown into radical crisis. As I have argued in this paper it is the melancholic attachment to identity categories, or a politics of the ownership of AIDS death, that transforms the materiality of the corpse into the ideal of lost “Gay”. This loss can perform the transcendence that the HIV+ body was incapable of performing. It stands to reason, therefore, that the threat posed by PLWA is that the route to this transcendence – a symbolically constituted death – is excluded; hence the need for the evisceration of the HIV+ body within AIDS politics. But for Brown the solution is not some kind nihilism, nor is it an abandonment of a commitment to transforming injustices. Rather, we must move beyond the identitarian commitments that help to (re)produce these injustices:

‘identitarian political projects are very real effects of late modern modalities of power, but as effects, they do not fully express its character and so do not adequately articulate its condition; they are symptoms of a certain fragmentation of suffering, and as suffering

lived as identity rather than as generic injustice or domination – but suffering cannot be resolved at the identitarian level.’ (Brown 2001: 39)

NZAF might, in other words, not offer Nathan Brown as the role model for the liberal Gay self whose practices of self-governance will promise an end of the horrific realities of rising HIV rates in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Instead we should argue that AIDS-as-post-crisis reveals the ongoing purchase of homophobia, racism and the murderous inadequacies of a neoliberal healthcare system in New Zealand and elsewhere. We should direct our energies to transforming these institutionalized structures rather than intoning gay youth to work within them. This is not a naive argument for somehow getting outside structures of power but rather for recognizing that identities are structured through them. Recognizing the complicity of identity with the power structures of productive of it is not a call for abandoning politics but rather a mandate for thinking a politics of non-identity (Halberstam 2005, Edelman 2004, Butler 2004). The embodied space of PLWA *should* (to the fullest normative weight of this word) always generate these kinds of political difficulties. Insofar as PLWA continue to be a problematic space for NZAF they remain a material manifestation of the limits of limits of identity politics.

Acknowledgements:

Sincere thanks are extended to the Auckland staff of the New Zealand AIDS Foundation, especially Tony Hughes (Research Director) and Vern Keller (the most generous Librarian I could have wished for.) Thanks also to Michael Brown, Robin Kearns, Vincent Del Casino and Lawrence Berg who all provided valuable comments on the paper. Travel assistance for this research was provided by a Howard Martin graduate research grant from the University of Washington.

References:

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2002. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, New York: Zone Books.
- Altman, Denis. 1988. ‘Legitimizing through disaster: AIDS and the Gay movement’. In, Elizabeth Fee and Daniel Fox (eds.), *AIDS: The Burdens Of History*. Berkley: University of California Press, pp. 301-315.

- Berlant, Lauren. 1997. *The Queen Of America Goes To Washington City*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. 1998. Sex in public. *Critical Inquiry* 24(2), 547-567.
- Bersani, Leo. 1988. 'Is the rectum a grave?' In, Douglas Crimp, (ed.) *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, pp 197-222.
- Bersani, Leo. 1990. *Homos*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bordowitz, Greg. 2003. *The Aids Crisis is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986-2003*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Brown, Michael. 1997. *Replacing Citizenship: AIDS Activism and Radical democracy*. New York: Guilford.
- Brown, Wendy. 1995. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, Wendy. 2001. *Politics Out of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Crimp, Douglas. 1988. How to have promiscuity in an epidemic. In, Douglas Crimp (ed.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, pp. 237-271.
- Crimp, Douglas. 1989. Mourning and militancy. *October*, 51: 3-189.
- Crimp, Douglas. 2002. *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Crimp, Douglas. 2003. 'Melancholia and moralism'. In, David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (eds.), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkley: University of California Press. pp. 188-202.
- Davis, Lennard. 2002. *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism & Other Difficult Positions*. New York: New York University Press.

- Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Freeman, Gregory A. 2003. 'In search of death'. *Rolling Stone* February 6th 44-48.
- Garcia Duttman, Alexander. 1996. *At Odds With Aids: Thinking and Talking About a Virus*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Halberstam, Judith. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place*. New York: New York University Press.
- Harver, William. 1996. *The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hogarth, Mary. 2002. *The Gift*. Dream Out-Loud Productions. Los Angeles.
- Hussain, Nasser and Melissa Ptacek. 2000. "Thresholds: Sovereignty and the sacred". *Law and Society Review* 34(2), 495-515.
- Meeks, Chet. 2001. Civil Society and the Sexual Politics of Difference." *Sociological Theory* 19(3), 325-343.
- Michaels, Eric. 1994. *Unbecoming*. Paul Foss (ed.). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ministry of Health. 2006. *AIDS New Zealand*, No. 57, February 2006. Wellington.
- Mitchell, Katharyne. 2006. 'Geographies of identity: the new exceptionalism'. *Progress in Human Geography*, 30(1), 95-106.
- O'Neil, John. 2001. 'Horror autotoxicux: the dual economy of AIDS'. In, Ruth Holiday and John Hassard (eds.), *Contested Bodies*. New York: Routledge, pp. 179-185.
- NZAF. 2004. *Negative Role Model*, Press release, June 14th 2004, Auckland. <http://www.nzaf.org.nz/CampaignDetail.asp?ArticleID=282>
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Tun, Waimar, David Celentano, David Vlahov and Steffanie Strathdee. 2003. Attitudes toward HIV treatments influence unsafe sexual and injection practices. *AIDS* 17, 1953-1962.
- Weston, Kath. 1991. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. New York: Columbia UP.

WHO. 2006. *HIV Surveillance Data*. www.who.int/countries/en

Wojnarowicz, David. 1991. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. New York: Vintage.

Yingling, Thomas E. 1997. *AIDS and the National Body*. Robyn Wiegman (ed.) Durham: Duke University Press.