

Coloring the Crisis: Representations of Blackness in American AIDS Drama

Astrid Haas

Biomedical, political, and media representations of Acquired Immune-Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in the United States have been strongly shaped by notions of AIDS as a disease which particularly affects gay men, intravenous drug users, and people of color. Much popular belief implicitly or even explicitly understands the higher infection rates of these socially marginalized groups as a somewhat “natural” consequence of non-conformity with hegemonic culture (Allen 120-25; Brandt 190, 193, 202; Quimby 163, 178f.). Especially during the 1980s, persons with AIDS were commonly depicted in the mainstream press as “diseased person[s], as morally repugnant, hopelessly doomed, and isolated from potentially significant sources of emotional support” (Clarke 116). HIV/ AIDS is thus only one of the latest manifestations of an age-old logic that associates people of color and non-heterosexuals with illness and disease (Allen 27- 43, 79; Gilman, *Difference* 79-149). A strong notion of socio-cultural “otherness” underpins large parts of the Western discourses about AIDS in Africa and among people of color in the United States. Here, racial, cultural, and class bias intertwine with conceptualizations of sexual mores: Not only is HIV widely believed to have originated in Africa (Brandt 188); based on implicit Western assumptions about African cultural “primitiveness” as well as presumably parallel tendencies among Western communities of color, many Western discourses about AIDS subscribe to beliefs about a structural dichotomy between “Western” and “African” AIDS or between a “gay” (and implicitly white) and a “black” (and implicitly heterosexual) affliction (Gilman, *Sexuality* 322ff.; Treichler 99-126).

At the same time, the African American community at large has been rather reluctant to address HIV/AIDS among blacks in the United States (Dalton 205, 208-18; Quimby 163-71, 179). The black press largely neglected AIDS coverage until the mid 1980s, and those journalists who did raise the issue were often torn between their responsibility to publicize the existing risk of HIV infection for African-Americans and their desire to fight pathologizing notions of AIDS as a “black” epidemic. Responding to the racist implications of having AIDS appear to be a black malady, the African American mainstream media tended to address black homosexuality or bisexuality in a pejorative and condescending manner or ignored the issue altogether (Lupton 17f.). When the basketball star Earvin “Magic” Johnson publicly announced in 1991 that he was HIV-positive, African Americans suddenly came into the focus of both the white and black

media coverage of the AIDS crisis. Even though Johnson was not the first prominent African American whose HIV infection was revealed to the public, his status as a major sports icon raised concern about AIDS among the Black media and their audiences. However, Johnson's case had little lasting impact on raising awareness of AIDS in the black community. Johnson was widely regarded as an exceptional African American, and the recurrent, and widely applauded, emphasis on his promiscuous heterosexuality even reinforced the silence about black homosexuality (Harper 135 n.2; Treichler 85, 143).

The AIDS crisis has been felt profoundly in the American art, literary, and theater scene. While the first plays addressing the subject of HIV and AIDS produced on American theater stages focused almost exclusively on the experiences of gay white men, a new generation of plays emerged during the first half of the 1990s which began to make visible some of the "black" faces of the crisis (Jones ixff.). But how are African American concerns and experiences addressed in American drama in relation to AIDS, and from what vantage points do the plays speak? In the following, I will discuss some of the ways "blackness" is represented in three American AIDS plays of the period: Victor Bumbalo's *What Are Tuesdays Like* (1993), Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991/ 92), and Cheryl West's *Before It Hits Home* (1989). Written by white playwrights and set in a largely white environment, the first two plays feature only one African American character each. The focus of my inquiry here will therefore be on the depiction of these characters and their function within the plays. Unlike *What Are Tuesdays Like* and *Angels in America*, Cheryl West's play *Before It Hits Home* is written from an African American perspective and addresses the black community in particular (Walters 300). My concern in the analysis of West's play will be how AIDS does hit the home of an African American family, and how issues of race and sexuality are discussed.

Victor Bumbalo's drama *What Are Tuesdays Like* was first performed at Carnegie Mellon's Showcase of New Plays in 1993. Written in a realist mode, *What Are Tuesdays Like* follows a small number of AIDS patients meeting in the out-patient waiting room of a New York City hospital once a week. Each of the play's nineteen scenes takes place on a Tuesday afternoon over an unspecified period of time. Complete strangers to each other at the beginning of the play, three white men and a black woman "come together at their most unprotected moment and begin to travel the way to friendship and, finally, to family" (Bumbalo 266). As the only heterosexual, the only woman, and the only person of color, the character of Denise McMillan stands out in the small group of patients. She is an "attractive black woman" (275), a mother of two (278, 298f., 303), and seems to be firmly placed in a network of familial support. (276f., 283, 298f., 303, 307). As such, Denise appears as a kind of foil to the gay men she meets in the waiting room. While she shares their anxieties about their illness and treatment, she cannot join them in bonding together on the basis of

their sexual identity or share their experience of rejection by employers or family members based on their sexuality. While the men seem to be concerned primarily with their own lives, Denise has to balance her needs with those of her family. Denise's decision to place her two children in the foster care of her sister to spare them the pain of witnessing their mother deteriorate and die highlights her concerns (298, 303).

The way Victor Bumbalo presents his characters as *patients* sets Denise further apart from the others. The health of the three men changes markedly in the course of the play, a development that is further emphasized by the chronological sequence of the play's scenes, and their physical deterioration and approaching death are major topics of their waiting room talk. Denise's health, on the contrary, remains stable, and her HIV infection is addressed rather indirectly. Unlike her fellow patients, who talk openly about intimate relationships, she appears almost de-sexualized. While the men's illness is implicitly linked to their homosexuality, Denise was infected through intravenous drug use (Bumbalo 287). While the men report the *loss* of partners, she encounters difficulties in

finding a man, knowing that her viral status makes it impossible for her, as she puts it, to "follow up" on a date (287). Even though Denise is set apart from the other characters on the grounds of her sexuality, she is, nevertheless, shown as an integral and equal part of the budding "family" of patients. Viral status, waiting room anxiety, and the experience of powerlessness and stigmatization go beyond differences of gender, race, and sexuality. This "alliance of the marginalized" is tellingly expressed in Denise's anxious remarks about the experimental treatment she is scheduled to undergo: "My doctor said I should be delighted. But I can't help wondering, why me? Is it because I'm black? When I told that to my doctor, she said, I was getting paranoid. Perhaps. Then she told me that a lot of gay men were going on this drug. I asked her to show me one straight white man who would be participating. Then maybe I would show more enthusiasm" (276).

What Are Tuesdays Like convincingly shows how a group of strangers develops strong personal attachments that transcend various kinds of social barriers. However, even though the play's characters are drawn with psychological depth, the representation of racial, gender, or sexual identities and experiences largely remains stereotypical: the almost non-sexual, family focused, sacrificial black mother acts as a foil for the gay white men focused on themselves and their sexuality. The play implicitly establishes a tight link between whiteness, maleness, and gayness as well as between blackness, femaleness, motherhood, and drugs. In the realm of the AIDS treatment waiting room, gay white men appear as the implicit norm, whereas African Americans and women gain presence only within the token figure of Denise, the single-mother, a straight black drug user. That status demonstrates the tight racial and sexual framing of black womanhood: the references to Denise's drug history, expected untimely death,

and the absence of her children's father recall white racist stereotypes of African American women as sexually promiscuous, immoral, and disease-ridden (Higginbotham 193ff.). As a single woman who gives away her children and allies herself with gay white men, Denise fails to meet those standards of black middle class respectability which are built upon idealized notions of motherhood as well as upon a suppressive silence about women's and gay men's sexuality (Harper 132; Higginbotham 195f., 198ff.).

Tony Kushner's two-part epic drama *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* remains, to this day, the best-known American drama to address the issue of AIDS. Part one of *Angels in America*, entitled *Millennium Approaches*, was first performed in a workshop production at the Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, in May 1990. After its premiere by The Eureka Theatre Company of San Francisco in May 1991, *Millennium Approaches* was produced at the Royal Court Theatre, London in 1992, and a Broadway production was mounted at the Walter Kerr Theatre in April 1993 (Kushner I, vff.). After being staged in a workshop at the Mark Taper Forum in May 1992, Part Two, *Perestroika*, premiered at the same venue the following November. A London production at the Royal Court Theatre as well as the Broadway premiere at the Walter Kerr Theatre followed in October and November 1993, respectively (Kushner II, vff.). Both parts of *Angels in America* have enjoyed wide exposure; they have been staged in regional theaters throughout the United States and have been produced in various foreign countries (Savran, *Queer Theater* 159).

Kushner's play depicts the interconnecting lives of a group of people in New York in the mid 1980s. While focusing in particular on five gay men who are affected by AIDS as patients, friends, caretakers, or colleagues, Kushner addresses broader issues, such as the definition of a gay community and the moral and spiritual state of (white) America in the Reagan years. The only person of color in the play, the African American Belize, works as a registered nurse in a New York City hospital (Kushner II, 19). Belize is important in the play both because of his professional function and because of his personal identity as a gay man and former drag queen. It is within this dual role of caretaker and gay man that Belize's life is affected by the AIDS epidemic. Working in the hospital's AIDS ward, he deals with AIDS patients on a daily basis; this has given him a professional knowledge of the syndrome. In addition to his job, he cares for his AIDS afflicted friend Prior at home. He also tries to help Prior's lover (and later ex-lover) Louis come to terms with his fear of AIDS and death.

While Prior shares a drag queen past with Belize, it is only the black man who is closely associated with drag as well as with notions of theatrical performativity, here linked to cross-dressing practices. As Marjorie Garber points out (Garber 190-93), cross-dressing or drag tends to cause cultural anxieties in contemporary Western cultures, as it thwarts the socially normative correspon-

dence between a person's sex and gender and is, consequentially, often associated with socio-sexual deviance. Cutting across gender boundaries, drag emphasizes the cultural formation of gender identities through performative acts of self-fashioning (Butler 124-37). Belize's gay and (former) drag identities are further reflected in his name: actually named Norman Ariaga, the name Belize, by which he is called throughout the play, "is a drag name that stayed" (Kushner I, 3). This name is telling in two ways. As a woman's name, it contributes to its bearer's feminization, as does Belize's status as a caretaker and an ex-drag queen (Savran, *Taking It* 251 f.). Moreover, by choosing the name of a Central American country with a largely Creole and mestizo population (*Webster's* 1500), Kushner further emphasizes the somewhat "exotic" status of his only black character. In addition to his "feminizing" drag identity and "feminine" profession, Belize is further set apart from the white gay male characters by the way his sexuality is represented on stage. He clearly presents himself as a gay man and also speaks openly about his sexual orientation. Nevertheless, unlike his white gay counterparts in the play, Belize only *mentions* having a sexual relationship (Kushner II, 94), but neither does he talk about sexual encounters nor does his lover appear in the play (Minwalla 105).

Both as a caretaker and as a (drag) "performer," Belize reflects stereotypical representations of people of color (Savran, *Taking It* 7/251; Wong 71ff.). As Sa-ling Cynthia Wong points out, caregivers of color serving white people have been stock figures in the white American imagination, its literature and film (Wong 69, 82f.). The white patients'/employers' physical and emotional dependency on their black, Hispanic, or Asian nurse/servant is balanced in white-authored mainstream representations by the symbolic feminization or desexualization of the caretakers. Confining men of color to subordinate positions as caregivers has been a powerful vehicle for channeling white anxieties about non-white males. Nonetheless, it is the caretaker who traditionally has the most intimate knowledge of his/her patient, and it is, consequently, within the caregiver's capacity to hold up a mirror to society (Butler 125). Belize fully embodies these capacities. He is highly aware of both the limits and the possibilities of his position as a black man in a racist culture and its racialized power structures. Faced with both unreflected racism and blunt racial insults in the play, Belize holds his own with wit and self-confidence and refuses to see himself as a victim. While he confronts the self-pity of Louis, who is torn between his fear of Prior's illness and his shame for having left his ailing lover, with a mixture of condescending humor and sharp irony (Kushner I, 89-96), Belize has to pull out all the stops to respond to the racist provocations of one of his AIDS patients, the lawyer and political power broker Roy Cohn (II, 22-28). Even Belize's longtime friendship with Prior increasingly turns into a patient-caretaker relationship, as the AIDS-afflicted Prior depends on his friend's help and nursing skills.

Belize's subordinate position and his "supporting role" in *Angels in America* are mimicked in a sketch by the black performance group Porno Afro Homos (Postmodern Afro-American Homosexuals). The opening scene of their program *Dark Fruit* entitled "Aunties in America: Epiphanies and Roaches" shows three black male characters from successful contemporary gay American plays talking about their dissatisfaction with their roles as servants or caretakers (Porno Afro Homos 323-25). The scene begins with Belize from *Angels in America* reenacting and recounting the scene in which the angel arrives in Prior's bedroom:

Belize: The last Miss Ann Angel: white dress, white wings, white halo, white attitude, white everything—looks like a flying igloo—Miss Thing comes crashing through the ceiling. [...]

Jacob: She can't use the front door?

Belize: You know white folks. Then everywhere you look feathers, plaster, epiphanies and roaches.

Paul: Now who's got to clean all that up?

[*Belize just looks at Paul*]

AH Well... (Porno Afro Homos 323f.)

In this short sequence, the Pomos expose the "white" perspective that guides *Angels in America* by emphasizing the angel's whiteness up to the point of ridicule and by exposing the visitation of the angel as an effect-oriented product of white imagination that will, once again, leave the dirty business of cleaning up to people of color. A few moments later, Belize becomes more explicit about this aspect of his role when he complains to his companions: "Missy Kushner has me up there every night reading these white kids' asses or wiping their butts. It's all the same to me. In part two I get to wipe Roy Cohn's butt. Find an epiphany in that!" (Porno Afro Homos 324). The phrase "it's all the same to me" not only remarks upon the monotonous and menial duties of a nurse, but also recalls a passage from *Angels in America* in which Belize tries to hide his identity from Roy Cohn's white employee Joe Pitt. When Joe identifies him as Roy's nurse, Belize takes refuge in the racial cliché that "[w]e all look alike to you. You all look alike to us" (Kushner II, 92). In their allusion to this scene, the Pomos turn Kushner's exposure of the racial stereotype into an assertion of self-confident black disregard for the individuality of "these white kids' asses" (Plum 237).

In "Aunties in America," a fierce critique of the one-sided representation of gay black men" is given a telling finale when the three men dress as mammies and perform a mock minstrel dance, until, suddenly, they pull off their head rags in defiance, and the scene blacks out (Porno Afro Homos 325). The figure of the black mammy recalls stereotypical racist depictions of African Americans

in the minstrel tradition. Originating in the 1820s, so-called minstrel shows represented one of the most popular forms of theatrical entertainment for white Americans during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In a ridiculing way that mimicked African American culture, minstrels presented black life in America as a “comic” and “exotic” show. While there were African American actors performing on the minstrel circuit, the roles were more commonly played by white men in blackface (Taumann 14-17). The stock figure of the sacrificial black caretaker of white families, the mammy, is one of the best known and culturally most powerful of these stereotypes. As they reappropriate the mammy from the white-controlled minstrel tradition, the Pomos defy the social subordination of African Americans as caretakers and supporting actors. By rewriting a widely acclaimed drama like *Angels in America* from a black gay perspective, the Pomos also expose and respond to an unconscious racism in Kushner’s play: “Aunties in America” not only unveils the implicit white perspective of successful gay plays of the 1980s and ’90s but also presents a counter-discourse that inscribes the African American voice into the American theatrical gay experience (Plum 236-39).

What “Aunties in America” ignores is the potential for subverting power relations inherent in Belize’s caretaker function. In particular, in his encounters with Roy Cohn’s racism, Belize fully plays out his power over his patient, knowing that Roy’s deathbed pain and fear of being outed as a homosexual through his AIDS affliction make him highly dependent on Belize (Kushner II, 22-28; Minwalla 108f.). Unlike the Pomos’ slipping into drag, Kushner’s Belize never appears in women’s clothes on stage and only suggests that he might be “doing drag again” (Kushner I, 94). Nevertheless, his verbal and performative skills in dealing with racist encounters clearly recall the cultural image of the fierce black drag queen (Ross 159). Belize defies white America by undermining the rules of the medical establishment rather than by transgressing gender lines and questioning cultural representations. When Roy Cohn becomes his patient, Belize advises him to avoid an ineffective but painful routine treatment even though it is clear that he utterly despises him. “Consider it solidarity. One fag- got to another” (Kushner II, 26), Belize says, explaining his motive for helping Roy. After Roy’s death, Belize (with help from Louis) steals Cohn’s secret stack of powerful AIDS drugs from the hospital for the ailing Prior (II, 121). More- over, Belize’s refusal to dress in white at work (II, 20) cuts across the demarcation lines of class and health status; hospital uniforms mark off doctors and nurses from the patients they serve. In wearing plain clothes in the hospital, Belize visibly associates himself with the AIDS-afflicted people he cares for. The uniform’s tell-tale white color can further be read as a signifier of American society at large, whose traditional role of subordinate caretaker Belize embodies and subverts at the same time.

While the individuality and the self-consciously performative association with drag transcend a simplistic tokenism, the character of Belize, nevertheless, seems to fulfill a primarily didactic function. Various critics have noted that he serves as “the rhetorical mouthpiece for Kushner’s opinions” (Minwalla 105), as “moral bellwether” (Savran, *Taking It* 151) or as the “political and ethical center of the play” (Román 213; Minwalla 104). Belize forms the key link between the other characters and holds up a mirror to their shortcomings. His own point of view is “never submitted to critique” (Savran, *Taking It* 251). However, unlike the other characters, Belize’s “inner life or outer journey” (Román 213, Minwalla 104f., 110) are not presented in the play. At least partially, Kushner’s clearly careful crafting of his play’s only black character grew out of the controversy about representing African America in the post-civil rights era, following the publication of William Styron’s novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1967 (Rushdy 4ff., 53-95). By including a strong black character in *Angels in America*, Kushner shows that his vision of (gay) America goes beyond the white experience. He demonstrates—and thus valorizes—the contribution of people of color within the gay movement and AIDS activism (Román 213, 309 n.29) without claiming to speak for African Americans as a group. Because Belize’s close connection to the AIDS epidemic is not related to his sexuality but his caretaker role, the black nurse is “safely” detached from the still controversial issue of male homosexuality and AIDS affliction among African Americans. Moreover, in not explicitly visualizing Belize’s gayness—he neither wears drag nor engages in sexual acts—Kushner avoids the pitfall of turning his only African American character into an “exotic” (and erotic) spectacle for a predominantly white audience (Román 309 n.29). While Kushner’s play largely supports the continued equation of gayness and AIDS affliction with a distinctively white experience in America, he nevertheless does engage in a critical discourse about race in relation to homosexuality and AIDS (Minwalla 104f.).

Cheryl West is one of the few African American playwrights produced on the American stage who address the subject of AIDS in their work, a situation she herself attributes to both the racism of producers and the African American sensitivity concerning representational images of black life (Taumann 174). West writes:

Black people have earned the right to be suspicious of the images depicting black life. We have been so stereotyped and maligned in film and theater and television for years. Yet, the pressure can also have the effect of censoring what you want to write, what is true to your experience. [...] With my play *Before It Hits Home*, there was a feeling from some within the community that I should have been ashamed, as a black woman, to have written that. Well, first to put AIDS and black in the same sentence. But also to show a mother, a black woman, who can’t deal with it. Black women are supposed to be the ultimate

martyrs, able to bear anything. But isn't that itself a stereotype? ("Cheryl West" n.p.)

In fact, it is the critical unraveling of stereotypes that is one of the most remarkable features of West's play. Following the tradition of the family drama, *Before It Hits Home* sheds particular light on the complex nexus of gender and sexuality within the microcosm of a single black family. West's play poses important questions about how attitudes to and embodiments of gender and sexuality are presented and how these representations interact with African American experience.

Before It Hits Home won an award at the Seattle Group Theatre's Multicultural Playwrights' Festival in 1989 and was given a workshop production in Seattle the same year. A revised version of the play was produced at the Arena Stage Theater in Washington, DC in 1991, followed by an Off-Broadway production at the Second Stage Theater as part of the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1992. Although the Arena Stage production of *Before It Hits Home* was successful in terms of ticket sales, the play met with mixed reviews. While some critics praised it for its "mix of sitcom laughter, high-packed melodrama, and emotional insight" (Walters 300), others deplored the drama's melodramatic nature or "preachy" tone. West defended her play against such criticism, once again emphasizing the problem of cultural representation: "The white community [...] made several plays and movies about the AIDS crises. Once there are more artistic expressions of blacks with AIDS out there, one play won't be singled out as being 'preachy'" (qtd. in Walters 300). Several playwriting awards affirm the artistic quality of *Before It Hits Home*. In 1990, West became the first African American to be awarded the Susan Blackburn Prize, an international award given for an outstanding play in English by a woman. A year later, she received the Audelco Award, and in 1992 she received the Helen Hayes Charles McArthur Award for the outstanding new play of the year (Taumann 174, Walters 300).

Before It Hits Home tells the story of the bisexual black jazz musician Wendal Bailey, chronicling the impact of his sickness with AIDS on his and his family's homes. Seriously affected by the syndrome, Wendal breaks up his relationship with his girlfriend Simone and also leaves his male lover Douglass to spend what is left of his life with his parents. Coming home to them, he puts all his hope in his mother's care and support while expecting nothing but contempt from his father. As it turns out, however, it is his mother who cannot cope with Wendal's illness and leaves her home (West 57f.), whereas his father develops the strength to single-handedly take care of his dying son (64-68). This subversion and ultimate reversal of the stereotypical gendered family roles of the sacrificial black mother and the absent black father is sudden. Up to the point when the Bailey parents learn of Wendal's illness and his bisexuality, they seem to embody these very roles and believe in them. Adhering to a strong work

ethic and a rigid notion of manliness, Luke Bailey constantly holds up Wendal's younger brother Junior, an army sergeant, as a male role model (16ff., 49ff.). Luke's wife Reba is largely focused on taking care of her family; providing her kin with a good home is her key concern. Unlike her husband, she has always had a close relationship with Wendal (17f., 22, 51). The strength of this mother-son bond turns out to be its weakness, however. Wendal's disclosure of his bisexuality and AIDS infection reveal that he has kept a large part of his life hidden from his mother. It is not only her son's sexuality and sickness that Reba rejects as shameful and contagious, but also, and even more, the lie Wendal had lived for the past years (52-55, 57f.). On the other hand, Luke Bailey's long-held belief in male responsibility toward one's kin turns out to be a source of emotional strength that helps him to overcome his prejudice against Wendal's bisexuality and prompts him to take responsibility for his ailing son (35, 63f.).

Race as a forceful category of socio-cultural identity is explicitly addressed only in two scenes of the play. The first takes place in a hospital examination room, where Wendal talks to his doctor, a white Jewish woman (on the doctor's identity, see West 6, 31; "Cheryl West" n.p.). Upon being told that he is HIV-positive, Wendal bursts out in a diatribe of anger:

All you doctors are alike. You my fourth one and every one of you trying to make me believe I'm dying. [...] You know this whole AIDS thing is some kind of conspiracy. Some more of y'all's genocide.... Try and lay everything on us, cancer, drugs, whatever y'all think up. Well I'm here to tell you, y'all AIDS better take a number, get in line. And you might as well wipe that silly grin off your face, 'cause this is one nigger that ain't gon' lay down and die. (West 19)

When the doctor tries to intervene, telling Wendal that she is not to blame for his condition, he continues: "Then who is? Now let me see if I got this right. You telling me I got bad blood... well now... remember ol' Tuskegee? I recall you told 'em they had bad blood too... and then watched them rot to death. Ya'll got a history of this bad blood shit, don't you?" (20). By suggesting that his AIDS diagnosis results from a racist plot based upon a structural link of Blackness, crime, and disease, Wendal seems to try to shift the responsibility for his having contracted HIV through unprotected sexual intercourse to the medical establishment and society at large. However, as Harlon Dalton points out, the term "genocide" in connection with AIDS recalls a host of African American AIDS legends claiming that HIV was manufactured in American government laboratories, from where it either accidentally got out of control or was intentionally spread among socially marginalized groups, especially African Americans, gay men, and drug users (Dalton 209f.; Turner 68,145f., 163, 212).

In her allusion to such theories of conspiracy and genocide, Cheryl West voices African American anxieties about medicine's prominent involvement in racial oppression. She elaborates on this issue by putting black fears of AIDS-related racial pathologizing into a historical perspective. Wendal's reference to "bad blood" in the argument with his doctor invokes traditional racist assumptions of African Americans as inherently diseased. Since antiquity, blood has been conceptualized as vehicle of life as well as death, as purifying force and as source of disease. Speaking of having bad blood conveys an essentialist notion of blood and the identity of the body it runs through (Treichler 21). In addition to this general symbolic significance, "bad blood" has a more specific meaning in African American culture, where it is closely tied to the *Tuskegee Syphilis Study*. Wendal explicitly alludes to this in his diatribe. The Tuskegee Experiment, as it was also called, was a long-term medical study of the development of untreated syphilis among African American men, conducted from 1932 to 1972 in Alabama and based on racist, pathologizing notions of black men in the South. Part of the scientists' strategy was to prevent their subjects from seeking effective treatment by misleading them about their actual diagnosis; their treatment, they were told, was for their "bad blood." By invoking the Tuskegee Study in confronting his doctor, Wendal not only channels his fear of illness and death, but also puts his personal situation into the larger socio-historical context of African American political distrust of a racially hierarchical medical establishment that has often pathologized blacks and exploited its power over them. Contemporary AIDS legends express and further reinforce such distrust through their claims that forces in power such as the Federal government or the CIA try to keep African Americans powerless by directing diseases or illegal drugs to Black communities, as Turner points out (Turner 108, 182ff., 189f; see also Dalton, 220ff; Turner 113, 138, 152-56, 158, 162). The popularity of such legends especially among African Americans rests on a history of tense relations between Blacks and a medical establishment which has shown little concern for the physical integrity of the black body.

This black American mistrust of a white-dominated mainstream culture and the Tuskegee Experiment in particular are reiterated in the reaction of Wendal's mother to her son's disclosure of his medical condition. When Wendal tells his mother that he has AIDS, Reba at first suspects that her son was infected through a contaminated blood transfusion. Her question "Did you have some kind of surgery and they gave you bad blood?" (West 52) takes up the imagery as well as the underlying suspicion of the medical establishment that Wendal displayed in confronting his doctor. While Wendal alludes to the racist assumption of African American "natural" sickness that the Tuskegee study was based on, Reba regards the HIV-infected "bad blood" of her son as something that the medical establishment has willfully or carelessly given to him. In both scenes, the "bad blood" serves as a shortcut for a lethal disease that sets the

sick clearly apart, acknowledging notions of sexual and socio-cultural difference that mark off the infected as outsiders.

Although Wendal's anxiety about the medical establishment as such is legitimately grounded in the black historical experience, his referral to "genocide" in the conversation with a Jewish doctor seems in poor taste. While he accuses the doctor of racism, it is, in fact, Wendal himself who is prejudiced, as his speech reveals. Claiming the term genocide exclusively for African American suffering and implying the physician's involvement in acts of genocide, Wendal cynically ignores the history of anti-Jewish violence, and in particular the veritable genocide of the European Jews under the German Nazi regime from 1933 through 1945. In connection with the AIDS epidemic, Wendal's accusations recall a particular conspiracy theory circulating among blacks in the Chicago area during the mid-1980s, according to which Jewish doctors willfully injected African Americans, especially children, with HIV-contaminated syringes and thus spread the virus among the black population. This theory merged black mis-trust of a white-controlled establishment with the age-old stereotype of Jewish malevolence; it also recalled the related traditional association of Jews with venereal diseases. Evoking the notion of the "corrupt and corrupting Jew," Sander Gilman points out, "places the black in the position of the victim and reverses the images of the pathogenic black as the source of AIDS" (*Sexuality* 325).

Before It Hits Home, however, eschews such a simplistic dualism of black and white/Jew, friend and foe. Confronted with Wendal's accusation of genocide, Dr. Weinberg defends herself with the angry self-confidence of a veteran in the fight against AIDS: "I've seen more patients today than most doctors see in a week so why don't you do us both a favor and cut the shit. You've seen four doctors, if you want I'll refer you to a fifth. I've been working in this epidemic for a long time and it's not because I have an affinity for your suffering or for that matter, my own" (West 20). Despite the frustration that lurks through her remarks here, Dr. Weinberg has remained deeply committed to her patients. When Wendal is hospitalized for some time, she not only handles his moods with humor, but even procures for him a jazz music cassette that he has obviously longed to possess (31f.). She is also the person in the play who most openly and confidently accepts Wendal's bisexuality (32).

While it is race that divides Wendal and his doctor, it is sexuality that separates the musician from his family. Opposite attitudes to non-heterosexuality initiate the breakup of the Bailey family even before Wendal comes out to the others. Wendal's parents, his brother Junior, and his son Dwayne have internalized a traditional view toward sexuality that is deeply embedded in their understanding of what defines a "true" man or woman. Non-heterosexual manhood is unthinkable for them except within the cliché images of effeminacy—the "sissy," the "fairy," or the "faggot" (West 49, 63). Luke justifies his use of such

condescending terms for gay men by claiming that “[t]hey call themselves that.” Thus provoked by his father, Wendal replies: “So! We call ourselves nigger, but that don’t mean we are one. You don’t allow Dwayne to use that word in this house. Do you?” Turning to his son, Wendal continues: “Go on Dwayne say nigger to your grandfather. Say nigger like you said fag.... Go on, say it” (49). While race as such is not at stake here, it becomes a powerful correlate for sexuality; an instrument to counter the Baileys’ homophobia. By placing the label “nigger” alongside “fag,” Wendal draws a compelling analogy between racist and homophobic speech. As he confronted his doctor with the medical establishment’s history of racial prejudice, Wendal now tries to make his father aware of the structural kinship between homophobia and racism.

Unreflected homophobia also characterizes the Bailey parents’ reactions to the disclosure of Wendal’s AIDS affliction. When they get to know about their son’s illness, neither can imagine that Wendal has contracted HIV through sexual intercourse, a way of transmission which, for both Bailey parents, unequivocally indicates a sexually deviant identity. While Reba initially thinks of a contaminated blood conserve as the cause of Wendal’s illness, Luke almost automatically believes that Wendal must have been injecting drugs. He even grabs his son’s arm and demands that he reveal his needle marks (West 62). Luke’s reaction tellingly illustrates a point Philip Brian Harper has made about the problematic attitude among African Americans to gay men and AIDS. He points out that the ongoing silence about black male homosexuality “is enabled by the ease with which the significance of sexual transmission of HIV can be elided beneath the admittedly massive (but also, to many minds, more “accept- able”) problem of IV drug-related HIV transmission that is endemic in some black communities” (Harper 132). This resistance to acknowledging and accepting sexual diversity as part of the African American experience is one of the key issues that Cheryl West targets with her play. As she states in an inter- view:

There’s the denial that “We don’t have bisexual people.” The denial of thinking gay people don’t exist, or that they aren’t active in our community. Of thinking, “If you’re married, you’re safe.” Or, “If your partner looks healthy, you’re safe.” We have had to learn that this virus doesn’t choose only certain people. It can happen to anyone. (Evans 11)

Victor Bumbalo’s *What Are Tuesdays Like*, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, and Cheryl West’s *Before it Hits Home* belong to a group of recent plays by ethnic minority, feminist, and gay/lesbian writers that have reformulated traditional notions of dramatic realism. Drawn with psychological depth, focusing on the individual, and often set in a domestic environment—major elements of American bourgeois realist drama—plays like August Wilson’s *Fences* (1987),

Cherrie Moraga's *Heroes and Saints* (1992), or Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* (1998) strongly connect the individual experience to larger, and sometimes controversial, social, political, or economic issues. Holding on to elements of domestic realism, they articulate the impact of these larger issues on the individual. The realist mode, Chuck Kleinhans argues, allows writers to gain "a profound psychological resonance in the audience of [their] own time, especially when reinforced by depictions of the audience's own class, gender, and ethnicity" (Kleinhans 163). By integrating elements that reveal the constructed nature of the text—such as symbolism, direct addresses to the audience, overlapping scenes, and non-chronological narration—plays like *What Are Tuesdays Like, Before it Hits Home*, and especially *Angels in America* also follow the postmodern logic of rejecting any claim to reveal a universal "truth." In blending postmodern elements with more traditional realist ones, these plays validate the experiences of a broad range of audiences at the same time as they contest major cultural "master narratives" about race, class, sexuality, or the family and give a voice to those marginalized in mainstream America (Graff 21-25; Savran, *Queer Theater* 160; Taumann 62f., 126-29). By merging separate dialogues and intercutting scenes, both Kushner's *Angels in America* and West's *Before It Hits Home* illustrate the interconnections between the lives depicted in these plays. A montage-like scene that presents Wendal's and his father's separate remembrance of a train ride they took together long ago (West 34f.), for instance, foregrounds the two men's mutually unacknowledged emotional attachment to each other. Various split scenes depicting the simultaneous actions of two to four different characters show the interconnected lives of Prior, Louis, Roy Cohn, and others. Symbolic characters, such as prophet-like, pregnant AIDS patient Angel Peterson in West's play or the figure of Ethel Rosenberg in Kushner's drama, function as links between individual experiences with AIDS and the wider social implications of the epidemic. Angel's presence in *Before it Hits Home* points to the fact that HIV/AIDS transcends gender and sexual orientation. The appearance of Ethel Rosenberg to the ailing Roy Cohn in *Angels in America* suggests a historical dimension to the repressive forces that have shaped his life—his involvement in the McCarthy "witch-hunts" of homosexuals and his homophobic politics of the 1980s. It is the psychological plausibility, the realism of West's play—and the same could be said of Kushner's and Bumbalo's works—that "forces the spectator to rethink preconceived notions of family" (Taumann 180) and to reconsider the impact of culturally defined ideas of gender, race, and sexuality, and their interrelation, in the way individuals and groups confront AIDS (Savran, *Queer Theater* 160; Taumann 175f., 180).

While American AIDS drama since the mid-1980s has countered many of the stereotypical representations of gay (white) men, a differentiated depiction, with depth and complexity, of women's and African-Americans' experiences with HIV/AIDS is still rare on the American theater stages. Within a predomi-

nantly white environment such as that characterized by both Victor Bumbalo's play *What Are Tuesdays Uke* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, black characters remain largely limited to traditional, even stereotypical roles, such as the black caretaker, the mother, the performer, or the drug user. While they are given individual traits raising them above mere stock characters, Denise in *What Are Tuesdays Uke* and Belize from *Angels in America* nevertheless fulfill the token function of bringing in "blackness" as an addition to "gayness." Indeed, blackness and active gayness appear to be almost mutually exclusive. African American gay sexuality is not presented onstage in these two plays. Given Denise's gender as well as Belize's effeminate status as gay nurse and ex drag-queen, black masculinity is similarly excluded from any association with AIDS and the gay (white) male experience. Although Cheryl West is not alone among recent African American dramatists in her commitment to socially controversial issues (Taumann 132), a commitment that also guides her plays *Jar the Floor* (1991) and *Holiday Heart* (1994) (Walters 300ff., 304), *Before It Hits Home* is unique among those American plays addressing the AIDS epidemic. Cheryl West's play adds the missing perspective of Black masculinity and black non-heterosexuality; the play also addresses the crucial issue of homophobia within a Black community. As such, it strikingly reveals the structural line of oppression that links African-Americans and non-heterosexuals as components of a non-normative "other" in the predominant public AIDS discourses. While, as a single work by one playwright, it cannot and should not be burdened with, as West put it, "telling the stories of a whole race" ("Cheryl West" n.p.), West's drama, nevertheless, is an important contribution to a more differentiated picture of African American experience of the AIDS crisis.

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