

#25

“MY PROOF OF LIFE”: HIV AS REIFICATION OF BLACK METAPHYSICS IN DANEZ SMITH’S *HOMIE**

Toni R. Juncosa
Universitat de Barcelona

Ilustración || **Andres Müller**

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toni.juncosa@gmail.com

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Abstract || Since the onset of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, literature has responded to the pandemic with works that testify to the devastating loss imposed on millions of people worldwide. After the implementation of effective antiretroviral treatment (ART) in the mid-90s, however, contemporary experiences of HIV might be expected to diverge their attention from grief and mourning to more “positive” emotions. The aim of this paper is to consider such a potential paradigm shift among new generations of HIV+ people with access to ART. To do so, it explores Danez Smith’s lyric approach to a 21st-century racialized experience of HIV, attempting to read it as constructive rather than destructive, without leaving intersectionality aside, in light of both Afropessimism and Queer Optimism.

Keywords || Danez Smith | HIV/AIDS | Queer Optimism | Afropessimism | 21st-century Poetry

«My Proof of Life»: el VIH como reificación de la metafísica negra en *Homie* de Danez Smith

Resumen || Desde la aparición del VIH/SIDA en la década de 1980, la literatura ha respondido a la pandemia con trabajos que dan testimonio de la devastadora pérdida impuesta a millones de personas en todo el mundo. Sin embargo, después de la implementación de un tratamiento antirretroviral eficaz (TAR) a mediados de los años noventa, es de esperar que las experiencias contemporáneas del VIH desviarán su atención del dolor y el duelo hacia emociones más «positivas». El objetivo de este artículo es considerar este potencial cambio de paradigma entre las nuevas generaciones de personas VIH+ con acceso al TAR. Para ello explora el enfoque lírico que lleva a cabo Danez Smith de la experiencia racializada del VIH del siglo XXI, e intenta leer esta experiencia como constructiva en lugar de destructiva, sin dejar de lado la interseccionalidad y considerando en este contexto las perspectivas del afropesimismo y del optimismo queer.

Palabras clave || Danez Smith | VIH/SIDA | Optimismo queer | Afropesimismo | Poesía del siglo XXI

«My Proof of Life»: VIH com a reificació de la metafísica negra a *Homie* de Danez Smith

Resum || Des de la seva aparició als anys huitanta, la literatura ha respost a la pandèmia de VIH/SIDA amb treballs que testimonien la devastadora pèrdua patida per milions de persones arreu del món. Després de la implementació de tractaments antiretrovirals efectius (TAR) a mitjans dels anys noranta, tanmateix, podria esperar-se que les experiències contemporànies de VIH canviaren la seva atenció des de l'afecció i el dol a emocions més «positives». L'objectiu d'aquest article és considerar el potencial canvi de paradigma entre les noves generacions de gent seropositiva amb accés a TAR. A tal efecte, l'article explora l'aproximació lírica que Danez Smith fa a l'experiència racialitzada de VIH al segle XXI, intentant llegir aquesta experiència com constructiva en lloc de destructiva, sense deixar de banda la interseccionalitat, i en el context de l'afropesimisme i de l'optimisme queer.

Paraules clau || Danez Smith | VIH/SIDA | Optimisme queer | Afropesimisme | Poesia segle XXI

The eternally loading screen that is blackness
waiting to be called other than absence of.

Justin Phillip Reed

0. Introduction: Poetry in the “Post-Crisis” Era

2021. Forty years have passed since the slow but relentless outbreak of a pandemic that would mark contemporary history with its indelible imprint. On June 5, 1981, the US Center for Disease Control published an article describing five rare cases of *Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia* in young, previously healthy, white men. This was the first official report of what would later come to be known as HIV/AIDS. Since then, over thirty-two million people have died from AIDS-related health complications, and to this day up to one million continue to die yearly due to lack of access to medication (UNAIDS, 2020). However, the advent of effective antiretrovirals in 1996—the “pharmaceutical threshold” (Pearl, 2013)—has made it possible for many to lead healthy lives with HIV in the “post-crisis” period (Kagan, 2018).

Among them is Forward-prize laureate Danez Smith, who self-describes as a “Black, Queer, Poz writer and performer” (Smith, n.d.)². Smith’s early work is in direct dialogue with and pays heartfelt homage to the legacy of prominent voices in Black American literature: Audre Lorde’s poetic meditations on sexual empowerment, accounts of intersectionality *avant la lettre* and political struggle permeate Smith’s creative production, as do James Baldwin’s insightful explorations of the Black, queer body’s development in the religious contexts of Black Pentecostalism³. But it is to Essex Hemphill and Assotto Saint’s lyric testimony of living with HIV as queer, Black Americans in the 90s that Smith’s latest writing shows a most earnest debt⁴.

Regrettably, the creative production by such late poets was both fueled and extinguished by the AIDS crisis; hence the crucial role played by loss in their writing⁵. Contrastingly, Smith’s work—as that of Jericho Brown’s or L. Lamar Wilson’s—stems from the contemporary “privilege” of having access to antiretroviral treatment. Nonetheless, the positive HIV diagnosis explored in Smith’s *Don’t Call Us Dead* (2017) does certainly trigger a profound investment in loss⁶, and critics have adequately read it as an example of “black pastoralism” (Haines, 2019) and of the “Black Lives Matter elegy” (Lennon, 2020; Austin et al., 2020). Moreover, in this collection the speaker juxtaposes HIV and the police brutality persisting in the 21st century as byproducts of the same systemic white supremacy. But reducing Smith’s account of HIV exclusively to loss would perpetuate a conceptual association which today should seem, at least, outdated. If it is true that poetry can find beauty amid the most heartrending of situations, Smith’s picture of HIV is no exception.

After an almost devout dedication to loss in *Don’t Call Us Dead*, Smith’s following volume *Homie* (2020a) focuses on the healing constructiveness of friendship. HIV does occasionally feature in it, but when it is mentioned, the speaker does not approach it in exclusively “negative” terms. In “old

confession & new", for instance, the speaker's traumatic reaction to the positive diagnosis in the past is contrasted with their serene acknowledgement of it in the present: "now that it's an old fact, can it be useful? / that which hasn't killed you yet can pay the rent / if you play it right" (Smith, 2020a: 59). While HIV has not stopped being perceived as a potential threat which "hasn't killed you yet", there is a chance that the speaker might profit from their serostatus. Controversial as the reasons behind such shift may be, the lyric I's understanding of their diagnosis has taken a considerable turn. HIV no longer evokes almost exclusive images of death and decay as it does in *Don't Call Us Dead*; it no longer calls for protection and self-defensiveness only⁷. Instead, loss proves not to be incompatible with gain because, rather than ineluctable devastation, HIV can also be a promise of abeyant constructiveness. In a similar vein to "old confession & new," "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" shows acceptance for HIV, but most importantly this poem also claims it as a defining element of the self, and even professes love for it:

[...] you learn to love it. yes.
 i love my sweet virus. it is my proof

 of life, my toxic angel, wasted utopia
 what makes my blood my blood. (Smith, 2020a: 33)

But how to interpret such "love"? How does HIV become a "sweet virus"? Can HIV truly come to be perceived so positively that, as the title itself states, even its side effects are longed for? And what might the wish for side effects stated in the title be indicative of, if not a masochistic wish for a reification of stigma? Might the speaker's life be so unbearable as to find solace in the prospect of a death from untreated HIV giving way to AIDS?

Scholarly writing about HIV/AIDS literature has predominantly focused on the experience of loss, frequently recurring to the psychoanalytical paradigm of mourning and melancholia in its analysis⁸. Whereas this approach can be adequate for a literature so prominently featuring death, it is in slight conflict with those instances of HIV that—as Smith's lines above show—no longer perceive the virus as exclusively threatening. Thus, to continue to universalize loss as the central event portrayed in HIV/AIDS literature would fail to include a much wider range of experiences, such as those of people who can now lead healthy lives with HIV. If the devastating impact of the pandemic must continue to be acknowledged and explored, it is also necessary to consider how in the 21st century HIV may also offer other possibilities.

In *Queer Optimism*, Michael Snediker shows regret that most analyses of queer literature associate queerness with negative affect: "[m]elancholy, self-shattering, shame, the death drive: these, within queer theory, are categories to conjure with" (Snediker, 2009: 4). Against this pessimistic tendency, which he finds "less than practicable (or survivable) in lived experience" (13), Snediker chooses to work through the lens of optimism. In his close-reading of poetry by Hart Crane, Emily Dickinson, Jack Spicer, or Sylvia Plath, Snediker insists on finding room for hope and constructiveness, refusing to allow these writers' somber

fame to limit the reception of their work. The analysis of Smith's verse that I propose here follows Snediker's path. While my optimistic reading is interested in finding hope amid the wreckage of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, I do not wish to suggest that any of my interpretations actually correspond, in unambiguous or restrictive terms, to the poet's stated intention when writing these texts. Mine is merely one of the many readings that Smith's work makes possible, and my aim is to explore Smith's verse in search of such possibilities.

Increasingly removed from the devastating losses at the end of the century, can 21st-century *poz* youths come to perceive their status as other than loss? Must HIV continue to be lived as a traumatic, destructive element within the self, or could it somehow be lived as constructive? In what follows, I want to consider the possibility and implications of living with HIV as a potentially beneficial experience. With this in mind, I will be reading Smith's "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" (included in *Homie*) in dialogue with Queer Optimism as well as with the notion of social death recovered by Afropessimist thinkers. How may Queer Optimism illuminate, interact with or defy our understanding of HIV in the present? And how would this equation be affected by the racialization embodied in Smith's verse? What would an intersectional reading of Blackness and HIV look like through the double prism of Queer Optimism and Afropessimism?

1. HIV's Proof of Life

Divided into three sections of eight couplets each, "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" explores a wide range of emotional responses to being HIV positive. If "old confession & new" showcases the contrast between an initially fearful reaction to the diagnosis and its currently fruitful possibilities, "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" takes the reader on a more detailed journey through the fluctuations of self-perception in relation to HIV. The poem starts with a wish for a tangible manifestation of the virus in the asymptomatic speaker's body, an idea conveyed by both the title and the metaphor—already explored in *Don't Call Us Dead*—of HIV as pregnancy⁹: "i wish i knew the nausea, its thick yell // in the morning, pregnant proof / that in you, life swells" (Smith, 2020a: 33). But maternal instinct suddenly turns to filicide: "i'm not a mother, but i know what it is / to nurse a thing you want to kill // & can't" (2020a: 33). After this reference to the tragedy of Medea's story, the speaker drifts from the aforementioned "love" for their "sweet virus" to responsibility: "knew what could happen. needed / no snake. grew the fruit myself" (2020a: 34); from regret: "i braved the stupidest ocean. a man. / i waded in his stupid waters" (2020a: 33); to relief: "it felt like I got it / out the way, to finally know it up close" (2020a: 33). But the shifting tone of this piece settles on the acceptance and appreciation running up to the final image:

i want to live. think i mean it.
took the pill even on the days

i thought i wouldn't survive myself.
gave my body a shot. love myself

at least that much. thank you, me.
thank you, genvoya, my seafoam savior.

thank you, sick blood, my first husband, bff
dead river bright with salmon. (2020a: 34)

While each of the speaker's affective reactions to HIV deserves careful attention, the troubling thankfulness here shown offers most food for thought in relation to this paper's endeavor. As these lines clarify, the speaker's appreciation of HIV does not respond to anything like masochism or a "death drive". Reading the poem as suicidal would bump up against the explicit appreciation for Genvoya, the tablets taken as antiretroviral treatment, and even more specifically against the willingness to live on expressed in these lines.

As I am about to argue, the final couplet in this poem holds the key to the speaker's reconciliation, thankfulness and love expressed for the virus. Yet, this metaphor of the speaker's blood as a "dead river bright with salmon" offers two possible, antithetical interpretations. A first reading could attribute the causality of death to the threatening presence of HIV. The salmon would therefore symbolize dead T cells, their brightness here suggesting a devastation to the immune system. Static, floating fish—their scales reflecting sunlight on the surface of the river. Death clogging the speaker's veins, blood as a battlefield strewn with the casualties of massacred lymphocytes. From this perspective, the blood's sickness and the river's death are one and the same thing: the havoc wreaked by HIV's siege to self-preservation.

Against this idea, I prefer to suggest, controversially, that HIV is portrayed not as the causality of death but as a symbolic remedy to it. The final lines in the poem allow death to be perceived as a preexisting condition affecting the speaker before their HIV diagnosis. That is, in "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects", the river—the speaker's veins, their body—can be seen as always already "dead", yet this death is not *caused* by the "sick blood" inside it but in point of fact *challenged* by it. I am arguing that the blood is not "bright" with dead fish, but with thriving salmon sparkling as they swim upstream. The maritime imagery in the second section of the piece, where the speaker recounts how "i braved the stupidest ocean. a man. [...] took his stupid // fish into my stupid hands and bit into it" (33-34), already represents HIV as fish taken into the I, adding to my interpretation. From this perspective, the salmon at the end of the poem appear not as a metaphor for dead T cells, or for the speaker's immune system more generally, but as HIV itself. The closing image of salmon is thus not a synecdoche of the I as battling the virus but, rather, the virus within the I or, even further, the virus as enabling the I, as a part of the I which, paradoxically, reestablishes rather than threatens life.

2. The Meta-Aporia of (Social) Death

Before I continue my reading of this poem as representative of a life-giving experience of HIV, I need to clarify how it is possible for the speaker to perceive themselves as dead even before their diagnosis. As I have just claimed, the speaker's blood—and, by extension, the speaker themselves—can be understood as already dead. My suggestion does not respond to an idea of *actual* or *physical* death but to Orlando Patterson's notion of *social* death. Although Patterson's coinage refers to one of the main defining characteristics of slavery—alongside “natal alienation” and “dishonor” (Patterson, 1982)—, his spearheading contribution has been adopted by other contemporary thinkers as an accurate expression of the current social experience of Black Americans. In Patterson's text, social death refers to the fact that, under slavery, an individual has “no social existence outside of his master” (1982: 38). An enslaved person is “alienated from all ‘rights’ or claims of birth,” Patterson explains, so “he cease[s] to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order,” thus becoming “a social nonperson” (1982: 5). By this, Patterson does not mean that enslaved people are not human, or can have no social relations, but that they are not acknowledged as such by society at large and that their bonds have no social recognition nor legal support. However, as the work of other Black thinkers such as Judy (2020), Hartman (2008), Sexton (2011, 2015), Sharpe (2016), Warren (2015, 2018), Wilderson (2016, 2020), and Wynter (1994) testifies, Patterson's use of social death exclusively around active slavery limits its actual scope and representative potential.

Drawing on Patterson's concept, so-called Afropessimists propose that, at least for racialized people in the United States, social death did not finish with the end of slavery. Whereas Patterson's text regards manumission as concluding slavery through the recovery of freedom, Afropessimists have questioned the effective impact of that moment, arguing that the notion of social death applies not only to enslaved people but can be extended to their descendants as well, even among current generations. Afropessimists coincide with Patterson on the idea that enslaved peoples *outside the Americas* might have been able to return to their native land after manumission, recovering social and geographical bonds blurred by years of forceful labor. Yet, in the long wake of the Middle Passage¹⁰, Afropessimists specify that, for those taken to America, the recovery of an “original” state of “freedom” was and has always been impossible. In America, the routes from freedom to slavery are either untraceable or simply impossible to navigate due to generational, linguistic and cultural deracination. As Frank B. Wilderson III points out, there can never be “a prior meta-moment of plenitude” for Black Americans, “never a moment of equilibrium, never a moment of social life” (Wilderson, 2016: n.p.). Which is to say, Wilderson concludes, that “Blackness *is* social death” (2016: n.p.; emphasis Wilderson's).

Afropessimism's expansion of social death is founded upon the fallacy of manumission or, to put it in Wilderson's terms, based on the “failure” of “redemption” (2016: n.p.). “I, as Black person (if *person*, *subject*, *being* are terms we can use),” Wilderson states, “am both barred from the

denouement of redemption and, simultaneously, needed if redemption is to attain any form of coherence" (2016: n.p.). The problematic of redemption stems from the catch-22 of its narrative arc: from (a) freedom or equilibrium to (b) slavery or disequilibrium, back to (a) freedom/equilibrium/redemption. So how to *re*-gain something that has never been ours? How to go "back to" freedom? How to reach "plentitude" when there has never been a "meta-moment" of it? Wilderson clarifies:

The narrative arc of the slave who is *Black* (unlike Orlando Patterson's generic slave who may be of any race) is *not an arc at all*, but [...] a flat line that "moves" from disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored and/or rearticulated. To put it differently, the violence which both elaborates and saturates Black "life" is totalizing, so much so as to make narrative inaccessible to Blacks¹¹. (2016: n.p.; emphasis Wilderson's)

Significantly, Wilderson's bold claims are not a mere corroboration of social death. If Patterson blurs the line separating life and death, Afropessimists go a step further. In Wilderson's revision of Hegelian dialectics, "the dust up is not between the workers and the bosses, not between settler and the native, not between the queer and the straight, but between the living and the dead" (2016: n.p.). Calling into question the "social" in Patterson's consideration of the slave as a "social nonperson," Wilderson sees the dishonor and natal alienation that further constitute the status of the enslaved as characteristic of "abjection rather than [...] degradation" (2016: n.p.)¹². Afropessimists thus problematize not only the "livability" of the racialized, to use Judith Butler's (2004) term, but also their very ontological status. Wilderson's aforementioned doubt that "*person, subject*" and even "*being*" might be categories applicable to Black people does confirm the failure of redemption—of Patterson's manumission—but it also implies the broader impossibility of a Black metaphysics. It is from this position of distrust that Wilderson disputes Patterson, arguing that "there is no place like Europe to which Slaves can return as *Human beings*" (2016: n.p.; emphasis mine).

"[W]hat is the nature of a human being", asks Jared Sexton, "whose human being is put into question radically and by definition, a human being whose being human raises the question of being human at all?" (Sexton, 2011: 6). "[C]an blacks have life?", condenses Warren, "can black(ness) ground itself in the *being* of the human?" (Warren, 2020: 1-2). For Wilderson, answering these questions demands a confrontation of the "foundational belief" in the Humanities that "all sentient beings can be emplotted as narrative entities, that every sentient subject is imbued with historicity" (Wilderson, 2016: n.p.)¹³. Against this widespread assumption, he challenges "the idea that all beings can be redeemed" and accuses "historicity and redemption" of being "inherently anti-Black in that without the psychic and/or physical presence of a sentient being that is barred, *ab initio*, from narrative and, by extension, barred from redemption, the arc of redemption would lack any touchstones of cohesion" (2016: n.p.)¹⁴. If Black people are deprived of access to narrative as a metaphysical form, their ontological essence is also jeopardized. For Wilderson, there is little room for hesitation—Blackness

is marked by a “meta-aporia of narrative” which significantly portends an “absence of humanity” (2016: n.p.).

The contemporary persistence of social death is proven by the fact that to this day Black and Brown people continue to be treated as nonbeings by institutional powers. Perhaps its most jarring instance is, as a recent analysis of data collected between 2013 and 2018 states, that in the United States “young men of color face exceptionally high risk of being killed by police”, the highest lifetime risk being that of Black men, “about 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police over the life course than white men” (Edwards et al., 2020: 16794). The murders of Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, or George Floyd are the mere tip of an enormous, transhistorical iceberg, only visible thanks to the relentless effort of those who have persistently refused to forget¹⁵. Their names testify to the political vulnerability of racialized Americans, just as the work of Danez Smith, Claudia Rankine, or Patricia Smith corroborates the phenomenology of social death through poetry. It is undoubtedly outrageous, but not for that reason less true, that to this day many continue to embody the nonhuman status of the enslaved.

In Danez Smith’s poetry, the meta-aporia of Black metaphysics is ubiquitous. As early as in “black boy be,” the first poem in Smith’s *opera prima*, *[insert] boy*, the life of Black youths is said to be “like a nothing at all” (2014: 15). Further on, the speaker in “for black boys” wonders “how do you describe a son set / course to casket from birth?” to then conclude, “you have always been a dying thing” (2014: 19-20). The poet’s awareness of social death continues to be expressed throughout the book and spills into Smith’s following volumes. In “summer, somewhere,” the contradiction of such life-in-death is stated plainly: “dead is the safest i’ve ever been. / i’ve never been so alive.” (2017: 16). Even more specifically meaningful to our reading here, HIV is presented in most of Smith’s poems as inseparable from the speaker’s position as Black and queer. Conscious of the disproportionate ratio of queer, Black Americans living with HIV in the present and dead from AIDS in previous decades, the I in “every day is a funeral & a miracle” ponders

do i think someone created AIDS?
 maybe. i don’t doubt that
 anything is possible in a place
 where you can burn a body
 with less outrage than a flag (2017: 65)

Smith’s accusation is not new—in fact, it expands on Hemphill’s blunt “who wants us dead, / what purpose does it serve?” asked from the deadly first years of the pandemic in “When My Brother Fell” (Hemphill, 1992: 33)—, but current data continue to make room for asking such questions. As the succinctly titled “1 in 2” states in its first lines, “*On February 23rd, 2016, the CDC released a study estimating 1 in 2 black men / who have sex with men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime*” (Smith, 2017: 61). HIV is thus continuously associated to the (social) death of Black people in Smith’s lyric work. It is this recurring connection that makes “sometimes i wish i felt the side effects” stand out so vividly. The speaker in the poem self-depicts as dead, as a being whose very

being is called into question. However, death is here not a result of exposure to disease, but the effect of systemic anti-Blackness.

The commented final line in the poem, where the speaker's blood is a "dead river" attests to such a conception of the Black body. Similarly, the speaker's effort to give himself an opportunity ("gave my body a shot") implies the hardship and the continuous obstacles posed on Black bodies' literal struggle for survival. The body is here given an opportunity *despite* itself, so that remaining alive is a conscious *decision*, expressed in contrast with its supposedly natural relegation to social death. The fact that HIV is metaphorically expressed as childbearing in the poem also confirms this reading. The virus becomes "pregnant proof / that in you, life swells" (Smith, 2020a: 33) because viruses can only survive when hosted by a living being. HIV cannot be unless it is sustained by a body. In a way, the lyric I conceives the virus as much as the virus conceives the I. That is, the I can conceive (of) themselves not in spite of but thanks to the virus.

HIV appears in "sometimes i wish i felt the side effects" as salmon shining in glorious grace because it is given a space to thrive in. It is not just that sickness and death are not likened in the poem but, rather, that sickness challenges death. If the speaker shows such insistent appreciation for HIV, it is because the virus paradoxically threatens but also recovers the I's lost metaphysics. In this sense, HIV appears as a both intrusive and saving presence. The rest of the epithets to the virus in the poem—"my toxic angel, wasted utopia" (2020a: 33)—further illustrate HIV's powerful ambivalence: both protective and deadly, both intangible and real, a double-edgedness which can be extended to the whole notion of social death. The speaker's existence is proven by HIV and vice versa. The virus is, indeed, the speaker's "proof of life".

3. Hope, or the Beneficent Crisis of the Present

I have heretofore probed the possibilities and limitations of combining two schools of thought with such mutually-excluding names as Queer Optimism and Afropessimism. The centrality of hope in the opposition between optimism and pessimism—its presence in the former, lack in the latter—should indeed suggest their incompatibility. As I am about to argue, however, there *is* hope in Afropessimism, and my reading of Smith's poem shows, in fact, that these analytical approaches actually coincide and reinforce each other.

Afropessimism needs to be understood not as an attack on Black subjectivity or agency, but rather on those forms of power which deprive Black people of such qualities. It is not that Blacks "deserve" to be seen as essentially non-human *per se* but that Black existence problematizes the notion of human as it is generally conceived. Afropessimism highlights the faults in the ideological structures sustaining our understanding of what is categorized as human. It is a critical inquiry into those forms of power which systematically oppress entire sections of our population. As Sexton affirms,

nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system. (2011: 28)

In short, Sexton claims, “blackness is not the pathogen in afro-pessimism, the world is” (Sexton, 2011: 28). The task of Afropessimism is thus to acknowledge both the harrowing meta-aporia of Black metaphysics and, at the same time, to highlight the external cause of such ontological deprivation. Afropessimism does not deny Black power. Instead, it points to those structures which restrict it. Were these structures to fall, Blackness would not equal social death, nor negative metaphysics, nor life-in-death. Removed from its current context of systemic racism, police brutality, institutionalized anti-Blackness, and white supremacy, Blackness would be—in fact, can be—nothing other than life.

At first, the label accusatorily attributed to Afropessimism can be misleading. Wilderson’s “meta-aporia of narrative” and his resulting conclusion that redemption and historicity more generally are fallacies for Black people may certainly look like a hopeless denial of futurity. Associating hope exclusively to the future, however, would render Afropessimists’ critique altogether ineffectual. As Snediker points out in his introduction, “that hope definitionally exists futurally, [...] is the sort of temporal *donnée* against which Queer Optimism speaks” (2009: 16). And that is where Queer Optimism and Afropessimism meet—in their shared refusal to equate hope and future. For hope is not a passive, unengaged longing for the future. Instead, as Sara Ahmed notes,

hope involves a relationship to the present, and to the present as affected by its imperfect translation of the past. It is in the present that the bodies of subjects shudder with an expectation of what is otherwise; it is in the unfolding of the past in the present. The moment of hope is when the ‘not yet’ impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future. (Ahmed, 2004: 184)

Afropessimism is only pessimistic when it remains stuck in the distancing futurity of the possibility of social life. But, rather than denying the possibility of change, afropessimism must be read as pointing toward the only perspective from which change can be achieved—the present. By accentuating the current impossibility of a utopian, better future, Wilderson’s narrative dilemma forces our gaze back to the present where injustice is taking place, thus making room for the “not yet” from which political action must stem. This exact temporal shift is perfectly illustrated in Smith’s poem when the speaker reflects “i only knew how to live / when i knew how i’ll die. // i want to live” (34). In these lines, life is projected backward into the past: “knew how to live”; while the future is curtailed by the certainty of death: “knew how i’ll die”; but tension resolves in a third line claiming the present: “i want to live”. Temporality is initially explored both backward and forward, but in the end this dichotomy is solved by the speaker’s will.

In *Extravagant Abjection*, Darieck B. Scott argues that “neither the absolute past as defeat nor the absolute future as liberation and victory are the areas of anything other than directional emphasis—it is instead the fact that there *can be* movement toward one or another that is truly to be grasped” (2010: 51). It is that directional emphasis that Smith’s temporal readjustment showcases. That is the possibility of movement toward change that Afropessimism demands. Its apparent negation of the future is not so much a truncating denial of the possibility of change as an affirmation of and a call to an absolute presentness which we must seize if any livable future is to ever exist. In other words, by focusing on the impossibility of future recovery and underscoring the external sources of social death, afropessimist thought indicates a need to act in what Snediker calls “the beneficent crisis of the present, in which all such experiments must occur” (2009: 218).

Despite their ostensible irreconcilability, Queer Optimism and Afropessimism work toward the common goal of engaging in the destabilization of the rigid meliorism of future-oriented temporalities to indicate the distinctive potential of the present. Not so much ignoring the effects of the past on the present but actually inspired by the former’s ability to condition the latter, both critical trends urge us to immerse ourselves in the performative promise of what Scott calls the “future anterior”: the present’s capacity to condition the future. Believing in the possibilities of the future anterior, understanding that Afropessimism’s bold questioning of Black metaphysics is nothing but the necessary creation of a critical awareness laying the foundations of change, we can only agree with Sexton when he claims that “afro-pessimism is ‘not but nothing other than’ black optimism” (2011: 37).

As “sometimes i wish i felt the side effects” optimistically illustrates, Black metaphysics can be reified not in spite of but thanks to HIV. After the challenging experience of coming to terms with a positive HIV diagnosis in *Don’t Call Us Dead*, HIV is revisited and reconsidered in *Homie* from a new, more developed viewpoint. Throughout this volume, the virus continues at times to trigger images of mortality: “my blood brings me closer to death” (2020: 59); and antiretroviral treatment is embraced as “my miracle” (53). Death is not unfamiliar for the I, Smith insists, as being HIV+ implies being not “close” but “closer” to death, a comparative which proves the point of Afropessimism by showing death as already adjacent. Moreover, medical treatment is a “miracle” in its power to defy the perceived impossibility of survival. Yet, at the same time, such closeness to mortality as generated by contact with HIV accentuates the fact that, in spite of the undeniability of social death, the speaker is, for now, alive. It may be that the wish for side effects stated in the title of the poem I have been analyzing responds, simply, to a wish for a more constant reminder of such aliveness. Toward the end of the volume, after considering suicide as a shortcut to the “greater world” where “the rivers flow milk & honey / & hennessey & koolaid”, the lyric I in “my nig” chooses to remain alive: “none of that, just give me / the heaven of now” (68). As painful as life is, nothing is better than the “heaven” of the present.

Smith's posthuman embrace of HIV challenges traditional (anti-Black) epistemologies while also redirecting Afropessimism's attention to the politically charged present of the Black body's narrative arc. The poet's latest verse is invaluable in that it bears witness not only to racism and institutionalized violence against Black and Brown people in the United States, or to the persistent serophobia and stigma pervading our everyday lives, but also to the possibility to inhabit a hopeful present where the intricate intersection between racialization and HIV status can bear fruit. As I have argued elsewhere, in *Don't Call Us Dead* the threat of HIV triggers a wide range of self-defensive imagery expressing a perceived need to define the limits of the body (Juncosa, 2021). Contrastingly, in *Homie* the experience of seropositivity is strongly connected to hope, and "hope", Ahmed reminds us, "may expand the contours of bodies, as they reach towards what is possible" (2004: 185). The experience of the virus thus forces the speaker from the constriction of an uncertain future to the material truth of now. HIV's continuous reminder of mortality corroborates the meta-aporia of Black metaphysics, but this awareness situates the speaker in an almost absolute present where change can be sparked. Attesting to the importance of intersectionality for political strife, Smith's poetry shows that there is beauty to be found, but that beauty does not prevent nor hide inequality, and that our work against the tangible reality of social death must stem from the promise of the present. For a present in which life needs no more proof than life itself.

Notes

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² This paper respects Smith's preference for the gender-neutral pronoun "they".

³ See Melton, 2016.

⁴ See "Dear Essex" (Smith, 2019), "gay cancer" (Smith, 2020a: 60), and "my deepest and most ashamed apologies to Assotto Saint" (Smith, 2020b).

⁵ See Hemphill's *Ceremonies* (1992) and Saint's "Hooked for Life" (1991).

⁶ For an analysis of HIV as loss of freedom and imprisonment in Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead*, see Juncosa, 2019.

⁷ For an analysis of HIV as generating a need for protection and fortification imagery, see Juncosa, 2021.

⁸ See, for instance, Crimp, 1989; Cvetkovich, 2003; Ramazani, 1994; Pearl, 2013; or Zeiger, 1997.

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of HIV as a potential source of kinship in Smith's work in dialogue with Tim Dean's "blood brotherhood" (Dean, 2008), see Juncosa, 2021.

¹⁰ For an exhaustive consideration of the long-lasting impact of the Middle Passage and of slavery in US society, as well as an in-depth exploration of the term "wake", see Sharpe 2018.

¹¹ Douglass & Wilderson (2016) use the same logical pattern in their comparison of Black American social death to Elaine Scarry's account of torture. For Scarry, torture deprives the torture victim of all subjectivity, but such subjectivity can ideally be recovered in the process of healing—again, from equilibrium to disequilibrium, back to equilibrium. As Douglass & Wilderson state, this narrative arc does not apply to Blacks insofar as "the black arrives at the torture chamber in a psychic state too deracinated to be credited to a prior torture" (2016: 121). It is not that the authors equate Blackness to torture. Rather, they question the universal availability of equilibrium on which the idea of recovery is grounded.

¹² The notion of abjection, like that of pathology, offers abundant food for thought in its constructed relation to Blackness, queerness, and HIV. On queer Blackness as

abjection, see Craig, 2017; Reid-Pharr, 2001; and Scott, 2010. On Blackness as pathology, see Moten, 2008; Sexton, 2011; and Sharpe, 2012.

¹³ For more on Blackness as sentient being, see Judy, 2020.

¹⁴ Wilderson's statement that redemption is "inherently anti-Black" is as daring as it is radical. We must consider that the "narrative arc" which he deems inaccessible for Black people is central to the Pauline account of crucifixion around which African American Fundamentalist Protestantism revolves. While also an important reference for communal ontological structuration for many branches of Judeo-Christianity, the notion of redemption is deeply rooted in the Black American imaginary as a source of hope in future progress. Wilderson's rejection of it is particularly poignant and has enormous implications for Black politics. See Patterson, 1982: 66-76.

¹⁵ For a detailed account of the impact of journalistic insistence on not allowing these cases to go into oblivion, see Ramsby, 2020.

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