The Obsessive Body:

David B. Feinberg's Attempts at Distance While Facing the AIDS Epidemic

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of the body in the production of New York author David B. Feinberg. Through an analysis of his fiction and non-fiction, we will see how the author continuously employed the theme of the body in order to deal with the traumatic experience of the AIDS epidemic. We will see how Feinberg's three books, *Eighty-sixed*, *Spontaneous Combustion*, and *Queer and Loathing* each represent a crucial phase in the author's relationship with the disease which also affected him, and ultimately killed him in 1994. By focusing on the theme of the body, we will see how Feinberg's work is employed both as a way to provoke readers and spark a reaction from the public, and to allow him to deal with the trauma of living as a gay man during the epidemic. Through the main theme of the body, the paper focuses on a few key concepts, such as the stigma attached to PWAs (people with AIDS), the employment of humor in the context of the tragic, the obscenity of human corpses displayed as symbols of protests, politically incorrect behavior, the subversion sparked by a sick person proactively reclaiming his own narrative. Throughout the article, we will see how the theme of cleanliness, in particular, is employed to negotiate with the paranoia caused by the epidemic, and how, in general, Feinberg's work holds a prominent place in the landscape of AIDS literature.

Keywords

Abjection; AIDS Literature; Body; David Feinberg; New York Literature; Trauma Literature.

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> *I found myself performing some ancient ritual dance: the dance of the sugar-plum fairies? the mating ritual of the black-widow spider?*
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> David B. Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion*

Since its explosion in 1981 in the United States, the AIDS epidemic has had a connection with the LGBTQ community. Due to the fact that the virus, particularly in the beginning, seemed to hit mostly gay men, an equivalence was quickly formed between gay men and the disease. In fact, in the early days of the epidemic, before the name AIDS was adopted, the medical community referred to this mysterious new illness as GRID—for Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. This equivalence, with the addition of the fear and stigma which also rapidly came to be associated with AIDS, was at the root of much of the homophobia the gay community endured during the years of the epidemic. Queer bodies (in particular, again, the bodies of gay men) became the battleground upon which many of these tensions were fought. In several cases, gay activists reacted to this situation by exposing their bodies in order to show the reality of the disease and to unsettle the public. The display of their bodies on the part of PWAs (people with AIDS) was a way to reject the stigma and shame commonly associated with AIDS. Writers embraced a similar behavior in literature. Among these figures, author David B. Feinberg stands out for the way in which his own body is featured in his work as an attempt to deal with the disease. Throughout this analysis, we will see how Feinberg's employment of his body became a tool for him to come to terms with the death sentence that, at the time, came with an AIDS diagnosis, and what are the consequences in AIDS studies of his approach.

AIDS literature as a genre emerged in the Eighties. During this time, gay literature in general had started to gain a new prominence but was still viewed as a subgenre. While AIDS texts could be considered as an even smaller subgenre, they also became in some way a tool for gay literature to finally carve its place into the literary mainstream. AIDS literature expanded the scope of gay representation: what until then had mainly been a genre made up of coming-out novels, often populated by solitary gay characters, had evolved into the portrayal of a community, representing a landscape and stories that were invisible to the general public. This corpus extended over several literary genres, from fiction (novels but also many short stories) to poetry, drama, memoirs, and essays. Non-fiction, in particular, played an important role as many authors found fiction not to be straightforward enough to convey the gravity of the situation. In the late Nineties, after the discovery of protease inhibitors and the end of the emergency, AIDS literature mostly faded away.

Many of the authors who had written about AIDS had contracted the virus themselves and died (including Feinberg). Others either moved on to other topics, stopped writing, or moved AIDS to the deep background of their work.

In the landscape of AIDS literature, David B. Feinberg has a story like many others. At the same time, he is a figure unlike anyone else. A New York gay Jewish writer, Feinberg got diagnosed as HIV positive in the late Eighties and died of AIDS in 1994. In his all-too-short writing career, the epidemic was always at the center of his work, which is strongly autobiographical. In this capacity, he is not that different from many other gay writers, most of them also based in New York, who wrote about their experience with AIDS before succumbing to the disease themselves. Feinberg's voice, however, is unmatched in AIDS literature. His texts tell a story which, at that point, had already been recounted a few times over (his first novel, *Eighty-sixed*, was published in 1989, almost a decade into the epidemic), but do so in a way that had not been seen before in the landscape of AIDS texts. His work rapidly received critical acclaim, particularly within the gay readership: *Eighty-sixed* won the Lambda Literary Award for Best Fiction and was positively reviewed in the gay press and *The New York Times* alike. Feinberg's style distinguishes itself for "poignancy and frightening emotional resonance," while it "keeps the sarcasm going" (Texier 7, 9). His second novel, *Spontaneous Combustion* (1991), and the posthumously published non-fiction collection *Queer and Loathing* (1994) continued in this direction but became angrier and angrier as the epidemic progressed and Feinberg's health declined. In a field of autobiographical works (a crucial feature of AIDS writing in general), Feinberg's voice sounds particularly personal and provocative, and outrageously funny. The combination of these elements is the reason why his way of tackling the epidemic stands alone in AIDS literature.

Controversial Bodies

In the mid-nineties, poet and critic David Bergman argued that AIDS had been "the most radical consequence of the body for gay men in the last twenty years" (*Burning Library* XV). AIDS, Bergman wrote, had twofold consequences for gay men: it became "an excuse to turn against the body, no longer to elevate sensuous joys and erotic pleasures to the place they occupied in the Seventies and early Eighties," while also placing the body "in an even more intense spotlight. The body becomes central since its ravages demand no less of our attention" (*Burning Library* XV). Since the disease was largely affecting young gay men in their twenties, AIDS was also often 'visually' challenging, turning the bodies of young boys into old and sick ones in a matter of months. As aforementioned, apart from the reasons purely concerning health, AIDS was also rapidly associated with a stigma that became heavy with political

implications when queer bodies started to be portrayed in literature. The act of PWAs putting themselves on display challenged the status quo, reclaiming their otherness[1] both as gay people and as HIV-positive people. Queer bodies were, during this time, a lightning rod for any kind of homophobic prejudice. According to Emmanuel Nelson, AIDS

> has literally made the body of the gay male an object of massive public curiosity and of relentless cultural inquiry. [...] The body has emerged as a supertext, a territory over which a bewildering number of competing medical, political and cultural fictions seeks domination. Contemporary gay writers, then, have to reappropriate their bodies from the unprecedented ongoing textual abuse in order to give voice to the realities of their endangered lives. (2)

The centrality of the theme of the body during this time is therefore unavoidable in AIDS literature.

The representation of the body in AIDS texts carries different implications and fulfills different roles. The homophobic rhetoric which dominated the public discourse is usually contrasted in AIDS texts with the portrayal of behavior which would be socially regarded as obscene. This includes close portrayals of the queer body in different capacities. Especially when it comes to the outrageousness connected with the representation of the body, AIDS texts have to be considered in the light of Rabelaisian laughter.[2] The explicit description of bodily functions, both sexual and related to the disease, is a recurring theme in AIDS literature, and many authors, including Feinberg, employ a form of humor that is informed by this approach, provocatively putting the body at the center. The most common example when it comes to the portrayal of the body would be the list of symptoms, an essential tool that aimed to contrast the lack of information provided by the government. A few writers also decided to discuss the reality of having a sex life in the midst of an epidemic, with significant attention paid to the issue of safe sex, condoms, and the risks of anal intercourse. Many authors, however, included descriptions of the disease which did not have the goal of information but that of representation. Among these portrayals, obviously, there was the issue of the body dealing with the virus.

In Feinberg's work, the human body (specifically, his own) has always been a central element. During the clone years,[3] Feinberg reportedly paid a lot of attention to being fit and having muscles: "his hours at the gym had sculpted the skinny kid into the Gay Urban Clone" (Burkett 342). Like many of his peers, he worked out a lot: physical fitness was certainly not a rare concern at the time, particularly for gay men. However, during the years of the epidemic, the social significance of the body of gay men changed altogether and Feinberg gave a prominent role to this theme in his work, focusing on the impact of AIDS. The themes concerning the body are represented as multifaceted, from health to sex.

Later on, the theme of the body became indissolubly linked to his own diagnosis, and finally to his impending death. In one way or another, Feinberg filtered his anxieties about AIDS through the theme of his body, tracking the progression of his own illness.

Eighty-sixed: Sex and the Age of Anxiety

Part of the 'second generation' of gay authors writing about the epidemic, Feinberg always included AIDS in his work. Unlike older writers like Edmund White or Larry Kramer who had started to publish before the epidemic, AIDS always was the dominant theme in Feinberg's texts. This entails that, both in his novels and his non-fiction, Feinberg is always looking for a way to deal with AIDS. In this sense, his approach to the epidemic clearly follows the pace of his three books: *Eighty-sixed* is dominated by the obsessive fear of getting infected, *Spontaneous Combustion* deals with his positive diagnosis for HIV and, finally, *Queer and Loathing* expresses his fury at the idea that he knows that he is going to die.

As aforementioned, *Eighty-sixed*, Feinberg's first novel, is consumed by his anxieties about getting infected with HIV. Therefore, his relationship with his body is central in this book, and sex represents a big part of it. *Eighty-sixed* is divided into two parts: the first half, "Ancient History," is set in 1980 before the epidemic. The main character, Feinberg's alter ego B.J. Rosenthal, walks us through the pre-AIDS world of free sex and treatable STDs. Consequently, in the first half of the book Feinberg shows us what it was like when the results of the sexual liberation were still enjoyable. In the second half of the novel, "Learning How To Cry," set in 1986, we can observe the harsh shift in human interactions, particularly sexual interactions, because of the epidemic, as, in Feinberg's words, "everything besides AIDS gradually disappears" (Smalling). Here, B.J. finds himself taking part in the care of Bob, a former trick he had lost contact with. The novel is filled with Feinberg's frustrations about his sex life, and contains a few humorous passages about how having sex works during the epidemic.

The theme of sex is inextricably tied to gay novels about the AIDS epidemic. Sharon Mayes frames AIDS as "a modern plague; it struck young people in the prime of their lives, was always fatal, and was sexually transmitted. The connection between sex and death was never so visible to the consciousness of a society" (Mayes 84). This connection is explored by several AIDS writers, including Feinberg who gives it significant space, particularly in his early work. In the first part of *Eighty-sixed*, B.J. lives his sexuality freely and without regrets, cruising and going to the bathhouses. This part of the novel, which works in sharp contrast to the world described in the second, presents plenty of sex scenes, often described in voluptuous detail (Feinberg, *Eighty-*

sixed 18-23). In the second part of *Eighty-sixed*, we see B.J. obsessing over the risk of contamination and infection, particularly when it comes to sex. As aforementioned, the association of gay sex with a sexually transmitted disease worsened the stigma against gay people, and impacted how one thought of sex even within the gay community. In the AIDS age, Feinberg observes, "Erica Jong's zipless fuck had gone the way of the Edsel. The is no such thing as sex without angst anymore" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 318). Leo Bersani argued that, from a conservative point of view, the generation that had liberated gay sex was responsible for the fact that "the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal [...] of proud subjectivity is buried." This generation had now found itself in the middle of an epidemic which "has literalized [...] the certainty of biological death and has therefore reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation" (Bersani 29). In this sense, the attribution of meaning to the epidemic (what Sontag so forcefully warned against in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*) reinforced the centuries-old association of sex with death: "Sex equals death. Libido equals Thanatos. They used to be flip sides of the coin, didn't they?" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 19). Toward the end of *Eighty-sixed*, B.J. tries to have sex with a guy he picked up, and the voluptuousness of the first part of the novel is substituted by detailed descriptions of safe sex—without, however, getting to complete the act: in the midst of it a friend leaves a message on B.J.'s answering machine about Bob's death, thus reinforcing the connection between death and sex and the tension between life and death.

Even under the specter of AIDS, however, sex and desire are reclaimed. In the process of attributing moral implications to an infectious illness, the parallel between AIDS and venereal diseases from the 1800s, syphilis in particular, is strongly implied by themes like shame and promiscuity. Bersani argues that "the public discourse about homosexuals since the AIDS crisis began has a startling resemblance [...] to the representation of female prostitutes in the nineteenth century" (17), which marks the time of the outbreak of venereal diseases. A detailed discussion on gay sex in the age of AIDS can therefore be read as a reaction to a world that would have wanted to see gay people's sexuality disappear. This way of discussing sex in literature is particularly interesting in the late Eighties and early Nineties, because it can be seen as an explicit response to the Bush administration's stance on the 'innocent victims.' Feinberg, for example, angrily writes that "Ryan White was America's favorite innocent victim, which left me guilty, guilty, guilty. Verdict first, trial afterward, just like in *Alice in Wonderland*" (*Spontaneous Combustion* 189). The theme of sex is obviously complex to tackle in a literary production like this, but AIDS authors do not shy away from discussing it. Many AIDS texts want to stress the point that gay people needed to have a

sex life like everybody else, even in the midst of an epidemic. With Feinberg being both Jewish and gay, the influences of both cultures are present in his work, ranging from a rich repertoire of camp references to a dark humorous tone. This cultural background is particularly noticeable in his early work: the influence of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*[4] is mostly visible in the way he deals with sex. Like Roth, Feinberg maintains a bitter sense of humor on both sex and neurosis. For example, he ironically notes that those who are going to survive the epidemic are those who did not have sex, did not have a social life and therefore overturn the Darwinian argument: "I don't see any end to it. I can't tell you what it's doing to the community. Pretty soon there's going to be nothing left. Survival of the fittest. Shit. Survival of the celibate" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 264). The act of reclaiming the right to a sex life, however, does not exempt him from developing a defense mechanism against the dangers of the virus. In his case, this defense mechanism includes associating sex with an obsession with cleanliness.

Germs and Showers, Contamination and Obsession

Feinberg's tormented relationship with the theme of sex is channeled through an obsession with being clean. His fixation on the possibility of getting infected is expressed through descriptions and prescriptions to wash oneself compulsively and a fear of germs, especially in *Eighty-sixed*. The act of obsessively disinfecting himself is a narrative device to put distance between himself and the virus in the hope of escaping infection, rather than a judgement about sex, a position which would be closer to opinions held by other AIDS authors.[5] The meticulousness that in the first part of *Eighty-sixed* is reserved to the description of sex scenes is, in the second half of the novel, used to describe actions such as this: "I shampoo, I rinse, work in some conditioner, soap up my body, rinse out my hair, rinse off my body, check for swollen glands in the crotch, under the arms, at the neck. None today. I give myself a second cleaning with pHisoHex" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 192). Even if in the first section of *Eighty-sixed* there are a few instances (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 113) where B.J. discusses cleanliness regarding sex, he also makes fun of a trick who showers immediately after sex by calling him "my Lady Macbeth" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 37), thus not taking it too seriously. The second part of the novel, on the other hand, is where Feinberg's obsession with cleanliness really manifests itself, and B.J.'s torment starts.

The fact that the cause of the virus was unknown for a long time sparked a sense of paranoia which was particularly prominent in the Eighties. The AIDS epidemic, however, was not the only reason for this paranoia. The theme of contamination which is implied in the concept of plague was also present in the public discourse, for example, in reference to the tragedy of Chernobyl. Feinberg directly compares the landscape of the epidemic with

the nuclear disaster: "It's Chernobyl. I'm glowing because I just had chicken Kiev" (*Eighty-sixed* 205). In the context of AIDS, the idea of contamination is extended to the formulation of a "specific modality of homosexual pollution" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 132), which added onto the stigma formulated around the idea of gay people as general sources of contamination, especially for heterosexual men. In Feinberg's fiction the satirical tone pervades even the portrayal of his own paranoia:

> the People With AIDS Coalition has 'Hug a Person with AIDS.' I plunk down a dollar and confront my deepest fears. He has no visible lesions. He looks reasonably healthy. I give him a hug and am joined by the facilitator in a therapeutic bear-hug. After it is over, I thank them and wonder why. What's next? Rim a person with rheumatoid arthritis? Dry-hump a person in an iron lung? Damn it, I can't even stop thinking sarcastic comments. Maybe it's the only way I can cope. (*Eighty-sixed* 234)

The idea of pollution brings along fear and paranoia about the presence of contaminating particles. At one point, after hearing someone coughing next to him in a park, B.J. comes clean: "I see germs everywhere" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 154). Later on in the novel, as he hears his best friend Gordon cough on the phone, he treats the whole issue of his own obsession humorously:

> Gordon coughs and clears his throat. […] 'You've got a cold?' 'Don't worry, B.J., you won't get the germs over the phone.' 'Did I tell you last week during therapy Neil sneezed, and I tensed up like a cat—you know, the hair on the back of my arms stood on end. […] So he blows his nose and throws the tissue, ineffectually, missing the trash. […] he asks why it's bothering me, and I tell him I don't like germs.' (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 297)

It is worth noting, though, that Gordon ends up testing positive at the end of the novel—so Feinberg may have found a way to justify his paranoia after all.

Despite the fact that it is animated by real and justified anxiety, Feinberg's obsession is always conveyed through a humorous filter. The author both makes fun of himself and in general laughs at the incongruity of the situation: "across the street the Sperminator is playing at the World—an unintentional AIDS title: death by sperm" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 193). In *Eighty-sixed*, the more B.J. tends to Bob, the more he worries over the fact that he too may be HIV positive, but even this thought is treated ironically. His fixation on being infected is expressed in passages such as this, where after visiting Bob in the hospital he feels compelled to go to a gay bar and jokes about the possibility of being infected already: "I wonder what draws me so urgently to the Spike tonight. The criminal's compulsion to return to the scene of the crime? The microbe's urge to return to the site of infection?" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 199). In *Eighty-sixed*, B.J. talks to a friend who is

worried about night sweats, trying to comfort him but failing to reassure himself: "'there's no sense in getting paranoid,' I reply, eating my words as I speak them. Intellectually, I'm convinced. The only thing to fear is fear itself. Psychologically, I'm a basket case" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 215). The fear of 'having it,' the fear of people he loves having it, fills his thoughts every day and dominates the first book.

Throughout his work, both fiction and non-fiction, Feinberg employs a device in particular to deal with his neurosis: he compiles lists. In *Eighty-sixed*, chapters are alternated with brief non-fiction sections, usually consisting of lists. In Feinberg's poetics, lists provide the chance of humorously breaking down the reality of an issue, and therefore the ability to somehow deal with it. *Queer and Loathing*, his only non-fiction work, presents lists as one of its main stylistic devices: in it, the author himself admits that "I've always enjoyed making lists" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 61). In the first part of *Eighty-sixed*, lists are what describes in the most detail concerns and interactions of the clone years. For example, one of the first lists is "Miss Letitia Thing's Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior Concerning Tricks, One-Night (or Afternoon) Stands, and the Like, with a Special Appendix on Relationships," in which he prescribes the Dos and Don'ts of one-night stands, advice such as "Never defile a lover's bed. Be imaginative. Use the couch, the fireplace, the bearskin rug, the linoleum kitchen floor, the closet, the bathtub, the fire escape," or "Stay at least fifteen minutes after you come. If he swallows, you are obligated to give him a back rub" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 30). It is after AIDS enters the picture, though, that lists gain their prominence in Feinberg's work. The first non-fiction intermission in the second part of *Eighty-sixed* is "Some Symptoms," a long list where the several symptoms such as itching, blurred vision, sweating or hallucinations are mixed with "speaking in tongues" or "an inability to insert the correct protuberance into an appropriate orifice during the sexual act" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 162). From this moment on, lists gain a crucial role in Feinberg's work, either as political rants or prescriptions about living in the AIDS age. What lists can provide, in his work, is an attempt at maintaining control. A rigid pattern such as the bullet point allows Feinberg to 'dominate' such a complex, traumatic matter.

In *Eighty-sixed*, lists are especially used to discuss Feinberg's anxieties about sex and cleanliness humorously. In the list "Safe Sex in the Age of Anxiety," for example, the author prescribes to "cover your mouth with adhesive tape," and suggests that "Foreplay should commence in the shower. The water temperature should be at least 180 degrees Fahrenheit" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 223). It is easy to see how humor, in a case such as this, can have the intent of downplaying Feinberg's fears about AIDS and, at the same time, his own paranoia. The first item on the list "How to Stay Celibate in the Age

of Anxiety," on the other hand, is "Acquire unattractive personal-grooming habits," followed a few lines later by "Subscribe to the Centers for Disease Control's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 238). Once again, therefore, infection and cleanliness are, albeit humorously, linked.

Diagnosis and *Spontaneous Combustion*

In the second novel, *Spontaneous Combustion*, the epidemic has progressed and the situation is even direr than the one described in *Eighty-sixed*. In this book, B.J.'s obsession about sex is substituted with his obsession about abstinence. Feinberg mixes his fear of contagion with the portrayal of what is now the social scene of the New York gay community:

> Allan and I talked about sex because it was much more fun than actually doing it. Safe sex was the operative. I suppose if I were ever able to actually stretch and reach myself, I would sheathe myself in a condom to prevent the possibility of transmitting some heynous disease to myself. Who knows? Maybe my lips would be cracked, of there'd be a canker sore. I'm so paranoid I masturbate with a water-based nonoxynol-9 lubricant. One can't be too careful. (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 38)

This neurosis, albeit with an ironic tone, functions as further demonstration that gay men are human beings with legitimate needs even during an epidemic. The satirical tone connected to abstinence is perhaps best expressed in the chapter "Why My September Phone Bill Was in Three Digits" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 141). Here, Feinberg parodies conversations on phone-sex lines, incredibly popular at a time when no one goes out anymore. The gay social scene has changed immensely from the scenes at the baths portrayed in the first part of *Eighty-sixed*. Feinberg notes how new and old habits emerge to compensate for this forced lack of a sex life:

> In the age of anxiety gay men go to the gym five nights a week, just to keep out of trouble. On weekends it's home with the VCR, watching porno, 'Masterbates Theatre.' In between checkups and hospital visits there are Front Runners, the Central Park Ramblers, the Times Squares, the bowling league, Sundance, and a host of other gay athletic-groups. For the religious-minded there's Dignity, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, and the Metropolitan Community Church. There's an endless list of twelve-step programs that meet at the Gay Community Center; people take on alibis at Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA), ACOA A-Anon, ACOA Gay Men Incest Survivors, Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, Sexual Compulsive Anonymous, and Sexually Abused Anonymous. The socially conscious volunteer at the Gay Men's Health Crisis, the American Foundation for AIDS Research, the AIDS Network, the American Run to End AIDS, and so on. Any way to sublimate desire; anything to avoid sex. (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 201)

If in *Eighty-sixed* B.J. was obsessed with getting infected, but the virus just affected

people around him like Bob or his friend Gordon (whose diagnosis closes the book), in *Spontaneous Combustion* B.J.'s anguish is aimed at himself. In this second novel, he is tortured on whether to take an HIV test. In the first part of the book B.J. obsesses over all the possible symptoms (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 18), and ultimately decides to get tested. Feinberg describes his state of anxiety in this situation:

> my anxiety level was high, and it was time to do something about it. I had reached a particular level of anxiety that corresponded to the resonant frequency of my brain; one more day in this state and it would explode. I needed to either elevate it to a frequency that only dogs hear or decrease it to a reasonable level so I could focus my anxiety on things like nuclear war, famine, torture in Third World countries, Beirut, Afghanistan, Lebanon, the West Bank, crack, the homeless, and my relationship with my mother. In short, it was time to take the Test. (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 69)

Once again, in the direst of situations there is room for a humorous take. Once he realizes he has gotten infected, B.J.'s obsession with cleanliness not only does not stop, but worsens as it is not isolated to sex anymore: "I sterilized my dishes by running them through the dishwasher three times before using them; I washed my fresh fruit with pHisoHex; I shaved with a new disposable razor every day; I made my bed once a week with seven sets of sheets, alternated with rubber ones, discarding three layers every morning" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 84). The connection between cleanliness and sex in the age of abstinence evolves into ironic reflections on masturbation: "I'm not particularly fond of any of my bodily fluids. I always carry a portable battery-operated liquid Dustbuster to instantly mop off those unsightly semen spills from the masturbatory bedsheets or the stomach of the occasional budoir visitor" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 95).

The Shift to Non-fiction in *Queer and Loathing*

As aforementioned, Feinberg's novels are heavily autobiographical. The progress of B.J.'s illness closely follows Feinberg's experience with AIDS, his own diagnosis and illness. In *Queer and Loathing*, the knowledge of his impending death prompted him to drop the filter of fiction (which was very thin to begin with) and directly address the reader. The role of neurosis and cleanliness evolve following the author's own diagnosis: the shift to non-fiction transforms the obsession with germs into a parody of straight people suffering from AIDS paranoia, i.e., of those who were freaked out by the possibility of proximity to someone infected. For them, Feinberg compiles yet another list on the "Etiquette for the HIV-Antibody-Positive" (*Queer and Loathing* 57-61), which includes advice such as to avoid bleeding in public, bring your own silverware and portable toilets when visiting squeamish relatives, and abstain from sweating at the gym. With the shift to non-fiction, Feinberg's

style becomes even more explicitly provocative. Examples of this difference can be found by confronting his own fiction and non-fiction. For instance, in *Spontaneous Combustion* B.J. plans to tell his mother about his diagnosis: "I remembered an old joke about coming out. A guy tells his mother that he has an inoperable malignant brain tumor and he has only six months to live. Then he tells her he was kidding, he was only gay. But somehow, I couldn't conjure up something worse to tell so that being HIV-positive would be a relief in comparison" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 149). Bitter humor and sarcasm are always present, but the prose is not as harsh as in *Queer and Loathing*, where he directly describes the effects of the disease with texts such as "Cocktails from Hell" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 109), in which he describes the reality of taking AZT, gives advice on "How to Visit Someone in the Hospital with a Terminal Disease" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 160) or, we will see further on, provides detailed descriptions of the physical impact of the virus on the body.

The diagnosis brought a harsh shift in Feinberg's writing. His style, already provocative to begin with, became even more aggressive, playing on surpassing the limit of what was considered acceptable. In particular, intentionally countering the kind of behavior society would tolerate from a sick person, or even more so from a queer person, became one of the main themes in *Queer and Loathing*. According to Susan Sontag[6], "with AIDS, the shame is linked to an imputation of guilt [...] . Indeed, to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed [...] as a member of a certain 'risk group', a community of pariahs," and "the sexual transmission of the illness [is] considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself" (24-26). As she argues in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, the concept of "illness as a punishment is the oldest idea of what causes illness": since the time of Oedipus, plagues have been considered to be "collective calamities, and judgements on a community" (Sontag 45). This tendency clearly tries to link the epidemic to a sentiment of shame and guilt for gay people, burdening them with "the stigma not only of AIDS, but also of queerness" (Butler, *Bodies* 23). The idea of AIDS being a judgement on the gay community was lethal, as the government justified its inaction with the argument that 'homosexual behavior' was really the cause to blame. When the virus and its mode of transmission were discovered, the fact that "it was characterized not as a viral disease, such as Hepatitis B, [...] but as a sexually transmitted disease, such as syphilis" (Gilman 247) reinforced the connection between illness and what was considered immoral behavior and, therefore, guilt and responsibility. Feinberg responds to this tendency in his style, that is, by being exceptionally explicit about his own experience. In particular, he rips that curtain that usually isolates those who suffer from a grave illness and details what the virus is doing to him. He is not passive, as most terminally

ill people are expected to be, on the contrary, he is intentionally disturbing. This subversive behavior is exacerbated by the fact that he carries it out humorously.

As he states himself in *Queer and Loathing*, "humor is also used as a distancing medium: You can't stare directly at the sun" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 87). The psychological necessity of humor is an explicitly declared need for him. In his book *Laughter in Hell*, in which he investigates the relationship between Jewish dark humor and the Holocaust, Steve Lipman argues that wit "produced on the precipice of hell was not frivolity, but psychological necessity" (8). Similarly to Jewish Holocaust humorists, Feinberg also makes fun of the darkest of circumstances as an act of resilience. Reflecting on the process of mourning, he wonders: "I had heard that it takes two years to complete the healing process and fully recover from the death of a close friend. Yet everyone was dying. There was no time left to cope. Were the two-year sentences of grief run concurrently or consecutively? Was there time off for good behavior?" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 151). Not even death, therefore, is off limits for him.

The Implications of Explicitly Discussing Sex

The tendency toward humor as a defense mechanism often assumed provocative forms, sometimes involving the subject of sex as a way to refuse to be shamed about it. In his essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?", Leo Bersani argues that "gay men's 'obsession' with sex [...] should be celebrated [...]. Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents jouissance as a mode of ascesis" (30). The connection between infection and sex is sometimes underlined in order to perturb. This is partly observable in passages such as the descriptions of the bathhouses in the first section of *Eighty-sixed*, but becomes more visible as Feinberg's disease progresses. An example of this is when, having to tell his mother that he has contracted the virus, B.J. finds that "the words were too thick to leave my mouth. I had cotton-mouth. Something was stuck in my throat. The residue of too many members?" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 194). In his essay, Bersani argues that the mainstream stigma pits male homosexuality against macho masculinity because of the patriarchal assumption that "to be penetrated is to abdicate power" (19). As a consequence, especially when it comes to sex, most AIDS texts are very explicit in the language they use: describing the dynamic of blowjobs in the age of AIDS, B.J. jokes that "irony of ironies, plus-signs can go down on negatives, but not viceversa" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 212). In the depiction of the effects of a sexually transmitted disease within a community that is already being shamed for its sexuality,

representation of sex[7] is crucial, and its display becomes a confrontational tool to face off homophobia. The portrayal of sex and dating in the AIDS age also includes passages on drug therapies. In *Spontaneous Combustion*, Feinberg articulates a reclaim of sexuality by describing his initiation to AZT or, as he calls it, "A Zillion Tricks [...] A glass of Perrier would have helped. [...] Enough had gone down my throat in the past with little or no coaxing" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 132-33). The author also describes how the therapy updated his cruising technique: "I'm taking A Zillion Tricks, [...] care to be a zillion and one?" (Feinberg, *Spontaneous Combustion* 136). As abovementioned, representing queer sex in detail is politically significant in a society that generally portrays it as repulsive. Hence, with passages such as these, Feinberg challenges the stereotype of what constitutes acceptable behavior for a gay man, as he defends what shapes his own identity and claims its legitimacy in a confrontational way: "what does it prove if we can mimic straight behavior? Why should we try to justify ourselves according to the breeder standards?" (Feinberg, *Eighty-sixed* 243). This reclaim of gay men's 'otherness' and, in some cases, even of the gay stereotype seeks political incorrectness in order to fight for representation.

When it comes to AIDS representation, an important aspect that has to be considered is that, especially for what concerns the gay community, AIDS was primarily striking young men in their twenties. The contrast between the horrible physical effects of the virus and the previously fit and young bodies of PWAs makes for a remarkably powerful imagery, which could include AIDS literature in other powerful canonical narratives depicting death wiping out a young generation. In this perspective, Emmanuel Nelson characterizes AIDS literature as a "feverish elegy, written collectively [...] to a generation dying young" (Nelson 3). In Feinberg's case, however, the tone is not that of an elegy as much as it is a paean. One of the main ways in which he makes his texts confrontational, particularly as his own illness progresses, is to show its effects explicitly.

Showing the Illness

Several AIDS texts portray the body of PWAs in order to show what the virus was physically doing to people. Consequently, graphic descriptions of the appearance of PWAs, often in the advanced stages of the disease, recur in many books. In the symbolic portrayal of PWAs, no other element has had as much as significance as the Kaposi's Sarcoma lesions.[8] However, besides portraying the reality of the disease, the use of graphic details also becomes a harsh but effective way to denounce the situation gay people were in, particularly when it comes to stigma. The display of symptoms echoes Kristeva's argument about abjection, according to which "in the symptom, the abject permeates me, I

am the abject" (Kristeva 11). Thus, the depiction of the body of PWAs, to use the words of Larry Kramer, became a way to use the fact that you "scare the shit out of people" (Kramer 44). The idea of making people uncomfortable is a common device in AIDS writing, and we could argue that few employed it as effectively as Feinberg. In *Queer and Loathing*, in particular, several writings aim at showing the effects of AIDS in the harshest way possible, especially by, again, including lists such as "Bleeding Gums from Hell" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 95) or "Warts from Hell" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 140).

It could be argued that in his fiction Feinberg deals more with the emotional, collective toll of being a gay man during the AIDS epidemic than he does in his non-fiction. In *Queer and Loathing*, on the other hand, while the emotional angst is still prominent, the author focuses more closely on what AIDS was doing to his body. The employment of this device in AIDS literature generally had the aim of gay people gaining visibility in the public discourse by making themselves impossible to ignore. This act of reclaiming the stigma, unafraid of touching even the most uncomfortable or controversial aspects of the situation, becomes exponentially louder and more outrageous in Feinberg's work. The display of lesions and warts, for him, is aimed at deconstructing the romanticized, elegiac narrative that was being constructed around these young men dying. A symbol like the red ribbon to attract awareness, for example, in Feinberg's view is misleading: "There's something 'nice' about a red ribbon for AIDS awareness. There's nothing 'nice' about AIDS. Leave it to some design queens to transform a plague into a fashion statement" (*Queer and Loathing* 184). This quote also signals another important trait in Feinberg's writing: the more he approached death, the more furious he was with everybody—including other gay activists. According not only to his own writings, but also to the texts of his contemporaries such as John Weir and Sarah Schulman, Feinberg made life impossible for everyone around him by forcing them to witness every worst aspect of his terminal illness. Weir details in his novel, *What I Did Wrong*, how Feinberg had one of his last outings going to Macy's, wearing a fur coat and announcing he had AIDS every time he approached anyone, either at a counter or in an elevator, thus spreading fear and discomfort across the general public (Weir 179-81). Schulman, on the other hand, documents in her book *The Gentrification of the Mind* how Feinberg's attacks also included those close to him:

> I remember when David threw a "dying party" in his Chelsea condo. He invited his closest friends and had us standing around eating and drinking while we watched him, emaciated, lying on the living room couch, dying in front of us. Then he had diarrhea accidentally on the couch and ran screaming to the bathroom. Stan Leventhal was there, very sick. After David shit his pants, Stan left. That's when I realized the cruel nature of David's act. He wanted to force everyone else who

> had this in his future to stare it down right now. No denial. No mercy. (Schulman I.3)

By forcing everyone, on the page and in real life, to witness what was happening to his body Feinberg brings the prominence given to PWAs' bodies to a new level. On what may have been the last time he was seen in public, Feinberg went to an ACT UP meeting from his hospital room at St. Vincent's, an IV connected to his arm, to scream at his fellow activists that they were not doing enough to fight the epidemic because *he* was dying. His rant was documented by filmmaker James Wentzy, who included it in his film *Fight Back, Fight AIDS*.

'Death Is Obscene'

Similarly to many AIDS activists, Feinbeirg's protest journey was not interrupted by his death. As aforementioned, it was not uncommon for AIDS activists to put their own bodies on the line. Their activism did not stop when they died. From the late Eighties on, ACT UP started to organize performative protests, such as the famous die-in at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, or the throwing of PWAs' ashes over the fence onto the White House lawn. The most controversial of these activities was arguably what was called a 'political funeral,' in which an open casket with the corpse of a PWA was brought in front of government buildings. In *Queer and Loathing*, Feinberg writes about these actions in the essay "Political Funerals" (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 254). Recounting the funeral of activist Tim Bailey, Feinberg writes about a stand-off with the police, who wouldn't allow them to carry the open casket, and finds himself acknowledging that

> In a way, the police are right.
> Death is unseemly.
> Death is obscene.
> Death is ugly. (Feinberg, *Queer and Loathing* 262)

That, of course, was the point of events such as this: to display the obscenity or, to use Julia Kristeva's term, the 'abjection' of the AIDS-ridden body: "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life" (4). In these cases, it was not merely a dead body, but a young body devastated by disease, an illness so violent as to make it an unnatural spectacle. When it came to Feinberg's own funeral, though, we know from Weir's account that the author was not the center of a political funeral. He was, however, the protagonist of—once again—a tragically comic ceremony, where his naked body lay in a casket with melting ice, thus needing to have a bucket underneath to catch the drops (Weir 204). The aim of Feinberg was, one last time, to use his body to make things as uneasy as possible for everyone else, even in the event of his own death.

When analyzing Feinberg's work, at every stage, we have to recognize how the desecrating act of obsessing over the human body helped him to cope. The representation and, most importantly, reappropriation of his own body as a PWA is at the core of what moves him to display it as he did throughout his work, and—crucial to the success of his style—he did so humorously. In this sense, the act of merely reclaiming his existence through the frank, harsh portrayal of his experience ends up being one of the most subversive acts in AIDS writing. His "public assertion of 'queerness,'" to use the expression employed by Judith Butler, "enacts performativity as citationality for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy" (*Bodies* 21). His challenge to what was considered appropriate, or politically correct, is made out of the mere fact that he writes about his experience without frills or romanticization, employing the diseased body as a proactive entity, and in a funny way. Laughter, Kristeva acknowledges, is "a way of placing or displacing the abjection" (8). The overlap of fact and fiction in his work makes his writings all the more challenging, as there is no doubt over whether he is portraying something personal or not, and his willingness to openly make fun of his own tragic experience allows the employment of abjection to be even more powerful. Feinberg succeeds in the hazardous endeavor of transforming a terminal diagnosis into an act of empowerment.

We have seen how the theme of the body has a prominent role in Feinberg's work. The overlap between fact and fiction that we can find in his books allows us to consider his texts as part of the performative protests he took part in during the last few years of his life. By displaying his body and his experience in such an open manner, we can say that Feinberg carried out his own version of a political funeral on the page, a long, loud ceremony which he took active part in and that he crafted himself.

Notes

[1] This dynamic echoes Bakhtin's argument on the gaze of the outsider: "essential [...] is [...] the right to be 'other' in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation" (159-160).

[2]The concept of "Rabelaisian laughter not only destroys traditional connections and abolishes idealized strata; it also brings out the crude, unmediated connection between things that people otherwise seek to keep separate, in pharisaical error. [...] [The basic groups of Rabelaisian series are:] (1) series of the human body in its anatomical and physiological aspects; (2) human clothing series; (3) food series; (4) drink and drunkenness series; (5) sexual series (copulation); (6) death series; (7) defecation series. [...] This new picture of the world is polemically opposed to the medieval world, in whose idealogy the human body is perceived solely under the sign of decay and strife, where in real-life practice, there reigned a crude and dirty physical licentiousness" (Bakhtin 1981b, 170-71); the Rabelaisian laughter represents the "heroization of all the functions of the life of the body, of eating, drinking, defecating and sexual activity" (Bakhtin 192).

[3] In the Seventies, the term 'clone' referred to a specific archetype of gay man, direct product of the sexual revolution. Frances Fitzgerald describes their style as "short hair, clipped mustache, blue jeans, and bomber jacket" (62-63).

[4] Feinberg, in fact, stated in an interview that "I always thought of myself as 'the gay Philip Roth'" (Weinberg 47).

[5] The most prominent example for this phenomenon is playwright Larry Kramer: for more, cf. Bergman 127.

[6] Sontag had originally argued her theory about metaphors and illness in her essay *Illness as Metaphor*, which is about cancer. AIDS, though, pushed her to return to the subject because, as she herself put it, this is "a disease whose charge of stigmatization, whose capacity to create spoiled identity, is far greater" (Sontag 16), because of the moralistic implications.

[7] The theme of sex is present in different ways, often depicted with a humorous nuance.

[8] In the detailed depiction of the illness, the "disfigurement—argues Sontag—reflects underlying, ongoing changes, the dissolution of the person. [...] The marks on the face of a leper, a syphilitic, someone with AIDS are the signs of a progressive mutation, decomposition" (Sontag 41). KS lesions were developed as a topos calling on a deep cultural and literary tradition, first and foremost *The Scarlet Letter*: "I'm forced to wear my own scarlet letter in the form of these abominable purple blotches; a blazing visual condemnation for all the world to see so they can pass judgement on me and become part of my perpetual penance" (Burrell 153).

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Biography

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