

***“That Joke Isn’t Funny Anymore”:  
Or, How Oscar Wilde Contracted HIV***

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... “The worst thing about getting AIDS? Convincing your parents that you're Haitian.”

This first, enduring comic response to the emerging AIDS epidemic of the early 1980s is unattributed. It points, however, to two assumptions about its early gay victims which would – for the joke to have any resonance – must strike the listener as axiomatic: that they were not “out” to their parents about their homosexuality; that they were not from Haiti (and by extension, were not non-white).

It took until 1989 for HIV/AIDS to receive significant attention from mainstream filmmakers, and when the Craig Lucas/Norman René collaboration *Longtime Companion* appeared, critical attention focused on its daring, but equally formally absurd “return to the beach” closing shots, where the deceased are resurrected on Fire Island, and the party continues. Still, *Longtime Companion* managed a few, rare things – things which the first big budget Hollywood AIDS vehicle Jonathan Demme’s *Philadelphia* – which emerged some five years later, scripted by Ron Nyswaner - could not: it frequently deployed gay American tropes of humor (invariably “camp”) to disrupt and complicate its central, melodramatic narrative of “disease-demise-death” in the biomedical context, and of uncontrollable spread in the epidemiological one.

That said, one key moment in the film focuses on the first hospital admission of a young, confident, promiscuous Fire Island partygoer, who has been the leading protagonist in ridiculing the early reports of “gay cancer”, in the heavily comical opening minutes. Two of his friends turn up to the Emergency Ward to find a world of racial diversity markedly in contrast to the blanket whiteness we have witnessed on Fire Island, whose only (scarcely present) ‘Other’ is the occasional woman. The camera pans around the waiting room, finding (probably) African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, even Haitians, all waiting, alongside an ethnically very diverse medical support staff, and, to the patient and his friends’ surprise, a female, Indian doctor. The symbolic narrative could hardly be clearer: that HIV/AIDS *joke* isn’t funny anymore. One reason why it isn’t funny is because one of the subculture’s privileged, white gay professional elite has suddenly been cast down into an underclass, infected by or far too proximate to those infected and affected by HIV, the largely non-white.

Casting back, we see that the single most influential, and recklessly partisan work of AIDS-related non-fiction, Randy Shilts’s *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987; itself the source of an HBO film of 1993), had not only opened with a highly speculative account of the first case of AIDS – that of a female Danish doctor working in Africa – but had, throughout, implicitly tied the

tragedy of the epidemic's early years – and especially its impact upon members of the American gay subculture – to a conceptualization of (predominantly white and Caucasian) Americanness as compromised by or vulnerable to waves of (at least in part, non-white) immigration. This is captured in the author's decision to open the book with an account of the 1976 New York City harbor celebrations of the bicentenary of the US Declaration of Independence. Shilts emphasized here that sailors had come to Manhattan from all over the planet, though in practice it was the latter-day successor to seafaring immigration – mass airline travel - that would fuel his entirely fabricated storyline around the French-Canadian air steward Gaetan Dugas, irritatingly not non-white, perhaps, but at least foreign-sounding and linguistically "other".<sup>1</sup>

Casting forward, we find in the utterly-sombre *Philadelphia* that non-whiteness plays an entirely other role than in *Longtime Companion*. Where the latter film might be questioned for its seemingly blanketing focus on the tragedy of "white AIDS", Demme's film both complicated and confused its own intentions by identifying an African-American, heterosexual (and initially starkly homophobic) personal injury lawyer, Joe Miller (played by Denzel Washington), as offering the only means by which white, preppy AIDS victim (and *near* devout monogamist) Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks) might seek redress after his dismissal from a seemingly uniformly white, male law firm (though employing African-American administrators on poor terms, which will generate a key plot point in the courtroom sequences). Paradoxically, *Philadelphia* inverted expectations (and arguably aimed to boost audience figures and revenue) by implying that the tragic "fall" of white, American gay professionals might only be attended to by a new, upwardly mobile African-American professional class – a class which, arguably it considered better reflected the sort of mainstream (bourgeois) values of homeliness and a conservative approach to family life to which Hollywood storylines invariably cling.

In *Longtime Companion*, arguably, contracting HIV is figured as a dramatic fall from grace of members of a social elite that, physically, remained white but came to be associated not only with very non-white (impure) qualities of dirt, disease and contagion, but in practice also became compelled to share even pseudo-domestic spaces such as the hospital bed or waiting room with a racially diverse and in class terms semi- or disenfranchised populace. Its white "fall guys" were, equally, subject to the very limited opportunities of medical redemption (temporary relief of some key symptoms) offered by a series of non-white medical employees. Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991-92) would pick up this broad conceit, but take it into very different directions, by allowing the bedbound embodiment of white (Jewish), closeted, gay professional America, Roy Cohn (another lawyer!) to be subjected to the chorus-type commentary provided by his African-American nurse, Belize - the

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1 See Richard A McKay's outstanding study of Shilts's work, *Patient Zero and the Making of the AIDS Epidemic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

wittiest character in the plays, and the only one who – like a stage entertainer, indeed – is not afforded a surname.

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I should apologise for the highly speculative or subjective nature of this paper, and, moreover, for the fact that it fails to reflect its original aspirations, which involved surveying the range of responses to HIV/AIDS globally which had deployed humour. One chief reason for this is that so much of what my initial researches uncovered had racial, regional or nationalist inflections. Take this particularly poor joke, reflecting a Canadian stereotype of the Newfoundlander as mentally deficient:

There was a German, an Italian and a Newfie on death row. The warden gave them a choice of three ways to die...

1. To be shot
2. To be hung
3. To be injected with the AIDS virus for a slow death.

The German said, "Shoot me right in the head." Boom, he was dead instantly.

The Italian said, "Just hang me." With a snap of the rope he was dead.

Then the Newfie said, "Give me some of that AIDS stuff." They gave him the shot and the Newfie fell down laughing. The guards looked at each other and wondered what was wrong with this guy.

The Newfie said, "Give me another one of those shots." The guards injected him again and now the Newfie was laughing so hard that tears rolled down his cheeks and he was doubled over laughing.

Finally the warden said, "What is wrong with you?"

The Newfie replied, "You guys are so stupid... I'm wearing a condom."<sup>2</sup>

Are we to congratulate the creator for not deploying comparable stereotypes about gay people, as in so many other jokes evidently derived from and delivered to the concerned, non-gay, supposed majority of the Western cultural mainstream, the "worried well"? Many other early jokes focused on the supposed "unnaturalness" of gay male sexual practice to sustain a conceptualization of HIV/AIDS transmission as entirely marginal ("other"):

Gay [man] Chip goes into the doctor's office and has some tests run. The doctor comes back and says, "Chip, I am not going to beat around the bush, You have AIDS." Chip is devastated. "Doc, what can I do?" The doctor says, "I want you to go home and eat 5 pounds of spicy sausage, a head of cabbage, 20 un-peeled carrots drenched in hot sauce, 10 Jalapeno peppers, 40 walnuts and 40 peanuts, 1/2 box of Grapenuts cereal, and top it off with a

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.jokebuddha.com/joke/Death\\_Row\\_\(Newfie\\_Joke\)#ixzz55UtQHdw3](http://www.jokebuddha.com/joke/Death_Row_(Newfie_Joke)#ixzz55UtQHdw3)  
(accessed 16 July 2018).

gallon of prune juice." Chip asks, "Will that cure me, Doc?" "No, but it should leave you with a better understanding of what your ass is for."<sup>3</sup>

A version of this serially mutated into a vehicle for humour around the demise of Hollywood star Rock Hudson:

Rock Hudson goes to a new doctor in San Diego to see about treatment for his AIDS. The doctor orders: "Every day for the next week, go to White Castle and eat a dozen Sliders. After that week is up, go to New York and then come back. On that trip, stop at every McDonald's restaurant, have one sample of everything on the menu, and drink the 'orange drink'." "Will that cure my AIDS?" Rock asks. "No", the doctor replies, "but it will teach you what your asshole is really for."<sup>4</sup>

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In 2011, I gave a paper in Durban, South Africa, on the uses of humour in early gay American "AIDS narratives." It really did not go down well. Attendees – predominantly social scientists, outreach workers and/or carers, medical support staff or NGO employees working across the African continent - at the ASSHH event either walked out, tutted or objected loudly to my presentation, which focused on the satirical magazine *Diseased Pariah News* and writings by the ex-porn star Scott O'Hara, but also mentioned a few works of American AIDS fiction and non-fiction, including those written by David Feinberg and John Weir in particular. All these narratives were, inevitably, subculturally-oriented (gay writers for gay readers), and thus in a sense already "inward looking" and partial; they pertained to the social and political circumstances of the gay, Western epidemic as strongly as the quip about AIDS or the early films I have mentioned.

San Francisco resident "Scott O'Hara" (died 1998) was that unlikely thing: an HIV-positive gay American porn actor who refused to go quietly. Instead, O'Hara managed the decline in his own health by writing defiantly about it, about homosexuality and also about the need for responsible sexual praxis on the part of gay men. O'Hara's writings were collected in two volumes, *Autopornography* (1997) and *Rarely Pure and Never Simple* (1998), and also appeared in a number of anthologies and in the acclaimed satirical magazine *Diseased Pariah News* (published 1990-99). Issues 1-8 of *DPN* – long scarce, if not impossible to source – were

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.jokes4us.com/medicaljokes/aidsjoke.html> (accessed 16 July 2018).

<sup>4</sup> <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/net.jokes/wND1DoGBFuk> (accessed 16 July 2018)

digitalized in 2010 and placed on the internet, allowing ready access to one of the sole cultural responses to HIV/AIDS to find space for the creative outpourings of those most immediately affected by the epidemic, and likewise to have assumed a readership of HIV-positive gay men and gay men with AIDS.

Both O'Hara and *Diseased Pariah News* more generally were equally groundbreaking in the deployment of humour as a means of furthering understanding of HIV/AIDS, thus countering the solemnity and pomp of mainstream HIV/AIDS discourse (biomedical or political). But to most of the ASSHH audience, my focus on the role of humour in transforming attitudes about HIV/AIDS within and beyond its many specific subcultures and constituencies must have been at best irrelevant and non-sensical; at worst, pernicious and wrong-headed. I was told repeatedly that "African AIDS" – as distinct from the epidemic's other varieties, one of which I was seeking to smuggle back, as it were, into the proceedings - could never be funny, and that even suggesting a range of plausible responses in an individual to, say, a risky act of sex, to fear of HIV infection, or an actual HIV diagnosis, sent an entirely wrong message: it encouraged politicians and fellow citizens alike, in particular, not to take the epidemic seriously. My "smuggling" equally involved the very starting points of textual analysis within humanities scholarship: for the breach in perceptions throughout the conference also reflected the vast preponderance of social scientists or others working within the parabolic assumptions of social sciences culture over those very few (a handful) of academics present who were working on forms of textual analysis relating to literature, film, theatre, performance or the visual arts (the ASSHH constitution covers both Humanities and Social Sciences).

I have worried away at the "standoff" between Western and non-Western "narrativizations" of HIV/AIDS ever since, even whilst noting in the latter context, rare signs of innovation in terms of the deployment of humour: the AIDS-related theatre of South Africa's own Pieter Dirk-Uys springs to mind, a (white) actor and author who had already, in turn, subjected the horrendous, racist master tragedy of Apartheid to withering ridicule, almost by accident, in the creation of its housewife-turned-superstar flagwaver, Evita van Bezuidenhout, and also someone who, post-Apartheid had, in having to impersonate ANC leaders such as Thabo Mbeki, further rewritten the rules on the ethics of comic impersonation. I am grateful, therefore, to the suggestive citation of Barbara Browning's important study *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture* in the introduction by Alyson Campbell and Dirk Gindt to their recent, edited volume *Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the Twenty-First Century*<sup>5</sup>:

Browning frames the rhythms of black music and dance as 'infectious' to question the 'Western account of African diasporic culture that relies on the figure of disease and contagion. The metaphor is invoked – often in the guise

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<sup>5</sup> Alyson Campbell and Dirk Gindt (eds.), *Viral Dramaturgies: HIV and AIDS in Performance in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

of a “literal” threat – at moments of anxiety about diasporic flows, whether migrational or cultural.’ Needless to say, HIV and AIDS produced a particularly heightened moment of anxiety in history, and Browning ‘examine[s] both vital and violent ways in which [...] associations have been made between the AIDS pandemic and African diasporic cultural practices.’<sup>6</sup>

Nothing could more aptly summarise the deployment of “African AIDS” within Shilts’s fictive non-fictional account of American AIDS, nor better summarise the early, ubiquitous distinctions insisted upon by both Western mainstream and gay subcultural voices concerning Western and non-Western epidemics. In the context of early American AIDS narratives, these are manifest in representations of gay, white men succumbing to circumstances and states of poverty, unemployment and marginality experienced by equally American, but racially marked as „other“ men and women.

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Now, a leap of faith. I go on to consider an evidently distant and insupportable comparison: the arrival of Oscar Wilde on American soil in 1882, an irritatingly unsynchronic 101 years before the first reports of the earliest cases of HIV/AIDS. The recent transformational scholarship undertaken by Michele Mendelssohn in her *Making Oscar Wilde* is entirely responsible.<sup>7</sup> Mendelssohn’s book’s chief achievement lies in tracing the ways in which popular social and cultural forms came to capture and (it was to be hoped) contain the dangerous, apparently – given its spread across Europe – contagious qualities of aestheticism, dandyism and the very latent (but identified at length by his detractors) luxuriance, effeminacy and implied homosexuality of the Irish playwright.

At first the threat to American values may have seemed absurd, since Wilde’s first lecture tour coincided with the D’Oyly Carte staging of the anti-aestheticist satirical operetta *Patience* (1881) by Gilbert and Sullivan, which mocked its Wildean protagonist Bunthorne so effectively as to imply that the aesthetic creed, even in Europe, could only be a passing fad. But, just as in Browning’s identification of the Western construction of “African AIDS”, and just like Shilts’s construction of “Patience Zero” as a singular vector of transmission in relation to a great number of the first cases of AIDS across the US, the *actual* scale or likelihood of un-American aestheticism catching on was entirely beside the point.

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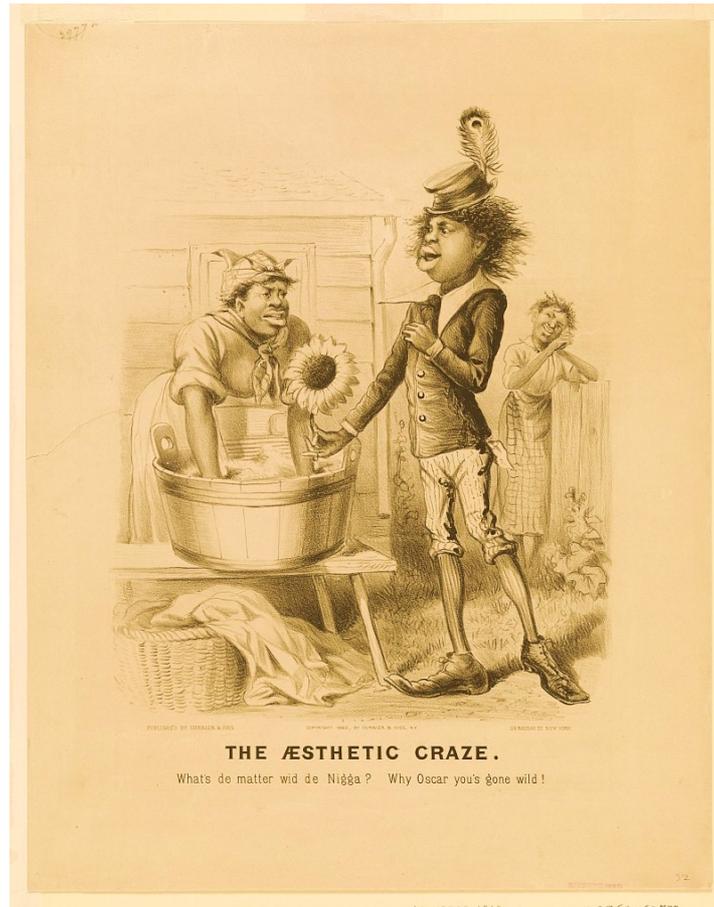
<sup>6</sup> Ibid., n.p., quoting Browning, *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture* ((New York/London: Routledge 1998) pp.6, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Michele Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

The more strongly Wilde honed his talks to identify New World values with those he came to find in his own Irishness – or “alienness” from England – the more strongly his implicit encouragement of personal defiance in respect of *laissez faire* economics needed to be contained. Wildean aestheticism’s promise of personal liberation seemed, by rejecting social and economic utilitarianism, to imply a first-hand threat to the enduring slavery (literal and figurative) which underpinned so much of America’s ongoing prosperity and future economic hopes. Moreover, Wilde’s radical embrace of idleness summoned up for his opponents only one recognizable internal threat to the social order: African Americans, with their reputed sloth and unreliability themselves the justifications for everything from white-initiated punitive working conditions to the chain-gang and lynching. Take the following front cover to *Harpers Weekly* (plate 21 in Mendelssohn’s book):



This sunflower-worshipping aesthete money is, as Mendelssohn points out, dressed conspicuously like Wilde. If the deployment of a monkey might arguably be interpreted as drawing on the then-in-vogue claims made by conservative thinkers of the risks to Western civilization of “degeneration” – already current, even if Max Nordau’s pivotal study *Entartung* was not published until 1892 – then the more specific and vulgar identification of aestheticist values within America’s non-white populations was equally already underway. The direct finger-pointing to the post-civil war America’s preoccupying racial “question” is illustrated in Mendelssohn’s Plate 1:



Mendelssohn describes how, on finding this remarkable and discomfoting image, she moved quickly on to other items in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library’s Oscar Wilde papers, suspecting a false scent... only quickly to find further satirical representations of the playwright as ‘Irish, Chinese, French, German, black, and, finally, a white American.’<sup>8</sup> She goes on to identify at length how American minstrelsy – which featured very predominantly vaudeville performers of Irish ethnic origin blacking up – took to placing aestheticism at the centre of their popular revues. By doing so, however, whether they were openly satirical of it or not, they risked confusing impersonation with self-identification.

In fact, the substitution of non-white features for the less-easily-visually-rendered potentially Irish ones in pictures of Wilde had already been instigated in the UK; by Linley Sambourne in a widely circulated 1881 cartoon for *Punch* featuring a thick-lipped, sunflower-faced Wilde as a Christy minstrel (Mendelssohn, Plate 13):

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<sup>8</sup> Mendelssohn, p.4.

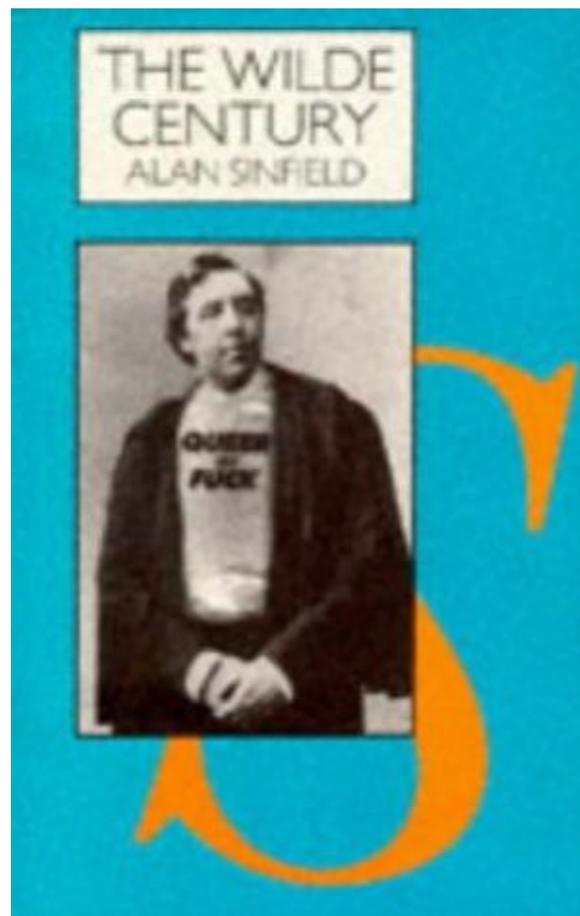


Wilde himself would further confuse things during his tour with non-progressive references to the unidentified African-American boy[or boys?] who attended him on tour as 'a black servant, who is my slave.' In all the visual rebukes to his fame and popularity, in any case, closeness is all. Wilde was seen to threaten the principles and practices of racial segregation, whether these were perpetrated through legal sanction or economic, social and geographical inequality.

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Oscar Wilde did not – as far as we may know - contract HIV. But he was portrayed as too close or too alike both to non-whites and to simians, just as Shilts and others have sought to classify the threat of AIDS to the USA (and by extension, the West) in terms of racial mix and contamination. It is at first sight obviously a coincidence, but I have been considering in the context of HIV/AIDS the astonishing revival of interest in Wilde as a gay hero and martyr - *both* (and thus ambiguously) a tragical and comical figure; a sort of latter-day minstrel for the sexually marginal. When I was an Oxford undergraduate (1986-89), no exam questions on the Victorian paper were set on Wilde, and as a fresher, I was effectively forbidden from studying such a 'trivial' author (in rather the same way as you could then happily complete the whole English degree without reading a non-white author, in fact, and just as you would focus on, say, "kingship" in Shakespeare, rather than his off-the-wall gender and sexual characterisations). Now there are two eminent Wilde scholars working at Oxford University, including Mendelsohn.

The meteoric rise in Wilde studies has occurred globally in the past three decades – precisely the same timeline in which sexuality studies emerged, and an array of post-structuralist developments in sexual identities; these in turn not only coincided with but proliferated in part because of the appearance of HIV/AIDS. Not least the cover of Alan Sinfield's 1994 book *The Wilde Century* announced how, according to a certain perspective at least, the Irishman had not only fathered the emergence of several marginal sexual identities across the twentieth century; he had also, by default if not design, as a result, enabled its radical activist wing:



The contemporary usefulness of Wilde lends him to almost all progressive causes, with the necessary obfuscation of his more conservative political moments (in this, his and Virginia Woolf's contemporary reputations are alike).

Still playing in cinemas as I type is Rupert Everett's remarkable film *The Happy Prince*, whose script has Wilde (played by Everett) proclaim his own syphilitic state in a Parisian hotel bedroom to friends: the nearest thing he could legitimately be, of course, to being HIV-positive:



In this context, Everett himself is obviously ideal casting. The actor not only confessed to nurturing acute fears of contracting HIV throughout the 1980s and 1990s whilst losing several partners to the syndrome. He reported in 2004 on BBC's *Newsnight* on the devastating legacy of the epidemic's (heterosexual) spread in Thailand.<sup>9</sup> And most recently, in an *Irish Times* interview, Everett contrasted the sudden celebrity status he acquired as a young actor with the equally rapid decline in health experienced by many peers:

My first surge of fame? It happened at the same time as Aids. So it was an anxious time. Lots of my friends got sick. I got quite famous. It was exciting. But it was also clouded.<sup>10</sup>

Oscar Wilde did not contract HIV and did not succumb to AIDS. But he has done everything else he reasonably might to become symbolically associated with our epidemic. Moreover, in the context of so-called "humorous" responses to AIDS, others who did die of AIDS-related causes have symbolically also been able to pick up the white/non-white subtext of threat and contagion - as in this "joke" about Liberace (also an early example of rumours concerning an African-American pop cultural megastar's alleged sexual tastes):

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<sup>9</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/3889661.stm> (accessed 16 July 2018).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/rupert-everett-lots-of-my-friends-got-sick-i-got-famous-1.3528142> (accessed 16 July 2018).

Q: What did they find during Liberace's autopsy?

A: Michael Jackson's other glove.

By contrast, the only joke concerning African-American basketball player Magic Johnson's HIV infection lamely and pedantically seeks to redeem heterosexual intercourse from the suspicion of risk by identifying him as secretly gay:

Q. What does Magic stand for?

A. My Ass Got Infected, Coach.<sup>11</sup>

Over thirty years ago, in the UK's first television drama reference to AIDS, *Brookside* character Gordon Collins tells his father that he fears that half the planet might die because the press has got everyone 'thinking it is a gay problem or a black problem or a junkie problem.'<sup>12</sup> Wilde, whose association with marginal sexualities, races, ill-favoured classes and self-destructive fixes of many kinds, could only have agreed.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/rec.humor/c8l4twjg368> (accessed 16 July 2018).

<sup>12</sup> *Brookside*, first aired 1 September 1986: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPG\\_erajl2M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPG_erajl2M) (accessed 16 July 2018).