



Corpses of Metaphor. Images of Death in David Leavitt and Jamaica Kincaid

by Fiorenzo Iuliano

Both David Leavitt's "Saturn Street" and Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* feature the dying and dead male body as a trope capable, on the one hand, of conflating a variety of problematic semantic areas, and, on the other, of accounting, thanks to its rhetorical potential, for the different apparatuses of biopolitical power that construct the corpse as a linguistic and ideological figure. Published in 1997, "Saturn Street" and *My Brother* both deal with the story of a male protagonist, whose AIDS-related bodily collapse is minutely described and elegiacally celebrated. My argument is that both *My Brother* and "Saturn Street" equate the homosexual male body with the corpse, a sterile and unproductive organism that aptly embodies its feral and, ultimately, non human nature. Moreover, the dehumanizing presence of death, so strong in both texts, accounts for culture-specific ways of constructing homosexual identity, by insisting on the opposition between the visibility and the invisibility of corpses as symbolic repositories of biopolitical injunctions. The distinction between the visible and the non-visible dead body, which is the most noticeable difference between the two texts, bespeaks the differences between the two regimes of political and cultural signification at stake.

In both texts, the realistic representation of the body and its assimilation to heterogeneous semantic areas continually overlap and resort to each other, suggesting that referential language can neither adequately term and define the dying body nor provide its accurate phenomenological description.



Nevertheless, the reading of AIDS as a metaphor is the topic of a famous book by Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, published in 1988. Severely criticizing the metaphorization of AIDS and its usage in different political and socio-cultural discourses, Sontag insists on the peculiar nature of AIDS, so arguing:

That AIDS is not a single illness but a syndrome, consisting of a seemingly open-ended list of contributing or “presenting” illnesses which constitute (that is, qualify the patient as having) the disease, makes it more a product of definition or construction than even a very complex, multiform illness like cancer. (28)

This approach to the discursive rendering of AIDS sounds particularly interesting if related to Leavitt’s and Kincaid’s texts, which produce structurally similar mechanisms of representation of the sick body, resorting to the power of different metaphors (technological and digital, in one case, vegetal in the other). Sontag’s remark about the ‘open-ended’ nature of AIDS seems to me an important point, in terms of linguistic productivity; the diagnostic indeterminacy of AIDS is paralleled by a linguistic polymorphism of the narrative renditions I am discussing, which make use of complex figurative detours to address their object. AIDS as a linguistic and semiotic phenomenon is an issue widely discussed by Tim Dean (1993: 84), who, in an interesting essay on the relationship between AIDS (as a) narrative and psychoanalysis, suggests that “AIDS is structured, radically and precisely, as the unconscious Real of the social field of contemporary America”. This complex statement unveils some assumptions that will prove crucial to my argument. First, AIDS is something that can be structured. This implies that, besides being (obviously) a disease whose impact on society has been quite strong in the past, AIDS is a construction that, not unlike a discourse, has the power to affect and transform the representation of the very elements setting up its own structure. Secondly, according to Dean, AIDS works as the “unconscious real”. I do not mean to delve here into the complex Lacanian jargon from which Dean borrows its lexicon; suffice it to retain his point that AIDS, structurally similar to the Lacanian real, lies at the very core of American society, and, through a process of rejection and foreclosure, is its secret object of *jouissance*, namely, what an organism needs to expel in order to enjoy its own equilibrium, stability, and internal harmony. Finally, Dean refers to “contemporary America”.

What AIDS represented for the US society and US homosexual communities in the 1980s is well known: it was wielded as a powerful means of repression and control by conservatives and Christian fundamentalists. While in the US context the role of AIDS as a menace and, at the same time, as a reason for chauvinist nationalistic and homophobic backlash finally resulted in the necessity, for gay men and activists, to speak out against every kind of discrimination, in the Caribbean, where *My Brother* is set, it was only through silence that something similar to a homosexual community



was created and defended against external attacks.¹ Leavitt's and Kincaid's works will help me to substantiate and broaden up these theoretical and historical assumptions, showing their intimate dependence on the mechanisms of linguistic and rhetorical nature both texts enacted.

"Saturn Street" is a novella included in *Arkansas*, a book published by Leavitt in 1997, when the author turned back to autobiographical fiction by collecting three long tales.² "Saturn Street", focusing on the unsettled relationship between the narrator, Jerry, a young writer from New York City working in Los Angeles, and Philip, a man suffering from AIDS,³ confronts its readers with death from its very beginning. The protagonist, Jerry, moves to Los Angeles six months after his partner has taken his own life; besides writing, he volunteers delivering lunches to people suffering from AIDS. Philip and Jerry casually meet and start a friendship, always on the verge of a love affair, which lasts until Jerry goes back to New York. Since their first encounter, Philip is described as a sort of relict of the 1970s, a man totally unable to adjust his own habits and perspective to the present time.

What Philip regrets is a celebrated golden past of homosexual history, a period in which sexual liberation seemed to be almost within reach, so distant from the paranoia of the AIDS era and its obsession with illness and safe sex. Moreover, through an interesting overlapping between Philip's life and his social and cultural environment, Leavitt elegiacally celebrates both the end of an era of optimistic homosexual empowerment and an old-fashioned idea of futurity, well epitomized by the Los Angeles neighborhood where Philip lives, Saturn Street, built according to a naive idea of a technological future, as it was possibly conceivable in the 1970s.⁴

¹ The question of AIDS in the Caribbean is extremely complex, especially because of the alleged and never proven Haitian origin of the HIV virus. Among the works on this theme, Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox Source, "The Contemporary Historiography of AIDS", *Journal of Social History*, 23: 2, 1989, pp. 303-314; Alexander Moore, Ronald D. Lebaron, "The Case for a Haitian Origin of the AIDS Epidemic", in Douglas A. Feldman, Thomas M. Johnson, (eds.), *The Social Dimension of AIDS: Method and Theory*, Praeger, New York, 1986; Paula A. Treichler, 1989, "AIDS and Hiv Infection in the Third World: A First World Chronicle", in Barbara Kruger, Phil Mariani, (eds.), *Remaking History*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1989; Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation. Haiti and the Geography of Blame*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995; Paul Farmer, "AIDS e razzismo. Medicina, stereotipi ed epidemiologia tra gli immigrati haitiani negli Usa: 1981-1994", in Roberto Cagliero, Francesco Ronzon, (eds.) *Spettri di Haiti. Dal colonialismo francese all'imperialismo americano, ombre corte*, Verona, 2002.

² For an in-depth analysis of *Arkansas* in both historical and thematic terms, see Kekki 2003.

³ In his first works Leavitt had obsessively dealt with cancer, a recurrent theme in several short stories from *Family Dancing* (1984) and one of the central motifs in *Equal Affection* (1989). "Saturn Street" is among the first works where Leavitt explicitly writes of AIDS and of its connection with homosexual relationships and community building in the US.

⁴ There is a noticeable literary tradition that features Los Angeles as the most adequate American city for futuristic, and often catastrophic, scenarios; as David Seed remarks (2010: 133), "The sheer variety of LA futures suggests that the fate of the city and of the nation has become an insistent, if somber, subject for debate. Although disaster and decline repeatedly figure in these accounts, paradoxically they are confirming a general perception of Los Angeles as the site of national experimentation."



At the end of the novella, Philip becomes blind, and Leavitt explains his condition resorting to a metafictional strategy. He compares him to a character from *Star Trek*, a TV series of which Philip is very fond: Medusan, a monstrous creature “whose thoughts were among the most sublime in the universe, yet whose physical appearance was so hideous no human could look at him without going mad.” (161) In contrast with the mythological narrative and its subsequent elaborations, Medusan here is a male character. He does not have a real body, being described as “hideously formless’. Intermittently he was ‘shown’ –a clatter of staticky sparks, intermixed with psychedelic burlblings of color.” (161)

The reference to Medusan is subtly related to other interesting passages interspersed throughout the text in an apparently accidental way. What sounds all the more striking, in a text whose main narrative line revolves around the decaying corporeality of a person with AIDS, is its recurring, almost obsessive reference to incorporeality.

The anomalous nature of Medusan’s body, thus, can be read vis a vis the policies for safe sex waged in the 1980s as a result of the dramatic increase in contagion from HIV among male homosexuals; in this sense, what is referred to in the *Star Trek* episode as a body with no external boundaries could be easily interpreted as a metaphor for the promiscuous and unprotected sex that had been the common behavior among homosexual people before the AIDS crisis.⁵

Leavitt decides to insert the episode of Medusan at the very core of the novella, but from the beginning Jerry is portrayed as an attentive listener of Dr. Delia, a psychotherapist whose radio program is broadcast daily. Dr. Delia is the first incorporeal presence of the tale: she is totally unknown to anyone, except for her voice. Moreover, Jerry is represented as a phone sex addict, fully aware of the immaterial and incorporeal world of sex lines, where subjects, roles and signifiers are totally interchangeable (“In the world of phone line [...] none of this signified. [...] Subjects become objects. [...] people presuppos[ed] that there *was* a ‘here’, that so

⁵ Promiscuity and unprotected sex, allowing bodily barriers to be trespassed, are the means through which corporeal fluids leak and are mutually exchanged, in what has been recently interpreted as a new possible paradigm of male bonding. In his 2009 *Unlimited Intimacy*, Tim Dean examines bareback communities, drawing a distinction between bareback sex, which implies an awareness of the risks involved in unprotected sex, and pre-condom sex, the latter referring to sex behavior before the AIDS crisis: “The AIDS epidemic has given men new opportunities for kinship, because sharing viruses has come to be understood as a mechanism of alliance, a way of forming consanguinity with strangers or friends. Through HIV, gay men have discovered that they can ‘breed’ without women. Unlimited Intimacy does not take for granted what might seem obvious, namely, that bareback subculture is all about death. For some of its participants, bareback sex concerns different forms of life, reproduction, and kinship.” (6) Dean’s work is particularly interesting in relation to a recent output in queer studies dealing with homosexuality and futurity, which theorizes kinship as not necessarily bound to the future as the ultimate perspective of human living. See Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York U.P., New York and London, 2005; Lee Edelman, *No Future. Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Duke U.P., Durham and London, 2006; Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography”, *Social Text* 84-85, 23: 3-4, 2005, pp. 57-68.



many voices defined a physical space, a place.” 143) Finally, he discovers what Philip looked like before his illness by accidentally watching him starring a porn-movie, his very sexual attraction to Philip being thus satisfied and fulfilled through the abstract and immaterial image of him having sexual intercourse with another man on a mute screen:

It ended in less than half a minute. Less than half a minute, and this revelation of all the erotic details about which I'd so long speculated – the shape of Phil's erection, the way his face looked when he came – was over. Finished. No secret left. [...] I felt sure that [...] young Phil was watching me as I watched him. (190)

Immateriality turns out to be one of the leitmotifs of the text, in what seems to me a crucial turn towards an understanding of its rhetorical strategy and political predicament. Given these premises, the construction of homosexuality as an identity based on the opposition or the interplay between the inside and the outside (a thesis theorized in the past by Diana Fuss) gets totally lost.⁶ The text features a representation of the homosexual bodies that blurs the boundaries between the inside and the outside, insisting, on the contrary, on an undifferentiated material and corporeal continuum as rendered by the sick bodies here portrayed.

This perspective clearly draws on common homophobic stereotypes about the spread of AIDS, whose origin was almost exclusively ascribed to the uncontrolled fluxes of viral fluids discharged from homosexual men's bodies. In Suzanne Yang's words (2001: 323), AIDS is a

disease of boundaries, of the relation between self and environment, and of vulnerability both specific and diffuse to the challenges posed from within and outside the body. These challenges reveal the persistent struggle and overcoming that the immune system ordinarily accomplishes in silence.

Yang insists on the importance of body integrity as a distinctive mark of health, and the first signs through which AIDS reveals its destructive presence, the ruptures on skins (wounds, lacerations, and so on), jeopardize the body's very integrity. This notion reinforces the idea of homosexuality as a threat to a regular economy of bodily exchange between the inside and the outside, which AIDS, finally, has totally unbalanced. The leaking body is a body whose surface is broken, and, like a body endowed with numberless mouths, it can overtly speak of itself, revealing hidden and possibly shameful truths. In Leavitt's text, however, the relation between the unscathed body and the normal subject is overturned; Medusan, in fact, regards the rigid and defined barrier of the body as the origin of human loneliness and

⁶ According to Diana Fuss (1991), the hermeneutics of the homosexual self is undermined by a structural problem: the homosexual subject being traditionally represented as the 'outside', the external and untamable 'other' of the sanctioned subject, any attempt at analyzing its internal self is bound to fail.



desperation: "But most of all, the aloneness! [...] You live out your lives in this shell of flesh, self-contained, separate. How lonely you are. How terribly lonely." (162)

Jamaica Kincaid's novel is the biography of her brother. Devon is thirteen years younger than his sister and still lives in Antigua, the Caribbean island where both he and Jamaica come from, she having moved to Vermont in the meanwhile. Devon contracts AIDS and eventually dies. The narrative follows the course of Devon's illness in the first part, and Jamaica's reaction to his death in the second. It is only after his death that she discovers that Devon was homosexual, and that had probably contracted the virus through unprotected relationships with other men.

A realistic rendering of Kincaid's personal experience, an 'autothanatography', as Louise Bernard has defined it (2002: 123), nevertheless *My Brother* enacts a progressive shifting from the medical-scientific to the tropological rendering of Devon's story and body. The references in "Saturn Street" to the immateriality of electrostatic waves are here substituted with the micro-materiality of vegetal organisms, to which Devon's dying body, and then his corpse, are repeatedly equated.

Gardening is a frequently recurring topic throughout the story, from its very beginning, both as a piece of biographical or autobiographical information and as an analogy with or an equivalent of Devon's body.⁷ Devon was a gardener himself, and, in what sounds more than a mere coincidence, Jamaica was reading *The Education of a Gardener* by Russell Page when she first heard of her brother's illness. She is in Miami when Devon dies and, before flying to Vermont, she goes to the Fairchild Botanical Gardens to buy rhododendrons: "I looked like a very sensible woman carrying two large plants covered with trumpet-shaped brilliant orange blooms in the middle of an airport." (97-98) Referring to a conversation held with her mother in the garden, she writes: "I noticed that the lemon tree my sick brother had planted was no longer there and I asked about it, and she said casually, Oh, we cut it down to make room for the addition"; and, later on, she remarks: "That lemon tree would have been one of the things left of his life. Nothing came from him; not work, not children, not love for someone else." (13) While Devon is ill, he and Jamaica take a walk to the botanical garden and try to identify every plant they see:

But then we came to a tree that we could identify [...] It was a tree, only a tree, and it was either just emerging from a complete dormancy or it was half-dead, half-alive. My brother and I became obsessed with this tree [...] If it crossed his mind that this tree, coming out from a dormancy, a natural sleep, a temporary

⁷ As Soto-Crespo (343-344) reminds us, "In 1999, Kincaid published *My Garden (Book)*, a series of long essays about gardens that is different in style and subject matter from her previous books. In earlier works Kincaid fictionalized both her own childhood (*Annie John*, 1983) and the life of her half-Carib mother (*The Autobiography of My Mother*, 1996), while in *My Brother* (1997) she memorialized the life of her youngest sibling. By contrast, *My Garden (Book)* appears to deal with seasons, plants, and flowers; in fact, it concerns history, cultural institutions, and imperial conquest."



death, or just half-dead, bore any resemblance to him right then and there, he did not say, he did not let me know in any way.⁸ (79-80)

The idea of Devon's body as a non-reproductive organism, at least according to the parameters of human breeding, is taken up again in the rest of the book:

Who is he? I kept asking myself. Who is he? [...] no one depends on him, he is not a father to anyone. [...] his father was the father of many children. This compulsion to express himself through his penis, his imagination passing between his legs, not through his hands, is something I am not qualified to understand. (69-70)

To the question "who is he?" Kincaid can give a provisional, only negative answer: he is not a father, he has no progeny. And Devon's penis—the partial object with which, in the first part of the book, Kincaid almost identifies Devon in his entirety, through a synecdoche that should account for his sexual exuberance – is later metamorphosed into a vegetal element:

he suddenly threw the sheets away from himself, tore his pajama bottoms away from his waist, revealing his penis, and then he grabbed his penis in his hand and held it up, and his penis looked like a bruised flower that had been cut short on the stem; it was covered with sores and on the sores was a white substance, almost creamy, almost floury, a fungus. (91)⁹

The vegetal nature of Devon's body depends on the configuring of his physical frame as the actual locus where the exchange of fluids occurs, a theme that is frequently recalled in the book. Jamaica remembers that Devon was attacked by red ants when he was a little child, and, while he lies ill in bed, she argues, "I was only wondering if it had any meaning that some small red things had almost killed him from the outside shortly after he was born and that now some small things were killing him from the inside" (6), almost as if porousness and leakage were inborn features of his body. When Jamaica sees Devon sick for the first time, the detail that apparently strikes her most are his lips, "scarlet red, as if layers and layers of skin had been removed and only one last layer remained, holding in place the dangerous fluid that was his blood." (83)

⁸ With reference to this passage, Sarah Brophy argues (2002: 270-1): "Toward the end of the first half of *My Brother*, Kincaid associates Devon with a mahogany tree, one of the few plants she can name as being indigenous to Antigua ("Alien Soil" 49), and this metaphor seems to console her by revalorizing his life. The fruit of the mahogany tree stands for their shared appreciation of indigenous plants and almost succeeds in presenting a purified image of Devon."

⁹ About the penis as a synecdoche for Devon and his social persona, Marie-Hélène Laforest argues (1998: 157): "Devon's identity is defined through his penis. When he can no longer perform through his genitals, he can no longer be defined as a man in the environment. [...] It is the myth of the West Indian macho her brother impersonates that Kincaid willingly debunks as she devalues black maleness and exposes her brother's penis, now a piece of undesirable flesh."



Devon's is more similar to a plant than to a man's body. The motif of micro-materiality thus comes up again: while in "Saturn Street" Philip's body participates in an exchange of immaterial particles, his blind and sick body being likened to the amorphous Medusan of *Star Trek*, in *My Brother* it is paraphrased into the vegetal nature of Devon's corporeality and its capability to produce a quasi-rhizomatic, plant-like procreation, instead of a human, parental one. Structural and semiotic similarities between the two texts can be ascribed to a common perception of the male homosexual body as a corpse in its own right, as something only thinkable as already dead, or rather, as never having been alive; both texts depict their protagonists as always already inscribed in an economy of dying, though rejecting such assumption in their expressed words.

The homosexual body is constructed as essentially non-human, and the corpse, because of its sterile, asexual nature, becomes the privileged symbolic locus where this dehumanizing process is enacted, charged as it is with a wide range of different semantic associations (from the mechanical and technological to the vegetal one), which ultimately point out its intrinsic and fundamental non-human nature.

One crucial and obvious difference marks off the two texts: while, at the end of "Saturn Street", Philip is still alive, and nothing is said about his apparently imminent death, the second section of *My Brother* hinges on the actual presence of Devon's corpse, ostensibly displayed and celebrated. This difference sounds particularly interesting in the wake of the similar economy of representation shared by both texts. I would suggest that the choice of AIDS as the hidden track along which the two plots unravel produces two different results, according to the different regimes of power-signification framed in the texts. Leavitt's novella is deeply ingrained in a historical and narrative structure that has by now subsumed AIDS as one of its constitutive, however marginal, features. From the beginning of the text, Leavitt sketches the way in which AIDS, as a collective and national experience of the 1980s, was perceived in the US collective imagination. The two protagonists come from New York and California (Philip, before moving to Los Angeles, used to live in San Francisco, where he came out as a gay man). Almost completely sidestepping any overt reference to the transformations occurred to Californian gay communities over the 1970s and the 1980s, Leavitt chooses to symbolically celebrate their present reality resorting to the end of the futuristic utopia of the 1970s, and using Philip's dying body as a multiple metaphor to embody the end of an epoch of both, at the same time, optimistic and naive confidence in the future, and triumphal affirmation and legitimation of homosexual identity and behaviors.



This overlapping accounts for a clear and specular perception of the 1980s as a phase of political and cultural stagnation, devoid of any utopian accent, aptly displayed through the present Los Angeles landscape and what Leavitt defines as "its very incongruity: the past's fantasy of the future, grown old."¹⁰ (168) At the same time, the affirmative force of homosexual communitarianism, which had seemed so powerful just a few years before, starts crumbling and showing its anxious and hidden disquietude, made explicit in Philip's words: "I'm not looking for organizations. I'm looking for a philosophy. [...] It's just that in my case all happened so suddenly." (149-50)

Depressing as it may be, Leavitt's scenario is coherently balanced and structurally self-sufficient. *My Brother*, conversely, triggers a dynamics of expulsion and rejection that finds its most critical momentum in the naked presence of Devon's corpse. Fiercely criticizing the novel, Jennifer Rahim (2006: 10-11) argues that

Devon's taste in history books (he is obsessed with *A History of the West Indies*, which valorizes imperial plunderers) and his homosexuality reproduce a decadent narcissism, whose prototype is the colonizer. His AIDS-consumed body therefore serves as a symbol of the historical stasis in which Antigua is imprisoned, the hell Kincaid escaped by immigrating to the "prosperous North" where her career as a writer blossomed.

Shifting the analysis to the dyad colonialism/postcolonialism has allowed many critics to point out that Devon's role in *My Brother* is to embody the subaltern condition of Antigua as a former British colony; in this sense, AIDS would be a metaphor for this state of subjection. In the words of Ramon Soto-Crespo (2002: 343),

In *My Brother*, Kincaid analogizes AIDS [...] with the spread of colonialism in the West Indies, an analogy she develops by suggesting that her brother's subaltern body becomes bereft of life in postcolonial Antigua, just as the West Indies were depleted of their flora during colonization.¹¹

¹⁰ Moreover, the contiguity of both AIDS and science fiction representation criteria is not unprecedented, as Susan Sontag remarks (1988: 18): "And the science-fiction flavor, already present in cancer talk, is even more pungent in accounts of AIDS--this one comes from *Time* magazine in late 1986--with infection described like the high-tech warfare for which we are being prepared (and injured) by the fantasies of our leaders and by video entertainments."

¹¹ Kezia Page (2006: 46) too reads the relationship between Jamaica and Devon as an overt reference to postcolonial dynamics: "Kincaid's portrayal of her relationship with Devon is [...] a version of the relationship between Antigua and the US. The terms of the remittance erase notions of cultural equality and instead enforce relations of third world dependency. The other side of the dichotomy presents Vermont or the US as the cultural superior to Antigua or the Caribbean."



I would argue that, rather than a rigid opposition between the USA and Antigua, what is at stake in Kincaid's novel is a paradigm of post-colonial knowledge in which homosexuality has no space, and in which death and the presence of the dead body are, rhetorically, the only, albeit paradoxical, means to allow the homosexual subject to speak. Two years before *My Brother* was published, Antiguan parliament passed a law against sex-related crimes, "The Sexual Offences Act". This law, which never mentions homosexuality, states in article 12: "A person who commits buggery is guilty of an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment. [...] In this section 'buggery' means sexual intercourse per *anum* by a male person with a male person or by a male person with a female person." The opposition between sexual acts and sexual identities, for Foucault a significant feature of the modern conception of sexuality, seems to have been erased once again, to the point that homosexuality and sodomy are forcibly conflated into the same paradigm.

Though obviously targeting male homosexuals, the law generically refers to both male and female persons, in a clear attempt at camouflage, thus confining homosexuality to the lowest possible degree of recognizability. In *My Brother*, Devon's homosexuality comes as a surprise for Jamaica, who obstinately keeps asking throughout the novel who Devon really was. In more general terms, the whole text insists on an urgent need for knowledge, a sort of tenacious *volonté de savoir* that keeps interrogating the subjects of the text about their sexual identity, whose revelation seems an imperative aim to achieve: "I did not know how my brother had contracted the HIV virus." (40); "I only wanted to know these things about my brother because they would tell me something about him." (41) "I know" is obsessively repeated after she discovers about Devon's homosexuality (159-161). In the end she writes: "he had died without ever understanding or knowing, or being able to let the world in which he lived know, who he was; that who he really was--not a single sense of identity but all the complexities of who he was--he could not express fully." (162)

Death is, in *My Brother*, the ultimate means that produces knowledge; as argued by Louise Bernard (2001: 134),

Kincaid's outing of her brother after his death, when his own voice has indeed been fully silenced, when he can no longer speak to the joys and pains of his life as a (closeted) gay man in Antigua, is certainly questionable. It is at this point, however, that Kincaid seems able to mourn her brother's death, to bring to the surface the sadness, as opposed to anger, she feels at the fact that her brother could not live life as his "true" self.



It is before Devon's corpse lying in the coffin that Jamaica starts asking questions:

The coffin lid was put in place and the sounds of the screws securing it did not cause us to cry or vomit or pass out. My mother said it did not look like Devon at all, and that was true, but I did not know which Devon she meant: Was it the baby a day old almost eaten alive by red ants, or was it the two-year-old boy who was left in my charge and whose diaper I neglected to change as it became filled with his still-baby feces because I had become absorbed in a book; or was it the Devon who was involved in the homicide of a gas-station attendant; or the one who played cricket so well and learned to swim at Country Pond; or the one who smoked the Weed, the way she referred to his marijuana addiction; or the one who changed from a vibrant young man who had come down with a very bad case of pneumonia and then was told in an open hospital ward by a doctor accompanied by two nurses that he had the HIV virus and that shortly he would be dead; or the one who was well enough shortly after that to begin having unprotected sex with women and sex with other people who were not women but who we – that is, his family – did not know about?

Which Devon was he? All of them, I suppose; and which did he like best, and which one of his selves made him happiest? I cannot tell this, and perhaps neither could be. (190-1)

While "Saturn Street", though dealing with analogous themes, completely overlooks the problem of knowledge, taking it for granted and, thus, avoiding to show the final stage of Philip's body, in *My Brother* the triggering of an investigation / knowledge mechanism is made necessary because of the Antiguan biopolitical regime, whose hypocritical blindness to homosexuality was undoubtedly known to Kincaid.

In "Saturn Street", Jerry, on leaving Philip's apartment, meets the guy who has just brought Philip his lunch, and asks him to listen to his story, and to drive him away from Saturn Street. "Where to, my good man?" 'Anywhere,' I said. 'Sounds good to me' Dave said. 'I like anywhere. Anywhere's always been my favorite place.'" (198) On the very opposite of Leavitt's 'anywhere', the urge to sound Antigua's controversial cultural heritage and present biopolitical regime makes Kincaid's text relentlessly question sexual identity; Devon's corpse, though not revealing anything in itself, acquires a symbolic role in the general economy of the book, instancing a new possible paradigm of knowledge based on death that, thanks to death, can open up a previously untouched and tabooed theme.



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Fiorenzo Iuliano holds a Ph.D. in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures from "L'Orientale" University, Naples. He teaches at the University of Naples L'Orientale and has been appointed to a position of researcher at the Theory Department, Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. He has published essays in journals and volumes on queer theory, postmodern thought, biopolitics, and death studies; His research areas are American studies, graphic novels, cultural studies. His current project is on US representations of bodies and death.

iuliano@unior.it

Jamaica Kincaid (/kɛˈnɪˈkeɪd/; born May 25, 1949) is an Antiguan-American novelist, essayist, gardener, and gardening writer. She was born in St. John's, Antigua (part of the twin-island nation of Antigua and Barbuda). She lives in North Bennington, Vermont (in the United States), during the summers, and is Professor of African and African American Studies in Residence at Harvard University during the academic year. This essay analyzes two works, *My Brother* by Jamaica Kincaid, and "Saturn Street" by David Leavitt, investigating the construction of homosexuality as a process accomplished by resorting to illness (AIDS) and death. In both works, indeed, the slow and dramatic course of AIDS amounts to the progressive unveiling of homosexuality as a social threat or a cause of anxiety and repulsion. The point I want to make in this essay is that the corpse is used as an effective metaphor for a dehumanized depiction of male homosexual and ill subjects.

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