# Discussing the Undiscussable: Reflecting on the "End" of AIDS

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# DISCUSSING THE UNDISCUSSABLE

## Reflecting on the "End" of AIDS

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*"Not-about-AIDS," by David Román. GLQ 6.1 (2000).*

Let's talk about 1996 as a moment. Before July 1996, before the eleventh International AIDS Conference in Vancouver, a diagnosis with AIDS, or indeed HIV, was a get-your-things-in-order, face-your-mortality, get-ready-to-hop-on-the-rickety-US-healthcare-ride sort of situation. Although AZT and DDI were being used somewhat effectively in certain cases, their effectiveness varied widely among patients and lead almost inevitably to HIV growing resistant to the drugs, higher viral loads, lower CD4 counts, opportunistic infections, and long battles with disease. I was going to write something like "well, you know the rest," but part of this piece is that you might not.

David Román's article "Not-about-AIDS" (2000), from the first issue of volume 6, not only reframed a watershed moment that fundamentally changed gay male culture but also pointed to the importance of performativity and performance and its impact on queer (and hegemonic) culture before and after combination therapy with protease inhibitors. Most importantly, he marks a discursive shift in the national conversation about HIV/AIDS that places the crisis either "over" or "elsewhere" and a shift in gay and lesbian leadership disassociating with the HIV/AIDS.

There is a certain amnesia attached to this time that many intellectuals didn't quite expect. Román highlights how the innovation in treatment created a discursive shift where lack of media interest, lack of public interest, and the call for post AIDS-as-crisis models as a response to HIV triggered radical rearticula-

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tion in queer culture. As Román's article points out, the post-1996 moment pinned white queer communities against other minority communities, and it spurred a very nonqueer reinforcement of racialized and class-related boundaries.[1] Access to prevention, to medicine, and to treatment was (and is) significantly affected by race, class, and geographic location. In 1996, while many in mass media were celebrating the "End of AIDS," others knew all too well that, as Mario Cooper stated, "AIDS isn't over. For many in America, it's just beginning" (quoted in Román 2000: 6).

Indeed, the circuit parties and revival of sex clubs that Andrew Sullivan problematically refers to as the "post-AIDS gay life-style" were spaces of exclusion and transmission. Circuit parties and raves reflect a moment in gay culture where body image (including racialized standards of beauty) were tied closely with gay male culture. Sullivan (1996: 55) asserts, "Sexual danger translated into sexual objectification, the unspoken withering of the human body transformed into a reassuring inflation of muscular body mass." Throw into the mix the use of steroids, ecstasy, and ketamine to bulk up, push risk completely from the mind, and facilitate finding beauty in yourself and others, and you have a recipe for terrible morning-afters: depression, exclusion, and the cult of the masc, swoll, straight-acting white guy.

Meanwhile, off the dance floor and into the conference room, Román (2000: 8) signals a decline in monetary donations for AIDS-related services and prevention because of "AIDS burnout, the growth in non-AIDS-related organizations catering to lesbian and gay communities, and the sense that AIDS is over." What's more, 1996 marks the beginning of the legislative push to criminalize HIV transmission.[2] These acts of criminalization have yet to be successfully fought by activists in the United States. In terms of queer radical community formation and freedom from state control of sexuality, these pieces of legislation reveal the legal precarity of poz queers' sexualities. Surely this is of concern to gay and lesbian leadership, right?

Combination therapy and the call for the "end" of AIDS in 1996 allowed for gay conservatism and splintered the poz community and AIDS survivors from mainstream gay culture. The medication that permitted HIV to become "a manageable disease" became controlled by medical and state apparatuses that determined access, price, distribution, and production. In a way, 1996 marks a shift from queer activism operating outside official channels, a return to structural inequalities that disproportionally affect queers of color, and a call to forget the past and embrace the future.

Román (2000: 8), in the face of this call to forget, insists on the importance of performance as "a powerful means on intervening in the public understanding and experience of AIDS and of countering neglect of it by the larger culture." In this way, we can understand performances as a powerful mode of agency to craft discourse to counter hegemony. Consensus can always be swayed, and one of our many weapons is memory. It is key for the HIV/AIDS crisis to be remembered not only as part of the past but also continuing in a different form into our present. Memory entrepreneurs—a lovely name for activism—could potentially critically remember (and solicit remembering) the shift that took place in 1996 in order to show continuity *and* change in queer culture.[3] How come it has been so thoroughly forgotten?

It's not uncommon here in rural Iowa to see faded stickers on trucks proclaiming "Never Forget" with reference to the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers. Everyone knows about these victims and mourns them. The Towers' memorial site is a pilgrimage location that ensures the active reproduction of memory. I ask myself, where is the memorial to the approximately 692,789 people who have died of AIDS in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016: 83)? Surely, this is cause for pause and media attention. Yet the most avid news consumer could tell you much more about the flu. What is alarming is that not only have we lost memory of the lived realities of the AIDS crisis, HIV and AIDS are systematically displaced in discourse as pertaining to the past or pertaining to "elsewhere"—either the Third World or the Third World within the First World.

Román is right to show the embodied theorization present in the dance performances of Neil Greenberg and Bill T. Jones, and their complex contributions to discourse on AIDS. They not only memorialize different moments in the crisis; they draw viewers into affectively charged dialogues with the national conversation on HIV/AIDS. Jones was perhaps one of the most well-known HIV-positive dance performers, whose work dealt directly with AIDS and the discourses surrounding it. Román writes about how Jones casually or accidentally disclosed his HIV status during an interview for the *Advocate* in 1990, and ever since, Román (2000: 20) states, "Jones is always already read in the context of AIDS." While Román does not delve further into this point, it is important to recognize how HIV status could typecast, limit, or censure artists, performers, or activists who intend to contribute to a conversation on HIV/AIDS. Indeed, Jones faced cruel criticism, especially once his real-life sero-status became public knowledge, once he was always already read in the context of AIDS. In many ways, this made him always already read as victim, not just positive or a PWA. Arlene Croce famously refused

to review *Still/Here*, but wrote an extensive piece in the *New Yorker*, without having seen the piece, questioning whether it was art. Her piece is perhaps one of the most powerful examples of discursive backlash.

Its title, "Discussing the Undiscussable," poses the question, "When players in a production aren't just acting out death but are really dying—as in Bill T. Jones's "*Still/Here*"—is it really art?" She accuses Jones of "putting himself beyond the reach of criticism," of crossing "the line between theater and reality," and of producing "victim art" (Croce 1994). She claims that Jones's work is "literally undiscussable," but somehow she manages to fill the pages with such gems as: "In quite another category of undiscussability are those dancers I'm *forced* to feel sorry for because of the way they present themselves: as dissed blacks, abused women, or disfranchised homosexuals—as performers, in short, who make out of victimhood victim art. I can live with the flabby, the feeble, the scoliotic. But with the righteous I cannot function at all" (ibid.). Her coup de grâce is to perform a logical 180-degree pivot: she takes a break from attacking the self-absorbed egotism of "victim" art to claim that this popular, philistine faux art is indeed the end of postmodern dance at a turn to "utilitarian art" and "twentieth century collectivism." Indeed, it is at once self-centered and collectivist. Discursively, she dismisses Jones's work for its clarity of message and clear connection to reality, maintaining that any aesthetic value within is "undiscussable." It begs the question: according to Croce, is any art that addresses AIDS discussable?

Lee Edelman (1994), in *Homographesis*, delves deeper into the discursive structures that tie AIDS with the real rather than the fictive or creative—what Croce questions as art. "The most disturbing feature of the Western discourse on 'AIDS' is the way in which the literal is recurrently and tendentiously produced as a figure whose figurality remains strategically occluded—and thus as a figure that can be used to effect the most repressive political ends" (ibid.: 80). He argues that the truth value and the scientific realness of AIDS is seen as literal without any element of the figurative. Indeed, while AIDS is famously a metaphor and conjures up complex imaginaries, it is perceived in terms of absolutes: positive or negative, living with HIV or dying of AIDS. Edelman recognizes that, on the one hand, AIDS carries a discursive charge that links it to absolutes, biomedical, logical, no-nonsense literalness. How very unqueer. On the other hand, activists and intellectuals have been calling for more-nuanced, humanistic discourse to counter the institutional rhetoric that paints us in such unflattering and inaccurate one-dimensional renderings. We are, after all, the queer *humans* affected by AIDS. And we contain multitudes.

Román's article in 2000 echoes the importance of artistic interventions to counter literal, politicized understandings of AIDS as well as anticipating problematic shifts in the crisis and the dynamics of the crisis. He anticipated the question: what do humanistic AIDS discourses look like and how do they escape being co-opted and folded back into the consensus of the hegemony?

This question gets taken up in important platforms like *GLQ*: Lucas Hilderbrand in "Retroactivism" (2006) also criticizes the loss of interest among gay males for the new "at risk" populations while advocating for the maintenance of cultural memory of the ACT UP era. In 2010, Paul Sendziuk revives this debate once again to question how AIDS films from the past allow for contemplating critically the so-called post-AIDS condition. Once again, Julian Gill-Peterson (2013) repeats eloquently the concerns that Román articulated in his "Not-about-AIDS." While mainstream media may still be "Not-about-AIDS," *GLQ* was and continues to be one of the crucial spaces where these important counternarratives and counterdiscourses are circulated and debated.

## Notes

1. "While white gay men who argue for the end of AIDS neglect to account for increasing infection rates among racial minorities, leaders in communities of color discount queer people in the AIDS emergency discourse that calls attention to AIDS in their communities. Queers of color do not fare well in these scenarios. In fact, homosexuality and race continue to be imagined as oppositional" (Román 2000: 7).
2. This push still prevails: to date, twenty-four states require people who are aware of their HIV status to disclose it to partners before any risk behavior. What that behavior might be is open to interpretation: some states such as Alabama reserve the right to isolate, quarantine, or civilly commit people living with an STD, including HIV.
3. "Memory entrepreneurs" is a term that Elizabeth Jelin uses in *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (2003) to describe those who actively seek to alter narratives of the past constructed by "official" state-sanctioned history.

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